Chapter 8
Turnaround Leadership: Building the Sustainability of Schools

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Introduction

Improving low-performing schools with the most challenging circumstances remains a pervasive and persistent challenge in any education system (Meyers and Darwin 2017). In this regard, the term 'turnaround schools' has been generally used to refer to low-performing schools that have significantly improved and transformed themselves into high-performing schools over a period of time (Liu 2020). Although "no single definition of school turnaround exists" (Hochbein and Mahone 2017, p. 15), the varied definitions of "turnaround school" encompass interchangeably used terms like 'turnover', 'redesign', 'restructuring' and 'reconstitution' (Adams 2019; Harris et al. 2018).

A variety of institutional reform approaches, including frequent short- and long-term strategic planning based on student data, replacement of staff, and curricula and instructional efforts, are used to transform underperforming schools (Duke 2015). Stringfield et al. (2017) suggest that improving these schools requires a multifaceted and multipronged approach, which takes time; thus, they cautioned against "quick-fix turnaround" approaches. Likewise, Day (2014) warned that quick fixes in such schools can only lead to temporary recoveries, while sustained change will prove difficult to achieve in the long term.

Looking at the available research literature on turnaround schools, most studies have been undertaken in Western education systems, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States. In American education, for example, one of the most

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difficult tasks faced by school leaders is turning around persistently underperforming schools and radically making academic improvements in a short time (Malone et al. 2021). Naturally, turnaround schools can be resistant to change as their students are typically from disadvantaged and deprived socio-economic backgrounds (Meyers and Darwin 2017; Murphy and Meyers 2008). These schools also face a multitude of challenges, such as low teaching quality, poor facilities, insufficient teaching resources, and fragile leadership (Adams and Muthiah 2020; Harris et al. 2018). Moreover, according to Murphy and Meyers (2009), research on turnaround indicates that toxic cultures and norms are always present in failed organizations.

In response to this issue, turnaround leadership refers to a leader changing to a positive direction or transforming a failing organization into a successful one. Hill (2016) revealed that turnaround leadership is a type of leadership under which school leaders have the same underlying goal of regaining confidence via empowerment. As Fullan (2006) claimed, turnaround leadership concentrates on the critical role of leadership, such that turnaround school leaders' very actions improve the system they operate. Researchers have shown that successful turnaround school leaders who undertake turnaround efforts manage to improve students' performance above the fifty-fifth percentile (Le Floch et al. 2016). These leaders promote dialogue and communication, create a culture of respect and accountability, emphasize teamwork, and inspire initiative by motivating their followers. Apart from leadership, the attitude of employees is more significant in a turnaround circumstance than anything else in an organization (Clark 2014).

We commence this chapter with an explanation and contextualization of the idea of 'turnaround leadership' based on the literature. We then elaborate on the characteristics and practices of turnaround leadership, such as building capacity; improving curriculum and instruction, enhancing teacher professional development, establishing a positive school culture and climate, and developing relationships with parents and the community. In addition, a model of turnaround leadership is discussed. Finally, the chapter provides insights on the outcomes of turnaround leadership based on a review of related articles.

Origins of Turnaround Leadership

Turnaround leadership originated in the business sector, intending to transform an at-risk firm into a profitable one (Reyes-Guerra et al. 2016). Boyd (2011) shared that turnaround leadership has been applied by businesses throughout the modern age. Most prominently, since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education 2003) introduced stricter accountability measures, it has become common to adopt a business concept into education (Reyes-Guerra et al. 2016). The NCLB is often associated with academic success and student test scores. Therefore, it is presumed that using test scores as a benchmark would help school leaders identify strategies to transform their underperforming schools.

According to Hochbein and Duke (2011), turnaround leadership in schools has been discussed extensively for some time. However, Tyack and Cuban (1997) reported early on that researchers appear to reject the idea that schools can be transformed by simply rebuilding. Subsequently, many prominent scholars on turnaround leadership, such as Fullan (2005), Murphy (2008), Leithwood et al. (2010), and Hitt and Meyers (2018), have published works to clarify turnaround leadership in the school setting.

Fullan (2005) explained that turnaround leadership was first used to improve underperforming schools before it was combined into a comprehensive strategy for long-term systemic change. Murphy (2008) expanded on Fullan's (2005) work by describing the three themes of turnaround leadership: leadership is the crucial factor in the turnaround equation; change of leadership is a critical component in organizational recovery; and the type of leadership (rather than style) is significant in organizational reintegration efforts. Correspondingly, Leithwood et al. (2010) stated that turnaround leadership encompasses how turnaround school leaders strengthen teacher capacity, redesign their schools, and enhance instructional programs.

More recently, Hitt and Meyers (2018) conceptualized turnaround leadership into two phases: (1) turnaround or dramatic intervention and (2) sustainability or continuous improvement and growth. In the first phase of turnaround, turnaround school leaders are required to maintain the school, stop any decline, and start the improvement process. The second phase of sustainability involves keeping a positive direction and transforming the institution towards sustained growth. Most importantly, the concept of turnaround leadership requires constant change and improvement in terms of infrastructure and human capacity. Therefore, school leaders need to have a better understanding of how their leadership can be integrated into the sustainability phase to achieve effective organizational change (Harris et al. 2014). In the next section, we discuss if a change of leadership is necessary for school transformation.

Change of Leadership for School Reform

A change of leadership has consistently been observed as a key factor and a central topic in the literature on turnaround schools (Liu 2020). The notion is that there is no need to replace an underperforming school's staff, but it is crucial to bring in a new principal for recovery. Based on a turnaround case in Hong Kong, Chan (2013) corroborated that a change of leadership, especially the school principal, can help transform a failing school. Existing research has primarily recommended replacing existing principals with new ones armed with the necessary set of skills, knowledge, dedication, and character to lead transformation (Brown 2016; Chan 2013). Indeed, supplanting the school principal in a failing school with a more skilled and dedicated one is a fundamental factor in turnaround policy (Liu 2020) and is imperative for successful reform. This change is also known to inspire teachers to make corresponding changes in their teaching practices (Reyes and Garcia 2014). For example, a change of leadership brings about new modes of management, enforces

accountability measures, and enables teachers to innovate curricula and improve student assessment methods (Butler 2012).

The school turnaround process is affected by various factors, such as poor facilities, weak leadership, insufficient teaching resources, and low teacher quality (Harris et al. 2018). Moreover, the effects of new leadership actions differ according to actual school situations. Therefore, whether a change of leadership guarantees successful turnaround requires further exploration (Liu 2020). Additionally, Player et al. (2014) underscored that turnaround schools must be equipped with staff who are willing and able to make essential changes. Research has proven that effective school leadership coupled with high quality teaching staff can account for up to 60% of students' achievement (Marzano et al. 2005). A closer look at the literature shows there are other consistent strategies for school turnaround that have proven to be successful and impactful across educational settings. These include the appointment of expert assistance (Duke 2015), the implementation of an extensive reform model (Brady 2003), and school improvement planning (Mintrop and MacLellan 2002).

Characteristics of Effective Turnaround School Leaders

A review of extant research points out several characteristics of turnaround school leaders that produce effective and positive impacts in various educational contexts (see Fig. 8.1).

First, a turnaround school leader provides *inspiration and motivation* to others to work collectively to achieve goals. Inspiring people is crucial to draw contributing ideas from employees, while motivating people helps achieve a specific and immediate goal (Leithwood et al. 2010). For example, principals work with school staff to inspire and motivate them to maximize their production, create doable goals, and eventually, bring about change in the school. As Duke (2015) mentioned, motivation serves as a catalyst for the excitement and commitment necessary to make a tough shift.

Second, Leithwood et al. (2010) stressed that one of the main characteristics of a turnaround school leader is *effective communication* to achieve desired goals. As an effective communicator, a turnaround school leader is expected to have constant, clear, and direct communication with their staff (Hewitt and Reitzug 2015). This is in line with Murphy and Meyers' (2009) claim that quality communication is a crucial necessity in a turnaround organization.

Third, turnaround school leaders have *courage* in enforcing high standards and engaging their staff and community in open dialogue. Nonetheless, blind courage only results in improving the wrong areas. Thus, these leaders must have the courage to do what is right based on a thorough understanding of the context. In particular, turnaround school leaders need to evaluate underperforming staff and dismiss them if needed. In some cases, especially in rural areas, having open discussions about performance might be challenging; however, teachers respond well to leaders who are courageous. If a turnaround school leader has the courage to demand a set of

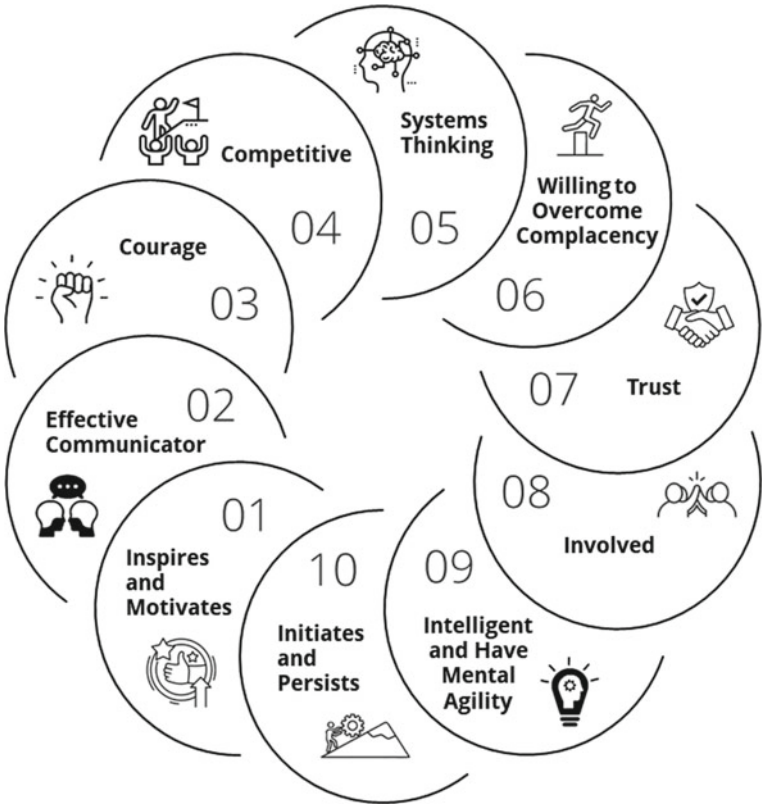

Fig. 8.1 Characteristics of successful turnaround school leaders

practices and engage teachers in the implementation process, the majority of teachers will follow their rules (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms 2012).

Fourth, a turnaround school leader possesses the characteristic of *competitiveness.* Research on the turnaround principal at Mill Elementary School showed that she has a highly competitive spirit, as she always wants to be number one (Aladjem et al. 2010). The principal has even instilled that spirit in her teachers and staff. Interestingly, the school's teachers pointed out that while they are competitive with other schools, there is no competition among teachers within the school.

The fifth trait a turnaround school leader has is a *systems thinking* orientation. Systems thinking refers to the discipline of identifying the underlying structure of complicated circumstances and separating high-leverage change from low-leverage change (Sterman 2000). Through systems thinking, turnaround school leaders can develop deeper insights, prevent unexpected consequences, and manage problems more effectively. For instance, if an instructional program is not working, the leaders must be able to identify the causes of the operational failure and find solutions to solve inefficiencies (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms 2012).

Sixth, in order to transform an underperforming school, turnaround school leaders should have the *willingness to overcome complacency*. Scholars have demonstrated that school leaders who make drastic changes are likely to face strong opposition from their staff. Therefore, the willingness to overcome complacency is important for leaders who constantly struggle with disruptive practices (Meyers and Hitt 2017).

Furthermore, as the seventh trait, research shows that *trust* between school leaders and staff is crucial in turnaround leadership. A turnaround school principal who displays strong relational trust with his/her staff trusts the teachers and inspires them to believe in themselves. Consequently, this relationship creates a trusting element in the work environment (Hewitt and Reitzug 2015; Tschannen-Moran 2014).

Eighth, Ong (2015) posited that turnaround school leaders exhibit *involvement*. Principals of a turnaround school need to be fully committed and actively participate in every task, always knowing what to do and when to do it. Most importantly, turnaround school leaders must set an example for others and raise a challenge that effective staff will accept.

Ninth, turnaround school leaders have to comprehend complicated systems on several levels, meaning that their *intelligence and mental agility* are crucial for success. They must act swiftly while maintaining the relationships among students, the community of educators, and parents, who are all working together towards a shared goal. Furthermore, turnaround school leaders need to be skilled on both pedagogical and operational levels to make wise decisions (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms 2012).

Finally, the tenth characteristic of a turnaround school leader, as proposed by Hitt et al. (2019), is *initiative and persistence*. For instance, to achieve long-term success, the principal of a turnaround school sets a challenging goal, perseveres in resolving issues within the school, and creates a problem-solving plan to achieve a high standard of performance.

Turnaround Leadership Practices

Studies have proven that effective school leadership practices improve student achievement in difficult schools (Meyers and Darwin 2017). In this section of the chapter, we outline five approaches identified in the literature that school leaders use to improve underperforming schools (see Fig. 8.2).

First, a turnaround school leader *emphasises building capacity.* To build capacity within their schools, principals must assist teachers both individually and professionally while also being aware that their needs vary with time (Leithwood et al. 2010). A successful leader concentrates on expanding the capacity of teachers through staff development, which is essential to staff's professional success (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Meyers and Hitt 2017; Hitt and Meyers 2022) and better student learning outcomes.

Second, a principal with turnaround leadership *improves curriculum and instruction*. To enhance instruction, turnaround school leaders must be skilled in fostering

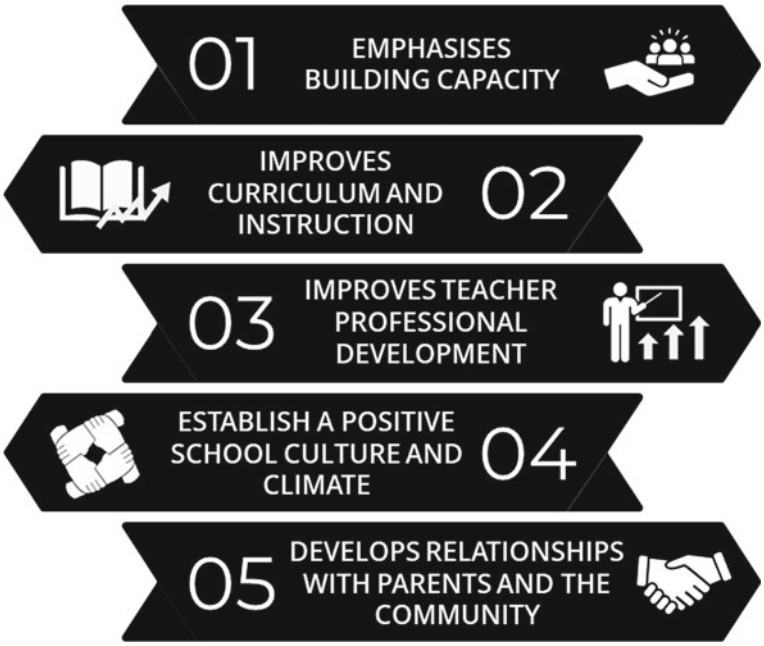

Fig. 8.2 Five approaches to improve underperforming schools

the values and norms that de-privatize teaching practices, develop collegial cooperation, and build organizational trust (Leithwood et al. 2010; Tschannen-Moran 2014). Principals should also aim to improve classroom instruction by hiring and allocating teachers with the appropriate skills to handle issues facing turnaround schools, closely observe student learning data, and use that data to make decisions. Turnaround leaders themselves frequently use data to promptly define goals and implement changes in instruction, student learning, and classroom practices (Bogotch et al. 2016). In addition, turnaround school principals uphold the idea of differentiated learning for students, such that they work hard to offer opportunities for teachers to enhance pedagogy and gain more material knowledge (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms 2012). For example, Aladjem et al.'s (2010) case study reported that as a result of a decline in student test scores, a turnaround school principal formed small groups of instructional teams to become mathematics or reading specialists. The teachers in the teams ultimately modified and enhanced their teaching practices using student data. Specifically, they evaluated the efficiency of their instructional strategies and activities using a range of student-specific data, following which they altered their instruction to meet their respective students' needs.

Third, a turnaround school leader *improves teacher professional development.* Principals of turnaround schools are known to develop personalized professional development programs for each teacher, along with school-based training and support systems based on teachers' growth needs (Hitt and Meyers 2022; Myende et al. 2018;

Pashiardis et al. 2011). These principals encourage staff to further their education by organizing seminars on teaching practices (Pashiardis et al. 2011). They also provide training to make sure that teachers receive ongoing and high-quality staff development. For example, turnaround school leaders bring in subject matter experts and establish a professional learning environment among teachers (Reyes and Garcia 2014).

Fourth, a turnaround school leader *establishes a positive school culture and climate.* According to Lane et al. (2014), a positive culture and climate is the basis for the successful development and thorough refining of turnaround practices, as well as the ensuing improvement in student achievement. In particular, turnaround school principals ensure that teachers adhere to behavioral expectations that support student learning. This includes creating a collaborative, courteous, and trustworthy environment among teachers that increases students' performance. Such a safe and respectful environment is essential to allow the school to actively implement instruction, use data systems, and give helpful and constructive feedback to teachers (Lane et al. 2014). In Yoon and Barton's (2019) study, turnaround school principals were found to strengthen their school's positive culture, which enabled them to eliminate most problems in the school. Indeed, the principals of turnaround schools in the study acknowledged that a negative culture is an obstacle to the school's mission. Notably, creating quality interpersonal relationships and high levels of organizational trust with teachers is crucial to form a positive school climate (Ahlström and Aas 2020; Pashiardis et al. 2011; Tschannen-Moran 2014).

Fifth, a turnaround school leader *develops relationships with parents and the community.* The principals respect the culture and socio-economic background of the communities. In order to acquire the trust of parents, principals are transparent in their school's financial report (Harris et al. 2017) and apologize to the parents if they make mistakes or over-step their limits (Wallin and Newton 2015). Subsequently, these practices help principals obtain support from parents and the school community (Wallin and Newton 2015).

Types of Leadership in Turnaround Schools

The literature on successful turnarounds underlines the importance of effective school leadership (Liu 2020; Mette 2013; Schueler et al. 2017; Strunk et al. 2016). Most research on turnaround school principals' leadership in countries such as England, Australia, Sweden, and Canada has revealed that the principals practise distributed leadership with the support of joint decision-making, open communication, and critical inquiry (Day 2014; Meyers and Hitt 2017). Other scholars have found that successful turnaround school leaders develop a shared vision of the future, motivate their staff to work collectively and collaboratively to achieve organizational goals, and systematize overall organizational objectives into essential tasks (Duke and Jacobson 2011; Leithwood et al. 2010).

Bogotch et al. (2016) offered recommendations on effective leadership practices for school turnaround. First, they emphasized the need for new school leaders to shift leadership from a management-centered to instructional model. The vision and traits of transformational leadership must also be implemented by all school leaders (Bogotch et al. 2016; Velarde et al. 2022). Next, the school itself must allow for new allocations of time and the development of its staff capacity. The establishment of professional learning communities is imperative, while those already estabilised need to be nurtured and guided. Bogotch et al. (2016) further reaffirmed that distributed leadership is required in school turnaround situations. Finally, they asserted that it is important for turnaround school leaders to achieve immediate successes to demonstrate their control over the situation.

Many researchers have attempted to find an ideal turnaround leadership style. These attempts have been futile as each turnaround situation varies. As such, Whelan (2011) suggested that turnaround leaders in schools require a combination of emotional quotient and cognitive competence to affect meaningful change. Futhermore, the literature implies that turnaround school leaders should place more emphasis on the interpersonal dimensions of their leadership approach (Whelan 2011). In light of the inconclusive extant research, further analysis of the antecedents of turnaround leadership and its effects on school effectiveness and improvement is important to provide knowledge for effective leadership training (Liu 2020).

Outcomes of Turnaround Leadership

In this section, we discuss the the effects of turnaround leadership from our review of the literature. Based on Hitt and Tucker's (2016) study, there is a positive impact of turnaround leadership on student achievement when principals cultivate a conducive work environment for students and teachers, build up teachers' instructional capacity, develop a shared vision and goals for their schools, and engage with the larger community. Therefore, turnaround leadership can be surmised to increase student performance.

Pham (2022) found that turnaround school performance in Memphis, Tennessee improves when principals develop a positive learning environment, encourage peer collaboration, and employ effective teachers. In contrast, Heissel and Ladd (2016) reported negative effects on students' performance in North Carolina elementary and middle schools. Specifically, they discovered that school principals' turnaround leadership results in a decline in average school-level passing rates for reading and math as well as a rise in the proportion of low-income students. Similarly, Strunk et al. (2016) examined the Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which aims to improve the district's underperforming schools. Their results showed that students in the first cohort of school turnaround exhibited no significant improvements in results, while achievement dropped significantly for students in the third cohort of school turnaround.

In Reyes and Garcia's (2014) research, there was an increase in teachers' motivation with a positive learning and working environment. In this environment, school principals concentrate on professional development and use data to guide teachers' daily instruction and intervention. Most importantly, they invite teachers who perform well to discuss what worked with their team. Staff development activities also increase under such principals, who constantly seek to provide continuing quality development for teachers. Along the same lines, Duke and Jacobson (2011) discovered that teachers in Texas high schools gain more opportunities to exercise their leadership and participate in decision making when their principals create new positions called lead content teachers for each academic discipline. Additionally, these principals upgrade the school's infrastructure, which strengthens relationships between middle school and high school teachers, allows for information exchange with students, and facilitates better curricular articulation. Correspondingly, in Jacobson's (2011) study, distributed leadership and staff professional development were revealed to be essential for school success. Moreover, the teachers in the school under study create a culture of collegial teacher professional development and collaborative learning.

Scholars such as Reyes and Garcia (2014), Duke and Jacobson (2011), and Jacobson (2011) have revealed that turnaround leadership has a positive effect on teacher performance. However, Heissel and Ladd (2016) stated that there is also a corresponding growth in the teacher turnover rate. This is because turnaround principals increase the time teachers spend on professional development programs, thereby adding to teachers' burdens and giving them less available time for teaching.

Under turnaround leadership, De Lisle et al. (2020) found an increase in community involvement in the context of Trinidad and Tobago. For example, parents participate in the adult literacy program late in the evening. Most notably, the school principal actively engages the community, whereby both parties benefit from the partnership. Similarly, there are positive changes in school culture, especially in parental involvement, when school principals recognize the importance of parents' participation (Reyes and Garcia 2014). For instance, school principals welcome parents in the parent center to participate in school activities. Moreover, Heissel and Ladd (2016) claimed that through the Turning Around the Lowest Achieving Schools (TALAS) program, communication with parents and the community has increased and improved over the years.

In the United States, schools principals are known to encourage parents from diverse cultural backgrounds to become involved in the schools. This is done through various initiatives such as volunteer work and participation in decision-making (Johnson et al. 2011). Likewise, in Cyprus, principals have connected schools to the community and involve the community in school decision-making (Pashiardis et al. 2011). In summary, we observe that turnaround leadership has both positive and negative effects on students' achievement and teachers' performance, as well as a generally positive effect on community engagement. This may be because turnaround efforts reflect negative forces influencing the survival of a school, including insufficient resources and huge time pressures.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and discussed what turnaround leadership is, if a change of leadership is necessary for school transformation, the characteristics of turnaround school leaders, and the practices of effective turnaround school leaders (e.g., building capacity, improving curriculum and instruction, enhancing teacher professional development, establishing a positive school culture and climate, and developing relationships with parents and the community). In addition, the types of leadership and the outcomes of turnaround leadership were also discussed. We conclude that turnaround leadership is vital to transform underperforming schools.

Many scholars have invested efforts into finding the ideal characteristics of turnaround leaders; however, each turnaround situation is different. It is therefore difficult to identify the ideal profile of a turnaround school leader. Despite this limitation, we have briefly explained the characteristics a turnaround school leader should have based on the works of Aladjem et al. (2010), Hewitt and Reitzug (2015), Hitt et al. (2019), Meyers and Hitt (2017), Ong (2015), Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms (2012), and Tschannen-Moran (2014). We have also provided insights into the types of leadership and the different approaches turnaround leaders use to transform their schools.

In particular, there is growing evidence that distributed leadership is required in school turnaround situations (Bogotch et al. 2016; Day 2014; Meyers and Hitt 2017). Fullan (2006) reiterated that successful turnaround school leaders develop and empower other leaders in their schools. Teachers, along with other school staff, have to be empowered and guided to discover greater possibilities for their professional growth. Ultimately, turnaround schools must be staffed with leaders who are willing and able to make essential changes; to this end, some leaders must be redeployed for successful reform (Player et al. 2014).

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