



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Closing the gap clearinghouse

## Teacher and school leader quality and sustainability

Resource sheet no. 5 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

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### Summary

#### What we know

- There is a remarkable similarity between recent Australian and international research on teacher and school leader quality and sustainability, and the more broadly recommended policy and practice in Indigenous education that recognises the importance of:
  - self determination
  - increased and sustained individual and collective capacity building to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures
  - education practices that are culturally relevant and context specific
  - working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership.

#### What works

- Teachers and school leaders are most effective when they are:
  - contextually literate (understand the broader environment)
  - organisationally savvy (organise their schools to respond to this environment)

- leadership smart (act with others, focus on areas where they can make a difference, make changes based on evidence, make sure all changes are heading in the same direction, use a range of leadership styles and develop leadership in others).

- Teachers and school leaders achieve positive education outcomes when they act independently, are community-minded, supportive of differences and have a capacity for change.
- Schools work better when they operate as flexible organisations that focus on developing networks, trust and resources (social capital) at three levels:
  - within the school as a community of professional learners
  - between schools
  - between the school and its community.
- Improving teacher and school leader quality and sustainability is a developmental journey with targeted interventions appropriate to each stage of that journey.

#### What doesn't work

- A stand-alone leadership development strategy (other initiatives like ensuring the cultural relevance of school-wide practices is equally important).
- Failing to understand context and its implications for the organisation of schools and the function of school teachers and leaders.



- Teachers and school leaders choosing to be dependent, focused on the individual, supportive of sameness, and involved in constant, unfocused change.
- Narrowing what counts for good schooling to a few areas that are relatively easy to measure.
- External authorities imposing change and reporting requirements on schools.
- Leaders who are position-based, do not work through others, are inflexible or rigid in their approach, act in areas they cannot influence and adopt only one leadership style, especially if this doesn't develop leadership in others.

## What we don't know

Currently, we don't have evaluation data to know:

- how Indigenous school leadership best operates
- how to measure what we value, such as child and community social development (instead of just focusing on what can be easily measured)
- what valid, reliable, efficient administered evidence-gathering instructions represent the 'best' choices for use by schools.

## Introduction

Schools need sustainable reform to meet the challenges of rapid and constant change and higher community expectations. This sort of reform does not come about through external education authorities imposing requirements on schools (Alexander 2009; Bishop and Mulford 1999; Coffield et al. 2008; Hyman 2005; Mulford 2008; Pring et al. 2009). Instead, teachers and school leaders need to make sure that what happens in their schools is what they and their communities want to happen (Day et al. 2009).

A great deal of a school's success depends on which areas of school life teachers and school leaders (school principals and all those who undertake official leadership positions in schools) focus their time and attention. Because a single action by a teacher or leader can have more than one outcome, an effective leader needs to see and act on the whole, as well as on the individual elements in a school and its community over time.

Sustainable school reform is best achieved when teachers and school leaders:

- understand what is happening in the broader community and the implications this has for schools (being contextually literate)
- run their schools in ways that respond positively to their community (being organisationally savvy)
- act with others, pursue a consistent vision over time, focus on areas they can influence, use evidence to support change and use a range of leadership styles (being leadership smart).

A summary of these elements and their relationships is described in Appendix I.

Educational initiatives that consider context, its implications for the organisation of schools, and the implications of both for teachers and school leaders are critical. Failure to link all three of these elements can mean that initiatives are not implemented or, if implemented, do not meet the original intent (for example, Mulford & Edmunds 2010). Other negative consequences can include feelings of confusion, overload, stress and low morale on the part of school staff (Bishop & Mulford 1999; Mulford & Edmunds 2010).

This resource sheet examines the evidence on what works for teachers and school leaders, using the three elements of success, being: contextually literate; organisationally savvy; and leadership smart. There is little quality data on effective school leadership, particularly in an Indigenous Australian context, and what evidence is available is rarely acted upon.

## Being contextually literate

Schools operate in a world of rapid advancement in science and technology, changes in demography, increased globalisation and environmental pressures. This context results in constant change, complexity, uncertainty and insecurity, ethical dilemmas and higher expectations concerning what outcomes schools can achieve (Alexander 2009; Carneiro et al. 2006; Mulford 2008).

For teachers and school leaders to succeed they need to:

- choose between competing forces
- broaden what counts for good schooling
- change the ways schools are organised and run (Mulford 2008).



When choosing between competing forces, the best choices are to foster:

- independence rather than dependence
- community rather than individualism
- difference rather than sameness
- the capacity to adapt to change.

Broadening what counts for good schooling involves developing and supporting a wide range of social skills and goals, as well as academic skills and goals. A need exists to measure what communities value, not just value what researchers or administrators perceive can easily be measured (Mulford 2010). Longitudinal evidence from the UK has shown that social skills (as assessed by teachers) are much more important in influencing students' relative life chances than academic outcomes alone (Carneiro et al. 2006; Cunha et al. 2005; Feinstein 2000; Margo et al. 2006). Recent Australian research has found that the strongest predictor of student academic achievement is the student's social skills (Mulford & Edmunds 2009).

Schooling is also about contributing to children's wellbeing. The 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' UNICEF (2007) highlighted 40 separate indicators across the following six dimensions of child wellbeing:

- material wellbeing
- health and safety
- educational wellbeing
- family and peer relationships
- behaviours and risk
- subjective wellbeing (young people's own subjective sense of wellbeing).

Educational initiatives that consider all these dimensions are necessary because, as the UNICEF study found, no one dimension reliably predicts child wellbeing.

In brief, the quality of schooling needs to be judged in relation to all it does, not just its academic test scores. Child and community social development may be as, if not more, important in meeting the demands of society today and in the future. While there is debate about how to measure such broad outcomes, it must be done.

## Being organisationally savvy

Teachers and school leaders need to be organisationally savvy and must work together to move schools from:

- mechanistic to organic living systems—living systems see organisation as a process, one of constant adaptation, self-improvement and growth. It occurs naturally and inevitably in response to a strong desire for learning and survival (Wheatley 2005)

- hierarchies to social networks—networks rely on collaboration (Leadbeater 2005) and cannot be controlled by formal systems (Rusch 2005).

Schools can move to living systems and social networks through developing 'communities of professional learners' (Mulford 2008; 2010) and the development of social capital (Mulford 2007).

## Communities of professional learners

Research shows that establishing communities of professional learners (essential to quality and sustainable teaching and school leadership) involves the following developmental sequence (Mulford 2007):

1. Establish a community—move the educational focus from an operational to a people agenda, which entails communicating with schools about what they and their communities want to happen (Day et al. 2009). Success is more likely when school communities are provided with opportunities to be proactive rather than reactive, are involved in decision-making through an open and supportive structure and are trusted, respected, encouraged, and valued (Hughes 2009).
2. Develop a community of professionals—this involves sharing norms and values; respecting differences and diversity; developing a shared and monitored mission; focusing on implementation and continuous improvement in quality learning for all students; de-privatising practice; collaborating, and critical reflective dialogue, especially that based on broad-based performance data (Burgess & Berwick 2009).
3. Building a capacity for change—which entails learning from evidence-based evaluation and innovation (Gorringe & Spillman 2008).

Each stage of a community of professional learners, and each transition between them, can be made easier by appropriate leadership ('being leadership smart') and ongoing, optimistic, caring, nurturing professional learning programs.

## Social capital

The evidence-based research seeks to broaden what counts for good schooling by including student social skills and the way schools are organised and run to encompass communities of professional learners. It implies that there is a need for teachers and leaders to have an increased focus on social capital development (that is, the development of networks, trust and resources).



Social capital has three different but related levels:

- between schools and parents and other communities ('linking' social capital)
- between schools ('bridging' social capital)
- within schools ('bonding' social capital).

The development of 'linking' social capital establishes ties between schools, parents and others in the community. Australian (Silins & Mulford 2007) and international research (Leithwood et al. 2004; OECD 2004) shows the positive effect of a supportive home educational environment on student outcomes, especially student empowerment and social development. If schools can help improve a student's home educational environment, they will improve a broad range of student outcomes at school. 'Linking' social capital also extends to what the school can do to help the community develop itself.

Bridging social capital concerns schools networking together to learn and share experiences. It can be difficult to achieve bridging social capital as some educational policies promote competition rather than cooperation between schools.

Bonding social capital grows from the establishment of communities of professional learners.

## Examples of developing social capital

### ***Trial model for Indigenous education delivery – Australian Primary Principals' Association***

The Australian Primary Principals' Association (2009) has proposed that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) establish a partnership of primary schools, with large Indigenous enrolments, that will function as a 'quasi' system in which new models of governance, staffing and service delivery can be tested. This example of 'bridging' social capital is based on four core elements:

- the creation of a new governance model in which schools operate as a 'quasi-system' with a small central hub and a high level of school autonomy
- the creation of an elite, dedicated principal and teacher workforce to staff these schools
- access to experienced trouble-shooters to provide problem-solving support and advice when needed by school leaders
- a commitment by COAG to integrated and comprehensive service delivery for the schools.

### ***Indigenous Community Development projects participative evaluation***

Participative evaluations of 14 of the 69 projects from the Community Development Fund of the Telstra Foundation, which aimed to specifically benefit Indigenous children and young people, are reported in Higgins (2005). A theme that emerged in many of the projects was the importance of engaging with school communities in order to bring about change. In fact, the report concludes that 'schools can be a sentinel site for the [community] change process'. Other findings included the importance of:

- taking time, working with local schools and communities, including Elders, local families, and other stakeholders
- collaborating with other organisations
- communities being helped to identify problems and implement solutions themselves
- leadership.

### ***School to community partnerships best practice – Cooktown High School***

Cooktown High School's actions in developing the Indigenous as well as the wider Cooktown community are an example of best-practice in school to community partnerships. Australian research on this form of 'linking' social capital found that rural school-community partnerships delivered a variety of positive outcomes for youth and for the community, including:

- the provision of training that meets both student and community needs
- improved school and community retention
- positive environmental, cultural, recreational and economic outcomes (Kilpatrick et al. 2002).



For more information on building effective school to community partnerships see:

- Kilpartick et al. (2002) – for details of twelve indicators of partnerships (including in Indigenous communities)
- Higgins (2010) – for a detailed community development framework for improving Indigenous children’s wellbeing that reveals insights into building effective grassroots initiatives.

Using organisational concepts such as communities of professional learners and ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital can help to turn research into policy and practice. For example, it can help school communities:

- understand and address the complexities in moving a school to a place of sustained quality teaching and leadership without the school being overwhelmed by the demands for change surrounding it
- target appropriate interventions to ensure more effective progression through the stages of a school becoming a community of professional learners
- understand that there is no such thing as a ‘quick fix’.

These concepts, which involve developmental journeys and a tailoring of action to a context, organisation and people, can also be applied to the provision of teacher and school leader professional learning. More systematic and specialised professional learning programs are needed for those who are:

- novices
- in small schools
- in high-performing and low-performing schools in poor communities
- in Indigenous schools.

### **Better Educational Activities and Strategies to Try (BEAST) – Mareeba State High School**

Mareeba State High School on the Atherton Tablelands, Far North Queensland, developed a range of effective teaching and learning strategies set up as part of professional development for experienced and new teachers. These strategies were compiled into a resource folder for teachers called the BEAST (Jones 2002).

### **Indigenous focused teacher training – AEU**

The Australian Education Union (AEU) developed a campaign in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. One of its major features was a focus on ensuring that all teachers in the government system received access to a comprehensive program of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, both in their pre-service teacher education program, and as an ongoing in-service program to support their teaching practice (Moyle 2004).

### **Teacher training and engaged leadership**

A model of engaged leadership in Indigenous communities can be used as a basis of professional learning (Benham & Murakami-Ramalho 2010).

Engaged leadership supports:

- children and youth
- delivery of learning and teaching within the context of place and spirit
- partnerships with diverse communities.


Stories of engaged Indigenous educational leaders:

- put the case for alternative Indigenous educational settings that emerge from Indigenous lifeways
- suggest a model of Indigenous educational leadership that engages, ensures and nurtures a spirit of collective will and supports Indigenous sovereignty, culture, and language
- describe a vision for leading, learning, teaching, and living that is culturally respectful and socially just.

## **Being leadership smart**

‘Smart’ or successful school teachers and leaders act:

- indirectly (that is, through others)
- in a synergistic way (that is, accumulating a number of effects over time in the same direction)
- in areas they can actually influence
- using a range of leadership styles, especially those that develop leadership in others
- in ways that are evidence-based (Mulford 2010; OECD 2010).



## Leadership support – The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Australian Education Systems Officials Committee’s Senior Officials Working Party on Indigenous Education

The MCEETYA working party on Indigenous Education (2006) advocated strong, proactive and informed leadership supported by:

- learning outcomes for Indigenous students (for accountability)
- improved incentives to attract, retain and recognise high performing principals
- accredited school leadership programs
- opportunities for Indigenous teachers to become leaders.

## Principals Australia’s ‘Dare to Lead’ project (2007)

The underpinning belief of Principals Australia (previously Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council) ‘Dare to Lead’ project is that principals are the people who can make the most difference to the schooling outcomes of students. Formed in 2003, the project is network based and employs research evidence for improvement. Evidence at the end of 2007 indicated that the project had improved Indigenous student results in Year 5 reading (+4.77%), Year 5 writing (+8.76%) and Year 12 retention (+8.59%). It also made positive changes in school practices focusing on Indigenous matters, such as stimulating reviews of practice, development of strategic plans, changes in professional development, curriculum and community partnerships.

Leadership that makes a difference is both position-based (principal leadership), and distributed to others (teacher leadership). However, research consistently shows that both of these types of leadership are only indirectly related to student outcomes (Day et al. 2009; Leithwood et al. 2004; Silins & Mulford 2007). Successful leadership needs to:

- contribute to organisational capacity
- influence what happens in the core business of the school, that is, teaching and learning

- influence students’ perceptions of how teachers organise and conduct their instruction and their interactions with, and expectations of, their students.
- contribute to students’ positive perception of their teachers’ work, which promotes positive outcomes in school participation, academic self-concept, engagement with school and academic and social achievement.

The values and beliefs of teachers have been found to be significant in promoting student social development and student empowerment (Silins & Mulford 2007). These occur when:

- teachers are respectful of each other, hold high expectations of staff and students, and believe students’ wellbeing is important
- teachers believe they can make a difference in their classrooms, and they involve students in classroom and school decisions.

## Actions to address limited outcomes achieved by Indigenous students

Three Indigenous educators (Hughes et al. 2007), with extensive experience in education and schools, have recently discussed the actions needed by school leaders to address the limited academic outcomes being achieved by the majority of Indigenous students. They take the former Principals Australia L5 frame for school leadership and add an Indigenous focus from the ‘Dare to Lead’ project to demonstrate that Indigenous school leadership:

- starts from within—leaders personally value and acknowledge Indigenous culture
- is about influencing others—leaders listen to and act upon Indigenous community input
- develops a rich learning environment—leaders actively promote contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students
- builds professionalism and management capacity—leaders keep up to date with current Indigenous trends, issues and plans
- inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others—leaders invite Indigenous community role models into the school to motivate and challenge students.



Teachers' values and beliefs have been shown to have direct impacts on student outcomes, however, links between principals' values and beliefs and student outcomes are yet to be demonstrated. We know that effective principals influence student outcomes indirectly through teachers' work with students in their classrooms and school. Working in this indirect way, leaders and their schools have even been shown to be able to moderate the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage (Mulford & Edmunds 2009).

With the key challenges of acknowledging school context, effectively organising schools and developing smart leadership skills, leaders aiming to achieve sustained, quality teaching and school leadership need to create synergistic effects. Synergistic effects are the accumulation of a number of effects (e.g. social skill development and positive academic outcomes) obtained in partnership with others within the school community.

Achieving positive educational outcomes also depends on which areas of school life principals and their teachers choose to focus their time and attention (Day et al. 2009; Leithwood et al. 2004; Mulford 2010; OECD 2004). Success will most likely occur if they choose areas they can actually influence, such as:

- building school capacity (communities of professional learners/'bonding' social capital)
- student and other school and community social development ('bridging' and 'linking' social capital).

Emerging models of shared leadership and interactive professionalism highlight the need for different school leadership skills. While one leadership style or approach may work well for some teachers and leaders, in practice most adopt a range of styles. Successful leaders adapt their leadership practice to meet the needs of different circumstances (Day et al. 2009; Leithwood et al. 2004; Mulford 2010; OECD 2004).

Despite these different approaches, all successful leadership has at its heart the development of leadership in others. No skill is currently more important than school leadership development and succession planning; that is, sustainability of leadership itself.

The following two case studies outline two leadership strategies to improve outcomes for Indigenous students in Australian schools.

### **Cherbourg Primary School**

Chris Sara (2003) has documented how he reversed high absenteeism and low academic achievement in a short period of time at Cherbourg Primary School in Queensland using a range of leadership approaches. Practical steps were taken to address specific issues, such as:

- engaging with the powerbrokers in the community to help build a vision for the school
- children monitoring their own absences as a class, and then having to explain those absences to the whole assembly every Friday, with the class with the lowest number of absences winning free ice blocks from the tuckshop
- introducing a school motto ('strong and smart'), uniform and song
- assigning students to keep different areas of the school tidy and litter-free, and altering the school maintenance contract so that local Indigenous people were engaged to work at the school
- making an Indigenous studies program integral to the curriculum in all Years.

Sara (2003) concludes that: 'the most important thing I did was to believe in the people already at Cherbourg, and to be prepared to value what they had to say, to the extent that it truly influenced the directions of the school'.

### **Interventions to improve the delivery of education of Indigenous students – Our children, our future report**

The *Our children, our future: achieving improved primary and secondary education outcomes for Indigenous students* (Doyle & Hill 2008) report identifies eight intervention categories that work to improve the delivery of education to Indigenous students (all of which are suited to philanthropic investment). In regard to leadership, the Stronger Smarter Principals Program, developed by Chris Sara and run in the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, is used. Groups with a maximum of 20 staff complete a one-week residential course and develop an action plan for their schools to address. Follow-up support is then provided to assist principals to take responsibility for their school's results.



Given the ageing demographic of the education profession in Australia, now is the right time to identify talent, fast-track those with potential, mentor and coach them, and move them to educational leadership.

Finally, in respect to being leadership smart, while teaching and school leadership today is more evidence-based than ever before, care is needed to make sure the evidence used is high quality. There is a particular need for information about useful, valid, reliable, efficient and cost-effective evidence-gathering instruments for use by those in our nation's schools (Leading & Managing 2005). It is only in this way that we can have an open, professional debate over evidence, rather than what seems to be the current norm of seeing it locked away in employers' files and selectively used, if at all, for accountability and control purposes. This evidence would be more beneficial in improving schools and the children within them.

## Relevance within an Indigenous Australian context

On the basis of the available evidence, it is clear the balance between school context, school organisation and school leadership can best be achieved by groups of teachers and leaders, or professional collectives and alliances who negotiate, set and deliver their own agendas.

Furthermore, there is a strong similarity between the conclusions in this resource sheet and policy and practice recommended for Indigenous education, that recognises the importance of:

- self determination
- increased and sustained individual and collective capacity building to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures
- educational practices that are culturally relevant and context specific
- working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership.

Educational professionals need to re-establish their individual and collective educational agency. They need to overcome the gap between dependence on politicians or system bureaucracies to achieve what they want, and actively work to establish schools as 'communities of professional learners' that give greater focus to social capital development.

## Conclusion

The evidence reviewed for this resource sheet shows that teachers and school leaders must make sure that what happens in schools, now and in the future, is what they and their communities want to happen. The success in understanding and acting effectively on the three interconnecting elements—school context, organisation and leadership—is the biggest current challenge for Australian teachers and school leaders. Teachers and school leaders must be part of ongoing conversations about context and its implications for schools.

Teachers and school leaders need to understand and be able to act on the evolving and preferred organisational and leadership models for schools, with a clear priority given to student learning. These organisational models focus on communities of professional learners and the development of social capital in and between schools and between the school and its community.

Finally, leaders need to act through others; make sure changes over time are in the same direction; act in areas they can actually influence and adopt a range of leadership styles, especially those that develop leadership in others.

Only in meeting the major challenges in these ways can Australian schools and school systems truly move forward with sustainable teacher and school leader quality.

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## Terminology

**Indigenous:** 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people.

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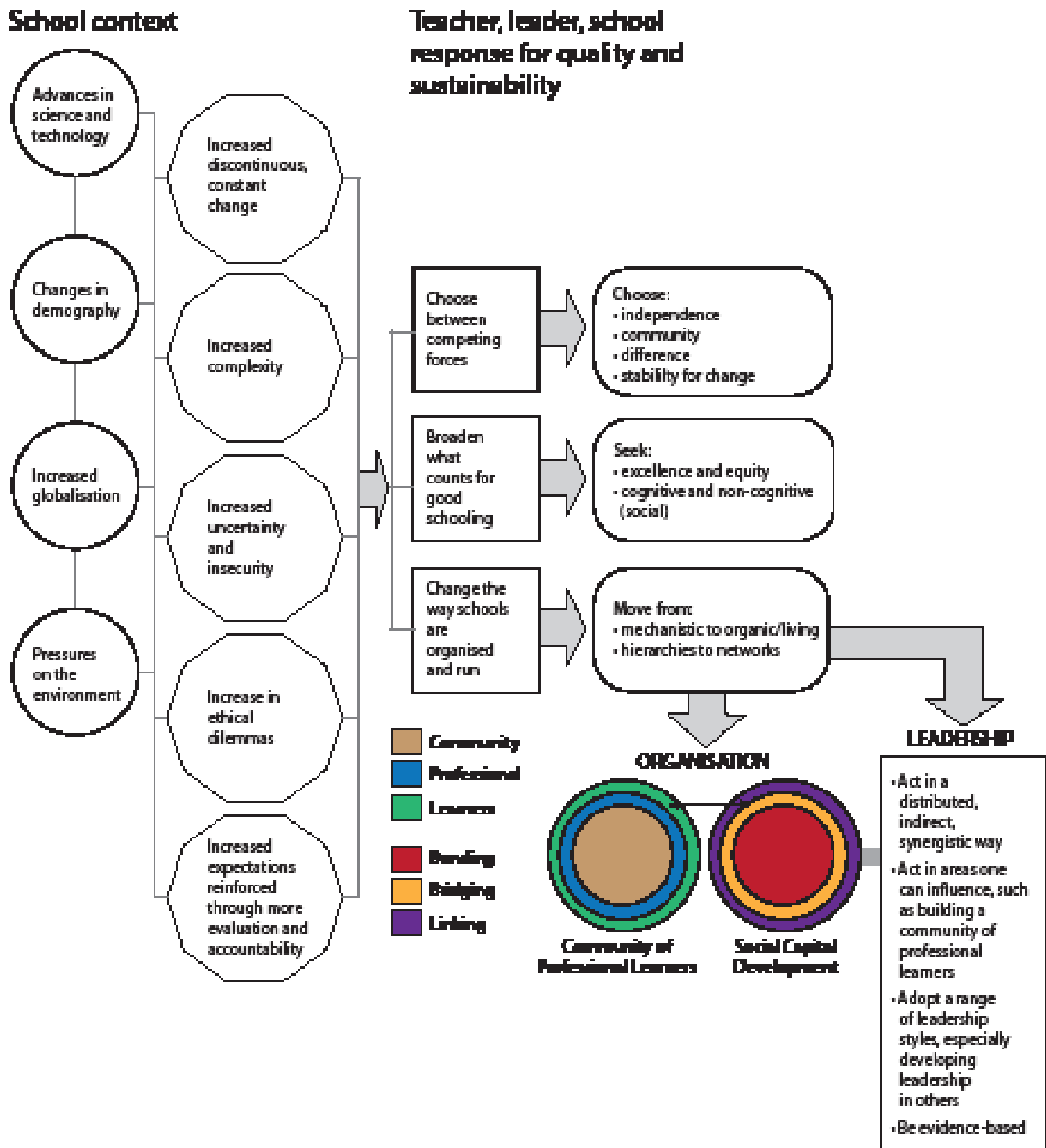
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# Appendix I:

## Summary 'flow' for teacher and school leader quality and sustainability



The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Australian Government, or any Australian state or territory government.