

A Compassionate Approach to Regenerative Systems Change

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Abstract

For decades, education systems around the world have grappled with top-down reform efforts that, despite best intentions, have regularly failed to deliver lasting, impactful change (Fullan, 2024). These approaches, driven by a constant, unwavering belief in centralised policies and standardised solutions, have struggled to consistently meet the diverse needs of students, teachers, and communities, yet continue to dominate the thinking of governments and policy makers (Savage, 2021). In an era marked by complex global challenges - from climate crises and growing inequality to armed conflict, assaults on democracy, and rapid advances in technology - the need for our education systems to help prepare young people for a changing world has never been more urgent, yet our education systems remain slow to adapt (Hannon and Peterson 2021). The chronic challenges facing the teaching profession globally - such as burnout, high turnover, and a shortage of school leaders - further highlight that the status quo is unsustainable and that it is time to change how we approach leading change in education (OECD 2024).

This paper explores the extended study of an alternate approach to systems change grounded in theory and research from the fields of biology, systems science, social-emotional learning, leadership studies, and organisational learning. It traces the evolution of the approach over a period of eight years in a regional, faith-based association of independent schools in Australia and its impact on places (schools, professional learning communities, regional office) and people (regional executives, school leaders, teachers, and students). A central focus for the study is an examination of the application of two integrated frameworks to nurture change: the Compassionate Systems Framework for living systems change, developed by the Center for Systems Awareness (CSA) and MIT Systems Awareness Lab, and *Growing Deep*, a leadership and formation framework created by Lutheran Education Australia (LEA). The study also has an explicit interest in systems change focused on the development of healthy, resilient, and adaptive learning communities.

Context

Lutheran Education South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australia (LESNW) is a regional association of faith-based independent schools in Australia. Its work is overseen by national body, Lutheran Education Australia, who provide leadership, professional learning, and resources, in alignment with Lutheran Christian values and educational standards. The LESNW Regional Office supports a community of 40 Lutheran schools and early learning centres and serves the needs of over 15,000 students and 1,500 staff. The association works towards its vision as ‘a community of learning communities that is thriving, supportive, and compassionate, collaborating to enable each community to achieve their vision’.

The Past

The challenge

In 2016, the new executive leadership team at Lutheran Education South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australia (LESNW) faced significant challenges in aligning the actions of the regional office with its mission and the needs of the schools it served. A key issue was the disconnect between the region's espoused mission and the reality of the lived experiences of its stakeholders. While the mission statement had a clear focus on supporting school effectiveness and improvement within a Lutheran context, and fostering collaboration among schools, feedback gathered from regional staff and school principals revealed that the work of the office was mainly focused on maintaining systems for regional administration and ensuring the financial stability of schools. Over time, this gap between the stated mission and day-to-day reality of stakeholders had created confusion over the role of the regional office and fragmented efforts for building a unified sense of purpose across the system.

This lack of alignment and shared purpose had, in turn, contributed to challenges in fostering a culture of collaboration. The schools in the region operated largely in isolation, with minimal interaction between principals or with the regional office on matters related to school effectiveness and improvement. The relationships between principals were more defined by a focus on collegiality than a commitment to cooperation and development. It was also significant that many principals had deliberately distanced themselves from the regional office, having come to see it more as an external authority than a partner in improvement.

Additionally, the breakdown in relationships between school principals and the regional office had contributed to a climate of mistrust, which further compounded the challenges faced by the new leadership team. As principals increased their focus on maintaining the independence of their schools, their commitment to engagement in the region had declined, accompanied by a growing fear of intervention from the regional office if they faced any significant financial or leadership issues. Many principals had become unwilling to engage with performance data in collaboration with their colleagues or the regional office, hindering the coordination of efforts for improvement. In turn, the regional staff found themselves increasingly mired in reactive crisis management, with schools only reaching out for support in relation to struggles with leadership, operations, or declining student performance when issues had escalated to breaking point. This cycle of isolationism and missed opportunities worked to intensify the disconnect between the regional office and schools, trapping the stakeholders in a series of quick fix solutions that neither addressed underlying issues nor led to sustainable improvement.

It is important to note that the constitution for the LESNW region presents constraints on the ability of the Regional Office to develop centralised projects or programs designed to support school effectiveness and improvement. The document sets out how the office will operate as part of an association of independent schools, with its role focused on advocacy, industrial matters, professional learning, the management of government funding, and the provision of support regarding recruitment, governance, and school operations. Where the regional offices in many school systems have authority and responsibility for the delivery and regulation of education in schools, the LESNW constitution sets clear limits on the ability of the regional office to mandate specific practices or programs. In turn, these limits present challenges for the regional office in developing and resourcing initiatives designed to nurture collaboration

and improvement, with an underlying tension between its responsibility for supporting schools in crisis and its ability to more proactively help them improve performance.

Finding the way forward

In the light of these challenges, LESNW began the formation of an approach to systems change in 2016 through its participation in a reform project led by the national body for Lutheran schools, Lutheran Education Australia (LEA). The National Leadership Lab (NLT Lab) ran for a period of two years and supported national and regional leaders to explore systemic, collaborative approaches to strategic planning, leadership development, and school effectiveness and improvement. Its work was guided by a change management framework and informed by research, tools, and practices from the fields of systems theory, leadership studies, adult learning, mindfulness, and social innovation (Senge 1990, Mezirow 1991, Scharmer, Senge, Jaworski and Flowers 2005, Scharmer 2007, Kania and Kramer 2011, Langer 2015). The lab was designed to complement the launch of *Growing Deep*, a national formation and leadership framework developed to guide schools in fostering learning that integrates academic, spiritual, and moral growth grounded in Lutheran Christian values. The lab was dissolved at the end of 2017 following the design of a set of shared strategic projects and a change in executive leadership at LEA.

During its operation, the NLT Lab was the focus of a research project that examined how its approaches fostered collaboration for innovation within and across multiple levels of the school system (Owens 2020). The findings from the study led to the development of a model for Awareness-based Systems Leadership (ASL), including a shared set of tools and practices for use in regional offices and schools. In 2018, LESNW adopted the model as the foundation for an approach to systems change in their region, with the integration of ASL intended to support the introduction of the *Growing Deep* framework by providing practical methods for implementation. For example, a focus on the development of self-awareness as a capability in *Growing Deep* was supported through the use of practical tools like the Ladder of Inference from the ASL toolkit which promotes deep reflection on the ways an individual's mental models shape their thinking and action. The integration of theory, tools, and methods from the ASL model with the vision, capabilities, and vocational practices for Lutheran education communities created an important opportunity to engage school principals as partners in addressing the challenges being faced in the region and working towards systems change.

In 2018 and 2019, LESNW extended opportunities for engagement with the change process by offering an expanded range of professional learning forums to support capacity building and community building. The combination of learning labs, in-school workshops, and events helped to broaden engagement across the region, with regional executives, school principals, middle leaders, and teachers coming together to form communities of practice. Towards the end of 2019, LESNW leaders accepted an invitation from Peter Senge, a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to join an international community of schools and school systems forming around the Center for Systems Awareness (CSA), a not-for-profit organisation he had recently co-founded with Mette Boell. Given the alignment between their approach and the Compassionate Systems Framework being developed by CSA, the regional executive team became active participants in the global community and helped to form an Australian network to support the growth of the work locally.

Since 2020, the regional office has increasingly adopted the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks as the foundation of its approach, providing a unified

structure for building capacity and fostering community both within schools and across the region. These frameworks reflect the region's commitment to holistic learning, leadership development, spiritual growth, and innovation, aiming to support the growth and well-being of all stakeholders in the system, while enhancing school and system-wide effectiveness and improvement. Building on this foundation, in late 2021, the executive leadership team and LESNW Board engaged in an extended appreciative inquiry and extensive collaboration with principals and teachers to develop a new vision and strategic directions for the region. This process culminated in a vision statement that captures the shared aspirations of all stakeholders: “Lutheran Education South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australia is a community of learning communities that is thriving, supportive and compassionate, collaborating to enable each community to achieve their vision” (LESNW 2021). This work also signalled the emergence of a systems change approach centred on providing centralised support for localised innovation.

The Present

Learning for flexibility, collaboration, and adaptability

In early 2023, the executive team at the LESNW Regional Office launched a research project to better understand the change unfolding across the region and explore how it could more effectively nurture this transformation. By this time, many of the worrying challenges that had hindered earlier progress - such as a lack of shared purpose, limited collaboration, and a culture of mistrust - had been reversed. The regional office had emerged as the hub of a community of school communities that was increasingly characterised by deep collaboration for innovation and improvement. School principals and regional leaders regularly engaged with each other on a range of strategic projects and a renewed sense of trust had developed between schools and the regional office. This shift from schools working in isolation to a more collaborative approach had also fostered a stronger sense of shared vision and collective commitment.

A related driver for the launch of the research project was the rapid increase in the number of schools interested in or actively adopting the *Growing Deep* and *Compassionate Systems* frameworks. These schools were at different stages of engagement with the frameworks and distinguished by the diversity of their needs, from an interest in building basic awareness to integrating the frameworks into learning and wellbeing design and using them to help lead whole school change. As demand for professional learning, site development, and tailored services increased, the regional staff found themselves struggling to meet existing needs, respond to new requests, and provide sustainable support for stakeholders (*see Table 1*). In this way, the executive leaders saw the research as a way of understanding change that could help inform the evolution of the regional office as a crucial part of a changing system.

The project ran for a period of 18 months and was grounded in a participatory action research methodology that emphasised close collaboration and shared decision-making throughout the research process. The participants involved in the project included an external research lead, and staff from the regional office, schools, and a range of professional learning communities. Participants collaborated in a variety of forums to shape the research and ensure that the ideas and issues explored reflected their interests, needs, and experiences. The data collection was designed to capture insights from within and across case study sites using a range of methods that included interviews, dialogue circles, journaling, surveys, and observations, along with secondary research from earlier studies.

The analysis phase of the research project focused on understanding the systemic nature of the change underway, exploring what was happening in specific sites and across the region as a whole. The participants engaged in reflective workshops and collaborative, sense-making sessions, deepening their understanding of change in their respective settings, the complex, interconnected nature of the region, and the ways by which an action taken in one place had influenced changes in another. In between these forums, the emergent findings from the research were also regularly shared among the group for further feedback, refinement, and validation. Some participants observed that the method worked to nurture shared ownership of the research project, while supporting the growth of a sense of collective responsibility for school improvement and regional development.

Type of engagement	Learning focus	Audience	Examples of current support	Challenges and limitations
Developing awareness	Introducing the frameworks, tools, and practices	Staff new to the GD and CS frameworks	In-school workshops, Learning Labs, Introduction to Compassionate Systems Workshop	Increased demand, lack of access to CSA and Master Practitioners, geographical distance and cost
Deepening practice	Nurturing teaching and leadership practice	Staff with experience of the frameworks	Learning Labs, In-school workshops, CSA training, local network events	Increased demand, limited access to Master Practitioners, cost and accessibility of CSA training, cost of travel for local network participation, lack of funds to access expertise from the local network
Extending cross-school collaboration	Learning and wellbeing design	Staff engaged deeply in program design	Learning Labs, local network events	Limited staffing = limited services, the distance between sites, lack of funding to access expertise from the local network
Site development	Leading change, innovation and improvement	Staff working on a whole school approach	School site development, Retreats	Limited staffing = limited services, no formal model for site development, physical distance between sites, lack of funding to access expertise from network
System leadership	Catalysing, enabling and supporting systems change	Staff leading change across schools and networks	LESNW networks, local network meetings, CS AP Community Calls	Lack of funding for Aust. network, cost and accessibility of working with CSA

Table 1: Mapping challenges associated with increased engagement with the frameworks

Case studies

The case study summaries that follow offer insight into the ongoing transformation of the region during 2023 - 2024. The collection represents a broad sample that includes rural and remote schools, the Regional Office, and cross-school learning communities. Each of the case sites share a strategic focus on the use of the *Growing Deep* and *Compassionate Systems* frameworks to support capacity and community building, wellbeing, school effectiveness and improvement, and regional development. While diverse in their nature, the summaries are organised around a common set of prompts for consistency: *What does change look like? What impact has it had? What structures and resources have supported change? What is next?*

Faith Lutheran College

Faith Lutheran College is located in Tanunda, in the Barossa Valley, north of Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia. The college has a long and rich history, originally founded as Langmeil School in 1845, before becoming Tanunda Lutheran School in 1989. In 1985, Faith Lutheran Secondary School opened in the valley, and in 2018, the secondary school, primary school, and early learning centre (ELC) were amalgamated into one unified college. With an enrolment of over 800 students, the college is the only ELC to Year 12 school in the Barossa region. The Junior School, catering to students from ELC to Year 6, follows the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP), while the Middle School offers the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) for Years 7 to 9. The Senior School provides the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) for Years 10 to 12, along with opportunities for Vocational Education and Training (VET).

What does change look like?

Change leadership at Faith Lutheran College has focused on cultivating a systemic approach to wellbeing, building from an initial interest in the well-being and personal growth of staff. Over the course of three years, staff at the school have regularly engaged with professional learning focused on building a capacity for self-awareness, deep listening, compassion, and emotional literacy. Over time, as staff felt more comfortable and proficient in engaging with tools and practices for their personal growth, they began to share them with students, taking the focus on wellbeing into the classroom and their work with parents. The Head of Junior School has played a critical role in leading change, drawing upon her prior learning with systems thinking and awareness-based leadership from an earlier involvement in the regional Learning Labs.

What impact has it had?

The impact of these practices has been profound at both the personal and organisational level. The staff have reported increased emotional awareness, better stress management, and a heightened sense of personal responsibility, which has extended beyond the workplace into their personal lives. Socially, the school environment has become more trusting, with staff feeling more connected and valued. The growth of stronger, more supportive relationships has helped deepen staff collaboration, and their engagement with professional learning and curriculum development. Importantly, student well-being has also improved over time, as evidenced by data showing positive changes in student engagement, with staff feeling better placed to understand and address behavioural issues.

What structures and resources have supported change?

Key to the success of this transformation was the sustained allocation of time for professional learning dedicated to exploring the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks on pupil-free days and in after school meetings. The professional learning process itself was iterative, starting with an interest in individual growth and expanding to focus on the staff as a collective and then students. The introduction of the concept of generative social fields has proven to be significant at the school, providing a shared conceptual reference point for the collective work of staff on nurturing a culture of trust, openness, and compassion. The opportunity to exchange stories with other practitioners engaging with the Compassionate Systems Framework in different contexts and countries through the Australian and global networks has provided ongoing inspiration and support for the work at the school.

What's next?

The next phase for Faith Lutheran College involves further embedding tools and practices from the Compassionate Systems framework into the classroom and student learning, in line with the aspirations of *Growing Deep*. A key focus for this work will be further integration of this approach within the school's IB PYP and MYP programmes. Challenges include the consolidation of practice in the secondary school, and the provision of regular professional learning for early learning staff, to ensure a consistent approach across the school. Recent growth in the engagement of schools from the Barossa network with the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks also offers leaders, teachers, and students with the opportunity to engage with a wider range of collaborative learning activities in the future.

Navigator College

Navigator College is a Lutheran co-educational school located in Port Lincoln, the largest city on the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. The college serves families from across the Eyre Peninsula, a remote region that stretches along the state's west coast, approximately 280 km from Adelaide. Established in 2009, Navigator College offers education for families from daycare through to Year 12. The college currently has 52 teaching staff and 33 non-teaching staff and serves the needs of 462 students. Since 2012, the school has been an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, offering the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP), as well as the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) options in the senior years.

What does change look like?

At Navigator College, the change process began with a clear focus on building the capacity of staff for collaborative leadership. The approach taken at the school to support leadership development was inclusive, with members of the senior leadership team learning alongside middle leaders and teachers. An early focus on self-awareness, deep listening, generative conversation, and systems thinking helped to foster a common language and collaborative culture at the school, providing a strong foundation for future work on learning and wellbeing design. The principal has served a critical role in leading change, initiating the engagement with the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks, and drawing on his prior knowledge from participation in the regional Learning Labs when leading staff learning. Building from his initial engagement with the frameworks as a member of the school's senior

leadership team, the Head of Middle and Senior School – Learning has emerged as a key collaborator for the principal and an important leader of change at the college, supporting middle leaders and teachers with the application of theory, tools and practices to collaborative planning and learning design.

What impact has it had?

The adoption of compassionate systems tools and practices has fostered greater self-awareness, stronger relationships, and a deeper sense of community across the college, aligning with the aspirations of *Growing Deep*. Staff have stated that the focus on supporting their personal growth and well-being has enhanced their ability to navigate complexity and build more meaningful connections, both at work and in their lives beyond school. The school now operates with a shared language, enabling staff, students, and families to collaborate more effectively toward a common vision. Additionally, these practices have contributed to the development of a more compassionate culture, which new staff members readily embrace, reflecting the positive environment within the school.

What structures and resources have supported change?

The College Principal established an important structure for capacity and community building at the college when he repurposed the Leadership Summit, previously a gathering of senior leaders, as an inclusive forum for whole school collaboration. Through the Summit, staff from across the school were able to engage with models, tools, and practices to support collaborative leadership and improvement, including the use of the Systems Iceberg, Stock and Flow diagrams, and the Four-player Model. The initial focus on learning for leadership proved to be crucial, enabling staff to take the lead with integrating new approaches into different sections of the school. In turn, a key factor supporting ongoing improvement at the school is the depth and breadth of staff engagement, with tools and practices embedded in staff meetings, leadership activities, classrooms, curriculum, and school-wide activities like assemblies and chapel services. The support from the Regional Office, through regular visits, the co-planning and delivery of professional learning sessions, and ongoing consultation, has served a vital role in helping to guide school leaders and staff through the change process. Senior leaders from the school have also been supported in their learning through active engagement in the local and global Compassionate Systems communities.

What's next?

Looking forward, the college aims to consolidate and expand the use of tools and practices from the Compassionate Systems framework across all areas of learning. Senior leaders are working with middle leaders to model and co-lead the approach, while developing a shared understanding of what the learning can look like in different contexts. The involvement of the Chair of the School Board in meetings and professional learning related to the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks has helped alignment at all levels of the school and opened up opportunities for further development in the areas of governance and community engagement. A challenge for the school is the ongoing turnover of staff – a common issue in remote settings that has been amplified in recent years by a national shortage of teachers.

LESNW Regional Office

The Lutheran Education South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australia Regional Office (LESNW), located in North Adelaide, South Australia, provides services, professional learning opportunities, and advice to an association of 40 Lutheran schools and early learning centres (ELCs) in South Australia, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia. The Regional Office has 13 full-time and 3 part-time employees and serves the needs of over 15,000 students and 1,500 staff across the region. Through its work, LESNW strives to build a dynamic, inclusive educational community where staff, students, and families are supported in living out the values and vision of Lutheran education.

What does change look like?

The change process at the Regional Office began with a clear focus on building staff capacity for collaborative leadership, as grounded in the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks. The frameworks have provided a clear direction for leadership development, along with a practical toolkit to support ongoing learning. The tools and practices from the Compassionate Systems framework, such as meditation, journaling, and check-ins, have been integrated into the structure of meetings and collaborations, supporting a transition towards compassionate, awareness-based practice as a cultural norm. This work has played a central role in fostering a more cohesive, self-aware, and responsive team dynamic, encouraging staff to show up in an open, authentic manner and engage empathetically with one another.

This shift in mindset and practice has also transformed how the office engages with schools. Office staff have shifted from a fragmented approach—where isolated departments met with individual schools to address specific challenges—to more collaborative, systemic ways of working. By consistently drawing on the Compassionate Systems framework in practice, staff in the office are developing a shared methodology that they regularly apply to a range of strategic projects and professional learning programs. The common use of the frameworks across the region has helped build a culture of shared responsibility and a commitment to collective action, along with a deeper connection with the vision and values of Lutheran education.

What impact has it had?

The introduction of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks has had a significant impact within the Regional Office, particularly in enhancing self-awareness, relational awareness, and collaboration among staff. Many staff members have reported an increased capacity to be focused, listen deeply, and collaborate effectively with others. A shift in mental models has encouraged staff to view their roles and the work of the Regional Office through a systems lens, helping to break down office silos and cultivate a culture of trust and shared responsibility. This cultural transformation has fostered a more inclusive approach to decision-making and has encouraged creativity in practice, helping staff respond more agilely and effectively to challenges and opportunities as they arise.

The change has also strengthened the relationship between regional office and school staff. By working together on the frameworks, regional staff now engage more regularly and purposefully with principals and teachers, focusing on long-term, systemic improvement rather than isolated interventions. This collaborative approach to professional learning - uniting regional staff and school teams - has sparked rich, productive dialogue, enhancing the

regional staff's ability to listen attentively and explore new ideas. Moreover, the continued emphasis on reflective practice has made staff more receptive to feedback from principals and teachers, helping to better align their work with the unique needs of each school.

What structures and resources have supported change?

Change at the Regional Office has been driven by a strong, ongoing commitment to integrating the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks into all aspects of its work. These frameworks now guide both strategic initiatives and daily operations, and have been embedded across various departments, including special projects, human resources, education, finance, and administration. This commitment is evident in increased investment in professional learning, such as supporting the Executive Leadership Director to complete training through CSA. It was also reflected in the transition to a new Executive Director, where the handover process emphasised ensuring the incoming leader's understanding of the frameworks that underpin the region's approach to change. As a result of this work, the office staff have increasingly adopted a compassionate, systems-based stance for their work, which influences how they perceive, understand, and collaborate with others in co-leading change.

What's next?

Moving forward, the Regional Office aims to continue its transition to more collective, team-based approaches, with an emphasis on shared leadership and decision-making. The progress made to date through the introduction of the frameworks has built significant momentum, both internally and in their work with schools, creating fresh opportunities for collaboration and improvement. An important next step for the office is to more formally articulate its approach to leadership development, regional development, and the advancement of school effectiveness, improvement, and innovation. As a part of this work, there is a need to develop more robust structures to help facilitate the adoption of the two frameworks within schools, including internal capacity building and increased access to expertise from outside the region. This broader engagement will ensure that local initiatives are informed by global perspectives and leading practice, while fostering sustainable and contextually relevant improvement.

Learning Labs

Launched in 2017, the LESNW Learning Labs have been instrumental in capacity building and community building for the distributed leadership of change across the region. The early labs provided participants with tools to navigate the complex, interconnected dynamics of their roles, with an emphasis on reflective practice, dialogue, systems thinking, and relational leadership. In 2020, the Learning Labs underwent a significant evolution with the integration of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks. This development provided greater structure and clarity for the design of the labs and led to the creation of an expanded range of offerings to support a continuum of learning for regional and school staff. The labs also offer a pathway towards site development for school leaders, creating a collaborative space where they can deepen their understanding of the frameworks, integrate tools and practices into their daily work, and plan for broader engagement with staff at their schools.

What does change look like?

The LESNW Learning Labs offer school and regional office staff the opportunity to engage in extended programs designed to nurture reflection, collaboration, and experimentation.

There is a range of labs available to staff, building from an entry level program focused on developing a foundational awareness of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks to more project-based offerings that support the application of tools and practices to areas such as curriculum development, wellbeing, and school improvement. The evolution of the labs from their initial focus on school principals and regional leaders has broadened participation in the programs to include middle-level leaders and teachers. Over time, the lab program has consistently enabled participants to return to their schools as change agents, applying new knowledge and skills to drive transformation in their practice and fostering change within their school communities.

What impact has it had?

The impact of the Learning Labs on participants and their schools has been both profound and measurable. Feedback gathered through appreciative inquiry, feedback, and ongoing evaluation highlights the labs' role in providing a safe, supportive environment for deep reflection, learning and change in practice. The participants report significant growth in their self-awareness, improved relationships with colleagues, and a shift in their professional focus from isolated problem-solving to leading more systemic approaches for sustainable change. Many leaders return to the labs each year, encouraging other colleagues to participate and, in some cases, stepping into leadership roles as co-facilitators. The impact of the labs has transcended a focus on individual development to help foster cultures of collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility within schools. The program has also helped to catalyse broader change by establishing a shared focus and forum for learning and change across the region.

What structures and resources have supported change?

The impact and evolution of the learning lab program has been supported through the sustained commitment of the Regional Office and continued engagement from schools. This collaboration has helped to establish the labs as a core structure for capacity building and leadership development, with the ripple effect from the learning of participants spreading out to schools across the region. In this way, the labs themselves can be seen as a structure that has supported the integration of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks into the everyday practice of leaders and teachers in the region. The use of feedback loops to inform ongoing refinement has enabled the labs to evolve over time and maintain relevance.

What's next?

Looking ahead, the Regional Office is focused on revising the format and structure of the Learning Labs to better align with the next phase of regional development. This process will involve a comprehensive review of the tools, practices and approaches used in the labs, in collaboration with facilitators and external experts, to ensure they incorporate leading theory and practices, and continue to meet the region's evolving needs. A key area of focus will be exploring how the labs can support the transition to a revised site development model, one that provides more sustained and effective support for whole-school change. Additionally, efforts will be made to expand the labs' reach by increasing teacher engagement and creating learning opportunities for students.

Cross-case Analysis

The research employed cross-case analysis to validate the unique insights of each case and strengthen the credibility of the findings by identifying key themes and patterns shared across cases. In addition, the analysis highlighted variations between cases, deepening an understanding of why and how certain factors play out differently across contexts. This approach also illuminated the broader phenomenon of change and helped provide insight into practical approaches for leading the ongoing transformation across the region. (Merriam, 1998; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Thomas, 2011). While the unique nature of the research limits its broader applicability, the insights gained offer valuable insights and considerations for others with an interest in leading systems change. The following themes and insights from the analysis are provided to extend the inquiry and foster deeper discussion.

A Living Systems Perspective

The most significant insight from the analysis was the importance of viewing the region as a living system – a dynamic, interconnected network of interdependent elements that evolve and adapt over time. This perspective contrasts sharply with traditional views of education systems as static, more mechanical structures, where the components such as curriculum, leadership, staff engagement, teaching, and student well-being are often treated as isolated parts that can be 'fixed' to improve performance. The living systems perspective instead highlighted the fluid and evolving interactions among these elements, illustrating how each part contributed to the whole in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. It also underscored the need to broaden the focus of the research to examine the underlying patterns and interdependent relationships that shape the region's ongoing evolution.

This perspective also helped clarify how change was unfolding across the region, not as a result of top-down directives and narrowly defined strategies, but as a dynamic and relational process. The region functions as an adaptive network, where growth and transformation emerge from the interactions between individuals, teams, and communities, nurtured by iterative learning and participatory, collaborative engagement. This understanding aligns with the conceptual foundations of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks, which emphasise relational leadership, interdependence, contextual development, adaptation, and non-linear growth. The analysis provided valuable insights into the characteristics of the region as a living system, highlighting the need for closer examination of these traits to better understand the system's functioning and the processes that nurtured change.

Interdependence – learning to be better together

The findings highlighted the importance of understanding the nested nature of systems within the region, where smaller systems exist within larger ones, with each influencing and being influenced by the other. This interconnectedness became particularly evident through the ripple effect of change observed within and across schools. For example, at Faith Lutheran School, a sustained focus on improving staff well-being led to enhanced support for students' emotional and social development, fostering a positive school climate that permeated the entire institution. Similarly, at the Regional Office, a focus on improving relational awareness enhanced staff interpersonal skills, strengthening interactions with principals and teachers, and fostering a more collaborative culture across the region. These examples demonstrate how targeted changes within one layer of the system - whether at the school or regional level – led to broader transformation. They underscore the importance of leaders working across

layers of the system when leading change, with the success of both individual schools and the region as a whole shaped by the quality and health of relationships that connect them.

Creating the conditions for emergence and innovation

The study revealed the crucial role of emergence in fostering innovation and problem-solving across the region, with new initiatives and solutions often arising unexpectedly through the collaborative interactions of school leaders, teachers, and regional staff. This creative flourishing was supported by a shift in leadership practice - from an emphasis on prediction, planning, and control to a focus on appropriate participation, contextuality, and the generative potential of collaboration. For example, interactions between regional staff and school leaders led to the development of a school health survey, which helps build a shared understanding of each school's unique strengths and challenges, enabling more tailored support and resourcing from the regional office. While strategic planning remains important, the emergence of the survey and the quality of its final form was an unexpected successful outcome, nurtured by a deliberate focus on how people engage with one another, understand diverse perspectives, and remain open to what can emerge from their interactions. Similarly, at the Junior School of Navigator College, a focus on play-based professional learning encouraged teachers to explore play-based approaches for student learning, fostering the development of innovative classroom practices. While this initiative had a clear focus on improving pedagogy and student learning, the successful outcomes from professional learning - distinguished by their contextual relevance to the teacher, class, and stage of learning - emerged from the joyful, mindful, and reflective ways in which staff interacted. Significantly, the study revealed a growing emphasis across the region on creating space for the emergence of innovative practice through connecting like-minded individuals, fostering awareness to recognise what is unfolding, and maintaining flexibility to embrace different approaches, including the ability to redefine outcomes based on collective wisdom.

Embracing diversity for adaptation and resilience

The study highlighted the importance of embracing diversity in the region's approach to systemic change. By valuing the diversity of its school communities, the region has cultivated a flexible environment that allows stakeholders to tailor strategies to specific contexts and address local needs. For example, the effectiveness and impact of the regional Learning Labs grew through the integration of project-based approaches, which have enabled participants to develop place-based responses to local opportunities and challenges that were timely, relevant, and meaningful. Significantly, this focus on local adaptation has empowered school staff in collaboratively leading school improvement while fostering a broader understanding of change as a cycle of growth and adjustment to evolving conditions, rather than a linear process.

This embrace of diversity and adaptation has also contributed to building resilience across the region. From an organisational perspective, the regional leaders and school staff have been supported in adjusting their strategies and practices to meet shifting circumstances, strengthening the ability of institutions to absorb and recover from disruptions while maintaining their core identity and mission. For example, at Navigator College, regional leaders helped school leaders refocus staff collaboration and professional learning to address challenges related to staff turnover, while ensuring alignment with their strategic direction and the goals set out in *Growing Deep*. On a personal level, the focus on diversity and adaptation has also helped build the inner resilience of staff, enhancing their ability to

navigate complex challenges while safeguarding their emotional health and wellbeing. For instance, the use of case clinics in Learning Lab programs has provided collaborative forums where staff can draw upon diverse expertise and wisdom in an environment that fosters psychological safety and self-care. This emphasis on valuing diversity ensures that responses to adversity are supported by diverse perspectives and collective expertise which reinforce the region's capacity for long-term stability and growth, even in uncertain times.

Compassion as a pathway to regeneration

The analysis revealed that cultivating emotional literacy and compassion was crucial for fostering human and community development across the region, serving both as key goals and as a foundation for broader educational success. Much of the work focused on healing relationships, trauma, and community, with an emphasis on helping individuals empathise with and support one another while remaining emotionally grounded. These practices built trust, promoted collaboration, and created supportive environments, enabling both individuals and communities to thrive while laying the groundwork for sustainable improvement. For example, at Faith Lutheran School, addressing staff trauma with tools like the Wheel of Emotion and regular check-ins helped heal the community and paved the way for improvements in learning design and student well-being. Similarly, at Navigator College, embedding emotional literacy and compassion into leadership practices fostered psychological safety, allowing staff to take risks and share innovative ideas while prioritizing well-being. Throughout the study, compassion - central to the region's faith-based ethos - emerged as a powerful force for renewal, countering isolation and apathy, while fostering positive relationships. By centring kindness, care, and psychological safety, the focus on compassionate practice restored energy, enhanced engagement, and nurtured a culture of continuous adaptation, helping communities navigate challenges and evolve in ways that prioritize individual and collective well-being.

Nurturing Change

The cross-case analysis also provided valuable insights into the broader phenomenon of change and the processes that nurtured it over time. It identified three core areas of practice shared across the sites - transformative learning, the cultivation of generative social fields, and compassionate action - as being particularly significant in supporting this transformation. Importantly, the analysis revealed that while each practice had a significant influence in its own right, it was the dynamic relationships between the practices that played a crucial role in restoring healthy relationships and revitalising the region. The interconnected nature of these processes prompted further exploration into how these practices functioned independently and worked together to shape and sustain long-term transformation.

Engaging in Transformative Learning

The focus on transformative learning has been key to building staff capacity to lead and adapt to change, while also fostering personal growth to stay grounded throughout the process. This approach is centred on critical reflection, engagement with diverse perspectives, exploration of beliefs and values, integration of new insights, and a sustained commitment to action (Mezirow, 1978). It encourages individuals to challenge their assumptions, develop new ways of thinking, and take purposeful action in response to evolving circumstances. In the region, the focus on transformative learning has supported a compassionate approach to systems change, anchoring efforts in the promotion of healthy, holistic human development. By

fostering a culture of continuous, adaptive learning, it has empowered individuals and groups to proactively address emerging challenges, adjust strategies to meet evolving needs, and maintain their well-being throughout the process.

Cultivation of Generative Social Fields

The cultivation of generative social fields has played a critical role in fostering collaboration, trust, and innovation in the region, providing the relational foundation necessary for systems change. These fields brought individuals together to share experiences, engage in meaningful dialogue, and reflect collectively on the changes needed within their environments. By nurturing these fields, communities built trust and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, creating a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect. This relational trust enabled collective action, empowering individuals to drive sustainable, community-led change. As these generative social fields expanded, they provided fertile ground for transformative learning and regenerative practices, offering safe spaces for individuals to experiment, explore new ideas, and innovate together. Leaders in the region have prioritised the cultivation of these fields, ensuring that systems change was nurtured through supportive relationships, inclusive cultures of collaboration and a strong sense of community.

Taking Compassionate Action

Taking compassionate action has been central to efforts aimed at fostering trust, empathy, and responsiveness to the evolving needs of individuals and communities. By prioritising empathy and care, this practice has promoted emotional healing, helping staff and community members reduce stress, build deeper connections, and improve overall mental health. Leaders have embraced compassionate approaches to encourage individuals and teams to develop greater awareness and expand their capacity for empathy, while also fostering a deeper sense of purpose in their work. Through this ongoing commitment, the focus on compassionate action has contributed to shifting the region away from hierarchical, top-down decision-making, creating more inclusive, collaborative environments where diverse perspectives are actively sought. This change has helped rebuild trust, heal relationships, and bring communities together to co-create solutions to emerging challenges. Compassionate action has been integral to fostering resilience within the region, enabling individuals and groups to address challenges in ways that prioritise collective well-being and the flourishing of people and places.

A trilateral process

In the region, three key areas of practice - transformative learning, the cultivation of generative social fields, and compassionate action - have been essential for fostering ongoing systems change. These elements are deeply interconnected, reinforcing and amplifying one another to form a comprehensive, regenerative approach to transformation. For example, the cultivation of generative social fields nurtures the trust, relationships, and open communication essential for compassionate action, while compassionate action, in turn, strengthens these social fields by fostering care, community, and shared purpose. Compassionate action deepens transformative learning by encouraging inquiry into emotions, feelings, and diverse perspectives, while transformative learning builds the capacity for reflection, empathy, and open-mindedness - crucial for compassionate action. Transformative learning contributes to the development of inclusive, equitable generative social fields,

which, in turn, provide safe spaces for reflection and the exploration of new ways of thinking and acting that support transformative learning.

The Future

A compassionate approach to regenerative systems change

The findings from this research provide insight into the transformative power and potential of approaches to systems change in education that are grounded in living systems theory. The study illustrated how viewing the school region from this perspective helped to cultivate a holistic understanding of the interdependencies that exist between the human, social, and environmental elements of the system and how the quality of the relationship between them influenced its growth over time. It also highlighted the fundamental importance of a focus on health, resilience, and adaptability within living systems, with the thriving of the region being fostered through a sustained focus on promoting the wellbeing of people, organisations, and communities. In a time when education systems worldwide face challenges such as declining mental health among students, teacher shortages, and high rates of burnout among school leaders, the research presents a promising pathway forward through practices that prioritise the collective wellbeing of the communities they serve.

Importantly, the research reveals that change in the region has been an ongoing, adaptive process, shaped by stakeholders who embraced new ways of being and relating to one another. Unlike traditional linear models of change often seen in education systems, the growth and transformation of the region emerged from the interactions between individuals, teams, and communities, and was nurtured by cycles of iterative learning and participatory, collaborative engagement. By applying frameworks, tools, and practices aligned with this understanding of living systems change, the region has developed a more adaptive, resilient, and sustainable approach to improvement and innovation. It is important to note that change in the region has not been driven by the complete abandonment of other approaches to leadership development, school improvement, and regional development, but rather by a process of review, adaptation, and integration that supports alignment and collaboration.

The study's findings underscore the regenerative impact of the theory, tools, and practices at the heart of this approach. This compassionate approach to change has fostered personal growth, healing fractured relationships, and strengthening collaboration, while revitalising schools and the broader regional community. By nurturing environments where both people and places can thrive, this transformation remains adaptable, meaningful, and enduring. The region's focus on promoting wellbeing and fostering resilience has strengthened its capacity to navigate uncertainty and respond to emerging challenges. As a result, it has created a more adaptive, sustainable, and locally grounded approach to improvement - one that supports human flourishing across all levels of the system.

Next steps

Moving forward, it is recommended that the region formally articulates a comprehensive strategy for supporting regional development and school effectiveness and improvement that is grounded in living systems theory. The strategy should include plans to strengthen support for the adoption of the *Growing Deep* and Compassionate Systems frameworks in schools, through a focus on capacity building, community building, research, and practice, in line with the theory of change model developed by the Center for Systems Awareness. As part of this

work, it is recommended that the region undertake a full review of its Learning Lab and Site Development programs to ensure that they are informed by global perspectives and leading practice, and continue to foster sustainable, contextually relevant improvement. The further expansion of these programs to include the participation of teachers, students, and community members is seen as promising way to further extend the impact and sustainability of change in line with the systems perspective.

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Appendix

1. Mapping the Growing Deep and Compassionate Systems Frameworks

Building Self-Awareness

- **Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF):**
The Ladder of Inference and Wheel of Emotions are powerful tools for building self-awareness. The Ladder of Inference helps individuals reflect on how their beliefs and assumptions influence their actions and decisions. The Wheel of Emotions encourages individuals to name and understand their emotional states, promoting emotional intelligence and self-regulation.
- **Growing Deep Framework (GD):**
Building Self-Awareness is a core capability in Growing Deep, involving an understanding of one's own biases, emotions, thoughts, and how these factors impact decision-making. It includes the capacity to remain grounded, suspend judgments, and navigate ambiguous situations without reacting impulsively.
- **Mapping the Connection:**
The Ladder of Inference and Wheel of Emotions support Building Self-Awareness by enabling individuals to pause and reflect on their own thought patterns and emotional responses. These tools foster greater insight into personal biases and assumptions, enhancing leaders' ability to remain open, reflective, and balanced in complex situations, which is central to effective leadership.

Deepening Faith

- **Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF):**
Contemplative Practices—such as mindfulness and reflective journaling—can support the development of faith in everyday life. These practices offer space for stillness and spiritual reflection, helping individuals align their actions with their values and beliefs, cultivating a deeper connection with both themselves and their faith.
- **Growing Deep Framework (GD):**
Deepening Faith involves a personal, living relationship with Jesus and an understanding of how faith informs one's actions, decisions, and relationships. It expresses itself in service to others and provides a foundation for navigating both joyous and challenging experiences.
- **Mapping the Connection:**
Contemplative Practices in the Compassionate Systems Framework directly align with Deepening Faith by offering individuals time for reflection, stillness, and spiritual grounding. These practices allow individuals to connect more deeply with their faith and integrate spiritual values into their professional and personal lives, fostering a sense of purpose and meaning.

Learning and Adapting

- **Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF):**
Tools such as System Mapping, Stock and Flow Diagrams, and Co-Creation Workshops foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. System Mapping helps individuals and teams visualize and understand the complex relationships within their systems, identifying areas for improvement. Stock and Flow Diagrams track the movement of resources and efforts, supporting ongoing adjustments to optimize outcomes. Co-Creation Workshops encourage collaborative problem-solving, where ideas evolve based on shared learning and feedback.

- Growing Deep Framework (GD):
Learning and Adapting highlights the capacity for growth and transformation in leadership, embracing new ideas, feedback, and adjustments. It involves openness to change and the ability to alter one's habitual emotional and cognitive patterns to reach one's highest potential.
- Mapping the Connection:
The tools of System Mapping, Stock and Flow Diagrams, and Co-Creation Workshops support Learning and Adapting by providing frameworks for reflective practice, systems analysis, and collaborative innovation. These tools promote a mindset of continuous learning, helping individuals and teams remain open to new ideas and feedback while fostering the capacity for transformative change.

Living Positively

- Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF):
The Wheel of Connectedness and Check-ins support the development of a positive, supportive culture by fostering connection and emotional awareness. The Wheel of Connectedness helps individuals recognize and strengthen their relationships, promoting empathy and emotional support. Check-ins provide regular opportunities for individuals to assess and affirm their emotional and relational states, creating a positive and encouraging climate.
- Growing Deep Framework (GD):
Living Positively emphasizes maintaining a hopeful, optimistic outlook, even during difficult times. It involves projecting warmth and faith in relationships, valuing the contributions of others, and creating a positive climate that encourages growth and well-being.
- Mapping the Connection:
The Wheel of Connectedness and Check-ins directly support Living Positively by fostering deep emotional awareness, empathy, and positive relational dynamics. These practices help build a positive, resilient culture by ensuring individuals feel seen, heard, and supported in their emotional experiences, which is key to fostering a culture of optimism, trust, and mutual respect.

2. Principles for Practice

The LESNW region's approach to leadership development, school improvement, and regional transformation is grounded in a set of guiding principles designed to inform practice, build capacity, and strengthen community engagement. These principles have been developed through collective reflection and the lived experiences of stakeholders within the region and are intended to offer clear guidance for leaders, educators, and regional staff as they navigate complex challenges. While still in development, these principles are being trialed in professional learning initiatives for leaders, with the goal of refining them and testing their usefulness and impact in real-world contexts.

These principles go beyond abstract ideas; they are actionable frameworks aimed at guiding day-to-day decision-making and leadership practices. By grounding leadership efforts in a dynamic and interconnected process, the principles help leaders work with greater clarity, purpose, and adaptability. They emphasize self-awareness, relational skills, and systems thinking, providing leaders with the tools to create sustainable, impactful change within schools and communities.

The following principles form the foundation of this approach, offering practical strategies for leaders to enhance their influence, build stronger relationships, and drive positive, lasting change. As part of their development, these principles are being tested through professional learning activities to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in real-life scenarios.

- **Start with Self:** Our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings shape our behaviours and interactions with others. Developing self-awareness enables us to make conscious choices and take actions that positively influence our lives, relationships, and the environment. This grounding empowers leaders to model integrity, empathy, and resilience in their work.
- **Connect with People and Place:** Every community and context is unique. To lead effectively, it's essential to understand the perspectives and needs of those we work with. Engaging meaningfully with the people and places we serve ensures that solutions are relevant, responsive, and aligned with local priorities, ultimately contributing to the community's well-being.
- **Create a Hopeful Vision of the Future:** Focusing on opportunities rather than problems enables us to overcome immediate obstacles and envision a positive, adaptive future. Leaders who articulate a hopeful vision inspire others, generating the energy, momentum, and commitment needed to turn long-term goals into reality, while creating an environment where change feels possible.
- **Work with Whole Systems:** Education systems are complex and interconnected, with each part influencing the other. Understanding how the components of a system interact allows us to address root causes and design solutions that impact the system as a whole. Effective leaders are mindful of their influence on the entire system, fostering long-term, positive change.
- **Embrace Experimentation and Emergence:** Change is non-linear and often unpredictable. By embracing experimentation, leaders can test ideas before full implementation, learning from failures and refining strategies based on real-world feedback. This openness to trial and error enables leaders to respond more flexibly and develop better solutions as needs evolve.
- **Cultivate Compassion:** Compassion is fundamental to effective leadership. By understanding the systemic forces and lived experiences that shape people's actions

and feelings, leaders can build trust, nurture relationships, and create a supportive environment for growth and development. Compassionate leadership fosters a culture of care, where all stakeholders feel valued and empowered to contribute to positive change.

These principles offer a developing framework for leadership practice, aligning with the region's broader vision for educational improvement and community development. They emphasize the importance of self-awareness, adaptability, and relational intelligence, encouraging leaders to engage with their communities, embrace change, and work collaboratively to create sustainable, context-specific solutions. As these principles continue to be tested and refined through professional learning opportunities, they will support the ongoing development of a resilient, compassionate, and responsive educational environment across the LESNW region.

