Article

What We Know about Successful School Leadership from Australian Cases and an Open Systems Model of School Leadership

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Abstract: In three devolved Australian school systems, for over 20 years, Australian researchers have been interested in understanding how successful school leaders lead schools that have a broad range of student and school outcomes that are above expectations. This paper draws upon findings from five Tasmanian, 18 Victorian, and one Northern Territory multiple-perspective case studies of successful primary, secondary, and special school principals. All cases are part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) and follow the methodologies of the ISSPP. At each school, data collected included interviews with the principal, senior teachers, teachers, students, parents, and school council members and document analysis. In addition, nine cases included observation of school activities, and two cases included a teacher survey. The cases reveal a complicated pattern of leadership activities by the principal and other school leaders that includes setting school directions, building positive cultures, developing supportive organisational structures, enhancing personal, professional, organisational, and community capacity, and developing networks, collaborations, partnerships, and stakeholder engagement. These areas of leadership action interact with school, staff, family, and broader contextual factors to develop outstanding teaching and learning that results in a wide array of positive student and school outcomes. Student outcomes include academic, extra-curricular, co-curricular, personal, and social areas. School outcomes include reputation, learning environment, resource allocation, community empowerment, and teacher quality areas. Successful school leadership is shown to be a complex endeavour, led by the principal but involving many and able to be sustained successfully over many years, leading to important and diverse student and school outcomes.

Keywords: successful school leadership; principals; International Successful School Principalship Project; sustainability of success; change

1. Introduction

There has been Australian researcher involvement in the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) since its inception in 2001. The ISSPP has been concerned with five research questions:

(i)   What similarities and differences can be identified in the beliefs and behaviours of successful school principals across national cultures and policy contexts?
(ii) Do different countries have different ways of defining success?
(iii) How do high-stake assessments and accountability measures influence the practices of successful principals?
(iv) Do different socio-economic contexts in which schools operate affect the ways in which successful principals work? Are different qualities and skills needed?
(v)   How do successful principals come to be and remain successful?

The ISSPP now has more than 200 case studies across more than 20 countries and now has a body of research that provides an accumulation of knowledge that allows it to rival quantitative research in terms of knowledge building and external validity. As part of

this project, we have provided 24 cases from the Australian context to help explore these questions; this number of cases provides a rich repository of research on Australian school leadership across two decades.

Initially, there were two research groups, with one led by Mulford in Tasmania and the other led by Gurr and Drysdale in Victoria. Mulford and his team were involved for the first decade, produced five case studies [1], and conducted ISSPP principal and teacher surveys across the state of Tasmania [2]. Gurr and Drysdale and their team of graduate research students have produced 19 Australian case studies, with most of these in Melbourne, Victoria, except for the two most recent cases, which were in the analysis stage and focused on a rural primary school in Victoria and remote school in the Northern Territory [3]. In addition, Gurr and Drysdale have had doctoral research students conduct three cases each in Indonesia [4] and Singapore [5], and a work colleague of the authors is working with Italian researchers on a case from Italy. This chapter reports on the findings from the Australian case studies only.

There are some important aspects to note before the main parts of this paper. This paper is focused on describing the research of the two Australian groups within the ISSPP. As such, it does rely on the self-citation of our research. We view this as a positive attribution because this paper provides, for the first time, a ready source of information about the various cases and publications from these research groups. Space limitations mean that extensive connection with the literature beyond the ISSPP project is limited. We acknowledge this issue. Many of our past papers, the completed theses of our master's and doctoral students (see Table 1), and our future papers address or will address this. As the principals we researched were considered to be successful leaders enacting a range of appropriate leadership practices, there is deliberately a conflation of principal with the leader.

This paper proceeds by highlighting features of the Australian education context, describing the methodology and cases, and then presenting the essential findings, and concluding with a discussion.

2. Australian Education Context

The Australian Commonwealth Government oversees regional governments comprising six states and two main territories. Education in Australia is a complex interplay between these different levels of government involving nine education departments (one federal, six state, and two territories) and between government and non-government schools. Responsibility for the provision of government schooling constitutionally rests with the state and territory governments. These provide most of the funding for government schools as well as governance, staff employment, curriculum guidelines, and so forth. Increasingly, there has been federal government influence, especially in terms of significant financial grants to both government and non-government schools (the federal government being the main provider of funds for many of the non-government schools), the development of a national curriculum, and the creation of a national accountability system through the development of a national assessment program in literacy and numeracy and the public reporting of these results.

In 2022, there were 9614 schools in Australia serving 4,042,512 students [6]. In 2022, 64.4% of students attended a government school, 19.7% a Catholic school, and 15.9% a range of independent schools [6]. The non-government sector is dominated by the large system of Catholic schools coordinated through one of the 33 Dioceses in Australia, with the Melbourne Archdiocese administrating the largest system comprising about 350 schools serving over 110,000 students in the greater Melbourne metropolitan area. Independent schools include a range of religious (e.g., Anglican, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, Lutheran, and Seventh Day Adventist) and non-religious (e.g., Montessori and Steiner) schools.

This paper is concerned with schools in Victoria, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. Victoria has the second largest education system (2279 schools, 1,016,070 students),

Tasmania is the sixth largest (262 schools, 81,510 students), and the Northern Territory is the smallest by student enrolments (194 schools, 40,086 students). All three systems have devolved systems that rely on centralized frameworks and systems that are realized through localized implementation. There are government, Catholic, and independent schools in all systems, although not all local areas have Catholic and independent schools in addition to government schools. This is especially the case in remote areas which might only have a government school [7].

3. Methodology

Across the cases, the broad research questions were:

1. What are the characteristics and practices of successful principals leading successful schools in Australia?
2. How does context influence these characteristics and practices?

Schools and principals chosen for this study had to be able to show that the school had been successful during the period of the current principal and that the principal was acknowledged as being successful. Whenever possible, the selection was based on evidence of student achievement beyond expectations on state/national tests, principals' exemplary reputations in the community and/or school system, and other indicators of success that were site-specific (such as favourable school review reports). Since 2008, all Australian schools have had to participate in an Australian-wide literacy and numeracy testing program conducted for years 3, 5, 7, and 9: NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy; see https://www.myschool.edu.au/naplan-explained (accessed on 14 June 2023)).

This research was conducted through multiple perspective case studies. For all Australian cases, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal (multiple interviews), teachers (individual and group interviews), parents (group interviews), students (group interviews), and members of the school board or council (individual interviews). Secondary data were collected through school documents, press reports, school websites, researcher notes, and so forth. For later Victorian case studies (from school I onwards) and the Northern Territory case, observation of the work of the principal and of the life of the school are also included through researcher field notes of the observations. The three most recent cases (schools N, O, and P) also included an ISSPP teacher survey and used the latest interview protocols.

Interviews and field notes from observation were analyzed thematically, with the analysis of data reviewing, coding, and filtering the data via various cycles of deductive and inductive coding. Survey data, when used, was presented in frequency tables, with measures of central tendency indicated.

This research was designed and undertaken following the standards and practices for ethically appropriate research provided by The University of Melbourne and The University of Tasmania.

Cases

Table 1 provides a description of key features of the 24 Australian case studies. The pseudonyms used are those that have commonly been reported in our various publications. We have included student age ranges with school types to allow for the ease of comparability, and school context includes location and either a school/researcher description of student educational advantage or, if appropriate, a measure that has been used since 2010 to report on Australian school educational advantage (the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage—ICSEA—a measure which has a mean/medium of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100). School size also includes data about student cultural composition where available. We have included whether the principals identified as male or female.

Table 1. School name, type, context and size, principal gender, and key references.

Schools (Pseudonym) and Research Years	School Type	School Context	School Size and Student Composition	Principal Sex	Thesis or Key Report Where Available
Tasmania (5)					
Pleasant Grove 2002–2004	Government District High School Ages 4–18	Rural Medium advantage	520 students Anglo-Saxon (little cultural diversity)	Male	Mulford, Johns, and Edmunds (2009)
Watersedge 2002–2004	Government High School Ages 12–18	Metropolitan High advantage	490 students Anglo-Saxon, with 6% international students (mainly Asian)	Male	Mulford, Johns, and Edmunds (2009)
Billabong 2002–2004	Government Primary School Ages 4–11	Regional Low advantage	225 students Anglo-Saxon, with approx. 17% Indigenous Australian students	Female	Mulford, Johns, and Edmunds (2009)
Eastman 2002–2004	Government High School Ages 12–18	Regional Low advantage	551 students Anglo-Saxon, with approx. 5% Indigenous Australian students	Male	Mulford, Johns, and Edmunds (2009)
Windmill 2002–2004	Government High School Ages 12–18	Metropolitan Low advantage	263 students Anglo-Saxon, with approx. 7% Indigenous students	Female	Mulford, Johns, and Edmunds (2009)
Victoria (15 + 3 revisited cases shown in darker blue)					
School A 2004	Government Primary School Ages 5–11	Inner suburban Low advantage	218 students 20% LBOTE	Male	Hardy (2006)
School B Initial case study (2004) plus revisited case study (2014)	Government Special School Ages 5–18	Inner suburban Medium–high advantage ICSEA 1071 (My School, 2017)	121 students 23% LBOTE 2% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Female	Di Natale (2005); Goode (2017)
School C 2004	Catholic Primary School Ages 5–11	Outer suburban Low advantage	146 students 2% LBOTE	Female	Ford, no published report. See Gurr et al. (2006)
School D Initial case study (2004) plus revisited case study (2008)	Government Primary School Ages 5–11	Outer suburban Medium advantage	580 students 5% LBOTE	Female	Drysdale and Goode (2004); Goode (2017)
School E 2004	Government Secondary School Ages 12–18	Suburban Medium advantage	1000 students 25% LBOTE	Female	Karvouni (2005)
School F 2004	Catholic Primary School Ages 5–11	Suburban Low advantage	388 students 73% of students from an Italian background, with another six cultures represented.	Female	Ford, no published report. See Gurr et al. (2006)
School G 2004	Catholic Primary School Ages 5–11	Suburban Medium advantage	385 students Diverse cultural mix 51% Anglo (35% 3rd generation Italian). 11% parents born in Italy, 14% in China, 8% in other Asian Countries, and small numbers from 22 other countries.	Female	Ford, no published report. See Gurr et al. (2006)
School H 2004	Catholic Primary School Ages 5–11	Suburban Medium to high advantage	435 students Majority English speaking backgrounds. The rest from 20 different cultures with Italian being the major one 22 teachers	Male	Ford, no published report. See Gurr et al. (2006)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Schools (Pseudonym) and Research Years	School Type	School Context	School Size and Student Composition	Principal Sex	Thesis or Key Report Where Available
School I Initial case study (2007) plus revisited case study (2014)	Independent Boys' School Kinder-year 12 Ages 3–18	Suburban High advantage ICSEA 1182 (My School, 2017)	1381 students 26% LBOTE 0% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Male	Doherty (2008); Goode (2017)
School J 2015	Government Secondary Ages 12–18	Inner city High advantage ICSEA 1104 (My School, 2017)	602 students 21% LBOTE 1% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Female	Longmuir (2017)
School K 2015	Government Secondary Ages 12–18	Suburban Medium–high ICSEA 1088 (My School, 2017)	1009 students 20% LBOTE 0% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Male	Longmuir (2017)
School L 2016	Government Secondary Ages 12–18	Suburban Very low advantage ICSEA 882 (My School, 2017)	1163 students 78% LBOTE 2% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Male	McCrohan (2020)
School M 2017	Government Secondary Ages 12–18	Suburban Low–medium advantage ICSEA 969 (My School, 2017)	236 students 14% LBOTE 3% Indigenous (My School, 2017)	Female	McCrohan (2020)
School N 2022	Catholic Primary Ages 5–11	Suburban Average advantage ICSEA 1027 (My School, 2022)	455 students 43% LBOTE 0% Indigenous (My School, 2022)	Male	Gurr, Reed, Drysdale and Goode (in press)
School O In progress with data collected in March–May 2023	Government Primary Ages 5–11	Rural Medium–high advantage ICSEA 1097 (My School, 2022)	194 students 2% LBOTE 4% Indigenous (My School, 2022)	Male	Hudson, in progress
Northern Territory (1 case)					
School P In progress with data collected in November 2022	Government K-12 Ages 3–18	Remote Very low advantage ICSEA 601 (My School, 2022)	251 students 98% LBOTE 97% Indigenous (My School, 2022)	Female	MacFarlane, in progress

For most cases, there is a research thesis or report that contains the main information about the case (theses are listed at the end of this paper). There are only four cases where there is not a thesis or report supporting them. These are cases C, E, F, and G. Patricia Ford conducted these cases with one of Drysdale, Goode, and Gurr supporting her on each case. Tragically, Patricia died before the thesis could be completed. Whilst we have field and analysis notes for these schools, formal reports were never written. Findings from these cases were included in [8,9]. As we proceed to consider what we have learnt from these 24 cases, we will generally use the school identifier as an in-text reference, in the knowledge that the reader can connect with a reference to a publication.

4. Essential Findings

4.1. Success Defined by Schools

Part of the reason for the foundation of the ISSPP was to explore the broader concept of school success rather than the typical narrow focus on student academic outcomes of the school effectiveness research. Whilst the selection of schools in the Australian cases of the ISSPP included student performance on state/national tests, this was used to ensure that the schools were at least effective before also considering the reputation of the principal in the community and/or school system, and other site-specific indicators of success.

Once in the schools, the researchers uncovered a broad and sophisticated understanding of success. For example, [10] described success in schools B, D, and I. For Principal B, success in the special school included students growing in confidence and being able to shine through musical performance and drama. With Principal D, there was, in addition

to the literacy and numeracy outcomes expected of a primary school, an emphasis on improvement in student social competencies. Principal I, in a high-fee independent school, described success in his context:

> *Academic success is a given. I see results as important, but to produce well-rounded human beings that can go into the community and make a difference, that's what education is about.* [10] (p. 129).

Saturday sports, social justice activities such as working with First Nation peoples in remote Australia, and outdoor education activities were all viewed as student outcomes at school I.

For student success, schools described traditional student academic outcomes (literacy and numeracy for all schools, except school B, and Year 12 results for all secondary, high or K-12 schools), and they also described student success in other curriculum areas (e.g., science, music, and sports awards in many of the schools) and in extra and co-curriculum areas (e.g., student leadership at school I; student-led projects at school K). Schools also described tangible and intangible authentic student outcomes like spiritual development in the Catholic schools (schools C, F, G, H, and N), and, evident in most schools, the development of social skills, self-identity, wellbeing, citizenship, and lifelong learning.

Extending well beyond the effective schools research, many school outcomes were also identified, and these included the following in most schools: enhanced school reputation; positive learning environment; improved buildings and grounds and other resources (human, financial); community empowerment; and high teacher quality.

As another example, later in this paper, we describe features of school N (see Figure 4), and this shows a broad range of student and school success. The student outcomes include the typical academic orientation focused on literacy and numeracy outcomes but expanded considerably beyond this to include student learner agency, faith development, community connection, lifelong learning, and preparation for secondary school. School outcomes are similarly complex and include aspects to do with supporting the Catholic faith, school improvement, teacher and community development, and school reputation.

These rich views of success mean that the leadership of the schools is never straightforward, as the whole development of the child is a foremost consideration, as is the development of the staff, school, families, and community.

4.2. Principal Contribution to Success

There were common qualities and characteristics identified in the principals in the Australian cases. The principals had strong values and beliefs, which were also reflected in the values, beliefs, and orientations of the schools. Each of these principals had a clear vision for their school, a core set of values and a strong educational philosophy. To achieve that vision, they recruited well, had high expectations of all and had a focus on building staff capacity. They might modify their practices to suit changing contexts, but they did not deviate from their core educational values and beliefs. More importantly, they knew themselves, surrounded themselves with complementary people and continued to develop themselves both personally and professionally. They were humble, lifelong learners who could listen and learn from others. They saw their work as a vocation, and all these principals had many years of experience as a principal, most in at least two schools.

Strong relationships were an inherent part of each principal's personal qualities. Power can be bestowed through position, but these principals, through their relationships, had personal power, which enabled them to have even greater influence [11,12]. This was exemplified by Principal B and the philanthropic school grants she was able to source through her relationships. Principal I built relationships through his presence around the school—at the school gates, school functions, and sporting events. Everyone was treated equally, and he made time for everyone. In a school of 1381 students, he not only knew every student by name but knew something of their background and their family and could communicate with them on a personal level.

All the principals in our studies recognized that they could not succeed in isolation. Within their school communities, they modelled the behaviour they expected of others, maintained high expectations of themselves and others, and invested in good relationships with all in the school community and with the community agencies.

All these principals were educational leaders. Other than Principal A, who acted as a direct instructional leader working regularly with teachers in their classrooms, the effect of their educational leadership was mostly indirect; they were able to influence others to achieve their organisational goals by creating a learning environment and a learning culture, but how they achieved this was in response to their environment. Bossert [13] (p. 38), argued that '...principals must find the style and structure most suited to their local situation'.

Successful principals know how and when to intervene. Some interventions were 'revolutionary' or disruptive and required courage; this is discussed later in this paper (see Figure 2). For example, Principal B developed a culture of learning through the introduction of a Visual and Performing Arts curriculum, mirroring Harris' [14] (p. 16), contention that 'nothing really changes for students and their learning unless there are changes in beliefs, behaviours, and practices of teachers'. This dramatic change had school-wide implications for teachers who had to relearn their craft and rewrite their curriculum, for therapists who now had to plan and work alongside teachers, for parents who saw their child making progress, and for the students for whom there were now higher expectations that they learn. Principal B courageously changed the culture from a 'welfare culture' of caring to a broader educational culture of caring and learning. Equally revolutionary was school K, a school in danger of being closed because of low enrolment. Principal K moved to individualized learning where students could take control of their course once basic literacy and numeracy skills had been met by choosing 100% from over 150 electives as part of their Individualized Learning Plan. All reference to year levels was dropped, the uniform was abolished, and the default rule was 'Yes'. Over twelve years, the number of students grew from 286 to 1250. While significant but not revolutionary, Principal I challenged the pedagogical practices of teachers with the building of the Centre for Contemporary Learning, moving the focus from the content of <u>what</u> to learn to <u>how</u> students learn, with teachers as facilitators and mentors in the learning process.

As noted above, successful principals understood that the performance included the broader purpose of education. It encompassed a wide range of student outcomes as well as parent and community attitudes, school reputation, staff attitudes, and resourcing of the school. Success was centred on the whole child and not only the academic results.

4.3. Sustaining Success

Hargreaves and Fink argue that sustainable improvement is dependent on successful leadership, positing that:

Sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts in ways that do no harm to and create positive benefits for others around us now and into the future'. [15] (p. 224)

Davies defines sustainable leadership as 'the key factors that underpin the longer term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose, which provides success that is accessible for all' [16] (p. 18). Beyond the four leadership dimensions of success identified by Leithwood and Riehl [17,18]—setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing the instructional program—Davies [16] includes resilience, self-leadership, influence on others, and engagement with the broader community.

The impact of the principal's self-efficacy and continued personal and professional growth was a significant contributor to their sustained success and the sustainability of the school's success.

In the study of three principals (B, D, and I) who, in the same school, had sustained success for longer than a three-year consecutive period, Goode [10] found that the suc-

cessful leadership was contingent upon their leadership style, their personal qualities and values, their strategic interventions, and the extent to which they were able to respond to and influence their external and internal environments. All three principals demonstrated strong relational qualities and created a positive school culture by creating warm, open, trusting, supportive, and collaborative environments that functioned as the social glue in their organisations. These cultures had become firmly embedded, developing and broadening social capital beyond the school gates and cementing the reputation of both the principals and their schools. School I and School B, for example, had grown exponentially in their student population. The selection of the right staff was a key determinant in the sustained success of these three principals: Principal B made sure she surrounded herself with people who had complementary skills, surrounding herself with 'smart people'. Drysdale et al. [19] (p. 23) reported, 'Sustainability is very dependent on the right people...it's not a one-person show'. Mulford and Silins [20] (p. 2) agreed that sustaining success required the 'leadership capabilities of many rather than a few'. Both Principals I and D believed that you should hire people with the right attitude and passion and then develop their skills; you build the capacity of staff to lead by giving them opportunities to influence [10]. Principal B demonstrated this also, devolving many management tasks in the school through expanding her leadership group, enabling her to concentrate her energies outside the school, strengthening her alliances and networks, raising the profile of the school, and accessing resources. Establishing partnerships with other schools provided opportunities for teachers to shadow leaders to learn the craft of leadership. In sustaining their success, these principal's leadership styles changed. They knew themselves, and they were more confident in how they led. Harris and Lambert [21] cited the importance of building teams as a condition for sustaining success, with Zbar [22] agreeing that success could only be sustained by distributing or sharing leadership. All three had taken this action because they cited stronger relationships, more confidence in their ability and those around them, and a realization that they could not do it successfully alone. Hallinger [23] contends that there is a link between transformational leaders, the characteristics of which they exhibited, and distributed leadership because the latter involves developing a shared vision and a commitment to change.

As principals, they were all optimistic, enthusiastic, determined, and persistent. Impediments and hurdles were not barriers but rather challenges that were worth fighting for. They maintained a clear set of values, which guided their behaviours. They attracted and retained talent. They built professional learning of staff to support changes in teaching and learning, as well as in leading. They were highly visible within the school and within the broader community and so were able to gauge attitudes and readiness for change through the 'emotional thermometer'. A common feature in the sustainability of their success was that all three principals had initiated changes to improve the school's performance. Principal I was determined to continuously improve, never resting on the school's past successes. Leadership was very important. He believed that every student should be a leader; it was not a position. He, therefore, expanded the student leadership opportunities as well as international study tours, sporting opportunities, and outdoor learning experiences. Principal D had changed a toxic culture to one that was highly relational and inclusive, moving the school from a rule-based to a values-based approach [10]. Having established common practices and a common language within the school, she sustained its success by expanding this into families so that being 'fair' was fundamental to all practices, everyone was treated with respect, and self-esteem was never destroyed. An aspect of the sustainability of their success was the capacity to sustain themselves and achieve a work/life balance. Having the confidence to devolve responsibility was an enabler. Burns [24] equates confidence with self-esteem, suggesting that leaders with high self-esteem are more likely to be able to change and lead others rather than be led or changed by others or conform too readily. From this perspective, what differed most significantly in how these principals sustained success was their attitude to change.

Their philosophies and values influenced how each had responded to internal and external forces of change. The context in which they operated and their attitudes to change emerged as important factors in sustaining their success. They demonstrated common characteristics: all had a clear vision and strong educational and personal values; they built strong relationships; they engaged in professional capacity building; they were highly visible and engaged in the school community. What was different was how they approached change. This is discussed later in this paper.

4.4. Principal Contributions within the National, State System, and Local Contexts

Gurr et al. [9] reviewed all the early ISSPP cases and compared the principal response across the eight countries' contexts: Australia; Canada; China; Demark; England; Norway; Sweden; and the USA. While these were developed countries, there were differences in national and local contexts, and these factors impacted the principal's role that either facilitated or constrained their ability to influence school outcomes. Australia is a case in point, and in this section, we describe some of the contextual matters that help define the work of principals.

As noted earlier in this paper, Australian schools tend to operate within the centrally determined framework of policies and standards of accountability. Sometimes these are at the national level (e.g., the Australian Curriculum: www.acara.edu.au/curriculum (30 October 2023)) or with local interpretations (e.g., the Victorian Curriculum: https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au (30 October 2023)) Yet, as stated in the Australian Context section, Australia has a highly devolved system of education where authority and responsibility are decentralized to schools in terms of how they implement the frameworks. Government and Catholic schools are organised into systems that have delegated levels of autonomy, whilst independent schools have high levels of autonomy. For example, within an overall curriculum framework and requirements, schools have the autonomy to implement the curriculum for the unique needs of the schools. Schools and school principals can set priorities, select staff, and formulate budgets. At the local level, school boards or councils develop policies to support school operations, but principals have a high level of autonomy to implement policy. In Australia, the term commonly used for this school autonomy is school self-management, although school-based or site-based management is used internationally [25]. More recently, Caldwell [26] has described different levels of school autonomy.

Caldwell [26] argues that school autonomy is misleading in the sense that a system of public education is not fully autonomous. He claims that it is better to refer to a relatively high or relatively low level of autonomy. He identifies five levels of autonomy:

1. Decision taken by the jurisdiction in full autonomy;
2. Decision taken by jurisdiction after consultation;
3. Decision taken by the school within the framework;
4. Decision taken after consultation with others;
5. Decision taken by the school in full autonomy.

In the Australian case studies, we found that principals had high levels of autonomy in decision-making (Levels 3, 4, and 5) with respect to the organisation of instruction (curriculum materials, instruction time, pedagogy, assessment, and health and wellbeing of students), personnel management (teacher and staff selection, teaching duties, allocation of duties, dismissal), strategic planning and structures (programs of study, program design, subject selection, grade levels), and resource management (resource development, allocation of resources, capital works, budget management).

Autonomy comes with accountability. At the national, state, and system levels, authorities have standards for principals, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Principals and the Leadership Profile Principals [27]. As noted previously, there are also accountabilities to improve students' performance as measured by national tests of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) and the public reporting of these through My School (www.myschool.edu.au, accessed on 14 June 2023). To allow for a fair comparison between

schools, the ICSEA score is used to compare schools with similar levels of educational advantage. The extent to which schools add value is possible by tracking student literacy and numeracy performance and comparing this to the performance of similar schools and to the national averages.

Through school councils and boards, where these are used, and through system processes elsewhere, school principals also have high levels of accountability where they are expected to provide strong leadership by setting direction, promoting high-quality teaching and learning, and developing strategies to achieve goals [28]. They are expected to effectively manage the school, staff, and students and take responsibility for keeping abreast of educational developments and changes in policy. In addition, there are accountabilities for compliance, marketing, enrolment, and stakeholder engagement. Independent principals have similar accountabilities to Catholic and government principals with either additional or modified accountabilities.

4.5. Authority of the Principals to Lead and Manage

Principals in all systems have legitimate authority to lead and manage the schools, as outlined in the areas of autonomy and accountability above. They have the authority to implement policies and procedures mandated by their governing bodies. They have the responsibility to supervise and evaluate staff performance. This places them in a potentially powerful position to influence and seek compliance from staff. This provides a strong power base from which to lead. We consider principal authority through two lenses: principal capability; and orientation to change.

4.5.1. Principals' Capabilities

The school principals in the Australian ISSPP studies contributed to positive school outcomes using a range of influences beyond their legal authority. They balanced their legal authority with the capability to influence and create empowering environments to support the growth and success of the school community. They were skilled communicators who were able to convey their ideas and expectations. They drew upon other power bases to influence and motivate staff, students, and the broader community. They demonstrated the capability to lead and influence. In the section on 'Contributions to success', we identified the characteristics and qualities that supported their success beyond their legal status. In this section, we focus on the principals' capabilities to initiate and maintain change.

We can sum up the personal side of their leadership by using the term 'capability'. Their capabilities underpinned their abilities to influence. We define capability as the intersection between 'capacity' and 'ability'. It is the knowledge, skills, behaviours, values, attitudes, assumptions, and dispositions that make up the whole person.

These principals demonstrated a range of capabilities. Some leaders were described as heroic, inspirational, charismatic, or having a strong personal style (e.g., the principals in schools A, B, E, K, L, M). They often forged a powerful vision for the school and community that encouraged members to come on board. The other principals were what could be described as 'quiet leaders' and more nuanced in their leadership style. They went about influencing by using their expert knowledge in educational practices, curriculum development, pedagogy and leadership theories and sharing their knowledge. What they all had in common was that they could generate trust and respect and develop positive relationships. They exhibited integrity, fairness, and ethical behaviour. They invested their time and effort in establishing collaborative structures and processes to empower the community.

4.5.2. Leading Change

One of the most significant factors in how they led their schools was their capability to initiate and embrace change. They all innovated for school improvement. However, there were degrees of innovation. We identified these principals as either using incremental, transformation, or disruptive practices to lead innovation.

Level 1. **Incremental practices**—These principals were innovative and experimental. They put into place school improvement practices that led to sustainable progress. They attempted to embed change;

Level 2. **Transformation practices**—These principals were change agents. They were strategic in implementing change, sometimes incremental improvement, and other times, they were engaged in mildly disruptive practices. They were visionary doers who were not controlled by the external forces;

Level 3. **Disruptive practices**—These principals promoted dynamic and sometimes revolutionary changes. They engaged in the seven practices of disruptive leadership.

Our conception is very similar to the framework of Mayo and Nohria [29], who identified three archetypes of leadership:

- *Entrepreneurs,* who were ahead of their time and were not constrained by their environment. They were often able to overcome almost impossible barriers and challenges to find or do something new;
- *Managers,* who were skilled at understanding and exploiting their context. They demonstrated a deep understanding of the context and shaped and grew their business accordingly;
- *Leaders,* who confronted change and saw potential in their business that others failed to see.

Entrepreneurs create new businesses, managers grow and optimize them, and leaders transform them at critical inflection points. The entrepreneurs closely align with the disruptive leaders, the leaders with the transformative leaders, and the managers with the incremental leaders.

We identified the term 'disruptive' leadership, which is derived from our studies on how leaders initiated and sustained change in their schools. Our definition should not be confused with terms such as disruptive innovation (Christensen et al.) [30], where a new market displaces an established earlier market, or crisis leadership (Karasavidou and Alexopoulos) [31], which explains how school leaders cope with crisis situations and uncertainty. Our conception is consistent with our findings from our earlier studies (Gurr and Drysdale) [32] that showed how leaders contributed to success through their leadership styles. It is consistent with how we identified the heroic and post-heroic leaderships (Drysdale, et al.) [33] in depicting the range of leadership styles associated with creating change in schools. Again, it was demonstrated by showing how leaders created change through a range of incremental and transformational leadership practices (Goode, [10], Longmuir, [34], McCrohan, [35]). Disruptive leaders demonstrate the ability to challenge the status quo and create positive change in complex and uncertain environments. In ISSPP studies of successful principals in Cyprus, Pashiardis and Kafa [36] identified entrepreneurial leadership styles and skills as an important strategy when leaders are confronted with complex and competitive contextual demands.

By exploring the work of disruptive leaders from our studies, we identified seven practices that characterized their relentless orientation to change (see Figure 1).

We found that disruptive principals and leaders challenged the status quo and existing patterns, changed the direction of the school, transformed all aspects of the school, including philosophy, policies, structures, processes and roles, took a long-term perspective but were keen to achieve short-term results, challenged current pedagogical practices and championed a preferred model, influenced the change in behaviour, values, and assumptions, shifted the organisational culture, and were prepared to change staff to suit school directions. Drysdale and Gurr [37] further explored the idea of leadership in uncertain times, building upon the leading change ideas described here.

7 Practices of Disruptive Leaders
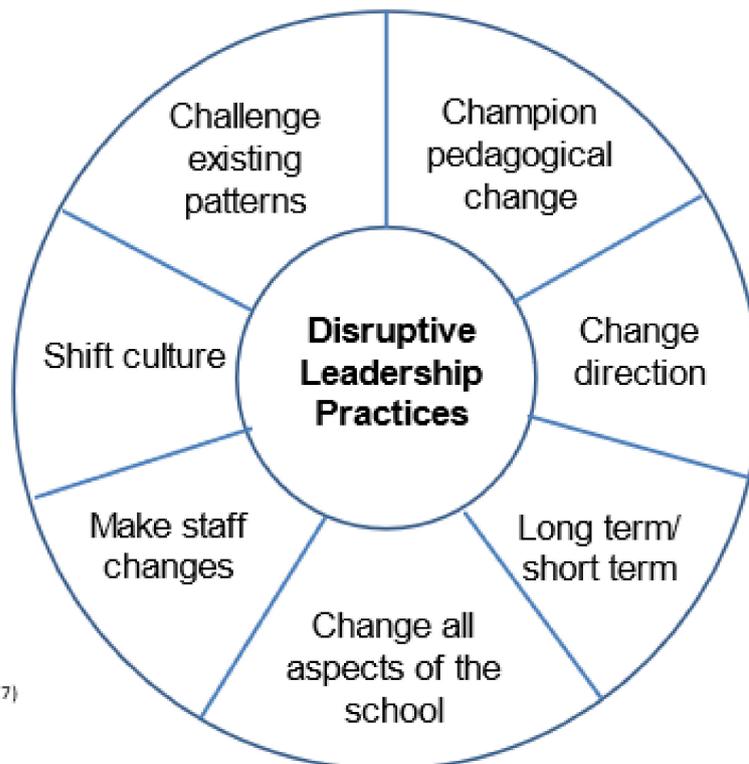
Drysdale, Gurr & Goode, (2017)
Rebuilding schools through
disruptive innovation and
leadership Presentation UCEA
Denver

**Figure 1.** Seven practices of disruptive leaders, 2017.

In this paper, we have grouped all our finished Victorian case studies into the three categories of innovative practices, and these are shown in Figure 2. There are six schools that have principals who illustrate incremental innovative practices: schools A; C; D; F; G; and H. These schools are seen as attempting to consolidate school improvement through incremental change and embedding the change into teaching and learning. Schools E, I, and J are in the category of transformation change. The leadership practices are mildly disruptive. The change is strategic and focused on individual, professional, organisational, and community capacity building. School improvement strategies are centred on school and community needs and priorities. They were able to build professional development and appraisal, set priorities based on data about performance, and communicate purpose, process, and performance. We have included five schools in the disruptive category: B; K; L; M; and N. Change in these schools is dynamic, with almost every aspect transformed. We see evidence of the seven disruptive practices outlined above.

The vertical line on the right of Figure 2 shows the degree of change from low to high: from incremental to disruptive. The size of the three categories of innovation is represented in a bar graph of the level of change in each category. The dotted line 'From incremental to disruptive leadership' practices show the trajectory of change from incremental to disruptive.

Figure 3 is adapted from Goode [10]. It attempts to stylize the three levels of innovative change and show the impact and extent of the change diagrammatically. It demonstrates the range in the capability of successful principals to innovate and use disruptive practices to affect change.
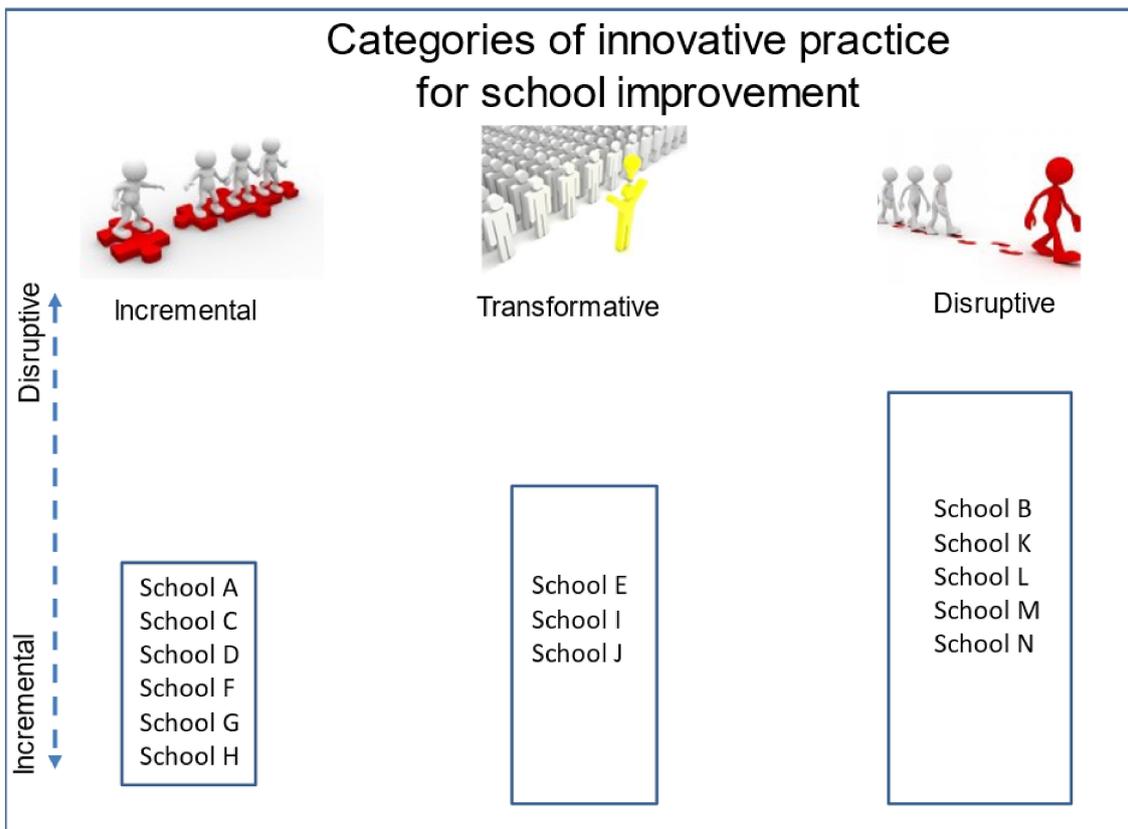
Figure 2. Categories of innovative practice for school improvement.
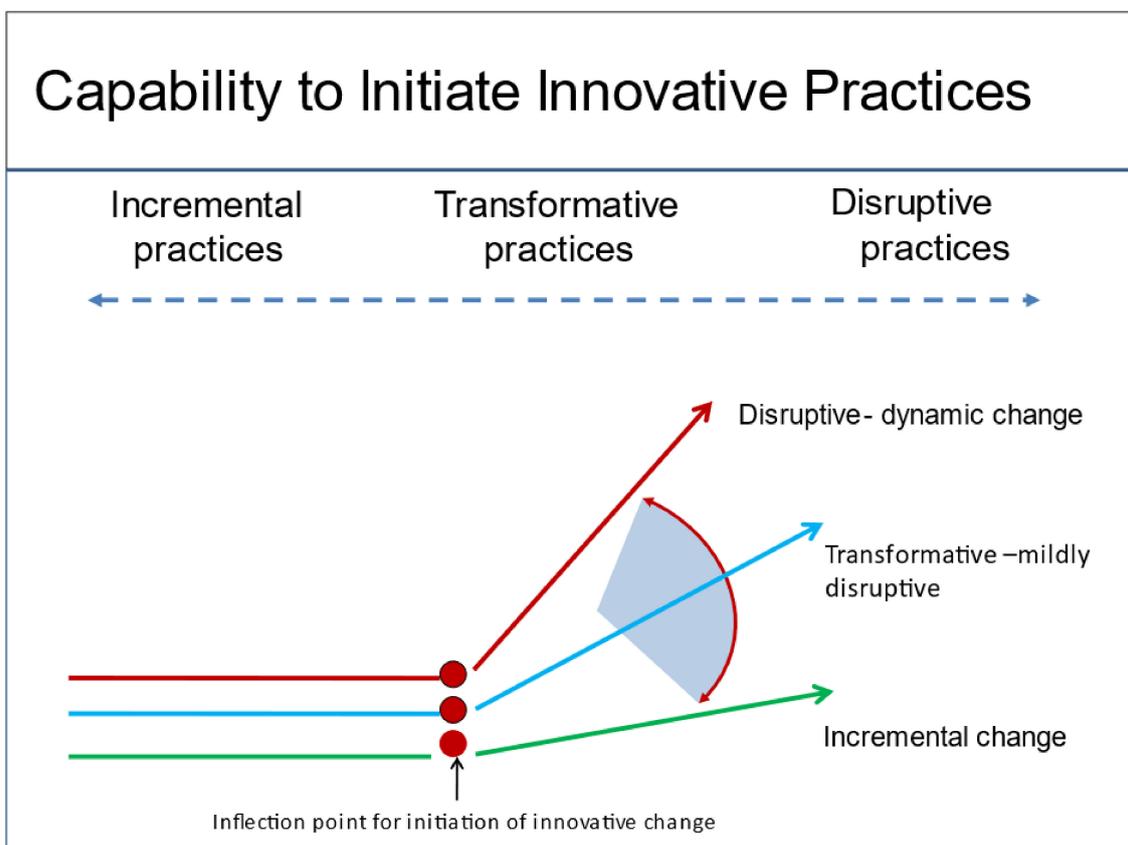
Figure 3. Capability to Initiate Innovative Practices.

The inflection point represents the time of the principal's appointment to the school and the beginning of their change program.

4.6. The Impact of Context on the Contribution of Principals to School Improvement

We have written about context extensively [3,12,36,38–44]. It is possible to discuss context generally, classify different types of contexts, or identify different levels of context. The following examples of ISSPP research show how principals interact with different contexts.

In the paper *Leadership in Uncertain Times* [38], we explore the general context of 'uncertainty' and how leaders are expected to respond and adapt their leadership to changing circumstances. In Gurr et al. [39], we explored the different contexts in a cross-country analysis as part of our early research. We identified contextual differences as national, regional, rural, and urban political, educational, and demographic. At the school level, we identified differences in the context, such as type, size, location, background history, stage of development, and leadership structure.

Our previous discussion of the Australian context describes the national, state, and system context that provides policies, frameworks, and guidelines that govern the levels of autonomy that principals exercise. Gurr and Drysdale [40] explored the Victorian government's educational context from the system, regional, and school perspectives. From the system perspective, it showed how the system attempted to influence principals through system leaders who could control some aspects of schooling, such as direction, budgets, buildings, and accountability. At the regional level, we identified some regional leaders who could influence principals by initiating regional-wide improvement programs and strategies to support schools. At the school level, we provided an example from one of our principals (School L) that explained the pathway to success within the context of four general contextual factors: socio-cultural; economic; political; and technological forces, system influences, and factors in the internal school context. Our findings showed that, while contextual matters impacted the principal's decision-making, they did not constrain his influence; in fact, he used these forces to his advantage to influence school performance and improvement. Gurr et al. [41] explored three underperforming schools, two with relatively high educational advantage (School K and School J) and one with low educational advantage (School L). This chapter identified several layers of context. External layers included institutional context, community context, socio-cultural context, economic context, and political context. The contextual layer at the school level was identified as the school improvement context. Each of the principals' leadership intentions and behaviour could be linked to these six contexts. Principals K and L were able to initiate change more quickly and dramatically due to the schools' being in educational challenging contexts. Principal J was required to build upon the school's current direction and initiate change more slowly because the school community context would not allow for rapid change. This research showed that principals operate within distinctive contextual levels, that levels of context can impact and shape their leadership responses, and that successful principals will use a range of inventions and lead in ways that reflect their personal capabilities.

As we have already noted, Goode [10] found that the sustainability of a school's performance over five years was inextricably interwoven with the principal's leadership and their response to internal and external factors. She showed that the principals' attitudes to change were critical in responding to internal and external challenges. For example, a positive, proactive response to change forces demonstrated by Principal B and Principal I supported the change agenda for school improvement in both schools. They were able to move forward with significant innovation. Principal D was reactive to the new external expectations from the education department. These expectations clashed with her own values and principles, and her level of school improvement strategies became incremental, whereas they had previously been transformational.

To sum up the 'context', from our Australian studies, we have found that our successful principals are less constrained by context and able to work within and across constraints. However, they do work differently. Some can work with the various layers, often navigating

the complexity of expectations and changes to gain success for the school. Others will change the aspects of the context, for example, by modifying or adapting mandates to suit their school needs. As agents of change, successful principals see aspects of their context as an opportunity to innovate. Context can provide a stimulus to forge a new pathway to school improvement by developing and implementing strategic interventions and building the capacity of the students, teachers, and school community.

We have concluded that while the contexts were different, Australian successful principals displayed many similarities: they were confident; they provided vision and direction; they had high expectations of staff and students; they empowered staff and built capacity; they aligned the community; and they promoted changes in teaching and learning, albeit different in each context, and developed the facilities in their schools, which supported teaching and learning.

The research findings in Australia have been consistent and reflect similar findings in the ISSPP research in other countries. In a book of illustrative cases from the first 14 years of the ISSPP [42], whilst core features of successful school leadership that work across varied cultures and contexts were articulated, Gurr and Day [43] also showed that successful leaders had nuanced responses to the culture and contexts that surround their schools.

4.7. Putting It Altogether—Success from A System's Perspective

The Australian research has explored how successful principals have contributed to the school's success through their capability to influence the school members and their constituents to develop and adopt a school improvement plan that leads to a range of positive school and student outcomes. They achieve this by balancing their legal position, which provides a relatively high level of autonomous decision-making, with their own capability to influence. They achieve this by building school capacity at various levels, creating an adaptive school culture, and putting into place mindful structures and processes. They also draw support from stakeholders, the groups with connections to the school and the wider school. The strategic interventions are directed to improve teaching and learning. The result is a wide range of student and school outcomes. This is all achieved within a complex layer of government, state system frameworks, guidelines, requirements, demands, mandates, differing expectations, and completing goals.

Our challenge has been to integrate our findings to try to make sense of the relationship between the various aspects. Since the early days of the ISSPP, we have attempted to represent our findings diagrammatically in models. Our most recent model, based mostly on Australian cases and survey research, is described in Gurr, Drysdale, and Goode ([3]. The model is shown as an open systems model to show the complexity and interrelationship of the factors described in the findings described in the previous paragraph. It shows the input factors (principal staff and school characteristics), the transformation stage (interventions and capacity building structures and processes), and outputs (range of successful outcomes for students and school).

In Gurr, Reed, Drysdale, and Goode [44], we have used this model to describe school N as an example of the model in practice. This school's contextualized model is shown in Figure 4.

We now consider the research themes highlighted in this paper through the perspective of the model.

The first aspect to note is that success in this school is multifaceted. In the 'success' section above, we described the way the school considered student and school outcomes.

Principal N's contribution to success is found in several aspects. The principal's background and qualities are important—his strong Catholic faith, post-graduate studies in Theology and educational leadership, having worked as a principal previously, and having worked in the Catholic system—have all been important to his success in being able to establish and develop his school as a recontextualized dialogue school, a school that is welcoming of many views and faiths and which strives to create a dialogue between Catholic faith and other views. His leadership has focused on developing staff

professional learning communities and learning communities for students and families, sharing leadership with others formally through senior and middle leader roles, through teachers working collaboratively together, and using the core leadership practices of setting direction (a world-class Catholic primary school), developing people through four capacity building areas, developing the school, and improving teaching and learning, along with the additional practices of developing self, leading as an influencing activity, and working with multiple contexts. These practice areas have resulted in developing teaching and learning across many areas and developing the contemporary Catholic ethos.
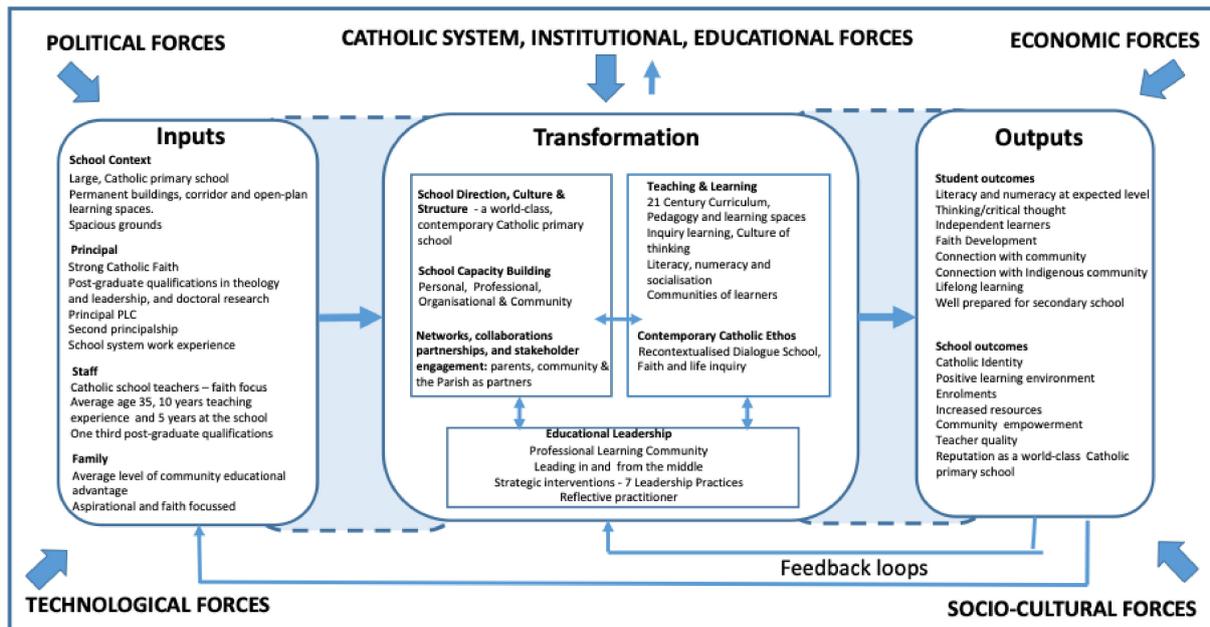

Figure 4. Open Systems Model of Successful School Leadership for School N.

Sustaining success through all the leadership practices described and judicious staff recruitment, developing supportive networks, collaborations, partnerships, and stakeholder engagement with parents, community, and the Catholic system, and through a relentless passion for having a contemporary Catholic school can be compared with work best practice. The feedback loops are important in that the outputs feedback and influence the input and transformation elements, whilst the system influences the school; it is influenced by the school through the promotion of its work as a recontextualized dialogue school, and the transformation elements all interact with each other through a process of continuous reflection and improvement.

The school has its own internal context—the input, transformation, and output elements—and this is surrounded by five contexts: the Catholic system and other educational forces; economic forces such as school funding; socio-cultural forces such as the desirability of Catholic schooling; political forces such as the importance given to education; and technological forces such as the ability to run remote schooling during the pandemic. The principal needs to be not only aware of these contexts but also be able to manipulate them to the school's advantage and, if needed and possible, manipulate these. For example, for the principal and School N, the transformation to a recontextualized dialogue school needed to proceed at a pace that the Catholic school system and Catholic Diocese were comfortable with, as not all in the church are necessarily supportive of this type of school. By developing this school successfully, the principal is also showing the system and the church that there are other possibilities for Catholic schools today.

The model in Figure 4 presents a linear pathway, but this is more a limitation of the diagrammatic model representation. The lived reality is far more complex and nuanced, as we have described. The inclusion of the feedback loops and two-way arrows attempts to

capture some of the complexity of the leadership work. For example, student and school successes can influence the type of families coming to the school, and the school is always fully subscribed.

The open systems model sits well with contemporary views of schools and within the future work of the ISSPP. The ISSPP is now exploring how complexity theory and ecological system perspectives can provide new insights into successful schools, and school N is one of the first cases to use new research protocols that reflect these orientations. Our model already captures features of complex systems [45], with many elements involved, the feedback interactions between these elements, and how the internal school context is surrounded by multiple contexts that need to be responded to and, in some cases, influenced by the school. It also helps to locate schools in the ecological systems view of Bronfenbrenner [46], who describes how a child's development is influenced by micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems and the interactions between these. The contextual forces in Figure 1 sit either within the macrosystem or exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's [46] conceptual framework. For example, the school is part of the Catholic faith (macrosystem); it is also a school within a Catholic system (exosystem). The school is as much a part of the child's micro and mesosystems as is the local Catholic church and parish. The interaction between the school, church, family, and child are important influences on the child, and these interactions reflect the complexity of the ecological systems view and how the contextual systems interact to influence a person's development. The broad ideas of success at School N give the possibility of rich development for students as the school is focused on more than merely academic success. The welcoming of families as partners with the school also aids student development as families support the school ethos and teaching and learning programs. That the school is a recontextualized dialogue school is an important influence on students because, while the school develops Catholic faith, it does so in a way that values other views and promotes an inclusive and welcoming worldview in students; this view and other initiatives at the school like inquiry learning and thinking curriculum, develop student agency and voice. These elements, a broadly focused view of student development that includes student agency and voice, engaging closely with families, and fostering an open and welcoming view of others that values diversity, help develop students who are active agents in their own development, and this is central to later ecological systems perspectives [47].

5. Conclusions

The Australian ISSPP researchers have contributed to this project and to the research on principal leadership more generally by drawing on the accumulated findings from over twenty years of case study research, together with various surveys into successful school principal leadership. The sheer weight of case study evidence (over 25 case studies in Australia and over two hundred from other ISSPP countries) provides us with great confidence that our findings stand up to scrutiny. The findings confirm the importance of principal leadership to student and school outcomes. Successful school principals contributed towards their school's success by focusing on success broadly defined—student authentic and traditional outcomes, and school outcomes—building capacity in their institutions and the people with whom they worked. Rather than relying on legitimate authority as a power base for their leadership, our research shows the importance of the principals' personal values, qualities, and characteristics in influencing people and events. They did not work in isolation but were collaborative and distributed leadership more generally. We call these leaders post-heroic leaders because they showed courage in challenging the status quo but also empowered others. While being true to their values and convictions, these principals were sensitive to their environment and adjusted their leadership to the changing internal and external context. Our longitudinal studies (over five years) demonstrated that they continued their impact and sustained their success by building on their previous success and being adaptable in meeting new challenges. The principals were strategic with their interventions but overwhelmingly focused on a

range of capacity-building strategies that helped transform teaching and learning within their context. We have synthesized our research by building models and frameworks that attempt to explain the research for academics and practitioners. Our recent open systems model builds on previous frameworks to show the complexity and dynamics of leadership by highlighting the variables and connections captured from our findings. These features are consistent with findings from ISSPP research in other countries. Our research is now centred on new ISSPP protocols that hopefully shed new evidence into other aspects of successful school principalship through a complexity lens.

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