SCHOOL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT
2025, VOL. 45, NO. 1, 105–124
ISSN: 1363-2434 | E-SSN: 1364-2626

Unlocking school success: person-organisation fit between a principal and a successful rural school in Australia

Christopher Hudson

Institute of Education, Arts and Community, Federation University, Berwick, Australia

ABSTRACT

The more than six decades of research on school effectiveness and the two decades of research on school success demonstrates the importance of principal leadership in successful schools. However, the 30-year history of research on person-environment fit has not been robustly connected to the literature on successful school leadership. This study extends the literature on successful school leadership by presenting an analysis of a sub-field of person-environment fit, that of person-organisation (P–O) fit, between a principal and a successful school in rural Victoria, Australia. Multiple perspective, mixed method case study methodology was used. Data were collected through interviews with school leaders, teachers, students, parents, a school council president and a system leaders school observation, document analysis and a teacher survey. Results showed that the principal enacted the core practices of successful school leadership to secure school success. Further analysis of these practices highlighted the P–O fit between the principal and the school, especially as it related to the principal's native connection to the community and the success of the school. The findings of this study offer important considerations to inform future investigations on the P–O fit between principals and successful rural schools in different contexts.

KEYWORDS

Leadership; school effectiveness; school improvement; educational change; school principals; person-organisation fit

Introduction

The more than six decades of research on school effectiveness and the two decades of research on school success has clearly shown that principal leadership matters. This large body of research demonstrates that strong principal leadership is closely tied to the attainment of desirable school and student outcomes (Gurr and Drysdale 2021; Reynolds et al. 2014). Despite this, there

has been scant scholarly attention afforded to how principals 'fit' with their school context as part of the process of a school becoming successful. At present, it is somewhat implied in the literature that because a school has been deemed successful and the principal has enacted leadership practices that have contributed to this success, then there must be a good fit between the principal and the school. It is logical to assume this to be true, but the 30-year history of research on person-environment fit, which exists in the organisational psychology literature, has not been robustly connected to the literature on successful school leadership. The aim of this study was to illustrate an example of principal–school fit as part of a case study investigation on a successful school in rural Victoria, Australia. Specifically, this paper connects research on the leadership practices of successful school principals to the research on person-environment fit, notably through the sub-field of person-organisation (P–O) fit. This paper firstly reviews the literature on what is known about school effectiveness and success, including an overview of the leadership practices of successful principals. Next, the literature on P–O fit is considered and the study's design is presented. Last, the study's findings are discussed as they relate to the literature.

Literature review

School effectiveness and success

Over its 60-year history, research on school effectiveness and improvement has helped to clarify why some schools are more effective than others and some of the features of these schools (Reynolds et al. 2014). Strong principal leadership has been shown to be important in enhancing student outcomes, but this impact is largely indirect (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021). From a review of literature on leadership and effective schools, Leithwood et al. (2004) stated that 'leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school' (5). In a later review of similar research in the US, Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) commented that it is difficult to envision an action with greater effects on student outcomes than that of improving principal leadership.

Effectiveness research has often had a narrow focus on student outcomes, with students' skills in literacy and numeracy being primary measures of effectiveness (Gurr and Drysdale 2021). School success is a broader concept in that it explores a wider variety of student outcomes and can include school outcomes, such as school reputation, school satisfaction, and students' wellbeing outcomes. It has been less well researched, but a major contributor over the past two decades to this has been the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), which this study formed part of. The ISSPP was established in 2001 and has since produced more than 300 case studies of successful

principals and reported on these through a range of different mediums. Collectively, this body of research has culminated in an authoritative understanding of the leadership practices of successful principals and how they influence schools to become successful in different international contexts. An overview of these leadership practices is provided next.

Successful school leadership practices

Over the last decades, Leithwood and colleagues (e.g. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020) have contributed much knowledge on what it is that principals of successful schools do and how they secure success in different international contexts. Part of the knowledge derived from this work are the four core practices of successful school leadership: (1) set direction, (2) build relationships and develop people, (3) develop the organisation to support desired practices, and (4) improve the instructional program. In Australia, which is where this study was located, principals are guided by the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL 2011), which is a public statement that sets out what they are expected to know, understand and do as part of their leadership. Within this statement there are five professional practices: (1) leading teaching and learning, (2) developing self and others, (3) leading improvement, innovation and change, (4) leading the management of the school, and (5) engaging and working with the community. There is significant alignment between the five professional practices listed by AITSL (2011) and the four core practices as described by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020): leading teaching and learning aligns with improving the instructional program; developing self and others aligns with developing the organisation to support desired practices as well as building relationships and developing people; leading improvement innovation and change and leading the management of the school aligns with setting direction; and engaging and working with the community aligns with building relationships and developing people. It is important to note that these practices do not occur in isolation from one another and in reality, they are interrelated. Leadership, though, cannot be reduced to a simple list of interrelated practices. As Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) commented, it is not these practices themselves, but the ways in which leaders enact them in relation to context which determines their impact.

Leadership in context

Research within the ISSPP has consistently shown that although successful principals are impacted by context, they are not constrained by it (Moos, Johansson, and Day 2011). Rather, they are reflective and are able to adapt their leadership practices to suit the specific contexts in which they lead (Day and Gurr 2014). The notion of leadership in context affirms the work of Hallinger (2018) who

reported: 'optimising leadership practices for a specific school at a specific moment in time must take into account multiple layers of the widely shared context as well as the personal resources of the leader' (19). Hallinger (2018) believed that reporting only on what successful school leaders do 'strips away the 'context specificity' needed to help practitioners understand how to apply findings in different schools' (6). It is for this reason that it is not so much what the principal does that should be the core focus, but rather the *relationship between* the principal's leadership practices and the series of connections, constraints and affordances within their school context.

In line with this view, and to extend the knowledge on rural school leadership further, Nelson (2022) argued that the focus should move from the traits and behaviours of individual rural school leaders. Instead, Nelson (2022) proposed a transition towards leadership-as-practice whereby insights are provided on how rural school leadership unfolds with and alongside other actors in context, which draws out the 'why' of leadership rather than the 'how' of leadership. Despite this call, much of limited research that we have on rural school leadership to this point in time has focused on neither (Hudson 2024a, 2024b). Rather, the focus has been predominantly centred on describing 'what' rural school leadership is, which, more often than not, has been associated with leadership as a means to *overcome* the challenges of rurality (Hudson 2024a, 2024b; Klocko and Justis 2019), such as the tyranny of distance and limited resource accessibility (Klocko and Justis 2019). Given these challenges, some have argued that rural school leadership and urban school leadership are different, drawing attention to the differentiated needs associated with the leadership development of rural school leaders (e.g. Andreoli et al. 2020; Hardwick-Franco 2019). However, there still remains a scarcity of research that focuses specifically on the leadership of rural schools in context, and, as such, we simply do not know enough about the leadership of rural schools today (Hardwick-Franco 2019; Hudson 2024a,2024b; Heffernan 2021).

Despite decades of research demonstrating that the four core leadership interrelated practices represent the work of successful principals and what they do to achieve desired school and student outcomes, much of the successful school leadership literature has not explicitly explored how these practices relate to the fit between the principal and the school. The next section discusses the literature on P–O fit, which focuses on the connections between people, their actions and feelings, and the organisation they work for.

Person-organisation fit

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a movement in the organisational psychology literature that focused on the connection between people and their work environment. The subsequent person–environment research sought to understand how worker outcomes were influenced by their

environment, with worker retention becoming a core focus because of the increased costs associated with having to replace workers in a postindustrial era (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005; Miller and Youngs 2021; Subramanian, Billsberry, and Barrett 2023). Emerging from this scholarship was the notion of P–O fit, which, in an early integrative review, Kristof (1996) defined as 'the compatibility between people and organisations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs or they share similar fundamental characteristics, or both' (4–5). While there has been scholarship on other types of person–environment fit, such as person–vocation fit, person–job fit, and person–supervisor fit, Miller and Youngs (2021) explained that P–O fit is the most studied type of person–environment fit.

In their meta-analysis of the different types of person–environment fit, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005) showed that P–O fit has been popularised because it is highly linked to organisational commitment and a better predictor of organisational turnover than the other types of fit. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully capture the decades of research on P–O fit, this large body of research posits that people are more attracted to, involved in, and motivated by organisations that match their personal values and supply them with the resources they need to do their jobs well (Kao et al. 2022; Kristof 1996; Miller and Youngs 2021; Subramanian, Billsberry, and Barrett 2023). Specifically, Kao et al. (2022, 7766) identified three dimensions of P–O fit commonly discussed across the literature:

a. supplementary fit: where an employee's personal characteristics are congruent with the characteristics of the organisation and other employees;
b. demands–abilities fit: where an employee's characteristics can fill gaps that are not filled by other employees;
c. needs–supplies fit: where an employee's psychological needs can be satisfied by the characteristics of the work environment.

Piasentin and Chapman (2006) noted that supplementary fit was the most sought type of P–O fit to secure organisational success. This is because when a person's values and characteristics are similar to that of an organisation, both the person and the organisation benefit from the congruence of ideals and values. Since demands – abilities fit entails a person's abilities matching the demands of an organisation, this type of P–O fit sees a person value the appreciation they receive for the skills and expertise that they bring to the role, but the organisation also benefits from the person supporting and developing the skills of others in the organisation to secure successful outcomes (Piasentin and Chapman 2006). While demands – ability fit focuses mostly on meeting the needs of others in the organisation, needs – supplies fit primarily focuses on an individual meeting their own needs in relation to the existing organisation conditions. This type of fit sees an individual think about P–O fit

in terms of whether the organisation satisfies their individual psychological needs at a particular point in time (Kao et al. 2022; Kristof 1996). Some have argued that it is not necessary to satisfy all three dimensions of P–O fit to secure both personal satisfaction and organisational success (Piasentin and Chapman 2006), and it is likely that fit changes as both the person and the organisation change over time (Barrick and Parks-Leduc 2019; Kristof 1996). However, Piasentin and Chapman (2006) noted that there has been little attention paid to understanding the multidimensional nature of P–O fit.

While the literature on P–O fit presents important analysis around how individuals and organisations meld together to achieve desired organisational outcomes, it has largely focused on organisations outside of schools. The concept has not yet been sufficiently leveraged in the field of educational leadership. One study, that of Ho, Bryant, and Walker (2022), did use P–O fit to examine the relationships among the leadership actions of middle leaders and their subsequent leadership actions. Findings demonstrated that 'a school's hierarchical structure may impede middle leaders' capacity to shape a supportive organisational environment for teachers' (514), and that it was important for middle leaders to have a supportive principal in order to contribute to a school's success. This finding suggested that the principal has to be the right fit for the school, too. However, there has been minimal focus on using P–O fit as a lens to understand how successful schools and the principals who lead them fit well together. This study extends the literature on successful school leadership by presenting an analysis of the P–O fit between a principal and a successful school in rural Victoria, Australia.

Methods

This study was part of a larger research project that investigated the leadership of a successful rural primary school in Victoria, Australia (Hudson, 2024a). The school in the larger research project was chosen as a research site because it was classified as a rural school as per the governing state education body (DETV 2019), and had been deemed successful using the following ISSPP criteria for the selection of a successful school:

a. the principal and the school had an exemplary reputation in the community and/or through professional networks,
b. confirmation through National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)[1] results that the school was at or above national expectations,
c. school review reports that indicated that the school has been deemed successful during the principal's tenure,

The selection of a rural primary school specifically was governed by who agreed to participate in the research out of a pool of eight schools, each of which were nominated through the researcher's professional networks and deemed a successful rural school as per the above criteria.

Profile of the school

Bandjina Primary School (pseudonym) is a primary school located in Victoria, Australia, and had 194 enrolments and 16 teachers at the time of this research. The school is located approximately 300 km from Melbourne. The township of Bandjina is a desirable rural location and has an affluent community. The school's most recent demographic data showed that 71% of the students are in the middle and top distribution quarters of the Socio-Educational Advantage when compared to other schools across Australia. Students' performance on NAPLAN were well above national averages, and, importantly, at or above schools with similar levels of high educational advantage.

Profile of the principal

Robert (pseudonym) was the principal of the school and had 24 years' experience as a teacher and school leader. He was in his ninth year of principalship at the school, which was his first and only appointment as principal. Robert had lived in the area all his life and currently resided in close proximity to the school.

Profile of the staff

The school had a mature staffing profile. Of the 16 teachers, most were highly experienced educators who had been at the school for a long time. The average age of a teacher at the school was 46 years-of-age, with the range between 33 and 54 years-of-age. The average amount of time in the profession was 18 years, and the average length of service at the school was 12 years, with only two teachers who had been at the school for less than eight years.

Data collection

This study was a multiple perspective, mixed method case study and included interviews, observations, document analysis, and a teacher survey. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with Robert, middle leaders ($n = 3$), classroom teachers ($n = 4$), a system leader, and the school council president. Consistent with other ISSPP case studies, Robert was interviewed on three separate occasions to gain a broad perspective of his leadership. Group interviews were conducted with parents ($n = 9$) and students ($n = 12$). In total, 31 people were interviewed across 12 individual interviews and five group interviews.

Interview questions were adapted from the 2021–2025 ISSPP interview protocol document (Day 2021), and covered different aspects of school success depending upon the participants' position within the school community, but all participants were asked about the characteristics and practices of the principal.

Seven hours of school observations were conducted across both formal and informal settings within the school. Observational field notes were made through a scripting process which described events and researcher observations, and these notes were recorded at the time of the observation or as soon as possible after the observation. The teacher survey was focused on how the teachers felt about their teaching at the school. All 16 teachers were offered the opportunity to complete the survey and 11 surveys were returned, reflecting a 69% response rate.

Data analysis

Analysis of interview and observation data was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022, 35–36) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, with these data analysed independently and then examined together to identify common themes related to Robert's leadership practices. Survey data was transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and underwent 'descriptive analysis' (Lodico, Spalding, and Voegtle 2010) with frequencies and percentages reported for each survey question overall, with this analysis used to support and extend the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Validity and reliability of the study was established through member checks of interview transcripts and data triangulation (Creswell 2015).

Findings

Findings from this study showed that Robert had enacted all four of the core leadership practices of successful principals. Given these four core practices are the leading conception of successful school leadership, the findings from this study are presented under each of these practices. The wide applicability of these practices allows for comparisons to be made between successful school leadership and P–O fit later in the paper.

Set direction

Robert explained that when he first started the principalship at Bandjina Primary School, he had to provide a sense of stability in the school community and repair relationships with parents, primarily due to the quick turnover of two principals before him. The system leader explained that the two principals had left the school because they were unable to cope with the high-level community demand for their time. As a result of this high turnover, Robert stated

that 'there was quite a big disconnect between parents and teachers and lots of distrust in the school'.

To set a positive direction in the school, Robert had focused on building a student-centred and community-orientated learning environment. He achieved this by constantly communicating the school's values so that everyone in the school community was aligned with what it meant to be a member of the school community. The three school values were: (1) we show respect, (2) we are fair, and (3) we are learners. All interviewees explicitly referenced these three values as important to the maintenance of positive relationships in the school community, with Robert explaining, 'in many ways, the school values echo how we all live together in the broader community here in Bandjina'. During an observation of an assembly, Robert spoke at length about the importance of these three values, which parents believed enabled them to connect more strongly to the vision of the school. As one parent reported:

> We see Robert at every assembly and he often just brings us all back to the purpose of the school. Like he'll just say something about the school values, and he grounds us all and reminds us why we're there and how to be with one another. I always find that very centering. (Parent group 1)

This had promoted a common language around high expectations for learning and behaviour in the school, which Robert summarised well:

> I am communicating with everyone how it all works. It's just getting the words being used, the common language. You say something often enough, it becomes second nature … It's just saturation media coverage, basically. (Robert)

Build relationships and develop people

Robert acknowledged that building relationships with people had defined his leadership at the school:

> My general overall leadership approach is asking myself if we have got the right relationships in the school to work together to do what we need to do. If we don't, then I get out there and action that. (Robert)

To mend the fractured relationships with parents, Robert focused on being highly visible and inviting them into the school to 'give them assurance that I wasn't just going to go, come in, try and change everything and then walk out in six months and then cause more upheaval'. Interviewees commented that Robert still maintains this approach:

> I see Robert out in the yard talking to people a lot. He does the first yard duty of the day, every day. He's always out there in the afternoon when students are being picked up and hanging around talking to parents. (Literacy leader)

> Robert has a habit of standing out on the road where all the parents are at the end of school. He makes himself available to parents which I think is great. (Parent group 2)

This was confirmed further during multiple observations of Robert's movements before and after school, where it was noted that he made a concerted effort to be highly visible in the school and talk to as many parents and students as possible. This high visibility extended out in the local community, too. Robert explained that being highly visible in the community was essential for him because it enabled him to build positive school-community relationships:

> There's a fair bit of after-hours things that I do but I see those things as important to my role as a rural principal … Anything that comes from the community I go to because it allows me to build and maintain school-community relationships. (Robert)

Robert lived approximately 400 metres away from the school, explaining that he had grown up in the area and had not moved far since. He saw his status as a local as a positive because it enabled him to build relationships more easily than if he lived further away:

> Being a local helps my leadership as principal because I know the community well and it allows me to be present and visible in the community … If I get stopped for a chat in the supermarket and I can share the message of what we are doing at the school with people … It's like school promotion in a way and I might not get that if I didn't live in town myself. (Robert)

Interviewees were keen to point out how well Robert managed his high visibility, notably because he had a vested interest in the success of the community of which he was a part of:

> He's a local guy and part of the reason he took the principalship was because he wanted to make a difference for his community … He's got that community feel about him, which I think is really important in Bandjina … He's well integrated into his community and that's why he's so accepted. (System leader)

Robert also had two young children, both of which had gone through the school while he was principal. Parents explained that they had built strong relationships with Robert because he was also a parent in the community.

Develop the organisation to support desired practices

Robert believed that as principal, 'you let teachers be teachers because that's what they do best', which meant that staff were empowered to focus on teaching and learning under his leadership. This connected strongly to the mature teaching profile of the school and their desire for autonomy. Robert acknowledged his approach might be different with a different staffing profile:

> The teachers here are very experienced and very knowledgeable. I see my job to work with them and not direct them. If we had a different staffing profile, it would be very different – I would have to be more directive. But with the staffing profile I have, it's more about me supporting teachers to teach. They have a high degree of autonomy here. (Robert)

This sense of teacher' autonomy was further supported through survey data, with all staff ($n = 11$) responding to the prompt of 'The principal trusts the staff to do their job well' with *strongly agree*. Robert believed that it was his job to shield teachers from unnecessary burden so that they could focus on teaching:

> Protecting my staff from unnecessary burden is really important … The most important thing here is teaching and it is my job to shield teachers from things they shouldn't have to worry about. I have a fine line on what's acceptable for teachers to do above and beyond the focus of classroom teaching. (Robert)

This was valued by all staff who saw it as a way to ensure that they did not get overwhelmed with excessive workloads, especially those who had informal leadership roles in the school. Indicative of this was the assistance that Robert provided one teacher who was also the school's camp coordinator:

> It [camp coordinator role] can be stressful to make sure you've got everything organised and there's a lot of paperwork … Robert is good with supporting me … he'll check in to make sure I'm okay … he often offers to work on things together. (Teacher B)

> For leadership roles like camp coordination, I see it as my job to do all the paperwork and compliance around those roles. My teachers shouldn't be spending too much time on those sorts of things. (Robert)

All staff felt that Robert was always supportive with their requests for instructional support. Indeed, they acknowledged that Robert provided them with whatever they needed to do their jobs well, whether that be the provision of resources or the protection of their time. Empowering teachers to teach well was considered a strength of Robert's leadership, as indicated by the below teacher comment:

> I think one of his strengths as principal is that he is very generous with his offer of time if you need it. If you feel like you need time for anything, it really is a matter of asking and it won't be no. It will be like okay, let's see how we can make this work so that you can have the time you need to fulfil the role. (Teacher A)

Improve the instructional program

Robert explained that he engaged in dialogue with his staff to get their perspectives on school improvement initiatives, especially related to the instructional program in the school. This dialogical approach was enacted because of the school's mature staffing profile and their desire to have a say in how the school was run. As such, Robert had the belief that his staff were the experts, and that improvement to the school's instructional program could only occur if they were involved in the decision-making process:

> It's a group decision. I would never say we're adopting this program, or we're now doing the whatever method. It's always a group decision.. The teachers here are the experts and they guide the pedagogy in the school. They make great instructional

> decisions, and if they're making those decisions alongside me, then it promotes whole-school buy-in. (Robert)

All six of the full-time staff interviewed at the school commented that they valued being trusted with a high level of autonomy to teach how they wanted to teach in the school. Robert also acknowledged the skill and knowledge of his three middle leaders, which consisted of a numeracy leader, a literacy leader and a learning specialist: 'Those three leaders all do wonderful things and they have a better skill set than I do when it comes to pedagogy'. This was especially noted for the learning specialist who was the most experienced teacher at the school. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school attracted extra funding from the department to support students' learning in the 2023 school year. Robert used this extra funding to release the learning specialist from classroom duties so that she could focus solely on building the instructional capacity of teachers in the school. Robert's focus on empowering his teachers to teach, as well as opening up space for his middle leaders to lead the instructional program, had enabled school improvement to be driven from within – that is, from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

Discussion

Bandjina Primary School was a safe, community-orientated environment where there was a common sense of empathy, trust, and purpose, allowing for high levels of collaboration between people in the school. Students described the school as friendly, welcoming, and warm. Parents described the school as supportive and community-orientated. Teachers described the school as a positive and welcoming place to work. There school had a stong reputation in the local community and also with the secondary schools in the nearby regional city. Interviewees acknowledged that Robert's leadership had been key to the school's success, and that he displayed a proclivity for leadership practices that enabled him to build and maintain the conditions necessary for everyone to work well together. It was clear that Robert and Bandjina Primary School were perfect for one another – a harmonious fit between person and organisation. The middle of the model in Figure 1 uses the analogy of a lock to illustrate this.

Analogies and models help in visualising relationships and connections between key variables. Figure 1 does this by demonstrating the relationship between the four core successful school leadership practices (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020), P–O fit, and successful school outcomes. On the left-hand side of the model in Figure 1 are the core leadership practices that Robert enacted in context. On the right-hand side of model in Figure 1 are the broader school outcomes that were achieved under his leadership. The middle of the model – the lock – is the most complex and it explores the P–O fit interaction between Robert's leadership and the school, reflecting

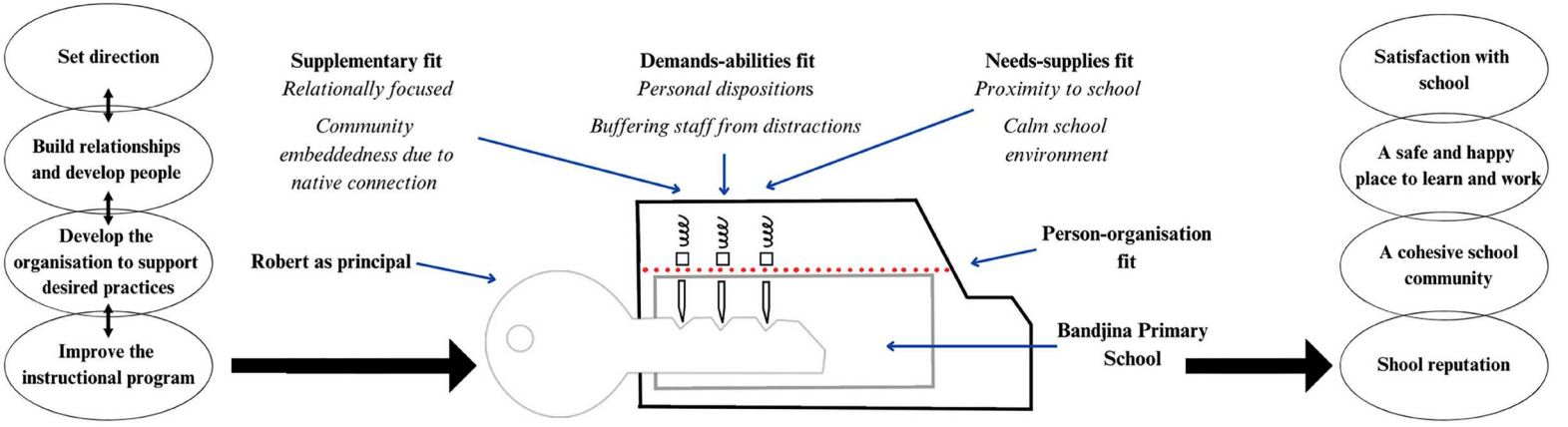

Figure 1. A conceptual model representing the relationship between Robert's leadership as principal, P–O fit, and successful school outcomes.

Nelson's (2022) call for more emphasis to be placed upon leadership-as-practice when investigating rural school leadership.

To unpack the lock analogy as it relates to P–O fit, it is first helpful to explain the basic functionality of a lock, notably lock pins, sheer line, and the lock barrel. Locks work by using a series of pins of varying lengths that are pushed down by springs inside the lock body. When a key is inserted into a lock, the pins fall into the valleys of the key grooves. If a key valley is too high or too low, it causes the pin to jam the cylinder and the lock fails to open. However, if the right key is inserted, the lock pins all line up along the sheer line and the lock can be opened. Findings from this study demonstrate that this same concept applies to the P–O fit of Robert and Bandjina Primary School. Robert was an ideal fit for the principalship at the school, and as such, he was able to lead the school well and over a sustained period of time. The 'lock' between principal and the school was easily opened, and this led to Bandjina Primary School experiencing the success that had it over the years of Robert's principalship. Robert's 'fit style' as principal of Bandjina Primary School satisfied all three dimensions of P–O fit as described by Kao et al. (2022).

The most salient P–O fit domain in this study was the supplementary fit between Robert and the school community. The school community valued trust, respect, and connection with one another, and Robert had provided them with that as principal because they were values concordant with his own leadership philosophy. Robert had purposefully sought moments of connection with the school community to heal fractured relationships and bring people into the school, ensuring he was highly visible both within and outside the school. The findings from this study differ from the claims of others who have suggested that an enhanced connection to community is one of the most challenging aspects of rural school leadership (Halsey and Drummond 2014; Heffernan 2021) and a major driving force of rural principal attrition (Hansen 2018). Interviewees in this study were keen to point out how well Robert managed his connection to the local community, relating this strongly to the fact that he was a local resident of Bandjina who wanted the best for the community of which he was a part of. This is an important finding given that principal attraction and retention has been shown to be traditionally difficult in Australian rural schools (Downes, Roberts, and Dean 2021; Halsey 2018; Hardwick-Franco 2019; Heffernan 2021). Robert was positively embedded in his local community, not only as the principal of the local school, but also as a father and committed community member. This meant that he was readily accepted by the community as one of them, and not considered as an outsider from the community itself. The notion of 'community embeddedness' (Hom et al. 2017) has been shown to be a key facilitating factor in the successful leadership of rural schools (Heffernan 2021) and was highly evident as a main source of P–O fit in this study. However, Robert's high level of community embeddedness was due to his native connection to

the Bandjina community. This is a lucky and unrepresentative example of P–O fit and as Hudson (2024b) further noted, 'whilst appointing a principal with local history may very well contribute to rural school success, this is a luxury that many rural schools are not afforded' (428).

The demands–abilities fit between Robert and Bandjina community was also evident, both inside the school and in the community. Robert explained that he was seen as leader in Bandjina and his presence at after hour community meetings was often requested as part of this (e.g. sporting clubs, council meetings, and local emergency services). Whilst the two principals before him found this to be challenging, Robert actively sought out these engagements because he saw them as opportunities to build positive relationships with local organisations, believing that they promoted reciprocal support for the school. Moreover, interviewees in the first parent group explained that they had a strong desire to be involved with the school because they had the capacity to do so, but the two previous principals had not sought to bring parents into the school and strengthen school-community relationships during their brief tenures. Because of the fractured relationships between the school and parents, Robert acted as a healing principal, building trust with parents by inviting them into the school, making himself approachable, and providing stability. Robert's personable, approachable and supportive nature meant that he was able to fill the void that the previous principals had not been able to. Across his three interviews, Robert proudly noted that the community desired his time and wanted to interact with him and the school, which, to him, was a clear indication not only of his success as principal, but as a community leader. The finding aligned with Klar and Brewer (2014), which was an ISSPP investigation of successful school leadership in a rural school in the US. To secure school success, the principal in Klar and Brewer (2014) focused on building strong school-community relationships by engaging in many different local community engagements, which was consistent with his personal leadership philosophy and values.

It is important to emphasise that the school had a mature and experienced staff, all of whom desired to have ownership of instructional decisions as opposed to having these decisions made for them. As such, Robert was quite hands-off with the day-to-day teaching and learning at the school, and his staff mostly managed the instructional program with a high degree of autonomy. The importance of principals acting as instructional leaders is well established in the literature (Hallinger 2003, 2018; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008), and Hallinger's (2003) model of instructional leadership is generally thought to be the most highly regarded. This model demonstrates that instructional leadership occurs across three dimensions: (1) defining the school's mission, (2) managing the instructional program, and (3) promoting a positive school climate. In relation to Hallinger (2003), Robert's instructional leadership was mainly focused on defining the school's mission and promoting a positive school learning

climate. Because of the mature and experienced staffing profile, the instructional program – dimension two – was driven from within and Robert believed his role was to act as a critical friend and to 'buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work' (Leithwood 2012). For example, Robert buffered staff from any additional paperwork that they had to complete for excursions and as part of their additional duties at the school, and he shielded his teachers from administrative burden that did not concern classroom instruction. As principal, Robert saw his instructional leadership role as one that ensured his staff had the means and the resources necessary to focus intently on teaching well. This finding is similar to that of Heffernan and Longmuir's (2019) study of the leadership of a rural primary school in Queensland, Australia, in that the principal had no formal leadership team beyond himself as principal and, resultantly, supported teachers to lead the instructional program. The mature and experienced staff, their desire for instructional autonomy, and Robert's natural proclivity towards honouring their expertise and buffering them from distractions melded together as a perfect fit in this study. This, too, is an abnormal fit in the sense that most rural schools have been shown to be dominated by beginner teachers (Halsey 2018; Downes, Roberts, and Dean 2021). For this reason, Robert mentioned he would most likely not adopt this same approach if he had a different staffing profile, acknowledging that he would have to be more 'directive' with the instructional program if the staffing profile at the school was a less experienced one.

The needs–supply domain of P–O fit was demonstrated through the characteristics of the school environment satisfying Robert's personal and psychological needs. Robert lived close to the school and that was a major reason for his longevity in the principalship. Moreover, the school was a safe, community-orientated environment where there was a common sense of empathy, trust, purpose, and calmness. Robert's personal characteristics were mirrored in this culture, especially his calm, measured, and quiet nature, and so, psychologically, he felt at ease in the school. Indeed, Robert sought to protect this balance, partly because it benefited the school community but also because it benefited him, too.

Conclusion and implications for practice

This study has highlighted the P–O fit between Robert and Bandjina Primary School, especially as it related to Robert's native connection to the community and the leadership practices he enacted to secure school success. Importantly, the two principals prior to Robert left the school early in their tenure and in quick succession, but Robert had stayed at the school for close to a decade since the beginning of his principalship. The findings from this study indicate that P–O fit is an important concept that helps to explain how and why Robert went on to lead the school successfully and over a sustained period of time, which could

have practical implications for the recruitment and retention of rural principals in the future. For example, enhancing the focus at a system level on developing localised principal preparation programs. Lee and Mao (2023) critically reviewed 64 empirical literature studies that were published in the US over the past two decades on the topic of principal recruitment and selection. They found that localised principal preparation programs were successfully used to select and recruit principals as the right 'fit' to lead hard-to-staff rural schools, which involved rural schools collaborating together to target and upskill local talent through mentoring and leadership development support. Klocko and Justis (2019) believed that rural principal preparation programs should focus on specialised training matched to the specific contexts of rural schools, with the findings of this study supporting this belief and suggesting that prospective principals might be drawn from local clusters. As Hudson (2024b, 428) noted,

> supporting the leadership development of those educators already living and established within a given rural community, especially through community partnerships and collegial mentoring relationships with other principals in the cluster, might contribute to the success of rural schools more than appointing a principal who is external to the community and is without local knowledge and connections.

Despite there being some research on the recruitment and retention of rural school principals in Australia (e.g. Halsey and Drummond 2014; Heffernan 2021), this research has not been strongly connected to the research on P–O fit and so the findings from this study are a notable addition to the literature. However, given the focus of this study was on one principal and in one specific context, the findings from this study are not considered to be generalisable. Future research would benefit from focusing on how rural principals in other and more different contexts secure school success, while also connecting this to the literature on P–O fit to build a more developed understanding of the interaction between rural school success, leadership, and the fit rural principals have with their schools.

Note

1. The NAPLAN is conducted in Australia each year, with students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 assessed in the domains of reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation), and numeracy. NAPLAN provides a measure of student performance in these domains and allows schools to monitor changes over time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

Notes on contributor

Dr Christopher Hudson is a lecturer in education at Federation University, Australia. His doctorate was focused on successful rural school leadership in Australia. He has published academic papers and book chapters in several areas of education: the intersection of sport pedagogy and social justice, professional learning communities, teachers' use of data to inform practice, and school leadership. He is also the author of the book, *Leading Positive Classrooms - Adopting an Educative Approach to Behaviour Management in Schools*. Through his consultancy and lecturing work, he aims to empower both teachers and students to maximise their potential for high-quality teaching and learning.

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