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**Strengthening leadership for school improvement:
Understanding the impact of context, culture and
collaboration in selected schools of the Sydney Catholic
Schools Eastern Region**

**Sydney Catholic Schools Eastern Region and Leadership Research
International (LRI), University of Southern Queensland:**

A joint research project

Research Report prepared by

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Strengthening leadership for school improvement: Understanding the impact of context, culture and collaboration in selected schools of the Sydney Catholic Schools Eastern Region



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Research Team

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Executive Summary

Overview

Guided by the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010) and prompted by the Sydney Catholic Schools Eastern Region Director, this study has focused on the strengthening of leadership for school improvement. It was considered important to gain insight into how schools sustain success, and in particular, how an understanding of context, culture and collaboration might be contributing to the strengthening of school leadership. The principals and their leadership teams of eight schools, together with the regional consultants have shared their perspectives on being a successful school and what it means to be a successful leader.

The study has been guided by the research question:

How does an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement?

The final report acknowledges the Principals' understandings of the impact of context, culture and collaboration on leadership. In addition, the report highlights their reflections on how the effectiveness of leadership might be strengthened beyond the findings of Hallinger and Heck.

Research Process

This project was conducted in two phases with a mixed methods research design where quantitative data formed the initial basis for the selection of 'successful' schools, followed by the data collection of leadership perspectives, being of a qualitative nature, focused on the strengthening of leadership for sustainable school improvement. Participants included eight principals and their leadership teams, and four regional consultants.

Phase 1 entailed the selection of schools by the SCS Eastern Region Office based on existing systemic data of schools.

Phase 2 entailed the collection and analysis of data through: 1) a whole of school survey tool that is the Diagnostic Inventory for School Alignment (DISA); 2) interviewing of the principal and the leadership team of each participant school; 3) workshopping with the principals; and 4) a focused interview with the regional consultants to the participant schools. Throughout this data collection the following questions were used:

- i. What is meant by ongoing school success for this school?
- ii. What evidence is available?
- iii. What factors contribute to ongoing school success?

The interviews and the workshop provided greater depth of understanding for the emergence of effective leadership in a school that has reportedly sustained ongoing school success, with the following guiding questions:

- i. What emerges in understanding the impact of context, culture and collaboration contributing to the strengthening of leadership?
- ii. What other factors might contribute to the reported outcomes?
- iii. What is the effect of a change in leadership personnel? (if applicable to the case study school)

Findings

The outcomes of this research study have been drawn principally from the qualitative data of the eight participant school leaders and their leadership teams in schools that were identified by the regional office as being 'successful'. This report culminates the researchers' interpretive analysis of the data in three interrelated findings – School Success; Leadership in Action; and Theorising the Effective Leader in Action. Firstly, building on from the selection of the eight schools as those of 'success' determined by the SCS Eastern Region Office, it was important to understand the principals' and their leadership teams' expressions of 'school success' (see Table 6). Emergence from this understanding of success has been termed 'leadership in action' (see Table 7) which exemplifies reference to the 'lived in' experience of the principals who referred to their understandings of context and culture interchangeably – the researchers have interpreted this as the lived experiences of 'organisational culture'. Leadership in Action has been constructed incrementally as: Emerging themes of leadership in action (see pp. 49-50); Factors of importance to principals (see pp. 50-5); and Researchers' interpretation of factors of importance to principals (see pp. 52-54). Finally, these findings have provided a rich opportunity to present the model of Theorising the Effective Leader in Action (see Figure 4) which is succinctly captured as the principal's *Visionary Commitment to Action* (see pp. 54-57).

Core to this theory is the principal's visionary commitment to action as they manoeuvre and manage the dynamics of interrelationships in the school community, most particularly amongst the staff. The findings of this study have highlighted the integral role of the principal in building relationship amidst the multiple facets of human complexity and collaborative leadership toward the 'potential for action' in schools. Figure 4 illustrates this complexity as the 'collection of individuals', the 'interaction of the mix' of individuals, and the 'facilitation of collaborative leadership' in schools.

The model for Theorising the Effective Leader in Action presented in Figure 4, shows that the school and the three factors of building capacity for potential action are the initial foci, and the principal is the 'effective leader in action' realising their *Visionary Commitment to Action*. Integral to this realisation is acknowledgement of the importance of the phenomenon of the principal's 'presence'. In concert with this development is the 'linchpin' relationship between the School and the System, specifically the interdependent relationship between the principal and the system personnel that enhances the principal's commitment to action. This is not a dependency relationship, but value adding to the notion of the 'linchpin' relationship in 'getting the right fit' for the ongoing support of the principal relative to the stage of career development of the principal and the specific needs of the school.

In summary, these findings acknowledge the uniqueness, the complexity and the 'messiness' of each school setting and thus the demand for each principal in partnership with system support to be cognizant of the requirements of the contemporary and emerging context. The following recommendations are offered in support of the strengthening of effective leadership drawn from the conclusions of this report.

Recommendations

Entrenched cultures

Recommendation 1: That the System seeks more creative and innovative means to revitalise longstanding members of leadership teams.

Career development for principals

Recommendation 2: That principals continue to be provided opportunities to build capacity for empowering intentional and focused discussions with the regional consultants about their career development.

Complexity of the school as a unique system

Recommendation 3(i): That the System continues to support networking structures and relationships amongst principals to enable enhanced confidence in learning from others about effective leadership.

Recommendation 3(ii): That the System continues to support principals in ways to acknowledge the unique context and culture of each school and the specific requirements of each principal.

System-School relationships

Recommendation 4: That the System continues to convey the intended complimentary roles of the principals and system support personnel.

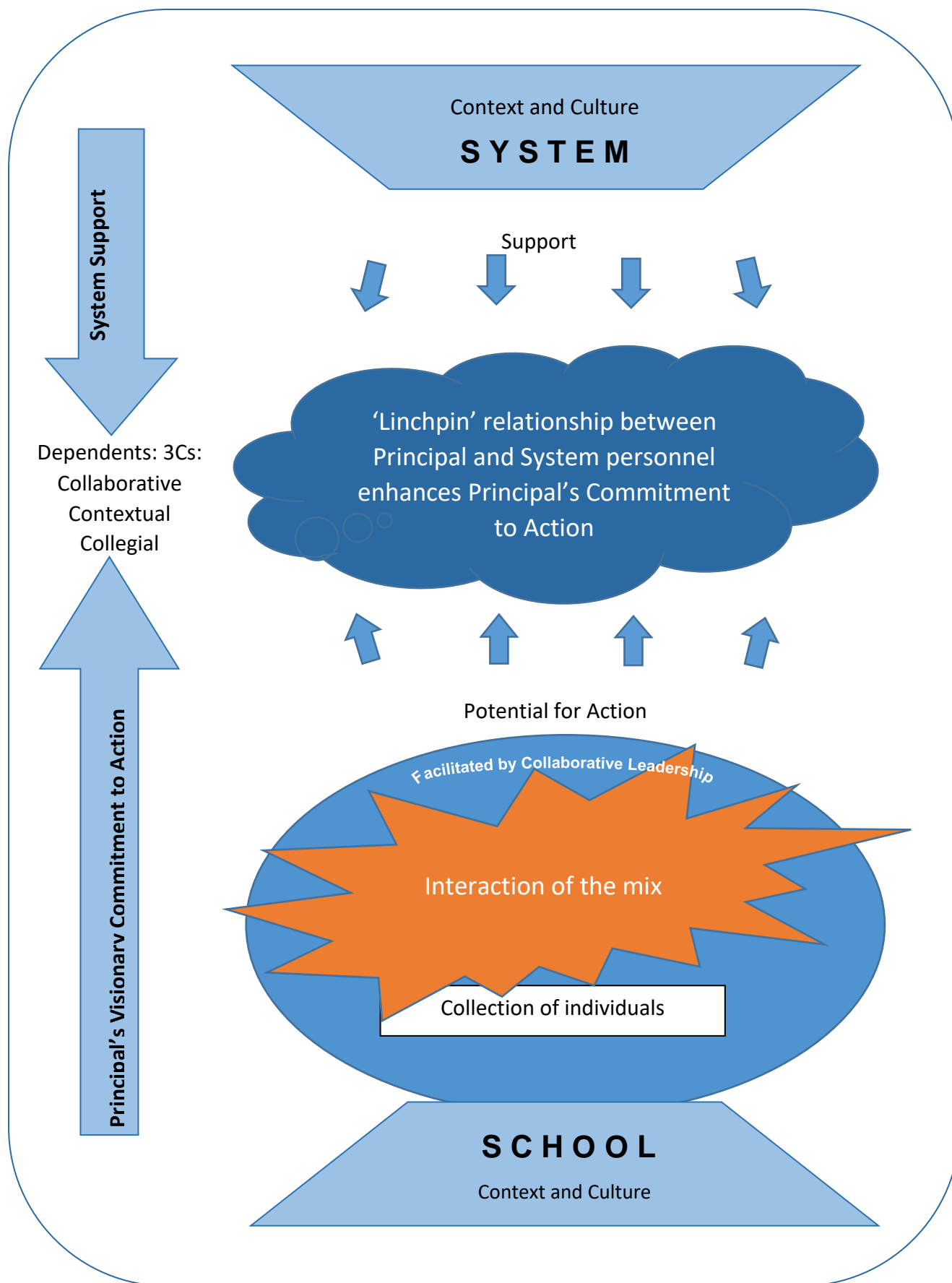


Figure 4: The Effective School Leader in Action: A System-School Relationship

Conclusion

This research study, initially inspired by the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010), set out in quest of how an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration might contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement. Specifically, this study has captured the voices of the principals and their leadership teams within eight recognised successful schools in the Sydney Catholic Schools Eastern Region, as they have shared their understanding of the impact of the context, culture and collaboration on their leadership for school improvement. The collective voice of eight participant principals, their respective leadership teams and four consultants of the Eastern Region Office has enlightened this study.

Respectful of the individual's length of time as a principal, their individually nuanced styles of leadership, inclusive of the value adding factor of their 'presence' in context, and the diversity of selected sites across this study, these eight principals have highlighted the importance of 'knowing' the context, the culture and the need for collaboration within each of their similar but somewhat diverse school sites. Of greater importance has been their individual and collective foci on the significance of developing collaborative leadership, both within schools and in the integral relationship between schools and the system. This is an added dimension to the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010).

The emergent finding of this study on effective leadership for school improvement is that principals and their leadership teams, together with their system support, have collective responsibility for school improvement. Schools in this system are not islands, and the participants in this study acknowledge this reality. How tightly or loosely coupled the system–school relationships are, or should be, is always a tension. However, this study has illuminated the collective responsibility of leaders to develop an organisational culture of collaborative leadership, that is, the responsibility of developing and implementing relationships that exemplify the skill sets and emotional intelligence levels of collaborative leadership in situ. Leading together requires a clearly defined and mutually agreed visionary commitment to action and requires all concerned to enact the collective responsibility of participation and evaluation for continual success.

Introduction:

This research project has been guided by previous studies of the Leadership Research International (LRI) team at the University of Southern Queensland to strengthen the concepts of leadership, capacity building and sustainability of school improvement agendas. The one-year research conducted during 2018 commencing with an introduction to the research in late 2017 to a selected group of schools of the Sydney Catholic Schools (SCS) Eastern Region was in quest of: *How does an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement?* All except one of the schools had engaged with the whole of school improvement project, Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools (IDEAS) (<https://lri.usq.edu.au/work-with-us/school-improvement-model-ideas/>), and with Systemic requirements (such as the School Improvement Framework – see Appendix 1) for the purpose of improving student outcomes. Selection of these schools by the SCS Eastern Region Office was related to evidence of success as determined by a collation of data in response to the System’s expectations. Participants were the principal and relevant leadership personnel in each of the schools, together with the system personnel (Regional Consultant) who have a direct relationship with the schools particularly in relation to school improvement.

Guided by the research of scholars Hallinger and Heck (2010), this study assumed “that studies of *school improvement* must assess change (i.e. improvement or decline) in the school’s academic processes and learning outcomes over a period of time. . . [and] . . . that *school improvement leadership* is directed towards growth in student learning” (p. 96). Further, it accepted the assertion that whilst leadership is a catalyst for school improvement, there are three ways of qualifying this claim – “Effective leadership styles and strategies are highly contextualised . . . school’s culture, or capacity for educational improvement . . . [and] . . . collaborative [school] leadership, as opposed to leadership from the principal alone” (p. 107). We, the researchers, further added: “alignment between systems and schools is dependent upon the relationship between the principals and system support officers” (Andrews, Conway, & Smith, 2017, pp. 8-9).

Background:

A synopsis of the background to this study was provided by the SCS Eastern Region Director, Elizabeth O’Carrigan.

Sydney Catholic Schools is a system of 152 primary and secondary schools, within the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney. The system has organised its schools into three regions – Eastern, Southern and Inner-West. The eight participant schools of this study belong to the Eastern Region of Sydney Catholic Schools, a region consisting of 51 schools, including 40 primary and 11 secondary colleges. The region has its own Director, four senior educational leaders known as Regional Consultants and a team of educators and others who provide services to the schools.

Prior to the mid-1960s the Sydney schools were mainly run by religious institutes and were only loosely connected and relatively independent. However, with increasing financial and enrolment pressure the system of schools gradually evolved, as successive governments, particularly in the 1970s, were reluctant to deal with individual schools. The Catholic Authorities (CEOs) evolved and became responsible for managing the funding campaigns, distributing government funds and accounting to government for the use of the funds received. With many religious institutes unable to provide principals and teachers, this too, became an additional role of the Catholic Education Office (CEO). The decline in the number of religious to staff schools, increasing government accountability and compliance, together with the need for expansion in schools saw continued growth of the ‘system of schools’. ‘The system’ itself has an ‘ecclesial’ identity, meaning its schools are faith based and share the same mission and goals. The system is organic in nature which requires its system leaders to remain responsive to changes and committed to ensuring improvement for each of the schools.

The challenge for the system today is essentially twofold: the ongoing evangelisation of students; and academic achievement. This requires the system to ensure there is equity in the distribution of resources, both human and material. Sydney Catholic Schools rightly claims to be a ‘successful system’ in terms of meeting its dual moral purpose in education and student achievement.

Strategies that have led to this ‘whole of system’ ongoing success include:

1. A whole of system commitment to a small number of ambitious goals for improvement, as outlined in the system strategic plan “New Horizons”.
2. A relentless focus on ensuring the success of all schools and students.
3. An emphasis on capacity building at all levels of the system, including system leaders, Principals, Assistant Principals, Religious Education Coordinators and Teachers. Extensive efforts support leadership development and improved teaching practice, not only through professional development but through the use of coaches, planning processes, and evaluation frameworks. Many networks have been created within and across the region.

4. A commitment to continuous improvement, the use of data and research, and strong implementation plans to support school improvement.
5. Effective use of resources and equity in distribution.

The Regional Consultants perform a pivotal leadership role by working closely with schools to ensure leadership development/performance, effective strategy execution, policy implementation, monitoring and accountability. The system makes available a range of services to support the effective operation of schools including legal, human resources, financial and facilities assistance. The Regional Office provides a range of services to support improved student learning and wellbeing. The team of Education Officers, Leaders of Learning in Primary, Secondary, Diverse Learning and Wellbeing work across the schools to deliver the services.

Looking to the future, the system continues to be agile in response to increasing demographic diversity, high-rise developments within the region, community expectations and the changing nature of parishes. In the Sydney Archdiocese, there are a growing number of geographically linked Parish Primary and Regional Secondary schools, that have formally decided to operate as a Kindergarten to Year 12 'Network' of schools, so as to provide students with an enriched, integrated educational and faith development experience. Once enrolled at the primary level into a Network school, students have guaranteed enrolment in the Network Secondary College/s.

A 'network' school means the schools agree to collaborate more closely on a range of shared approaches, including:

- enrolment of students;
- an aligned curriculum ensuring sequence without overlap, a shared vision for learning and pedagogical framework;
- joint focus on special programs;
- professional development for teachers; and
- shared Counsellors.

Many of the network schools are also looking to provide early childhood centres, before and after school care and links with other Catholic agencies and partnerships with universities and the TAFE sector.

Literature Review:

The literature review that frames this study has been guided by the research of scholars Hallinger and Heck (2010). This study assumes “studies of *school improvement* must assess change (i.e. improvement or decline) in the school’s academic processes and learning outcomes over a period of time. . .[and]. . .that *school improvement leadership* is directed towards growth in student learning” (p. 96). Further, it accepts the assertion that whilst leadership is a catalyst for school improvement, there are three ways of qualifying this claim – “Effective leadership styles and strategies are highly contextualised. . .school’s culture, or capacity for educational improvement. . .[and]. . .collaborative [school] leadership, as opposed to leadership from the principal alone” (p. 107). As the schools in this study are systemic schools aligned to systems governance structures, policy and accountability, we further add, “alignment between systems and schools is dependent upon the relationship between the principals and System support officers” (Andrews, Conway, & Smith, 2017, pp. 8-9).

This study focused on successful or effective schools, which were selected based on measures of student achievement, where performance demonstrated by results indicates that they are performing at or above comparable system and nationally like schools. This view of successful or effective schools often defaults to the work of Purkey and Smith (1985) who consider an effective school as one who views teaching as its central purpose and measures success by students’ progress in knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, they add that this is not the only measure of effectiveness, rather schools should be viewed holistically such that other factors that contribute to success need to be considered. These factors include: the provision of an environment in which teaching and learning can occur; the quality of the interrelationships between people and structures; the attitudes and behaviours of the teachers and other staff; and the acceptance that all students are capable of learning.

Drawing on a definition of sustainable school success from previous school-based school improvement case study research (Andrews, Conway, & Smith, 2017; Andrews, Crowther, Morgan, & O’Neill, 2012; Andrews & USQ-LRI Research Team, 2009), school success is constituted as:

. . .enhanced school achievements in agreed high priority goal areas, based on documented evidence of those achievements and teachers’ expressed confidence in their school’s capacity to extend and sustain those achievements into the future. (Andrews & USQ-LRI Research Team, 2009, p. 4)

This literature review now explores current research and writing around the factors contributing to school success, that is, Context, Culture, Collaboration, System-School Alignment (Coherence) and Effective Leadership.

Context

Hallinger and Heck (2010) describe context as student composition, teacher experience, principal stability, teacher professional certification, and SES data (ICSEA). Further Murphy (2013, p. 260) adds context is critical and components include:

History and experience, type of school, nature of the community and the district, level of schooling, and an assortment of other contextual factors are important in the development of academic press and supportive culture. . . .[and claim]. . . .When improvement efforts do not fit at the school, they rarely flourish.

And further, as Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) observe, “one cannot separate the leader(s) from the context” (p. 799). In addition, Harris and Jones (2015) claim evidence shows how powerful contextual and cultural influences affect policy implementation in significant ways.

Context in organisations is often referred to as a slippery notion, however, for a researcher an explicit definition needs to be presented. “[H]uman action can be rendered meaningful only by relating it to the contexts in which it takes place. The meaning and consequences of a behaviour pattern will vary with the context in which it occurs” (Gouldner, 1955 as quoted in Bate, 2014, p. 3).

Bate (2014), in an extensive review of the literature, offers several definitions which usually include: the surroundings associated with phenomena which help illuminate the phenomena; the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs; and a catch all word that refers to all those things in the situation which are relevant to meaning in some sense, but have not yet been identified (see Bate p. 6). However, most researchers agree that within the organisational environment there are context dimensions: Strategic, Cultural, Technical, and Structural and all of these dimensions need to be operationalised. In addition, context needs to be viewed as macro, micro and meso, the distinctions of which will be blurred, and context is not just physical space but also has a temporal context. Therefore, a longitudinal, historical view of practice is essential if the present is to be understood, and therefore processes in which people engage in over time are important. It is about “how people (selectively) attend to, interpret, and attach significance and relevance to what they perceive as being . . . external to themselves and how that [impacts] behaviour and interactions with others” (Bate, p. 8). It is this basis that context can be receptive or non-receptive to change and needs to be considered holistically, and inherent within the context is the action of leadership.

Given the complexity of context and the notion that it is ‘slippery,’ for the purpose of this study, context will be considered as having the following domains:

- Leadership – style, method, level of support from internal and external authorities (including a leader who has the ability to create a receptive context, at the same time as taking remedial action against the non-receptive aspects of the wider context)
- Political – level of empowerment, locus of decision making, mix of allies
- Cultural – shared mindsets (values, beliefs, norms) around action, ways of thinking
- Structural – resources and systems, training.

Qing Gu and Olaf Johansson (2012), in their research report on sustaining school performance, note the notions of “[u]nderstanding the nature of schools’ internal and external contexts, how they are mediated by school leadership, especially the leadership of the principal, and . . . how the interplay between contexts may influence. . . the fabric [of the school]” (p. 322). They argue the importance of context to school performance because:

1. School context is not static but a dynamic concept.
2. Building relational bonds – internal and external (especially in low SES areas) – the capacity to build warm, open, trusting, supportive and collaborative cultures within the context – this glue moves a school forward together. In low SES areas – is a broader community problem.
3. While talking about working in low SES schools, the principals are resilient, optimistic and hopeful – perhaps also passionate? Passion for social justice — principals need a strong sense of moral purpose, trustworthiness, persistence, flexible thinking and commitment and need to build collective capacity.

Culture

The most intransigent factor within a school is reportedly organisational culture, which is usually defined as *the way things are done around here* and is represented by group norms and assumptions (tacit) held by people within the organisation. Further, Schein (1985, 2010) and Deal and Peterson (2016) outline that culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the ‘persona’ of the school. They constitute learned patterns of behaviour that form the:

- . . . body of solutions (assumptions about reality, truth, time, space, human nature, human activity, human relationships) to external and internal problems that has worked consistently for a group and that is therefore taught to new members as the correct way to think about and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1985, p. 4)

A school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions, and practices, and it is heavily shaped by a school's particular institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture. Other contributing influences include the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles upon which the school was founded (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 1985). Often this literature describes school cultures as negative (unwilling to change) or positive (open to change). The following list is a representative selection of a few characteristics commonly associated with positive school cultures:

- The individual successes of teachers and students are recognized and celebrated.
- Relationships and interactions are characterized by openness, trust, respect, and appreciation.
- Staff relationships are collegial, collaborative, and productive, and all staff members are held to high professional standards.
- Students and staff members feel emotionally and physical safe, and the school's policies and facilities promote student safety.
- School leaders, teachers, and staff members model positive, healthy behaviors for students.
- Mistakes not punished as failures, but they are seen as opportunities to learn and grow for both students and educators.
- Students are consistently held to high academic expectations, and a majority of students meet or exceed those expectations.
- Important leadership decisions are made collaboratively with input from staff members, students, and parents.
- Criticism, when voiced, is constructive and well intentioned, not antagonistic or self-serving.
- Educational resources and learning opportunities are equitably distributed, and all students, including minorities and students with disabilities.
- All students have access to the academic support and services they may need to succeed.

(<https://www.leaderinme.org/every-child-is-a-leader-school-culture/> - FranklinCovey | Education)

Given the nature of schools, it is telling that Harris and Jones (2016) observe:

. . .the idea that education can simply borrow policies or strategies from education systems further up the PISA food chain is inherently problematic. . .borrowing strategies that are effective in one context and superimposing them, without adaptation on other systems has its limitations, complexities and drawbacks. (p. 4)

In addition, the current emphasis placed on collective capacity (collective self-efficacy – Donohoo, 2018), collaboration and building collaborative cultures within a school's environment assumes the existence of a community where people trust each other, share similar values and respect each other. Earlier research (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Newmann & Associates, 1996) established that:

[H]uman resources—such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership, and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions. . . .The need to improve the culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships in schools has received too little attention. (Kruse et al., 1994, p. 163)

Further research (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) established relational trust, that is, interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a group setting and is viewed as a core component of successful school improvement. Central to building relational trust is collaboration where collaboration is viewed as an inter-organisational process (Wood & Gray, 1991) and others (Sutton & Shouse, 2016; von Schuman, 2006) where collaboration is when people, sharing a common goal, engage in a creative/innovative process to share knowledge, learn and build consensus. The development of relational trust becomes then a component of building school capacity for improvement. Whilst school capacity refers to organisational, social and intellectual capacity within the school, and requires

. . . educational programs that are aligned to state curriculum standards; seeks ways to implement programs that promote student achievement over time; develops over systems of communication; involves staff in educational decision-making; has a well-developed range of academic and social support services for students; and has a professional teaching staff well qualified for assignments and responsibilities and committed to the school's purpose. (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 101)

Crowther, Andrews, and Conway (2013) note that developing capacity needs to focus on both individual teachers as well as the collective, and is essential for improvement.

In summary, where context is considered as multi-faceted and schools as organisation are diverse and multi-layered operating in four dimensions (structural, cultural, technical and strategic), then contexts have four domains (leadership, culture, political and structural). In addition, contexts have an inner context (organisational structure, resources, capabilities, culture and politics) and outer context (social systems, environmental context, laws, policy, regulations).

Within the context then, ensuring ongoing responsiveness to the ever changing demands requires leaders to build receptive capacity (and manage non-receptive capacity), especially the capacity of people to collaborate in a trusting environment, to move organisation to meet changing needs. Implicit in this action is the consideration of the processes of building capacity within a school, a process that requires a whole school approach and systems thinking. This movement towards ‘holism’ (Crowther & Associates, 2011) has renewed consideration of systems thinking (Senge, 2011) in conversations about school improvement and effective leadership. These conversations have encompassed exploration of schools as social systems, each unique, and each being influenced by both internal and external environment – they need to be adaptive (Owens & Valesky, 2015).

Schools as Open Social Systems

Owens and Valesky (2015) write:

Attention has been devoted increasingly to strategies for improving the performance of organizations not by changing their structures as a way of inducing more effective organizational behavior, but by dealing with participants in ways that bring about desirable changes in the structure . . . [and] in the character and quality of the social environment in which people work. (p. 98)

This has led to increasing interest in exploring schools as open social systems, where schools are viewed as unique entities – the context in which human interaction occurs (interrelationship and their response to environment). Therefore, an organisation “is an integrated system of interdependent structures and functions. . . .is constituted of groups. . .consisting of persons who must work in harmony. . .and know what others are doing” (p. 98). As Senge (2000) some years ago reminded us, we live in a world of complexity as it is a world dominated by change and ambiguity. As a result, schools work in a complex environment (both internally and externally) where you cannot ascribe phenomena to any single causative factor. Schools need to be quick and nimble learners, and organisational performance needs to be confident and competent. Open systems are therefore considered to be complex where an understanding of individual parts of the whole system is essential. Systems therefore need to adapt individual and collective behaviour to be able to respond to changing events. These systems are referred to as Complex Adaptive Systems (Owens & Valesky, 2015).

Although an individual school may belong to a larger system, each school is a unique social system, and the relationship between them depends on a degree of coupling. Coupling is the “glue” that holds relationships together, and schools are usually defined as “loosely coupled” – that is, although the organisational systems and subsystems and the activities they carry out are related to each other, each preserves its own identity and individuality. Often schools can be tightly coupled for

administrative purposes, but loosely coupled between larger systems and schools and/or between a school's administration and subsystems within the school (usually instruction and learning). The latter will vary depending on school use of structure and resources (and professional learning).

Effectiveness of organisation requires flexible structures; lateral and vertical communication; and expert power (rather than hierarchical power) as the dominant base of influence where emphasis on exchanges of information is more important than giving directions. As environmental conditions change, the school needs to adapt by responding with appropriate structures and administrative responses. Internal and external demands on schools are frequent and varied as is the complex nature of many problems that arise for which there is no known solution and impacts on relationships across the school. These issues or problems are what Weick (1976) called wicked and Schön (1995) called messy, and require the school to adapt to the changing nature of the environment. This adaptation requires new ways of thinking (Senge, 2000) in a world that is dominated by change and ambiguity and as such schools need to be nimble – to be quick learners. Two issues arise out of this complexity, the importance of context and the nature of leadership.

How schools address these approaches and issues is discussed in detail in Duignan's (2012) book, *Educational Leadership*. Duignan makes the following observations (drawn from his and other researchers – Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Wildy, Loudon, Dempster, & Freakley, 2001):

- a. Many of the internal challenges facing educational leaders can be defined as tensions that involve situations where values and ethics are contested ("contestable values dualities, or ethical dilemmas" (p. 59)).
- b. The tensions are usually among or between people based on differences in values, interests and preferences, "rarely can issues involving complex human behaviour. . .be reduced or resolved by logical and linear management processes. . .the leader [needs] to have a large measure of emotional intelligence" (p. 59).
- c. Many of the tensions relate to student discipline, staff relationships and teacher competence.
- d. One of the most consistent tensions is deciding whether to support decisions promoting the good of the group or the rights of the individual. No matter what the decision, leaders often agonise over the impact of their decisions on the individual (p. 61), for example, in the case of ineffective staff, long and loyal service is acknowledged and often the individual is considered before that of the needs of the student body.

- e. Educational leaders need frames of reference and decision guidelines for making choices in situations that present ethical positions (p. 77).
- f. There is a special need for leaders to call on their core values and moral purpose when leading in complex and dynamic situations (p. 92) and this need to be clearly articulated and authentically applied.
- g. A method as proposed should be followed in ethical decision making processes (p. 108).

However, adding to complexity, the solution in one school may not apply to another. All schools are not the same (Harris & Jones, 2018; Leithwood, 2010) as each school serves a unique community (teachers, parents, students) with their own values, beliefs, goals, concerns, and in “many subtle ways . . . teachers, administrators and students accommodate to the rules, regulations and discipline of the school” (Harris & Jones, 2018, p. 100).

Effectiveness of leadership style depends on the appropriateness in terms of critical contingencies in a given situation (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Further, it depends on the power of the leader; the quality of relationships between leaders and others; clarity of structures of the task; degree of cooperation required to implement the decision; level of skill and motivation of people; and agreement of outcomes (goals). Contingency enables you to deal with motivation, decision-making, organisational change, organisational culture and conflict management.

Leading Complex Adaptive Systems

In any consideration about educational leadership, Gronn and Ribbins (1996) argue that context needs to be taken seriously as context is a combination of situational, cultural and historical circumstances and often then defines and gives meaning to leadership. No one style of leadership is suitable for all school contexts. Rather, these depictions suggest that approaches to leadership are required which are attuned to the needs of the school as opposed to being determined by normative theories and models of what is deemed to constitute ‘effective’ leadership. Further, and in alignment with this thinking, Uhl-Bien (2006) argues that leadership is essentially relational, viewing “organizations as systems in which the actions of the manager are embedded. . . in organizational and environmental context but within a dynamic and unfolding history of role-bounded interpersonal relationships” (Osborn, 1999 as quoted in Uhl-Bien 2006, p. 663). Leaders, they argue, are faced with complexity, that is, interconnectivity which “occurs when networked interactions allow events to link up and create unexpected outcomes, [and as a result it is] more essential than ever for organizations to adapt” (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 10).

As a result of unpredictable organisational change and uncertainty, Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) claim organisations will turn to order, that is, increased accountability and regulation. Instead, what is needed is adaptive responses, as they capitalise on collective intelligence of groups and networks and often depends on the capacity for change that exists in the organisation. Therefore, leadership is not restricted to formal leaders; the relational perspectives will focus on processes of interaction, conversation, narrating, dialoguing, and shift the concept of organisation and that of leadership from a thing to a social construct (pp. 18-19). The emergence of distributed leadership (often called collaborative leadership) is a reflection of this reality. Collaborative leadership entails collaborative decisions focused on educational improvement, school governance that engages staff and students, encourages commitment, broad participation, shared accountability for student learning, and places emphasis on broad participation to evaluate a school's academic effort (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Hallinger and Heck (2010) conclude their study on impacts on student achievement with three statements:

1. No single approach to leadership will work to improve all schools. Effective leadership styles and strategies are highly contextualised. They must be responsive both to the initial state of the school's academic capacity and learning outcomes and to changes in these conditions as they develop (or decline) over time.
2. Leadership, while potentially an important driver for change, is by itself insufficient to bring about improvement in learning outcomes. The school's culture, or capacity for educational improvement, becomes one key target for change interventions in concert with efforts to strengthen leadership. Need to focus on both.
3. Collaborative leadership, as opposed to leadership from the principal alone, may offer a path towards more sustainable school improvement. Inclusion of a broader range of leaders in the School Improvement capacity, or conditions in the school that directly impact teaching and learning.

Given these findings, it is not surprising that particular adjectives have been coined to describe the particular work of leadership and or leaders. Given the context, then such terms as moral, instructional, transformative, strategic, have been used to describe the desired work, especially of the principal. There is a growing realisation (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; Woods & Roberts, 2018) that all of these actions may be important over time, depending on the action that is needed. The use of leaders of learning has grown in the literature, and what form it takes and by whom will vary according to context. As Duignan (2012) alludes, many authors (see Duignan, p. 118) recognise that maximising leadership influence in schools is a collective responsibility and as Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008)

conclude, “a commitment to greater leadership density and capacity within schools” (p. 31) is required to maximise student outcomes.

Further, capacity building to enhance student learning outcomes has emerged as an important action of leadership rather than ‘just the principal alone’. Darling-Hammond (2010) and Mitchell and Sackney (2016) contend that authentic teaching and learning requires an early and ongoing commitment to building professional capacity. Mitchell and Sackney (2016) found that in high capacity learning schools, educational leadership emerged organically throughout the school. They see a set of leadership activities intended to align high quality educational practice towards the goal of improved student learning as central to leadership work. In this understanding of capacity building, school leaders take a collaborative, learning orientated approach to regulating, coordinating, expanding and protecting professional practice. The principals have the role of enabling, guiding and focusing teachers back to a sense of shared purpose, which is linked to the alignment of practice. This role has been explored by Robinson (2007) who completing a meta-analysis, indicated that these actions of principals had the greatest impact (size effect) on the quality of teaching and on teachers’ learning and as a result, on student learning.

Critical to this study on effective leadership is capacity building and relational, adaptive leadership. Crowther and Associates (2011) argue that these are the keys to sustaining school improvement. Sustainability relates to in-school alignment – school coherence – where the development of a shared vision and Schoolwide Pedagogy® (see also Crowther, Andrews, & Conway, 2013) enables people to work together and distribute leadership. The Crowther and Associates (2011) capacity building model provides insight into how a school can manage the balance between the requirements of the system and the way of working together developed in the school. Professional learning communities do not provide sustainable school-wide change, as Andrews and Lewis (2002) found, a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the school may have deep commitment to change, while other teachers were merely compliant for as long as it is necessary.

Sharratt and Fullan (2009) define capacity building specifically as, “investment in the development of the knowledge, skills and competencies of individuals and groups to focus on assessment literacy and instructional effectiveness that leads to school improvement” (p. 5). They note that school districts have realised that capacity building is the key to successful school improvement (that is, improved student achievement) but argue that the actual goal is *realisation*, via systemic capacity building. For Sharratt and Fullan, the key to systemic capacity building is knowledge building that is universally

aligned and coherent – “knowledge building that emanates from centre and the field” (p. 5). They add that alignment of the district vision and shared school vision is an important part of this success.

Summary on Leadership

As Bush and Glover (2014) claim, to understand leadership, three dimensions – influence, values and vision – need to be considered. Leadership, they argue, involves leaders engaging in social and cultural processes that direct participants towards action and goals. Thus the central concept is influence and not authority, process and not product, and ultimately vision and values.

However, the importance of the principal, the leader, should not be seen as just leadership. Two areas that arise in the literature particularly relate to the influence of the principal. The first is the influence on the quality of teaching through developing intentional collective strategies (see for example, DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Duignan, 2012; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; and many others) to strengthen their field of influence. Duignan (2012, p. 123) claims the second area is the concept of presence. A number of authors (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009; Ford, Harding, Gilmore, & Richardson, 2017) have raised the issue of absence in the literature around the concept of “presence” (Ford et al., 2017) especially as it refers to material presence – that is, a “leader is materialized through practices of working on a corporeal self for presentation to both self and others” (p. 1553). Many would talk rather about image in developing an authentic leadership presence (Criswell & Campbell, 2008). In regards to the latter, “an authentic image requires [the leader] to gain a clear picture of the image people are currently perceiving, decide what image you would like to portray, and develop the skills to close the gap” (p. 13). Further they indicate that leaders are better able to influence if they convey a strong vision – “having the ability to lead change, being dynamic, showing competence in strategic planning, being farsighted, inspiring commitment, being original, and having a strong executive image” (p. 14). This is not a person’s external aspects (physical appearance, formal status), but rather the impression you make on others. The authors emphasise that it is how you communicate the message and how you develop a personal connection (know your staff), and the need to be present with them – there is a need to focus on “we”.

Duignan (2012) explores the concept of leadership presence and refers to presence as authentic relationships with others that expands your field of influence. Also, he draws on the work of Tolle (2005) who advises that, “whenever you interact with people, don’t be there primarily as a function or a role, but as a field of conscious presence” (p. 105) because “a mere presence. . .has a transformational effect on whoever they come into contact with” (p. 155). Further, he argues that if

leaders are to generate positive influence fields, it is not just what we do or what we enact that makes the “greatest impact on others, but the way we do them and the degree to which we are present to and for each other in the sacred but conscious space” (p. 108). In relation to authentic relationship, Duignan (2012) and others (see Bezzina, 2007, 2012; Starratt, 2007) explored the concept of moral purpose. This exploration reveals an increase in the use of the phrase with varying interpretations for application, but often without depth as to what is specifically defined as moral purpose.

At the core of a common definition for ‘moral purpose’ is a commitment of action prompted by fundamental values and ethics, and relevant to the focus of this study is the mutual relationship of moral purpose and leadership. Bezzina (2007, 2012) drew attention to the gap in understanding the connection between shared moral purpose and shared leadership in the pursuit of learning. He pointed to the need for having a commitment to making a difference in the lives and outcomes of students. Further, Bezzina’s (2013) study found that explicitly drawing attention to elements of moral purpose, “increased teacher and leader sensitivity to their operation. . .resulted in changed teacher practice and enhanced learning outcomes for students (p. 651). Earlier, Fullan (2001) concluded that moral purpose and sustained performance of organisations are mutually dependent. More recently the work of Conway and Andrews (2016) in whole school improvement processes (IDEAS) emphasised the importance of “the commitment of leadership to a set of values underpinning a clearly articulated and enacted vision that provides a moral compass upon which all mutualistic goal setting is orientated” (p. 176).

Yet, while some studies have emerged and opened up the conversation, much is still unsaid about how moral purpose is understood and enacted. Bandura (2006) pointed to the understandings of moral agency as behaviour that is true to one’s moral principles, and moral efficacy as the personal belief in one’s self to act with persistent moral integrity in the face of adversity.

Schools as Systems within Systems

More recent understandings arising from complex systems theory shed further light on the failure of previous large-scale reform efforts by providing insight into ‘hidden’ factors influencing systemic reform efforts. Complex systems science recognises the interdependence of parts of the system and the impact of networks of relationships within and between systems (<http://necsi.edu/>). The individual parts of a complex system cannot be understood in isolation. As their interdependencies may not be obvious, an intervention in one part of the complex system will have an (unlooked for) effect elsewhere (<http://necsi.edu/>). According to Bar-Yam (2011), many different types of networks

connect different parts of a complex system. The connected parts influence each other, to varying degrees, through their interactions. As Bar-Yam (2011) notes, “An important property of a network is its *topology*: which elements are directly connected to which others” (para. 4). Four topographies are identified: centralised, decentralised, fragmented and distributed – each, in their own way, having a direct impact on communication and influence within the system.

The relevance of this complex systems thinking to large-scale educational reform is well illustrated by Davis, Sumara, and D’Amour (2012) in their study of three school districts in Alberta, Canada that had administered resources to improve learning. The study focused on the strategies and emphases used by each of the districts as these offered insights into the characteristics of each of the three complex systems (the school districts) as they adapted to the new learning. Importantly, while the three school districts were all implementing the same change there were significant differences between them in terms of their histories, and systemic cultures. The likelihood of the success of the learning intervention was strongly influenced by the network typology within each of the school districts. Their findings indicated that where the networks are centralised, if the centre fails to adapt, the whole system fails. Both distributed and fragmented networks did not provide the necessary communication connectivity and influence. A decentralised network, however, has many centres, reasonably efficient communication and reasonably robust structures enabling considerable adaptability and flexibility. A school system’s characteristic networks are therefore an important consideration in its learning and adaptation to changing environments.

As Davis et al. (2012) conclude, the internal culture of the school district powerfully influences how the learning intervention is understood and implemented. With this knowledge, they argue that a great deal can be done on a structural level to ensure the types of associative networks that characterise the school district will support the learning. This suggests that there is a clear link to the likely success (or failure) of the intervention and the type of networks that characterise a particular complex system.

Alignment

The concept of alignment refers to structural and cognitive coherence between a system and its schools and within individual schools. Crowther, Andrews, Morgan, & O’Neill (2012) reported on research carried out in the Catholic education system in Sydney that provided insight into how a school system can work with its schools to improve student outcomes. The study showed that through data driven change, student outcomes had improved significantly. Importantly, the system had worked

with the schools, providing mechanisms that supported the change. This seems to provide an example of the kind of paradigm shift described by Darling-Hammond (2010) which includes the assertion that school districts must “move beyond the array of ad hoc initiatives . . . [focusing instead on] . . . knowledge based systems that help build capacity in schools for doing work well . . . [and developing] their capacity to support successful change” (p. 271).

Crowther et al. (2012) found that sustained success in student achievement requires ‘multiple leadership sources’, encompassing system, school and developmental project leadership constructs and processes. The complexity of leadership is also recognised. This encompassed a combination of strategic, organisation-wide transformational, and educative leadership with leaders working mutualistically within and across the system. Teacher pedagogical leadership was also found to be vital for school success and the construct of Schoolwide Pedagogy® (Crowther et al., 2013) emerged from the research as a core variable in the transformation of student learning outcomes. Crowther et al. (2012) concluded that, for maximum effectiveness, system, project and school leaders must understand each other’s values and priorities, negotiate common territory and then go to considerable lengths to demonstrate consistency and alignment. It is further contended that school success is a mix of broadly defined student and teacher achievements, visionary systemic direction, school–system values alignment, umbrella pedagogical frameworks (SWP®), and school development as a durational journey and multiple leadership sources: all dynamics as captured by the Crowther et al. (2012) capacity building model.

Concluding Comments

At the heart of a study on effective leadership is the sensitivity towards leading in today’s complex and dynamic environment. This study was guided by previous research (Hallinger & Heck 2010) who maintained that while leadership is a catalyst for enhanced student learning outcomes (school improvement), three other qualifiers are important, that is, context, culture, and collaboration. Also important in this study of effective leadership is alignment between schools and systems (Andrews et al., 2017). Therefore, such a study needs to take account of the school context: the internal and external pressures, interactions and relationships, resources, the capacity the school has for improvement, and how school success is viewed and how these successes can be enhanced.

Researching effectiveness within social systems is in itself challenging. More often than not, studies do not provide a clear understanding of concepts to be explored. Also, by taking an interpretivist approach, the focus is on how people make sense of what they see – how selectively they attach

significance and relevance to what they perceive and how this then drives action, interaction and behaviour. Schools and the context in which action occurs are unique, however, they do belong to a broader system (Sydney Catholic Schools – Eastern Region) which itself is unique yet nested within a wider system of schools (Sydney Catholic Schools of the Sydney Archdiocese).

This literature review establishes the position we take on the slippery concepts of context, culture and collaboration. Also highlighted is the importance of collaborative leadership within an open system. In addition, we present what the literature illuminates as leading complex organisations, not just the role of leadership but that of the leader in a unique Catholic school environment.

Research Design

This project was conducted with a mixed methods research design where quantitative data formed the initial basis for the selection of ‘successful’ schools, and the data collection of leadership perspectives being of a qualitative nature focused on the strengthening of leadership for sustainable school improvement. Multiple school sites in the Eastern Region of the Sydney Catholic Schools system were selected, in order to seek response to the overall research question:

How does an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement?

An initial collection of relevant data by the SCS Eastern Region Office was used to select the participant schools based on the overall factor of ‘success’. The contextual statement prepared by the office of the Eastern Region, and provided in this report as the background to the research, was used to support the determinants of success. The data used to determine the overall factor of ‘success’ were provided by the SCS Eastern Region Office. It comprised a cross section analysis of NAPLAN and HSC results, Annual Reports and relevant information provided by the Regional Consultants. This database informed a purposive sampling of schools that were deemed to be successful. A total of 12 schools were initially invited and, for varying reasons related to accessibility to the schools during the projected timeline of the study, eight schools accepted to be participants of the study. A point of interest is that of the initial 12 selected, eight of the schools had at some time in the past decade adopted the school improvement project IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools), and of the eight schools that finally accepted to be participants, seven of those IDEAS schools were in the count.

Background information relating to the participating schools and principals is as follows:

Participant schools:

4 Primary schools: all co-ed; enrolment range from 98 to 371; ICSEA range from 852 to 1218; all long established schools of varying stages of building renovations; and

4 Secondary schools: 1 co-ed, 1 all boys, 2 all girls; enrolment range from 835-987; ICSEA range from 1066 to 1131; all long established schools with varying stages of building renovations.

Participant principals:

Principals loosely (and coincidentally) fell into two groups of experience: 4 experienced principals previous to the current appointments; 4 newly appointed, first time principals in a timeline of the last 3 months to 2 years; within this group was also the recognition of appointments from both within the region, from another Sydney Catholic Schools region and from another Diocese.

Historical movement of leadership:

Length of service in current position ranged from one term to four years, including from long-term familiarity with the community before being appointed as principal, to new arrivals from inside the ER, other SCS regions and another diocese. Historical movement of the principals within the schools previous to current appointees ranged from long-term approximating 10 years to four principals in two years. Of note, is the overall longer term at the same school of many of the other members of the schools' leadership teams.

The research design comprised two phases as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Collection Timeline and Action Plan

Phase	Date	Activity	Data	Personnel involved
1	August 2017	Selection of schools	Evidence compiled and criteria applied by the SCS Eastern Region Office	Eastern Region personnel
	November 2017	- Information workshop - DISA survey planning	Reflective analysis activities by each school	Eastern Region personnel and USQ-LRI personnel
2	January-April 2018	DISA Survey	DISA report	Report completed by USQ-LRI personnel
	May 2018	2 hour school visit to each of eight schools	Documents and Interviews	Research team personnel with each Principal and their leadership team
	August 2018	Group workshop	Each principal's review of the initial analysis of their school, individual responses and a focus group conversation	8 principals, 2 USQ-LRI researchers, 1 internal co-researcher, 1 external validator
	October 2018	Focus group interview	Group interview focused on the consultants' roles in relation to their support of the principals	2 USQ-LRI researchers, 4 regional consultants

Phase 1 was a collation of existing systemic data of schools in the SCS Eastern Region, and the selection of schools based on criteria for school success and systemic expectations. The selection of the schools was also guided by evidence of ongoing 'school success' as defined by earlier research of the Leadership Research International (LRI) team at the University of Southern Queensland (Andrews & USQ-LRI Research Team, 2009):

'School success' is defined as enhanced school outcomes in agreed high priority goal areas, based on documented evidence of those achievements and teachers' expressed confidence in their school's capacity to sustain and extend those achievements into the future. (Andrews & USQ-LRI Research Team, 2009, p. 4)

Phase 2 entailed the collection and analysis of data through: 1) a whole of school survey tool, that is, the Diagnostic Inventory for School Alignment (DISA); 2) interviewing of the principal and the leadership team of each participant school; 3) workshopping with the principals; and 4) a focused interview with the regional consultants to the participant schools. Throughout this data collection, the following questions were used:

- i. What is meant by ongoing school success for this school?
- ii. What evidence is available?
- iii. What factors contribute to ongoing school success?

The interviews and the workshop provided greater depth of understanding for the emergence of effective leadership in a school that has reportedly sustained ongoing school success, with the following guiding questions:

- iv. What emerges in understanding the impact of context, culture and collaboration contributing to the strengthening of leadership?
- v. What other factors might contribute to the reported outcomes?
- vi. What is the effect of a change in leadership personnel? (if applicable to the case study school)

The quantitative data of phase 1 were collated from the records of the Eastern Region Office, whilst the qualitative data of phase 2 were collected by the researchers via the DISA survey, the interviews, the focused workshop and the focused interview.

The **DISA report**, derived from the survey of staff, parents and students of each participant school, encompassed perceptive data about School Outcomes including Student Achievement and Well-Being; Staff Professionalism; the Image of the School in the community; Alignment within the organisation (aspirations to vision); Staff professional learning; and Resourcing. Further detail about

each of these elements can be gleaned from Figure 3. This diagnostic tool has provided a rich depth of perceptive data unique to each school setting with respect to Organisational (School) Alignment and the School's Capital. Alignment is based on the concept of 'harmony' or 'coherence', that is, the creation of meaningful links between the key features of the school – the degree of alignment in the DISA is reflected in the Index of School Alignment (see Figure 1).

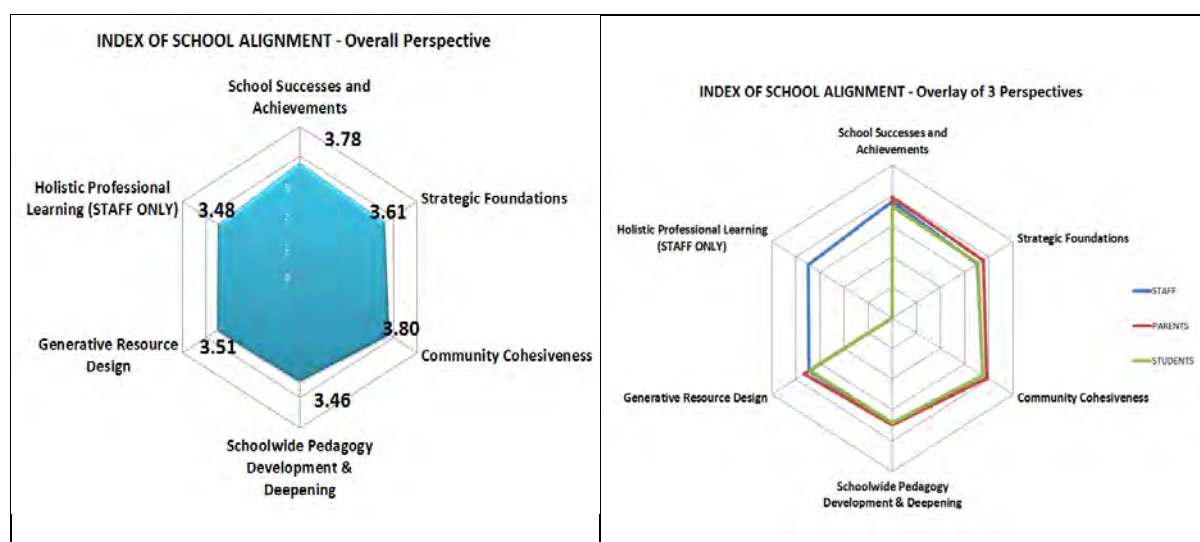


Figure 1: Index of School Alignment (an example)

School Capital, a calculation of the school's level of social, intellectual and organisational capital, is represented in The Index of School Capital (see Figure 2), which derives from a synthesis of a number of 'capital' models of school capacity building (Hargreaves, 2001; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003). The example provided shows that the relatively higher level of social capital amongst staff and parents indicates the potential for building capacity together, thus enabling the collective strength to address challenging perspectives, such as indicated in Figure 2 as Schoolwide Pedagogy Development & Deepening and Holistic Professional Learning.

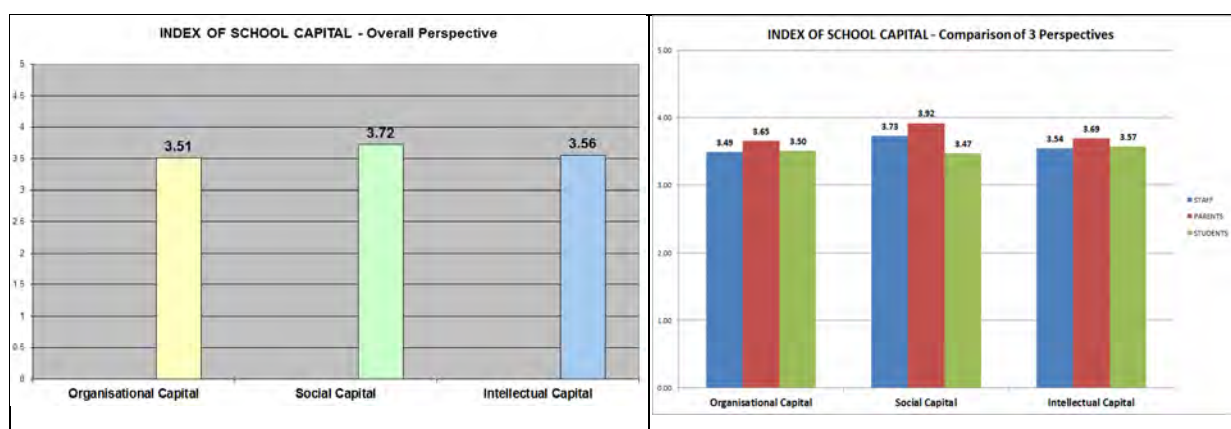


Figure 2: Index of School Capital (an example)

Informal interviews focused on the evidence of ongoing ‘school success’, as outlined earlier in this section, and the emergence of effective leadership in a school that has reportedly (as per the SCS Eastern Region data) sustained ongoing school success. These interviews were conducted at each school site, with each of the respective eight school principals (30 minute interview) and their respective leadership teams (45 minute interview). Each interview was audio recorded, later transcribed and then analysed by the research team for the production of a summary that was shared with each principal at the focused workshop.

A **focused workshop** was conducted by the researchers with the eight principals. Each of the principals was invited to initially review the transcribed interviews and the researchers’ initial analysis of the interviews, to respond from their perspective with confirmation and/or further comment, and to engage in a focused conversation circle with emerging themes as shared amongst the group. This workshop provided the researchers with added depth of clarity to the principals’ perceptions and understandings in relation to the overall research question.

A **focused interview** was conducted by the researchers with the four regional consultants, three of whom each have responsibility for at least one of the eight schools. This set of data provided opportunity for the consultants to explain their roles in relation to their support of the principals.

It was important that the data of each of the participant schools were mapped against the research questions and that the researchers gained a rich understanding of the circumstances, as shared by the principals and their leadership team, in each of the schools.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A cross-case analysis (that is, an analysis that considered data across all eight participant schools for an appreciation of the key themes, together with any apparent outliers) was the method used to explore the possibility of themes emerging from the data set in relation to the shared evidence of ongoing ‘school success’ and the leadership action. This approach framed the overall research question calling for an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contributing to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement. The school-based participants of this research project, that is, each principal and their leadership team, provided responses to the questions related to: What is meant by ongoing school success for this school?; What evidence is available?; and What factors contribute to ongoing school success?

The nature of the informal interviews meant that a ‘lock-step’ response to each of these questions was not the aim, but rather a narrative from the perspective of the interviewees as to how they interpreted the concepts of ‘context’, ‘culture’ and ‘collaboration’. By design, this approach presented

some challenges for the researchers in terms of finding the 'right' response, but more importantly was the expression of each of the participants as they wove the concepts of context, culture and collaboration into their narrative. Inherently, this approach highlighted the authenticity of the data without the possibility of contrived definitions, and encouraged the interviewees to tell their story of leadership and how it is affected by the context, the culture and the collaboration in situ. It became apparent to the researchers that the principals found it difficult to separate their understandings of Context and Culture. Their narratives were starkly representative of their 'lived in' experience and it could be interpreted that organisational culture is what dominates their operations, both in time and action. Each principal was interviewed on site and Table 2 is a summary of the interview data.

Table 2: Principals' responses summarised

Principal's vision/mantra/challenge [what did I come into?]	Principal's perspective of effective leadership [how did I need to work?]	Principal's understanding of effective leadership [what is the definition?]	Definition of success	Factors that have contributed to success	Factors that are inhibiting/opportunities for adding value
<p>The responses appeared to vary according to the context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Driving learning and connection to community; - To build leadership and teacher capacity; - A need to build a more trusting, collaborative culture - A need to empower the students to be more independent learners; - Sees need for adding value to T&L; - Needed to challenge the T&L in providing teachers with a view for academic success; works on a view that capacity is required for fluid movement of staff. - Focused on sustaining with the selection and movement of staff to meet the ongoing needs; - Manage the chaos and lead ahead through a process of continual change 	<p>The range of responses included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focusing on relationships and knowing how to have the 'tough' conversations; - Knowing the context; - Having a vision that consolidates the past and knowing how to move forward; - Being explicit by expressing with clarity about expectations and way forward. 	<p>Responses included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A leader who walks with the staff; building <u>respect and trusting relationships</u> with open and honest <u>communication</u>; - Having a clear <u>vision</u> for the future and ensuring that the team share this vision; - Developing a good <u>team</u> and be honest about the situation; a leadership team that leads others throughout the school; 'pick the right ones'; be prepared to have the difficult/challenging conversations; - Having a <u>presence</u> with students, teachers and parents - Building trust based on <u>credibility of previous</u> experience. 	<p>Overall, responses referred to academic success, then to the wellbeing of students and staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student attendance; NAPLAN growth; student wellbeing; student focus on learning (moved from a focus on behaviour to a focus on learning). - Engaged students; student well-being; relationships; growth in academic progress; staff confidence. - Community involvement and working together with a shared vision unique to this school - High school certificate results – especially in the growth data around students; embedding the learning framework - Academic Success plus well-being of students; having an effective leadership team; image of the school in the community; welcoming & a sense of belonging - Dual moral purpose –well-being and academic success for all. - On-going improvement; academic success; professional conversations with a focus on persistence - Academic excellence (good results) and caring for the community (happy kids); achievement for all students. 	<p>A range of responses from systemic support to school-based initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff PD about effective learning – used systemic projects and resourcing; mentoring - Mentored staff about the community and effective T&L; individualised learning, goal setting, - Students' use of language, consistency across classes is developing; use of data, analysis of students' needs, - Building a culture of success, e.g. credibility, culture of teaching, networking for leaders of pedagogy, collaboration - Collaborative leadership/restructuring of middle management with a unified approach. Trust in the goodness of people; staff led PD; prayer as a community –cohesion of purpose - Accountability – contract renewal, accreditation process; develop relationship with the system - Networking with other schools; school-parish partnership 	<p>Very few direct responses, but all related to the leadership team and/or whole staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties around agreed expectations for student growth; - Lack of shared understanding of community; engaging parents with a more shared understanding of school - Existing/entrenched cultures difficult to move - Lack of alignment through the vision for learning - Picking the 'right' people - Authenticity of contract renewal process ('Performance V Good people') - Available time

A second interview was held on site with the leadership team (inclusive of the principal) for the purpose of enriching the data that had already been collected from the principal's interview. The nature of these leadership teams at the time of the interview was varied, but all had experienced some change in personnel as reflected in Table 3.

Table 3: Nature of Schools' Leadership Teams

Compositional changes and Principal's time in the role	New Principal joined an established team (1 term)	New Deputy joined an established team (1 year)	New Principal and Deputy joined an established team (2 years)	Established team – representing considerable movement over 3-4 years	All new team (1 term-2 years)
No. of Schools	1	1	2	2	2

Table 4 provides the collated perspective of the leadership teams.

Table 4: School Leadership Teams' responses summarised

Leadership Team's vision/mantra/challenge	Leadership Team's perspective of effective leadership [how do we need to work?]	Leadership Team's understanding of effective leadership [what is the definition?]	Definition of success	Factors that have contributed	Factors that are inhibiting/opportunities for adding value
<p>One team strongly articulated: "we've got to nail what our vision and mission is about, and our strengths". Other versions of the same priority with reference to the contextual factors of expectation by staff, parents and students; knowing the student body, "You would never go into a classroom without knowing those kids".</p> <p>Most teams spoke of building a culture of collaboration, e.g. "work together giving feedback to help each other improve", for a shared understanding about learning.</p> <p>Openness around generating ideas, trialling different things and "if it doesn't work then try something else".</p>	<p>Responses ranged from a visionary perspective of working collaboratively to the practical implementation and modelling of classroom practice.</p> <p><u>Team working together with trust and shared vision</u> – "Developing a good team approach – advising each other".</p> <p><u>Building staff capacity</u> – "Young teachers – encouraged to try new ideas"; "Mentor (older teacher) gets involved. Model the way not ask anything I cannot do myself"; "Need to build capacity in others"; "Staff are empowered to lead".</p> <p><u>Modelling practice</u> – "as AP I need to also teach in classroom – important as you are in the same position as the rest of the staff".</p>	<p>Responses varied according to the needs and experiences of specific contexts. Some general themes were:</p> <p><u>Team working together with trust and shared vision</u> – a well established team considered "staff trust them. Knowing the context – knowing strengths/weaknesses/blockers. Having networks of pedagogical leaders across the system ... having a clear vision and professional development for the year well planned".</p> <p><u>Building staff capacity</u> – several teams spoke in different ways about the 'right' people, as quoted by one: "Employing people who have certain strengths–how to operate and how to motivate. Encourage others to lead and work in collaboration"; one team mentioned, "Trust in the Goodness of people – people generally want to do a good job and need to be respected that way. Bring people along with you".</p>	<p>With the exception of one team stating, "We are a high performing school – results focused and in the end it is the HSC and that's how we measure our success", all focused initially on aspects of well-being, student attendance, engagement and confidence of students. One school referred to their "dual moral purpose...a very strong relationship with the Catholic feeder schools...attendance rate high...well-being healthy".</p> <p>Several teams added evidence of involvement in co-curricular activities, image of the school in the community, celebrations of success, staff working collaboratively.</p> <p>Reference to HSC and NAPLAN results were prominent – "NAPLAN results last year were excellent...longer term [means] we're in this race...families want children to get really good results"; "Student growth has been a result of our ongoing success and teachers using the data to analyse that growth and make future action and plans".</p>	<p>A range of responses included:</p> <p><u>Staff conversations on whole school issues</u> attributed to engagement with IDEAS: "I see staff confident in some pedagogies that they haven't seen used before and have tried them out ... staff undertaking research within their own classroom and in their practice – confidence not to be stuck in approaches – I hear that with the conversations with staff".</p> <p><u>Using lots of data gathering tools</u>. Including: "looking after the students...the well-being and the importance of it. ... Focusing on connections and relationships with principals in other Catholic schools".</p> <p><u>Building relational trust</u>: "confidence in the leadership team and the leadership and direction, where we are heading".</p>	<p>This perspective drew mostly on pedagogical issues. A newly appointed team member noted difficulties with respect to changing the culture of teaching and learning: "my concern is, being so results focused, and the changing climate of education, the model we are so invested in, is rapidly going to become defunct and ... will not serve out students in the long term".</p> <p>Others related to the reluctance of staff: "Teachers will do it if they are told [but] they don't value it".</p> <p>And some reference was made to the traditional approaches of staff and students: "just give me the notes" – socialising from students as well as staff.</p> <p>Multiple sites discussed how to build relationships with long standing staff in particular.</p> <p>Some teams spoke of the importance of a 'smooth transition' from one principal to another.</p>

This rich data then gave scope for the principals' critique of the summaries. During the workshop, each principal was asked to review the transcription of their interview, confirm the accuracy of details, and engage in a response to four specific questions as summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Principals' responses during the workshop

Reflect on the Hallinger and Heck article, specifically the quote on the front page. What is it that you would add to their understanding? [imagine you are having the conversation with them]	Now, in summary, what might be the 3-5 practices/actions of an effective principal?	How might the system's knowledge of each school's context, culture and collaboration support the principal?	What then, might be advice for the system in appointing, supporting and developing effective school leadership?
<p>The range of responses included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Time</u> needed to learn the culture and context of a school. - <u>Collaborative leadership</u> is halted for a while with a new Principal and if the team is used to doing as the Principal says, it takes a while for the new Principal to realise this and then to establish collaboration through relationships. - Support and understanding of system is crucial however a more proactive pathway would be beneficial. - <u>Relational trust</u> and the building of positive relationships in the learning community underpin the work of school improvement at every level. - Schools need to have <u>clearly articulated values</u> which govern its work. - A clear <u>understanding</u> of what makes 'school function' and an ability to put this understanding <u>into practice</u> - <u>Alignment between system and school</u> is necessary for higher order success – 'relational trust' 	<p>These responses varied with a range of commentary that related to the specific context and culture.</p> <p>Common to most were three practices/actions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Building Relational trust</u> based on open and transparent decision making. 2. <u>Knowing and understanding the context and culture</u> of the school community in order to best drive both system and local agenda. 3. <u>Building capacity of staff</u> to raise and maintain high expectations and efficacy to benefit student learning outcomes. <p>Common to the principals of primary schools was the importance of instructional leadership.</p> <p>Common to the principals of secondary schools was the importance of a strategic agenda with</p>	<p>Overall, the responses might be summarised in three points:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Via Regional Offices, be <u>more involved in schools</u> to learn context and culture <p>The System's awareness of these features of the school enable it to see the school needs and not a 'one type fits all approach' to improvement, i.e. differentiated expectation.</p> <p>It is helpful if you are given the system's complete knowledge of each school's context, culture,</p> <p>By having the right leader in the right school is crucial. The level of experience, leadership style, interpersonal skills and characteristics of a leader need to be factored into the context of the school</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <u>Awareness of differences across schools</u> in terms of support e.g. financial, RTI <p>The system needs to be aware that even the best written and thoroughly</p>	<p>Most responses pointed to:</p> <p>The System would articulate the actual leadership needs of a given community and thereby seek such leaders who would bring strengths that would continue to build the alignment between context, culture and collaboration. System support needs to be present and listening to the leadership of the school, while challenging its assumptions is essential.</p> <p>Various perspectives were provided:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing and better preparation for early leaders; regular Regional contact with new Principals; more specific

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need a better understanding/trust across the whole educational sector - With growing pressures and expanding expectations on all levels of leadership, will it matter what the context of a community is if this keeps growing? - Need for the general public to have a foundation of respectful trust for teachers as professionals - trust and respect between all the stakeholders - A grieving of what was (buildings, religious personnel, student composition... so middle leaders believe they can't and they don't and eventually they really can't.[inheritance of a mindset about what was successful inclusive of a top-down control, i.e. learned helplessness; [and students] wanting to please resulting in a culture that seems unwilling to embrace risk and change. 	<p>clear goals and expectations for a vision of improvement, with some mention of alignment to the mission of the Church.</p>	<p>researched Policy may not apply to all settings.</p> <p>Understanding of a school's context by the system will support the principal in designing an improvement agenda. "When improvement efforts do not fit the school, they rarely flourish."</p> <p>3. <u>HR processes to support</u>: a) staff moving on, transferring, having a taste of another context; and b) principal support.</p> <p>Need to harness suitable leadership from the wider educational community.</p> <p>The system needs to explore options of teachers changing schools. In some cases a teacher can be a hindrance to the direction a leadership team wants to take the school</p> <p>Assigning mentor principal colleagues to new principals, collaboration hubs in cluster groups, principal input in cluster meetings, and time for principals to gather.</p>	<p>information for across region/out of diocese transfers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue to provide PD in/for leadership at the different levels of leadership - Conversation about possible system plans for schools - The system needs to build confidence in aspiring leaders through regular professional development opportunities. - Movement of teachers after a set time – a teacher contract renewal process
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Finally, it was important to glean the perspective of the regional consultants as to how they envisioned their role enhancing the effectiveness of principal leadership. Themes that emerged from the focused interview included: 1) management of accountability procedures; 2) role complexity; 3) personal challenges; 4) regional expectations; and 5) perceptions of a regional consultant.

- The management of accountability procedures was reported as a high priority with the regional consultants as they explained how they developed and implemented agreed quality assurance processes and procedures for: supporting the principals and leadership teams in their planning; monitoring the appropriateness of structures and processes in schools for compliance with national and local policies and systems; identifying and addressing

professional learning needs; evaluating the effectiveness of the professional learning in practice; and supporting and challenging principals and leadership teams on the quality of Catholic schooling.

- All participant regional consultants repeatedly referred to the role complexity of their positions. They described their dual portfolios as a major demand on time and quality of fulfilment, referred to the ever-changing needs of their respective portfolios and a conflict of perceived role and time availability. One participant offered: “We do so much and all the time more things are being added to our role – every year there’s a new role to perform. . . .how do we manage it?” And others commented:

I’m finding it a challenge with the quality of time that I spend with the schools to do the sorts of things. . .like being a change agent and supporting improvement given the focus of our work when we go to school is really highly structured – typically it’s limited to that given all the other things that we’re doing. I value the time with the schools and I’d like to put more energy – I think that’s where I could make a difference if that’s where I was putting in the majority of my energy – but a significant part of our time goes on to other areas. I feel limited in my influence on schools when I’m there for a short period of time throughout the year.

. . .is difficult when we have such condensed focused visits. I sense sometimes that principals want to talk about other things and the time isn’t always there.

A balanced viewpoint was offered: “What we have to do though is the work that we do with our portfolios. . .has to impact on the school – needs to be purposeful personal work that will reach the schools”, and, another participant offered a personal solution:

Planning is really important – planning at the start of the week, I’m planning each morning and prioritising, keeping a balance over the plans – sometimes you need to react to school situations. I think we have. . .effective processes and structures. . . .I delegate a lot. . .I’ve tried to build the capacity of people below me for want of a better word – to lead.

- All participants appeared to be struggling with the balance of aspiration and reality and referred to their personal challenges in terms of: “long days”; “hard job”; “heavy

commitment”. When asked how they manage, one participant spoke for what appeared to be the consensus of the group:

One of the factors that I think influences our relationship it’s just the time – actually having some quality time with the principals. Yes we’ve got some set processes and we have to work with them in a particular relationship but I’m finding that I can’t build that relationship as much as I would like to when it just stays in that process.

However, the reciprocal was positively offered as: “I don’t develop relationships with all principals in the same way – it’s knowing their context – what’s on the horizon, what they’re dealing with at the current time that really influences the way you interact with the principal”. Conversation evolved around supporting the principals to develop their “skill sets” and “emotional intelligence” in order to meet the required mandates of accountability in the principal role.

- The regional expectations were clearly enunciated in terms of alignment of their roles with the system’s vision, explained as “a collective vision born out of the needs of the region. . .that is collectively formulated”. Furthermore, the participants emphasised the importance of alignment between the system vision and the school vision, with for example, specific reference to the support of instructional leadership in all schools.

Expressed as important to the fulfilment of these expectations was the conversation about recruitment and appointment of principals and leadership team members expressed as:

We have a responsibility and accountability to ensure that each school is led by the most effective people possible. . .we have a part to play in recruitment – we are involved in the appointment of principals. That gives us an insight into perhaps contextualising leadership. We represent the school on those panels and we do have that knowledge of the school.

Much conversation developed around the issues of support, particularly in relation to the cluster meetings and professional support learning.

- An issue of some concern for the participants was the perception of the regional consultant. As one participant expressed: “there is probably not a broader role in the organisation than what the regional consultant has. . . .sometimes we get called to cover the whole territory – and so we’re not going deep enough because we are so broad”. When queried as to how each

regional consultant fulfills their portfolio, all participants highlighted the importance of not making the schools reliant on them, rather that the schools be supported to be self-generating. Thus, as explained by one participant, the role of the regional consultant needs to develop role clarity in “knowing the role and knowing the boundaries in the role”, as earlier informed by the complexity of the role.

Findings

This section recaps the purpose of the study querying how an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contributes to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement. The researchers’ interpretive analysis of the data is presented in three interrelated findings – School Success; Leadership in Action; and Theorising the Effective Leader in Action. Firstly, building on from the selection of the eight schools as those of ‘success’ determined by the SCS Eastern Region Office, it was important to understand the principals’ and their leadership teams’ expressions of ‘school success’. This then gave way to what has been termed ‘leadership in action’ which exemplifies the earlier reference to the ‘lived in’ experience of the principals who referred to their understandings of context and culture interchangeably – the researchers have interpreted this as the lived experiences of ‘organisational culture’. The Leadership in Action subsection has been constructed incrementally as: Emerging themes of leadership in action; Factors of importance to principals; and Researchers’ interpretation of factors of importance to principals. Finally, these findings have provided a rich opportunity to present the model of Theorising the Effective Leader in Action which is succinctly captured as the principal’s *Visionary Commitment to Action*.

School Success

Based on previous research of the USQ-LRI team (Andrews & USQ-LRI Research Team, 2009), school success is defined, as “. . .enhanced school outcomes in agreed high priority goal areas, based on documented evidence of those achievements and teachers’ expressed confidence in their school’s capacity to sustain and extend those achievements into the future” (p. 4). This definition emerges from the concept of organisational alignment when School Outcomes include Student Achievement and Well-Being; Staff Professionalism; the Image of the School in the community; Alignment within the organisation (aspirations to vision); Staff professional learning; and Resourcing. This definition is core to the basis of the Research-based Framework (Figure 3) upon which the Diagnostic Inventory of School Alignment (DISA) is constructed (<https://www.acel.org.au>) (see Research Design section).

RESEARCH-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING ORGANISATIONAL COHERENCE (RBF)

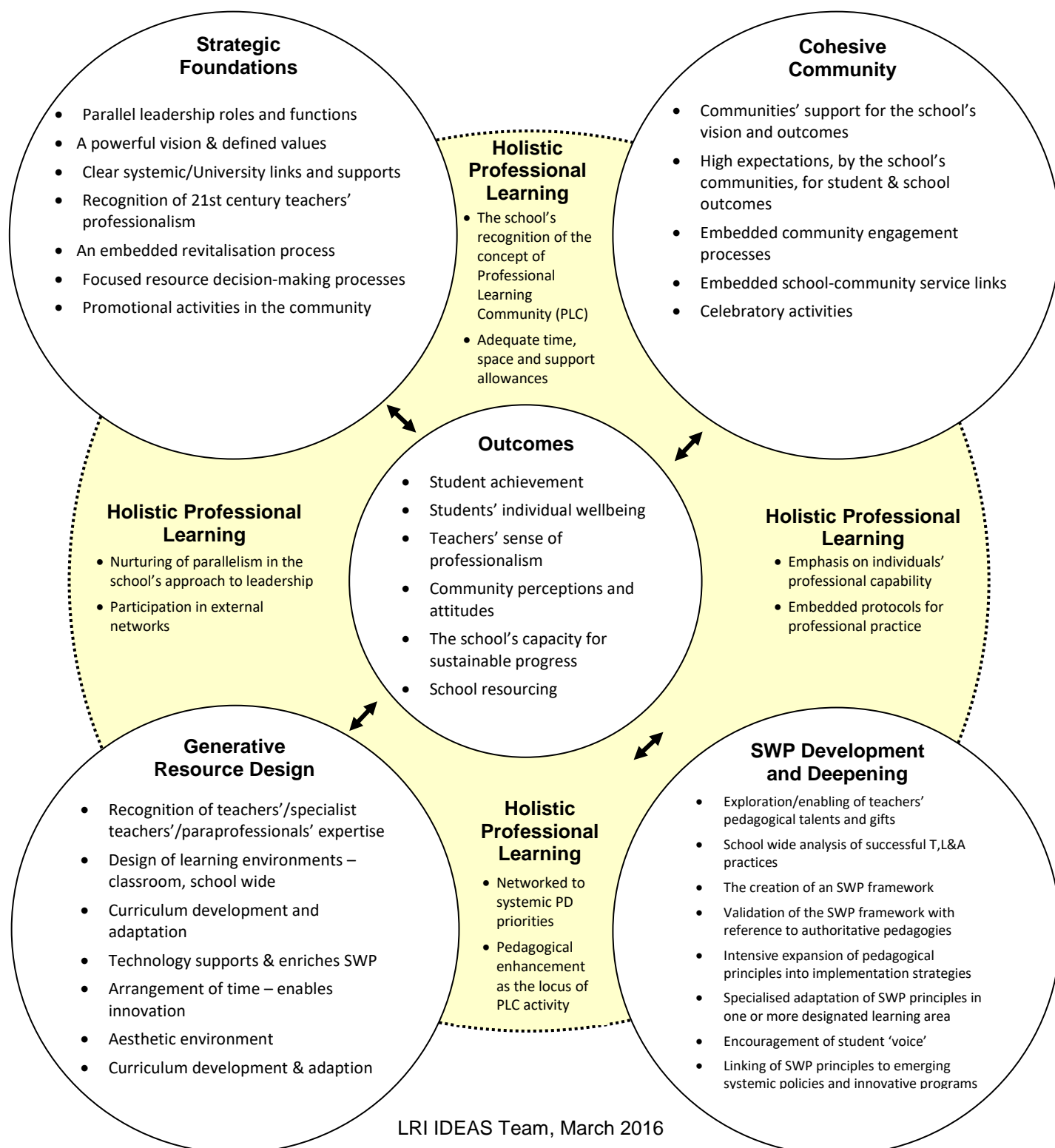


Figure 3: Research-Based Framework (RBF)

The school-based participants of this research project, that is, each principal and their leadership team, provided responses to the questions related to: What is meant by ongoing school success for this school?; What evidence is available?; and What factors contribute to ongoing school success? This project was never to create multiple case studies, but it was important to collect data from each of the schools in turn. It is the analysis of the combined responses as presented in Table 6 that has benefited the findings of this study regarding ‘Success’ and ‘Leadership’, and are best presented as a summative analysis of the indicators of success, the contributing factors to the reported outcomes of success, and the understanding of effective school leadership.

Table 6: Success and leadership

Findings	Evidence
Indicators of Success	<p>Markers of success included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing, or maintaining enrolments (System data) - Except for one, a high level of alignment (according to the DISA data) - NAPLAN growth results (as per MySchool and System records); - Strong social capital (according to the DISA data) - Accreditation with the Newman program (a system encouraged initiative) - HSC results for secondary schools (for one school this was their only identified success)
Contributing Factors	<p>Factors mentioned varied amongst schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic approach – forward thinking - Attitudes of staff - Collaborative practices amongst staff - Principal impact (except for one school) - High expectations for ALL groups (except for one school according to DISA data) - System support with finance, small school networking - Quality teaching – staff working together - Strong leadership team
Effective Leadership	<p>A range of responses from individual principals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having a clear visionary commitment to action that is values-based (two referred to the mission of the Church) - The ability to influence change and retain what is established - Being strategic with high expectations - Selecting new teachers (the ‘right’ people) - Having hard conversations with others - Communicating with intent/processes in place - Acknowledging others - Team building – cohesive leadership teams - Caring for self and being a learner / networking beyond the school - Building and maintaining relationships / relational trust - ‘Walking’ with the staff - Having ‘presence’

Most participants initially acknowledged the indicators of success as the quantitative markers of external testing and results in their schools (e.g. HSC and NAPLAN). However, with the exception of

one school where no further indication of success was offered, all other schools were also keen to share indications of success in terms of student and staff wellbeing, and the community perception of the school as a place of learning.

Factors identified as contributing to this success varied across the schools with some degree of diversity that appeared to reflect the context and the culture of the school, and their interrelatedness, and the principal's leadership experience and expectations within their current context. These factors included the quality of teaching and collaborative practices, strategic approaches supported by strong leadership teams, high expectations and attitudes, but in all schools, with the exception of one, there was evidence of the impact of the principal influencing the way in which success was being acclaimed. Evidence of this interpretation was derived from a range of responses in the DISA reports and the interview transcriptions, such as:

Staff believe there is an inspirational vision with clearly defined values; the principal promotes the vision and encourages collaborative planning; school success is promoted; and there are processes in place for school improvement. (DISA report)

Confident staff with a high level of relational trust; people who did not want to stay were enabled to leave; open and transparent articulation of a vision and processes for moving forward. (Principals' perspectives in a number of schools)

And, supported by a range of perspectives from leadership teams represented as:

... a sense of resilience able to cope with a lot of change; relational trust and confidence in the leadership; invitation to be involved, having a "presence"; having "an improvement mentality" with strong collaborative processes.

The researchers' analysis then led to the practices, actions and qualities of effective leadership as shared by the principals and their leadership teams respectively. Of high interest to the research team was the range of responses that appeared to have some comparability to success in keeping with where the individual principal (except in one case) was on their leadership career timeline. It is noted that amongst the eight principals, there were: newly appointed principals in 2017-2018 which included first time principals and previously experienced principals; principals appointed from both within and from outside the Eastern Region; and principals in their three to five year term at the current school for whom this was a subsequent principalship from previous appointments.

The third row of Table 6 represents a collation of responses from the principals with respect to their perspectives about effective leadership, which interestingly correlates to the summary of one particular principal written during the workshop (Note: The highlights have been added by the researchers to identify the themes that appear to pervade most of the principals' perceptions.):

Focus on the **importance of learning for staff and students**. Build the integrated professional development of staff through connecting educational standards, current research and high expectations.

Build relational trust with the community.

Harness support for **a strong vision for school improvement**.

Articulate the features of the improvement being sought.

Communicate the successes and the issues.

Build capacity of staff.

Core to the essence of these expressions and throughout the many hours of interview conversation was a palpable sense of moral purpose on the part of the principal. Each one of them in their personal and professional ways imparted a *visionary commitment to action*, the researchers' interpretation of the principals' enactment for enhancing the success of the school. Relevant to the focus of this study is the mutual relationship of moral purpose and leadership, referred to by Bezzina (2007, 2012) as essential to the need for having a commitment to making a difference in the lives and outcomes of students. This might best be highlighted by emphasising the importance of "the commitment of leadership to a set of values underpinning a clearly articulated and enacted vision that provides a moral compass upon which all mutualistic goal setting is orientated" (Conway & Andrews, 2016, p. 176).

Another list of attributes for the effective principal emerged from the workshop's conversational circle of all eight principals. It would appear that there is a synergy between the previous thematic listing and this listing as more of an adaptive and practical approach to leadership in action, thus the mapping of the two listings in Table 7.

Table 7: Mapping the emergent leadership themes for ‘Leadership in action’

Effective Leadership themes	Principals’ adaptive and practical approach
Learning for staff and students	- Instructional leadership – have teaching and learning at the forefront with a hands-on sense of what is happening in the classroom
Build relational trust	- Emotional intelligence – empathy - Good health – personal wellbeing
A strong vision for school improvement	- Keep strategic agenda in mind – keep looking ahead
Articulate	- Don’t cover up
Communicate	- Good communicator – with all audiences knowing ‘How’ and having a ‘presence’ – the importance of the use of language for a positive presence in the community
Build capacity	- Learning – learn from mistakes - Building capacity of staff – build the next leader - Delegation – free oneself up by effectively managing time

Overall, this response to evidence of ongoing school success from the perspective of effective leadership, might surely add value to the currency of what is ‘measured’ as success in school achievements and what contributes to the level of success in varying contexts. Interestingly, there appears to be a strong alliance of these perspectives to that of the System’s focus for leadership development (refer to Background section). Of particular interest for this study, is an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contributing to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement.

Leadership in action

It is important for the purpose of this report that a reminder of the definition of each of the terms – context, culture and collaboration, as presented in the literature review be revisited here. This approach provides a ‘grounding’ for the analysis to be interpreted in response to the research question: *How does an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement?*

Much of the literature, and specifically Joe Murphy’s (2013) work, defines context in terms of the history and experience of the school and its community, the type of school, the nature of the community within which the school is situated, the level of schooling, and an assortment of other contextual factors important in the development of academic press and supportive culture. Moreover, Murphy refers to the criticality of the context as it relates to school improvement efforts, and replete in the literature is the overall message that ‘context matters’. Specific to the data collection of this

study are the indicators of student composition, engagement of the leadership team, community perception, principal's appointment in relation to their leadership experience, and length of time in the current role.

Some instances of the principals' expressed understandings of the context translated as: "success was based on care"; "having to consolidate the present and bringing in a new campus structure"; "recognising a strong community with established staff"; "inherited strong 'well oiled' structures and processes with a highly competent leadership team".

The work of Edgar Schein influences an understanding and definition of culture pertaining to educational organisations where all members of the community continually contribute to the way in which the community operates from the governance and operation of school structures and policies to the relationships amongst all members. Based on the work of Schein (2010) and Deal and Peterson (2016), a school culture is built on the acknowledgement of the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school. In essence, it is the mandate of the principal in concert with their leadership team to ensure that the school's vision, and their visionary commitment to action, is clearly articulated and enacted as the auspice for the development of a positive school culture adding strength for the betterment of the school community.

All participant schools of this study showed a high measure of social capital (particularly as reflected in the DISA reports used as only one form of 'measurement'). Social capital is used in this study to refer to the professional relationships of trust and respect, considered essential dynamics of effective leadership and the capacity of a community to bring alignment of identified key elements to the core functioning of an effective school community. All leadership teams mentioned the importance of a confident teacher culture, but this phenomenon was interpreted differently in different contexts – as expressed: some manifested as "entrenched mindsets", others appeared to openly "resist[ed] change" in the comfort of their confidence, whilst some had developed into a state of "learned helplessness" where top-down structures and processes were in place.

Discerning a definition of collaboration presents a challenge in the face of organisational alignment of all elements contributing to the overall school achievements and success. Key to the success of organisational alignment within the parameters of this study is the level of collaborative leadership as it contributes to the capacity for the development of professional learning communities. Supported

by the collaborative school leadership work of Woods and Roberts (2018) is the notion of leadership in action with purposeful strategy and deliberation to make a difference.

It is in the area of collaboration that most of the principals and leadership teams appeared to express themselves in action. They provided instances of being astute listeners, observers and empathisers enabling them to act more strategically in response to the perceived needs of their community. The researchers note that this dimension appears to add a richer understanding to the impact of collaboration on their leadership quality. Examples of their expressions included:

- I took on an external facilitator to build our working together and now we're building capacity for where we're going together.
- I initially heard 'no one consulted me on this'. . .they were arguing every time you introduced anything. . .I think there was a bit of trust in what I was willing to share. . .now they come in and are so harmonious.
- [in reference to building capacity for working together]. . .there is cohesion. . .we all work towards the same goal. . .we enjoy our dialogue with one another. . .we team teach willingly . . .like a collective care.
- [in reference to breaking down the hierarchical structure]. . .team players need to listen to each other. . .it is not about me, you need to hear and respect others' points of view. . .we all bring different strengths to the team.
- [in reference to the challenges of disempowering the top-down model]. . .new leadership has been useful in looking at 'bigger things' and questioning how this might be done.
- I need to build a greater sense of trust. . .some teachers have more voice than others. . .need strategies we can use that gives everyone voice – that their opinions are valued and heard.
- A very strong emphasis on collaboration in very practical ways through effective teaching. . .so much reflection and feedback evaluation of where they're at, what we are doing next, how we can help this one along.

In response to the overall research question of this study, it was important to acknowledge and analyse the depth of meaning as shared by the principals and their leadership teams in relation to how their understanding of the context, culture and collaboration within each of their settings was influencing their leadership for improving school outcomes. An across school analysis of their responses, presented in Table 8, provided guidance as to how they gained their understandings.

Table 8: Analysis of understandings of context, culture and collaboration

The Principals	Understanding the impact of Context	Understanding the impact of Culture	Understanding the impact of Collaboration
Experienced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initially, having to recognise the position of the school amidst other schools of the area; the length of staff appointments, rate of staff turnover, principal and leadership team turnover; the quality of pedagogical practice; the perception and expectations of parents and past students of their school. - The marketing agenda for the school provided an understanding of the 'visibility' of the vision and strategic plans, and the recognition of staff response to the past and current principals' agendas. - Personal experience and credibility in other contexts provided some guidance as to recognition of characteristics in new contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initially had to sense the 'mood' of the school in relation to 'why we're here', 'what we're doing', evolving into getting to know people one-on-one before making any moves. - Needed to recognise and build on the history and strengths of the school based on foundational values; lead with clearly articulated vision aligned to direction and pedagogy. - Importance of building staff capacity for resilience and future focused change; sometimes providing stability amidst instability; respecting the previous leadership and building forward; being prepared to respectfully challenge perceived barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Importance of building a team approach, and engaging all in the language of the vision; continually reminding all of the direction of the school, what it stands for and how it operates. - Ongoing need to provide opportunities for engaging staff, students and parents in conversation – one-on-one and groups, developing a shared understanding. - Need to have 'team players' / the 'right' people; work with the strengths of individuals and groups; balance the need to motivate and sometimes 'move on'. - Recognition of learned habits sometimes need to be challenged to disempower learned helplessness, aka 'everything is as it should be/has been'.
No or Less Previous Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to know the context before any reason for change might be given; look at the structures and processes. - Urgency in getting to know the people; ask lots of questions; some ready to suggest possible 'solutions' but others more calculating in knowing the people/structures/history. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to know 'what happens/what is valued/how things are done' with a focus on the processes/rituals/structures. - Some frustration with 'legacies' that were perceived as unhelpful; difficulties of being accepted/getting 'inside'/a 'them and us' culture. - Importance of building trust in the 'face' of others giving 'good impressions' for the newbie. - Some impatience with 'getting things going'; knowing what is needed for change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to establish, or in some cases recognise importance of collaboration amongst staff and families – getting to know the community/building relationships. - Perception of sometimes not being readily accepted/trusted with occasional dominant 'voices' expressing the way it is here. - Keen aspiration to build capacity for collaboration beyond 'friendship' groups/year level groups to broaden professional learning experiences.

In compiling this across school analysis, it became apparent there was a level of expression that reflected a general difference between how the experienced principals and the less experienced principals gained their understandings of the context, culture and collaboration in their current appointments. Hence, the distinctive presentation in each column of Table 8 – *‘Experienced principals’* and *‘No or less previous experience’*. For instance, the experienced principals shared expressions relating to building a new culture; challenging existing norms; having confidence in dealing with difficult HR issues; and confidence in working with system personnel. They were cognisant of and confident in expressing how they were value adding to a ‘good’/‘successful’ school; dealing with entrenched mindsets, particularly of long established staff and pedagogical practices; and using the leadership team to assist in moving the agenda forward. Images of the skilful chess player come to mind.

In response to how these principals of some experience appeared to work within their immediate positions, three different metaphors have been selected: (Note: these metaphors are not to be confused with any one principal or site, but a compilation of traits as gleaned from the data and supported by relevant quotes.)

- The Strategist is building on what exists and is moving the school forward “with fresh eyes”, assisted by the inheritance of a competent and experienced team.
- The Builder needs to build a new school and thinks structurally, gaining confidence by having small wins, and being present ‘on the job’.
- The HR Leader is dealing with a fractured leadership team, having to “learn the system” in a school that is “losing touch with the future”, and is needing to develop a strong team that will challenge existing norms of “learned helplessness”.

The less experienced principals in general expressed feelings related to their need to establish self in context, to learn the ropes, and to bring new ideas and fresh eyes to the appointment. Their articulation of these expressions appeared to reflect the specific context to which they had been appointed. Albeit with appreciation for the support of a helpful orientation, a mentor and a regional consultant, there was a general sense of having to face strong ‘socialising influences’. On occasion, it was apparent to the researchers that perhaps the ‘right’ (a term used by several of the principals) match of these supports needed to be reviewed – Was that the ‘right’ mentor?; Does the consultant really know this culture? These ponderings were reinforced through expressions of conflict between the roles of support and performance assessment – “do I expose ‘warts and all’ when the regional consultant is visiting?” was the question of one principal and supported by several.

Although, this distinction between the experienced and less experienced principals may not be a new or startling finding, the researchers believe it is an important factor with possible implications for how principals could best be supported in their leadership appointments and ongoing development. In essence, the distinguishing difference between the ‘experienced’ and the ‘less experienced’ is possibly tempered by the experiential hindsight of the experienced principals who have gained a level of leadership self-efficacy only possible with some years and instances of experience. The trial-by-jury scenario comes to mind. However, it is posed that identification of specific principles as shared by the experienced principals might be categorised for the benefit of assisting the less experienced principal to move into more enlightenment and job satisfaction at an earlier stage of their leadership pathway. Alas, the ‘smooth transition’.

Concurrent with the findings from the principals’ perspectives was an interest in how the regional consultants, or at least those responsible for at least one of the eight schools, viewed their role and their interactions with the principals. Pervading sentiments throughout the focused interview were the notions of being time poor and the need to be structured and driven with procedures and skill sets in place. To begin, one of the consultants had, earlier in the year, invited a cluster of principals to share their expectations of the regional consultant and permitted a summary of the responses to be used in this study. These responses included: build relationships on trust; have wisdom and knowledge around system procedures; exercise authority; use timely and effective communication; lead the leaders; create relationship as a mentor; make connections with the right source/person; have knowledge of the school’s culture; be part of the community; and know the potential of leaders across the system.

Furthermore, one of the consultants spoke for all in suggesting: “I think we also have to make expectations very clear”, with another of the consultants adding: “what is important in this I think is that we don’t make the school reliant on us. They have to be self-generating”. Meanwhile, a third consultant offered, “[there is] probably not a broader role in the organisation than what the regional consultant has”, and emphasised the need for clarifying the role of the consultant not having to cross so many broad areas. Moreover, it was suggested that there is the possibility of making the role more strategic, more manageable by having someone like a high performing Assistant Principal, strategist, to work alongside. Meanwhile, one of the consultants lamented that: “I feel limited in my influence on schools when I’m there for a short period of time throughout the year” which seemed to speak for the frequent reference to very heavy workloads, dual portfolios, lack of time, and the structured school visits. This is an interesting admission when cross referenced with the Principals’ notion that the System support needs to be present and listening to the leadership of the school (see Table 5) and

confirmed by: “The Regional Consultants perform a pivotal leadership role by working closely with schools to ensure leadership development/performance, effective strategy execution, policy implementation, monitoring and accountability”(see p. 9). However, the researchers suppose from the data that an understanding of the ‘pivotal role’ might have led to some confusion.

Emerging themes of leadership in action

In summary, several thematic understandings have emerged from the data lending insight as to how best to recognise the support required for strengthening leadership for school improvement. Of paramount importance is the fact that ‘no one size or type fits all’ – each combination and interrelationship of the context, culture and collaboration as it pertains to one setting is unique and as such cannot be ‘matched’ with a standardised approach to support for the incoming or ongoing principal and leadership team. Complementary to the relationship building between the principal and the leadership team is the role of the regional consultant in recognising and responding to the uniqueness of each school setting. The commentary of most principals referred to the challenges of understanding the uniqueness of each of their settings and one principal’s comment seemed to summarise the level of required support as: “The system should challenge the school from within a type of zone of proximal development towards a strategic process of school improvement”. Another principal suggested that, “The system needs to be aware that even the best written and thoroughly researched policy may not apply to all settings”. Responding to the range of differences is *messy* and sometimes incongruent with system directives. It is time consuming and demanding of individuals to be open-minded, reflexive and willing to embrace the differences of each setting.

Next is the *good-to-great* syndrome – moving ‘good’ successful schools of long-term staff and entrenched cultures is often fraught with difficulties of resistance and fear of the unknown. Several principals referred to this challenge in their current setting with references to managing ways of working with the ‘right’ people for the ‘right’ fit and the need to encourage individuals to reflect upon their career development. Being prepared to acknowledge the strengths that are sustainable into the future and simultaneously release the burdens that cannot be sustained requires visionary, strategic and deliberate leadership action toward the development of a culture of collective responsibility and collegial commitment.

Lastly, adoption of the cliché *all that glitters is not gold* is useful – the image of the ‘good’ successful school is sometimes incongruent with morale. It takes courage to remove the traditionally encrusted covers from what exists inside. Principals facing this situation require the leadership skills of acting with transparency and clarity of decision-making that acknowledge the voices of all who together seek

improvement whilst identifying those less inclined to move forward. The ability to select the ‘right’ people and encourage others to move on depends heavily on establishing the trust of those who work collaboratively toward an improved future. This finding affirms the importance of the system–school alignment (Andrews et al., 2017; Fullan, 2005), and the responsibility of ensuring a strong “inter-related action between the principal and the relevant system school-support personnel [aka regional consultant], [whereby] [l]eadership provides the linchpin for system-school alignment and is actioned through 3-Cs of leadership – Collaborative, Contextual, Collegial” (Andrews et al., 2017, p. 44).

Factors of importance to principals

When the principals of the eight ‘successful’ schools were invited to reflect on the impact of understanding the context, culture and collaboration in relation to their leadership strength, the researchers believe that several thematic factors emerged. As earlier mentioned, these factors appeared to manifest differently according to the principal’s leadership experience. At this point we have chosen to refer to that ‘experience’ differential with respect to the early career principal and the ongoing career principal. The emerging factors are presented as: the ‘readiness’ factor; the ‘freshness’ factor; the ‘supported’ factor; and the ‘trustworthiness’ factor.

The ‘readiness’ factor: Initially, it was the collective response of the early career (EC) principals that flagged the factor of readiness. As they shared their thoughts about how the impact of understanding the context, culture and collaboration of their new appointments was influencing their leadership for school improvement, there was a definite call for being prepared and ready expressed in personal ways. As one EC principal explained while referring to the massive learning curve in a large school, “it takes time to learn”, and another along similar thoughts in relation to the new role added, “it takes a while for the new principal to know and be known”. In keeping with the factor of being suitably prepared and ready, other expressions reached out for further support with “ongoing and better preparation for early leaders” and “need for the application process [to be] explained at system level for system appointments”.

The ongoing career (OC) principals referred to this notion of being prepared in more advanced terms on the strength of their previous experience. One OC principal expressed that, “most effective school principals have a clear understanding of what makes a school function. . . challenge for them is to contextualise. . . need to modify style and strategies”. Another noted, “[there is] pressure on school leaders as they try to market their schools. . . trust is needed. . . confidence and assurance that what they are doing is in the best interests”. There were also requests for enhanced system support to be more customised, with a call for the “system to articulate the actual leadership needs” and to “build

confidence in aspiring leaders”, and the need for “a professional coach and an effective coaching process”.

The ‘freshness’ factor: A range of expressions pointed in the direction of the need for new ideas, new ways with “fresh eyes” to bring the benefits of reviewing and evaluating what might be possible in leading the school improvement agenda. The ‘possible’ in each school was most obvious when the principal was able to articulate and propose strategically their *visionary commitment to action*. In some cases, this appeared to be thwarted by current thinking within the school’s professional community. An underpinning element of this factor related to the length of time staff, inclusive of positional leaders, spend in one school – questions asked by two, but representative of most of the participant principals, were: “can a leader, not just a principal, be at a school for too long resulting in staleness, reluctance to grow?”; and “can the system support them to move to get a new opportunity?”. Most of the participant principals of this study contributed to the notion of needing to periodically refresh the appointments of all staff: “movement of teachers after a set time to other schools”; “teachers have a contract renewal process”; “explore options of teachers changing schools”; and “HR processes to support staff moving on, transferring, have a taste of another context”.

The ‘supported’ factor: Dependent on their experience of principalship and from where they had come, the principals shared their thoughts and aspirations for the need to be supported beyond what is already in place in the system. This factor emerged with a greater range of more personal expressions, obviously dependent on the length of time spent in leadership experience, and one might suppose partly reflective of personal strengths and capabilities, but surely highlighting the need for a trusting relationship for balancing reflective criticality and encouragement between the principal and the regional consultant assigned to the school. This range of expressions included:

- [the system] be more involved in schools to learn context and culture.
- Awareness of differences across schools, and across regions.
- Support the building of alignment. . .see the school needs and not a ‘one size/type fits all’ approach.
- The character and needs of the school should be considered.
- Understanding the school’s context will support the principal in designing an improvement agenda.
- Greater understanding of ‘collaboration support’.
- Be present and listening to the leadership of the school while challenging its assumptions.
- Continue to provide PD in/for leadership.

The ‘trustworthiness’ factor: Emergence of this factor occurred in relation to whether the principal was in their early career or ongoing career leadership stage and appeared to hinge on their relationship with the system personnel. It is acknowledged that there is always the contingency of personality differences and varying levels of confidence within the relationship, but in general the EC principals expressed some reluctance to expose “warts and all” particularly whilst in their probationary period, whilst OC principals appeared to be less concerned about their openness to share, to seek and to act. The degree to which the level of trust seemed apparent or not was expressed through the need to have “conversations with senior leaders about possible system plans for them [the principals]”; the need for “regular regional contact with new principals”; and a call for “more shared practice” amongst principals.

The notion of trust and the need for trusting relationships is replete in the literature of building professional learning communities for school improvement, but this study appears to have brought to attention the particular types and levels of trust required between principals and their school communities, inclusive of their system support personnel. The principals of this study expressed their notions of trust along the lines of: professional trust, as related to the ‘big picture’ of their relationship with all community stakeholders; relationship trust, in reference to their capacity for forming effective relationships with others; and role trust, of their leadership as perceived by themselves and others. If principals are to realise the impact of their understandings of context, culture and collaboration on strengthening their leadership for school improvement agendas, it is apparent that trust must be established in different ways.

Researchers’ interpretation of factors of importance to principals

Emerging from this ‘ready, fresh, supported and trusting’ climate appears to be the need for a high level of effective leadership as espoused in the literature of adaptive leadership: “Adaptive leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organisations to adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems” (Mulder, 2017, para. 1). Albeit principally from the field of business, the concept of adaptive leadership might well add value to the notion of strengthening the system-school alignment for school leadership support where, principals and consultants work in concert as:

Adaptive leaders creat[e] conditions that enable dynamic networks and environments to achieve common goals in an environment of uncertainty. Adaptive Leadership focuses on four dimensions; navigating [business] environments – leading with empathy – learning through self-correction and reflection – creating win-win solutions. (para. 6)

Such definition adds value to making sense of the complexity and ‘messiness’ of the school and all that it comprises. An interesting observation from the data of this study was that some principals were able to manage ways of encouraging staff to reflect upon their career development, resulting in some staff being able to ‘step up’ whilst others deciding to ‘step out’. However, other situations created greater challenges for the principal as they recognised the sensitivities of juggling personal and professional needs. These complexities of human interaction must surely be a phenomenon addressed by the contemporary school leader and their supporting personnel. From the report of Andrews et al. (2017), it is this ‘linchpin’ relationship that must be “conceptualised as an inter-related action between the principal and relevant system school-support personnel. . .provid[ing] the linchpin for system-school alignment. . .actioned through 3-Cs of leadership – Collaborative, Contextual, Collegial” (p. 44).

Further to the notion of a leadership style is the phenomenon of ‘presence’. Most commonly attributed to great leaders in describing a commanding style or a charismatic personality, the possibility of identifying the nature of presence for the school leader is uplifting. One who is ‘ready, fresh, supported and trusting’ must surely command a presence, which, from the evidence in the data set of this study, the researchers characterise in three ways – image, impression, and connection.

Overall, a theory of presence is most effectively understood through the medium of conveyance to another. Many of the participant principals of this research study spoke of the importance of having a vision for their school, but it also seemed that for some it was as much about being the vision. Being the image of the vision, as conveyed via the spoken word and in action, for example, as spoken by one principal: “speaking openly about the wellbeing agenda for staff and students and actively looking for ways to further encourage positive wellbeing” – the adage ‘actions speak louder than words’ comes to mind. For other principals, this notion of being the vision appeared to manifest in being articulate, being involved in the action, being the ‘voice’ across all mediums in living the vision. The second identified characteristic of presence is more commonly portrayed in physical appearances of posture, dress, mannerisms, but must be more deeply understood as impression. The effect of one on another being far more meaningful than just the physical appearance factor and must include the way in which one has an affect because of the manner in which they present themselves to another. This characteristic was not as obvious in the data set, but implicit in the way many of the principals spoke of their consciousness, confidence and competence in relationship with others. Each principal portrayed themselves differently in their role, but it appeared that central to the notion of impression was the need for a certain level of physical and emotional energy, thus foreboding the importance of monitoring one’s wellbeing. Finally, and for the purposes of this study, so closely entwined in the

importance of effective collaboration is the characteristic of connection. More specifically, this aspect of presence was evidenced in “being there”, “articulating and communicating” with empathy for the complexity in situ, and further expressed by one principal: “the need to possess a high emotional intelligence to effectively navigate the challenging landscape and connect with all in a positive manner”.

In summary, the notion of presence appears to evoke a high level of moral purpose calling upon the intensity of interacting with another human being, perhaps a level of caregiving as so eloquently presented by Kleinman (2017):

Presence is a calling forward or a stepping toward the other. It is active. . . . Presence is built out of listening intensely, indicating that the person and their story matter, and explaining carefully so that you are understood. (p. 2466)

Theorising the Effective Leader in Action

Theorising the Effective Leader in Action is the outcome of this study which has focused on the principals of a set of selected schools within a system. Of significance in the findings of this study is the acknowledgement of the principals within their schools, together with their leadership teams, of their specific role in leadership action. Simultaneously, it is the interrelationship (what the researchers have termed the ‘linchpin’ relationship) between their specific context and the system that has emerged in strengthening the *Principal’s Visionary Commitment to Action*. As constructed in Table 8, it has been revealed that principals are impacted by the context, the culture and collaboration in situ, in response to the research question: *How does an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement?* Furthermore, the data as presented in Tables 5, 6 and 7 have brought to light the importance of the relationship between school leadership and system support in strengthening their leadership. Figure 4 is the representative model as described and explained in this section.

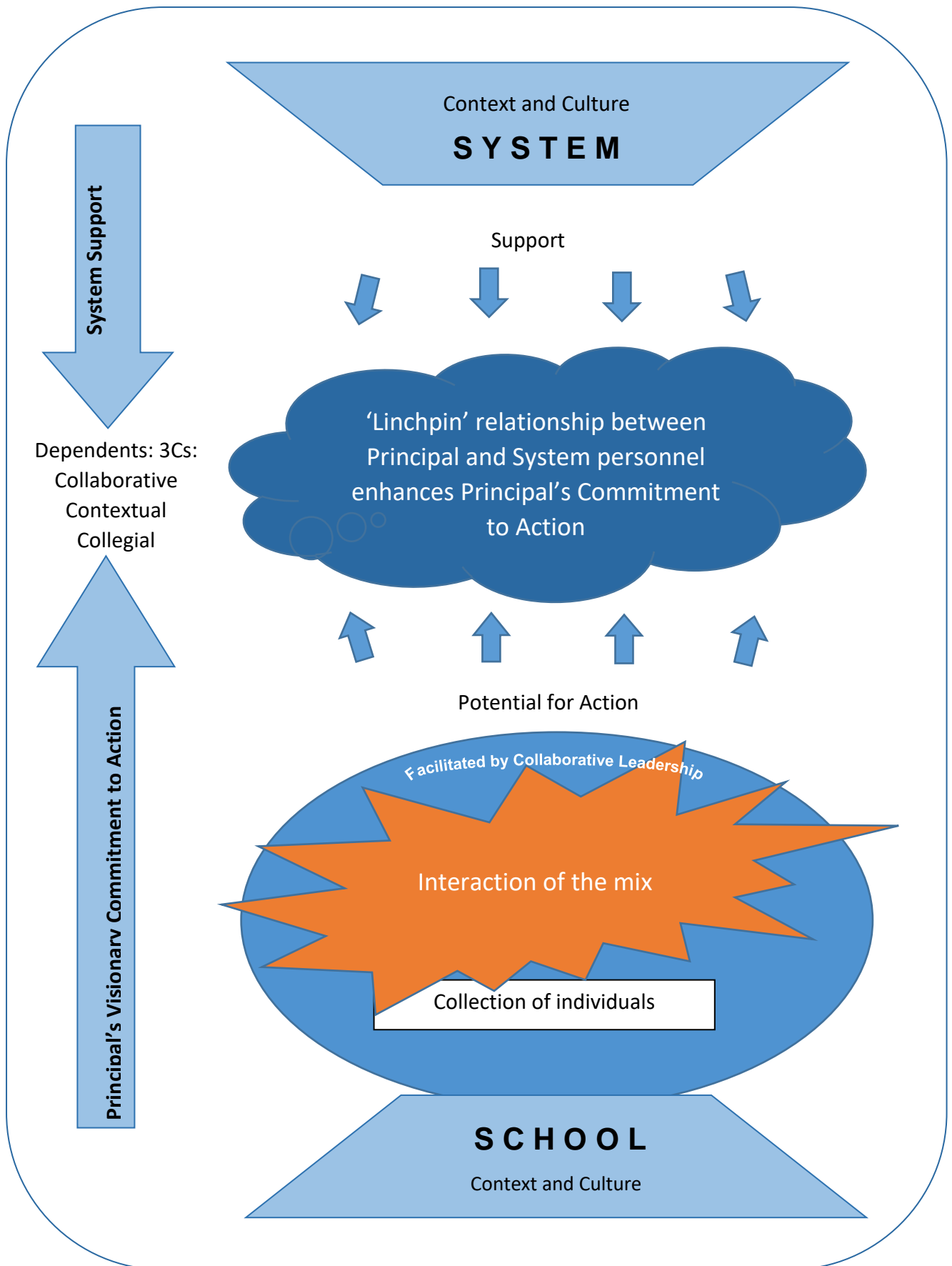


Figure 4: The Effective School Leader in Action: A System-School Relationship

Core to this theory is the ‘principal’s visionary commitment to action’ (refer to the Findings section, Table 8 and p. 38) as principals manoeuvre and manage the dynamics of interrelationships in the school community, most particularly amongst the staff. The findings of this study have highlighted the integral relationship of the multiple facets of human complexity and collaborative leadership toward the ‘potential for action’ in schools – that is, the ‘collection of individuals’; the ‘interaction of the mix’ of individuals; and the ‘facilitation of collaborative leadership’ in schools.

- The ‘collection of individuals’ is referred to as the unique collection of experiences, talents, and personalities as represented amongst the staff where no one collection is the same as another. Multiple references to “it takes time”, “getting to know” and having “the right people” in the data exemplified awareness by the principals of the importance of knowing and appreciating the range of individuals and their offerings as relevant to the principal’s visionary commitment to action for the school’s success.
- The ‘interaction of the mix’ of individuals emerged as the most important dynamic in moving forward (thus, the starburst graphic). Each principal shared experiences of their unique relationship with their leadership team and staff in general. These data gave insight into what is often termed the ‘culture of the place’ or what is interpreted in this study as the ‘organisational culture’ of the site. Building on the concept of collective intelligence in schools (Conway, 2008), the arrival and/or departure of individuals always changes the dynamic of the mix. For some principals, it appeared to be a relatively easier move with a confident and competent leadership team ready to respond to the visionary commitment of an effective principal; for others it was expressed as a challenge and needed time and a set of skills for recognising the dynamic; whilst others expressed degrees of frustration in coping with cultures of entrenchment and resistance.
- The ‘facilitation of collaborative leadership’ builds on the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010) who state that collaborative leadership does not depend on the principal alone. This notion was affirmed in all eight cases, where each of the principals spoke of the importance of working with a strong and mutually focused leadership team. However, this study has moved the concept forward in noting that the effectiveness of collaborative leadership, uniquely relevant to each school, is dependent on the Principal’s visionary commitment to action in concert with the System’s support.

The model for Theorising the Effective Leader in Action presented in Figure 4 shows the school and the three factors of building capacity for potential action are the initial foci, and the principal is the ‘effective leader in action’ realising their *Visionary Commitment to Action*. Integral to this realisation

is acknowledgement of the importance of the phenomenon of the principal's 'presence' (see pp. 54-55). However, the findings of this study, as presented particularly throughout pages 51-54, have emphasised the importance of the relationship between the Principal and the System support personnel, particularly that of the Regional Consultant (as also confirmed in the Background section of this report). In concert with this development is the 'linchpin' relationship between the School and the System, specifically the relationship between the principal and the system personnel that enhances the principal's commitment to action. Adding value to the notion of the 'linchpin' relationship is the importance of 'getting the right fit' between the principal and the regional consultant relative to the stage of career development of the principal and the specific needs of the school. Building on an earlier study by the research team (Andrews et al., 2017), the strength of the collaborative leadership between the system and the school is strengthened by the leadership qualities of collaboration, contextualisation and collegiality.

In summary, these findings acknowledge the uniqueness, the complexity and the 'messiness' of each school setting and thus the demand for each principal in partnership with system support to be cognizant of the requirements of the contemporary and emerging context. The following recommendations are offered in support of the strengthening of effective leadership drawn from the conclusions of this report.

Recommendations for SCS Eastern Region:

As is often the case when working with people positioned at high levels of leadership and management, there is an ongoing stream of learning to be gleaned from the dynamics of working collaboratively in varying contexts and cultures. It is the opinion of the researchers that no amount of structures and procedures will result in the desired effect if the processes for genuine collaboration are short-circuited. In different, but similar ways, all eight principals of this study focused on the importance of knowing their context and contributing to the building of a healthy culture through the enabling processes of genuine collaborative leadership both within their school community and with the system. Of note, it is the range of understandings and skills required for the enactment of collaborative leadership amongst the participants of this study that has led to the explanation of each of the recommendations of this report.

The final report acknowledges the Principals' understandings of the impact of context, culture and collaboration on leadership. In addition, the report emphasises their reflections on how the effectiveness of leadership might be strengthened beyond the findings of Hallinger and Heck.

In response to the data of this study, the researchers pose the following recommendations with the intent of adding value to effective leadership of principals within a high performing system of schools. These recommendations have been formed across the following foci: Entrenched cultures; Career development for principals; Complexity of the school as a unique system; and System-School relationships.

Entrenched cultures

Most of the interviews with the participant principals referred to the 'culture' into which they had moved on appointment, and recognised that it was a major factor in the potential for effective collaborative leadership. For most of the experienced principals it was a case of recognising who appeared to be the 'right' people for building effective teams of collaborative leadership, and enabling individuals to choose to remain involved with a revitalised focus, or opt for another position. For some principals this proved to be more difficult than for others and in all cases, inclusive of the opinion of less experienced principals, there was call for support to improved processes for assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of individuals. This was particularly needed for those leadership team members who had held their positions for long periods of time in the one school, resulting in commentary related to 'entrenched cultures' and 'resistors' making it difficult, if not perceptively impossible, to move forward. Inherent in this recommendation is the need to recognise the power of long-term appointments, and seeking ways of 'moving'/enabling people to move on.

Recommendation 1: That the System seeks more creative and innovative means to revitalise longstanding members of leadership teams.

Career development for principals

Principals enter schools at different levels of expertise, and the principals of this study positively acclaimed the effectiveness of system support for them in terms of principal mentors, nominated programs and cluster networks. However, the data revealed that there is need for more clarity around the specificity of support mechanisms and expectations relative to the 'just in time' needs of both the principal and their site. This has been interpreted in relation to recognising the complexity of human interaction, listening to the specific needs of principals and challenging them to know their needs, thus building confident and competent capacities for their career development.

Recommendation 2: That principals continue to be provided opportunities to build capacity for empowering intentional and focused discussions with the regional consultants about their career development.

Complexity of the school as a unique system

- i. The data of this study revealed repeated instances of participant principals explaining that ‘one size does not fit all’, in other words that every school has its own unique context. In particular, they were referring to a call for principals to make decisions specific to their needs in closer consultation with regional consultants. It would appear that this might be the result of a combination of factors that have appeared in the data. These factors included: lack of time on the part of the regional consultants to be in schools with principals; lack of understanding around the role of the regional consultant; and lack of perceived empowerment by the principals to make decisions specific to their context, that is, their organisational culture. This highlights the call for principals to align with the systemic changes and expectations of effective principal leadership, as outlined in the Background section of this report.

Recommendation 3(i): That Principals seek ways of building networking structures and relationships amongst themselves, in concert with system support, toward enhanced confidence in learning from others about effective leadership.

- ii. Principals in this study illustrated varying capacity to manage complex issues. Such issues included entrenched cultures, the need to enhance teacher skills in changing contexts, and poor leadership capacity in either the leadership team or middle level leaders. The varying capacity of the individual principal to manage complex issues related to instructional practices, courageous conversations, managing processes for performance review, and strategies for addressing difficult to move school cultures.

The researchers observed and captured in the data set that some principals who had used system processes effectively developed strategies to manage messy problems and had the capacity to hold courageous conversations with “good people” who were not meeting demands on their capacity to lead within their current position. This highlights the need for enabling the sharing of successful practices, especially in the effective use of system policies and processes, to be explored with principals and system support personnel.

Recommendation 3(ii): That the System continues to support principals in ways to acknowledge the unique context and culture of each school and the specific requirements of each principal.

System-School relationships

The Background section of this study (refer to pages 8-10) acknowledges that the system is and has been undergoing significant realignment of roles and responsibilities amongst all stakeholders, with specific interest for this study in that of the Principal of each school and the Regional Consultant. It might then be understandable that data gathered from both the principals and the regional consultants revealed some degree of ambiguity (refer to pages 44-50). Principals, whilst complimentary of the support of the system and specifically of the regional consultant, expressed some doubts about the degree to which they might be open with, and were being heard by, the regional consultant. Regional consultants appeared to struggle between aspiration and reality as they adhered to the processes and procedures and yet acknowledged the lack of quality time to spend in schools, particularly with the principals. In summary, whilst numerous conversations have already been held in this period of cultural change, these conversations need to continue in light of acknowledgement that cultural shift takes time.

Recommendation 4: That the System continues to convey the intended complimentary roles of the principals and system support personnel.

Conclusion

This research study, initially inspired by the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010), set out in quest of how an understanding of the impact of context, culture and collaboration might contribute to the strengthening of leadership for school improvement. Specifically, this study has captured the voices of the principals and their leadership teams within eight recognised successful schools in the Sydney Catholic Schools Eastern Region, as they have shared their understanding of the impact of the context, culture and collaboration on their leadership for school improvement. The collective voice of eight participant principals, their respective leadership teams and four consultants of the Eastern Region Office has enlightened this study.

Respectful of the individual's length of time as a principal, their individually nuanced styles of leadership, inclusive of the value adding factor of their 'presence' in context, and the diversity of

selected sites across this study, these eight principals have highlighted the importance of ‘knowing’ the context, the culture and the need for collaboration within each of their similar but somewhat diverse school sites. Of greater importance has been their individual and collective foci on the significance of developing collaborative leadership, both within schools and in the integral relationship between schools and the system. This is an added dimension to the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010).

The emergent finding of this study on effective leadership for school improvement is that principals and their leadership teams, together with the System support, have collective responsibility for school improvement. Schools in this system are not islands, and the participants in this study acknowledge this reality. How tightly or loosely coupled the system-school relationships are, or should be, is always a tension. However, this study has illuminated the collective responsibility of leaders to develop an organisational culture of collaborative leadership, that is, the responsibility of developing and implementing relationships that exemplify the skill sets and emotional intelligence levels of collaborative leadership in situ. Leading together requires a clearly defined and mutually agreed visionary commitment to action and requires all concerned to enact the collective responsibility of participation and evaluation for continual success.

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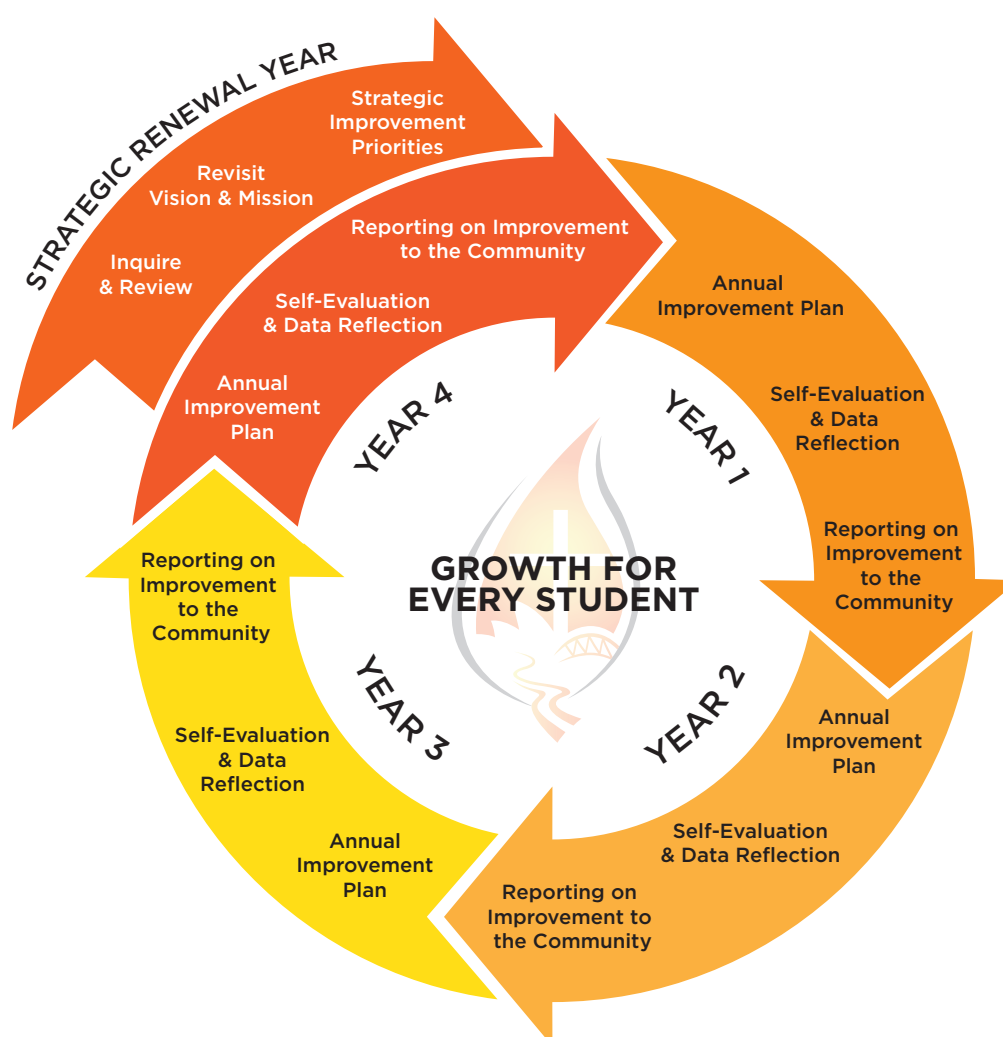
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

2.0 SRI Framework



Annual Improvement Plan (AIP)

Planning for and achieving the school's Key Improvements each year.

Evaluation of the Annual Goals

Evaluating the effectiveness of the AIP against the agreed criteria and identifying the school's capacity for further improvement.

Annual Report to the Community (ARC)

Reporting on the improvements achieved and priority areas for further improvement in accordance with compliance processes.

School Inquiry and Review

Looking back on the school's learning improvement journey and looking forward to the future directions with the support and challenge of an External Review every 4 years.

Strategic Improvement Plan (SIP)

Engaging the school community in revitalising the shared Vision and Mission and identifying the key improvements for the next 3-4 years.

APPENDIX 2: THE ARCHBISHOP’S CHARTER FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Archbishop's CHARTER *for* CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS have a unique role in the evangelising and educating mission of the Church. The Archbishop's Charter for Catholic Schools sets out the purpose and mission of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney.

The Charter will assist schools to reflect on and revitalize their understanding of this mission, and how it is lived out in schools. It will help to strengthen the religious life of school communities.

It will be a resource through which parents, teachers and support staff can be informed about the core principles of Catholic education, and inducted into the school's Catholic culture. The Charter will assist the Archbishop of Sydney to meet his responsibilities as a teacher of the Catholic faith under Canon Law.

The Charter was developed in response to *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads: Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of ACT and NSW* (2007). It involved significant consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

It is with great confidence that I commend the Charter to your parish/school community, with the hope and expectation that it will build upon the very firm foundations of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in our Catholic schools.

Dan White

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Executive Director of Catholic Schools

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Archbishop's CHARTER *for* CATHOLIC SCHOOLS





Archbishop's CHARTER *for* CATHOLIC SCHOOLS



Our Catholic Schools are called to:

- 1 Give witness to their distinctive educational, spiritual, moral and social purposes within the evangelising mission of the Church, founded on faith in Jesus Christ, and express this in a Mission Statement that identifies their traditions and charisms
- 2 Nurture students' love of learning through a Catholic pedagogy that fosters the development of the intellect, moral knowledge, understanding and reasoning in a relational, social and cultural context
- 3 Assist students to know, understand and celebrate their Catholic faith through the implementation of the Archdiocesan Religious Education Curriculum
- 4 Encourage students' participation in and commitment to the Catholic life of the school through prayer, meditation and involvement in the life of the parish, including the Sunday Eucharist
- 5 Teach students to know, understand and act on Catholic social teaching, in particular the 'preferential option for the poor', the obligation to be good stewards of God's creation, the recognition of universal human rights, and the responsibility to foster peaceful relations among peoples
- 6 Implement policies and practices for pastoral care, student wellbeing and an inclusive curriculum that are consistent with the mission of the Catholic school
- 7 Give priority to the enrolment of students from Catholic families
- 8 Work in partnership with and support parents as the primary educators of their children
- 9 Work with Parish Priests in nurturing communities where the celebration of the Eucharist, the Sacraments, Sacred Scripture, prayer and Catholic symbols supports students in developing a personal relationship with Jesus
- 10 Employ staff who have the capacity and commitment to give Christian witness and contribute to the mission of the Church
- 11 Provide a range of evangelising, catechising, and faith formation opportunities to enhance the witness and Catholic practice of staff, students and families.

+ *Anthony Fisher*

ARCHBISHOP ANTHONY FISHER
NOVEMBER 2014

APPENDIX 3: REVIEW AND INQUIRY PROCESS

SECTION 1:

The School Inquiry and Review Process: Purpose and Principles

1.1 THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL INQUIRY AND REVIEW

The purpose of the School Inquiry and Review process is to provide support to Sydney Catholic schools for self-evaluation and school improvement in line with expectations of the Education Act 2013. The process includes external validation and critique of the school's improvement journey. The School Inquiry and Review process is framed within Sydney Catholic Schools', School Review and Improvement Framework, as part of a four year cycle of continuous self reflection and school improvement

The systemic Strategic Improvement Plan, *New Horizons: Inspiring Spirits and Minds*, can guide school direction and focus on their improvement journey.

1.2 PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE PROCESS

The School Inquiry and Review process will:

- provide opportunities for schools to clarify their core Mission, Vision and Catholic Identity
- ensure alignment with the school improvement priorities of the system of schools
- strive for excellence in learning and teaching through the principles of authentic learning and authentic assessment
- foster a climate of school self-evaluation
- contribute to continuous school improvement
- identify strengths and areas for improvement which inform short and long-term goals
- enable a process for review that is developed collaboratively with staff, principals and Regional School Consultants
- facilitate effective personal and whole school reflection
- provide opportunities for schools and their communities to celebrate their achievements
- support and enhance the effectiveness of leaders in schools, and
- fulfil accountability requirements to regulatory bodies and stakeholders. (see *SRI Framework overview*)

1.3 WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF INQUIRY AND REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL'S LEARNING IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY?

As one of the processes for quality, improvement and accountability, the Inquiry and Review process:

- affirms the review and improvement processes, achievements and outcomes of each individual school community, with a particular focus on the Catholic Identity and Mission of the community and the learning experiences of its students
- provides stimulus for the school community to inquire deeply into its culture, policies and practices to ensure a point of difference for families
- provides a level of external objectivity to the school's ongoing improvement plans and outcomes
- provides an opportunity for high-order dialogue with a review team and facilitates further critical reflection on improvement
- assists the SCS system to resource ongoing school improvement
- provides accountability for the quality of review and improvement across SCS and where SCS, in turn, can meet its accountability requirements
- re-affirms that ongoing self review and improvement is a shared endeavour within systemic schools of the Archdiocese of Sydney.

