
Theories and Applications of Transformational School Leadership

Lessons from the Experiences of Two School Leaders in Jamaica

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Abstract

This article expands on findings from a qualitative study which was undertaken on two schools between 2013 and 2015 and published in 2017 which found that the schools were experiencing turnaround. One of the characteristics of these schools, which led to their selection for the study, was that they were assessed by the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) in 2013 as being “in need to immediate support.” This designation is the lowest performance rating on the scale used by the NEI to rate a school’s performance. This current study which was conducted between 2018 and 2019 seeks to examine the extent to which the turnaround efforts which were undertaken between 2013 and 2015 and explored and reported on in the article published in 2017, have been sustained. This study further seeks to explore the challenges the schools have encountered in sustaining those efforts and the progress they have made. This study found that sustaining turnaround efforts has been exceedingly difficult for both schools. While most staff members support the objective, both principals report that the effort is highly dependent on their direct presence and inputs and neither principal expressed confidence that if they were to leave the school the turnaround effort would be sustained or the momentum maintained. The study used data from interviews with both principals and focus group discussions among members of staff and students. The study has shed light on what may be described as the incubation period for attaining sustainable organizational change as well as the critical importance of embedding distributive leadership and shared power in the operations of an organization if transformational efforts are to be sustained.

Keywords: Sustainability, distributive leadership, empowerment, turnaround, transformational leadership

Introduction

This article presents findings from a qualitative study, which was undertaken in 2015, examining turnaround efforts of two schools between 2013 and 2015.

One of the characteristics of these schools, which led to their selection for the study was that they were assessed by the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) in 2013 as being “in need to immediate support.” This designation is the lowest performance rating on the scale used by the NEI to rate a school’s performance.

The problem of underperforming schools has been plaguing the Jamaican education system for generations. As a post-colonial society, financial support for school accessed by most students—who are, for the most part, children of the working class—has been limited. When secondary education was made ‘free’ in the 1970’s, more students had access to high schools, but the quality of the product fell and despite several reforms of secondary education, the majority of schools in Jamaica have been found to be underperforming, according to the latest report from the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) published in 2015 and 2017.

According to the NEI’s 2015 report which reported results on all nine hundred and fifty-three (953) primary, primary and junior high, and high schools in Jamaica, over the period 2010 to 2015, some 55% have been found to be performing unsatisfactorily. This situation showed some improvement in the 2017 report which involved a sample of 189 schools in the NEI’s second round of inspections. In the 2017 report, the percentage of schools found to be operating satisfactorily was 69%. The fact that schools are markedly different means that the sample of 189 cannot be deemed as representative and thus, as at 2017, there is no evidence that the overall picture has changed.

A google search of the word “under-performing schools” will show that it is a global phenomenon and is a reality in many developed and developing countries including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus undertaking and sustaining turnaround efforts is one of the most exacting challenges which governmental and school leaders face.

This current study seeks to examine the extent to which the turnaround efforts, uncovered between 2013 and 2015 and reported in the article published in 2017, have been sustained. This study further seeks to explore the challenges the schools have encountered in sustaining

those efforts and the progress they have made. The study has shed light on what may be described as the incubation period for attaining sustainable organizational change as well as the question of embedded distributive leadership.

For the purposes of this article, the definition of turnaround that is being adopted is informed by Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007) and Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Tallant, and Rahmatullah (2010) who posit that turnaround may be defined as a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in low performing schools to produce positive results and overall improvement within a short time, generally two to three years. Thompson et al. (2017), relying on the classifications used by the NEI, argue that successful turnaround occurs when schools move from being “ineffective” to “effective” and are in the latter state for a sustained period, as compared to experiencing some spectacular results which are not repeated.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, given the high percentages of underperforming schools globally, and the continued efforts by governments to promote school improvement and school turnaround, this study is significant because it seeks to explicate the nature of school turnaround and propose parameters for determining when a school has been turned around.

A second reason this study is significant is that it identifies potential pitfalls of which school leaders should be mindful as they pursue turnaround efforts, and thus calls attention to some key strategies that are useful, perhaps essential, in helping to sustain turnaround efforts. Ultimately, therefore, the study makes an important contribution to the literature on how to improve school outcomes.

Research Questions

The article focuses on four research questions, namely:

1. How do stakeholders characterize the teaching and learning environments of the schools between 2015 and 2017 compared to 2010–2015?
2. What factors, in the opinions of stakeholders, account for the differences in the teaching and learning environments of the schools since 2015?
3. Is there evidence to suggest that the environments that have

emerged in the schools since 2015, can be sustained, and if so, what is the evidence?

4. What are the strategies that the leadership of the schools have employed to attain and sustain the transformation of their schools?

Literature Review

Strategies for turning around underperforming schools have been well documented. Among the authorities are Arogyaswamy, Barker, and Yasai-Ardekani (1995); Kanter (2003); Matthews and Sammons (2005); and Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, and Ayscue (2007). These authorities suggest that one of the first steps to effecting school turnaround is the appointment of a new principal. This move is critical, they contend, as one of the reasons for the crisis facing any school is its current leadership. The changing of leadership can be used to signal to the stakeholders of the importance of change, according to Khandwalla (1984).

But while the commencement of turnaround efforts may be undertaken and early results seen, the larger question is the sustainability of the efforts. Krone (2013), reporting on turnaround efforts at some Chicago-based schools that had attempted the turnaround process, found that there were no distinct improvements which could substantiate a claim of successful school turnaround. In short, transformation is different from realizing improvements and as Smarick (2010) insists, turning around schools that were underperforming to beacons of success within a few years is impossible, but probable within a longer period.

Arsen, Bell, and Plank (2003) believe that, even under the best situations, turning around “failing” schools is a very complicated task. However, more recent studies conducted by Steiner and Hassel (2011) sought to renew confidence in the turnaround process by focusing on the competencies of the leadership and how these competencies enable effective turnarounds.

Olsen (2013) utilized an integrative survey approach to investigate how to turn around schools by identifying leadership practices and styles which were effective in influencing student achievement outcomes. Her research included twenty-eight schools in southern California which were the subject of school turnaround efforts. Olsen found that the effective turnaround principal is the one who can establish the characteristics of a modern school using strategies which enable the school to experience continuous improvement. The issue of experiencing continuous improvement is at the heart of school turnaround. As Thompson et

al. (2017) suggest, school turnaround, which involves moving a school from being ineffective to being effective, is not mere improvement but transformation.

The debate over the qualities required to produce effective schools has existed for over half a century and began with the work of Coleman et al. (1966) who uncovered certain core beliefs about schooling, one of which was that school performance was dependent on students' socio-economic status. This perspective was eclipsed by the notion of school effects, advanced by Brookover and Lezotte, (1977) who emphasized the role of the principal as instructional leader, and Edmonds (1979) who addressed the issues of student monitoring and home-school relations. The focus of research on school turnaround then transitioned to core strategies (Resnick, 1999), which was later replaced by the school context perspective, as advanced by Krüger, Witziers, and Slegers (2007).

Cuban (1983) and Purkey and Smith (1983) led the effective school movement in the 1980's through to the end of the century and was upstaged by the Fullan's (2006) change theory, Bridges' (2009), culture of change, and the learning capacity theory of Murphy and Meyers (2009). Conceptual models of school leadership ran parallel to the foregoing directions in the research on school improvement and the current location of the thinking remains in this area which has been extensively researched and strongly argued by Heck, Larson, and Marcoulides (1990); Hallinger (2003) and (2007); Marks and Printy (2003); Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005); and Leithwood and Jantzi (2006).

Summary of Major Theories on School Turnaround

The contending views on the key elements of effecting and sustaining school turnaround may be grouped and summarized in eleven (11) categories as follows:

- (i) The socio-economic theory of Coleman, et al. (1966);
- (ii) The instructional leadership theory of Brookover and Lezotte (1977);
- (iii) The new leadership theory of Khandwalla (1984), Arogyaswamy, Barker, and Yasai-Ardekani (1995), Kanter (2003), Matthews and Sammons (2005), and Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, and Ayscue (2007);
- (iv) The change theory of Fullan (2006), whose perspective is shared and specified by Bridges (2009) as culture change;

- (v) The distributive leadership theory of Spillane and Camburn (2006) and Spillane, Halverson, Diamond (2004);
- (vi) The context theory of Kruger, Witziers, and Slegers (2007);
- (vii) The general leadership theory of Kanter (2003), articulated in a somewhat more nuanced way as competent leadership by Arsen, Bell, and Plank (2003) which is supported by Olsen (2013) as well as Bierly, Doyle, and Smith (2016);
- (viii) The learning capacity theory of Murphy and Myers (2009);
- (ix) The sustainability theory of Krone (2013);
- (x) Jensen's (2013) five pillar theory of strong leadership that raises expectations; effective teaching with an emphasis on professional collaboration; measurement and development effective learning behaviors and outcomes, positive school culture, engaging parents and the community, which is expressed by Jarchow (2016) as the investment in mentoring and modeling theory;
- (xi) The policy support theory of Starks (2018)

Theoretical Framework

The dominant perspective emerging from the above locates school turnaround within the variable of leadership, based on the number of authorities who advance this point of view. This study accepts that leadership is the quintessential variable in effecting school turnaround as well as in sustaining same. Thus, the question this study seeks to examine is: "what are the key ingredients for sustaining turnaround efforts?" While accepting the place of all the factors highlighted above, this study rests on the view that leadership is essential but goes one step further to argue that it is distributive or shared leadership that will secure the sustainability of turnaround efforts.

Thus, the theoretical framework within which this study is located is that of Kanter (2003), who asserts the need for competent leadership and is supported by Arsen, Bell, and Plank (2003); Olsen (2013), and Bierly, Doyle, and Smith (2016), where this leadership expresses itself in what Jarchow (2016) describes as investment in mentoring and modeling theory. Mentoring is designed to prepare others to function more effectively in their roles and the mentor invests him- or herself in seeking to develop the capacities of mentees to lead the organization.

Therefore, a key strategy of mentoring, which is expressed as capacity-building, is empowerment. The conclusive position of this framework, therefore, is that leadership which shares power is the most effective strategy for sustaining school turnaround efforts.

Methodology

This study uses a case study design. According to Stake (1995) and Creswell (2014), a case study is a bounded and in-depth study of a research problem which is concerned with studying the phenomenon in context, so that the findings generate insight into how the phenomenon occurs within a given situation. It is often used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one or a few easily researchable examples. The case study research design is also useful for testing whether a specific theory and model applies to phenomena in the real world.

This study focuses on two schools which were found to need immediate support by the NEI. Data were collected using two main sources, namely, interviews with the principals and vice-principals and focus group discussions with teachers and students. The vice-principals were interviewed separately from the principals and similarly teachers and students participated in separate focus group discussions. The schools were the same ones in which the previous study was done. The interviews and focus groups discussions were recorded using a Samsung Galaxy smart phone and then the recordings transcribed. The data were analyzed to identify themes which emerged from the interviewees' responses to the questions.

Findings

Research Question # 1: How do stakeholders characterize the teaching and learning environments of the schools between 2015 and 2017 compared to 2010–2015?

Both principals, as well we teachers and students report that there has been significant change in the teaching and learning environments between the period 2010-2015 and 2015-2017. These changes they report are seen in students' discipline and performance, teachers' attitudes towards lesson preparation, teacher-student relationships, as well as the support of stakeholders. According to Principal A, students are far more organized, disciplined, and committed. These claims were corroborated in part by the school being named the highest performer in 2016 among newly created (non-traditional) high schools in the geographical region in which it is located. The school also attained record levels

of performance in two subjects in international examinations. In 2017 four students from that school earned merit awards in the Caribbean Examinations Council.

From his part, Principal B also asserted that there were encouraging improvements in students' academic performance and general deportment. He highlighted the area of general deportment pointing to drastic reduction in conflicts among students and increased efforts at mentorship being given by older students to younger students. Students at School B also reported that there has been a significant change in the teaching and learning environment in the last two years compared to the previous two. According to one student:

School is nice now. There are less fights and children get along. When I first came to the school there were fights every day, and it was just tiring. But now things are much better and as a result I am learning more. The teachers are nicer as well. They were nice back then, but they are nicer now.

Research Question # 2: What factors, in the opinions of stakeholders, account for the differences in teaching and learning environments of the schools since 2015?

The factors identified by students as being responsible for the changes in the teaching and learning environment of their school include: personalized attention given to them by their principal; better preparation for classes by their teachers supported by greater attention shown towards them; a cleaner physical environment including freshly painted walls and well-kept lavatories; as well as better relationships among peers. One student in the focus group at School B shared:

I believe the teachers are making a greater effort to help students. Maybe because there were so many fights, teachers were just tired. They would come to class late and behave like they don't care. But since about 2017 they are showing more concern and are more helpful.

Another student concurred:

Sometimes we used to feel sorry for the teachers dem, and we used to try to control our classmates, but the principal really talks to us and motivate us and encourage us and we decide to make the effort. The principal really wants us to do well.

Yet another student asserted that:

Him care bout us plenty and really motivate we. When him come into the hall during devotion time we glad to see him and once we see him, we feel good.

For their parts the principals noted that in addition to closer monitoring and supervision of teachers and stricter forms of accountability, they have introduced more expansive reward and recognition systems. These recognition and rewards systems, they report, have fired up the energies of most members of staff. Some staff members were deemed to be still functioning below their assessed capacities and below expectations, but these were in the minority. According to Principal A:

While you want everyone on board, you are not likely to have everyone on board, at least not all at once. So, the key is to be going somewhere and producing results and after a while people will see that you mean business and fall in line.

This view shared by Principal A was reinforced by members of staff of in the focus group at School A. One member, whose comments were endorsed by others, noted:

It is hard to just stand by and watch while the principal is trying so hard. Personally, I admire his energy and determination, but I could not do his job, and sadly, if he leaves, I am leaving, but if he is here, I will be here to support his efforts.

The consensus among staff and students was that it was the degree of motivation and encouragement provided by the leader which makes a difference. According to one teacher, speaking of Principal A, there is a style of motivation which is uniquely his and students gravitate to him as though he is their hero.

Research Question # 3: Is there evidence to suggest that the environments that have emerged in the schools since 2015, can be sustained, and if so, what is the evidence?

The issue of the sustainability of the turnaround efforts stood out as one of the most compelling findings of this research. We found it instructive that both principals expressed the fear that the advances experienced, and progress made in turning around the schools, are as yet not consolidated. There is, in their opinions, a strong probability that if they were to leave at this time the gains made could be reversed.

According to Principal A, there is a strong risk that the gains of the last five years could be undone if he were to leave. He highlighted what occurred while he was on eight months leave, citing the fact that the persons who acted as principals were not as energetic and diligent as they needed to be. (Each vice principal had acted for four months). He reasoned that:

School turnaround takes a lot of effort, you have to keep at it, for if you lose the momentum it will take a lot of time to get back to where you were. I must admit that I am not confident that if I left now, the successes we have made will be sustained.

Principal B echoed similar sentiments, noting that the threat of reversals to the turnaround effort is intensified by the fact that, ironically, principals cannot be confident about the level of support they receive from the central Ministry. When asked whether he felt that the Ministry of Education supported what he was seeking to do, Principal B said: “I wish I could say, with 100% certainty that I do, but I can’t.”

But one senior teacher held the view that part of the reason the turnaround efforts cannot be sustained is because the principal makes it too much about himself. This teacher felt that there was not enough sharing of power. The teacher complained that the level of autonomy and authority which Vice Principals should have is not granted and so decisions which they should be taking within their zone of responsibility they are not able to. Thus, this teacher concluded:

If you feel held back on things about which you think you should have authority, then you are unwilling to venture out. I recall an occasion when the principal was away from the school and I took a decision in an emergency which I think was well within my authority to take, given my level of responsibility, but when the principal returned, he said I should have consulted with him. It is not even the case that it was a bad decision, he had no problem with the decision itself, he just felt I should have consulted him first. As a result of that I am unwilling to take any decision or initiative, I wait on him; and other teachers do too.

Another senior teacher implied that part of the problem with the sustainability of the turnaround is that the principal views himself as being the architect of the effort. She stated that:

We have been improving since 2008 (a date before the principal took over) and we have been steadily improving since then.

These findings suggest that the leadership style of the principals as transformational leaders is both a help and a potential hindrance, and the factors which could create the hindrance is where the principals fail to divest themselves of control and give more space to their VPs and teachers to bring their own style to the transformation effort.

Research Question # 4: What are the strategies that the leadership of the schools have employed to attain and sustain the transformation of their schools?

The strategies employed by the leadership of the school to sustain turnaround effort include continued focus on data-driven instruction, diversification of extra-curricular activities and opportunities, professional development training of teachers, and coaching and mentoring of persons to assume leadership roles.

According to Principal A, the use of data is key. Thus, performance results are regularly discussed, and highlights of performance are placed at conspicuous places on the school campus and are designed to act as motivators for staff, students, and parents. The expansion of the range of extra-curricular activities is also a key strategy for Principal A.

Principal B reports that training of staff is key. He expressed regrets, however, that staff members who have been trained end up leaving to take up principalship roles in other school. Thus, he finds himself having to start over again each time. The long-term fix, he contends must be systemic such that an individual school is not struggling on its own to train leaders which it then loses to a system which is starved of quality leaders.

In addition to the measures discussed above, both principals report that they invest a lot of their time and energy encouraging and motivating students to achieve excellence. The students at School A share that their principal spends a good deal of time with them, particularly with the boys, and both boys and girls report that their academic performance, personal conduct, outlook on life, and the importance of schooling have changed.

Another strategy which both principals indicate that they employ to sustain the turnaround effort is actively engaging students, teachers, and other stakeholders in listening to their concerns as well as mentoring specifically identified members of staff to assume leadership roles. Principal B explains that he assigns additional roles and responsibilities to members of staff and gives them the space to take certain decisions.

Discussion

There are five overarching insights/themes which have emerged from the experiences of the two school leaders which shed light on both the nature of transformational leadership as well as sustainable organizational change. These five insights are:

- (a) communicating collective ownership of the change agenda;
- (b) maintaining a sense of urgency;
- (c) empowering all actors with the relevant level of authority to act in furtherance of the change agenda, with confidence and the freedom from fear or being overruled;

- (d) embedding the change in the fabric of the organization and the consciousness of the members of the organization;
- (e) implementing a succession plan.

A compelling lesson which the concerns about turnaround reversals, as articulated by both principals, highlights the need for a focused effort at distributive leadership or collective ownership of the change agenda according to Spalline et al, (2004) and (2006). This lesson emphasizes that the responsibility for and ownership of the change effort must be shared. Both principals indicate that they sought to take steps to do this. In the case of Principal A, he said he had identified two young members of staff whom he sought to train to be the next level of leadership, but both left the school to take up principalship positions at other schools. Asked about his Vice Principals, Principal A indicated that she is nearing retirement and has not shown interest in the transformation effort. This issue calls attention to a problem of succession planning in transformational leadership. The importance of succession planning is argued by Jensen (2013) and the Hanover Research Group (2016) who emphasize the need for targeted professional development, highly effective teachers, and data-driven instruction as way by which turnaround efforts can be sustained. These strategies are in line with what both principals have indicated as their strategy for sustaining turnaround.

The problem of collective ownership obtains at School B wherein the Principal contends that one of the Vice Principals, the senior, has strong personal opposition to him and as such is probably not only unsupportive of the change efforts but may even act in ways to undermine those efforts. The other VP, while supportive, does not seem to possess the level of personal agency to act independently. Both principals, while mindful of what they regarded as insufficient enthusiasm among members of their staff, emphasized that the need to find among their staff those who would be capable of carrying the turnaround effort forward. Jarchow (2016) notes the critical importance of this measure in any sustainable turnaround effort.

Given the threat of turnaround reversals and the internal school dynamics which foster this threat, the question which arises is whether there are additional measures, beyond internal distributive leadership strategies, which can help to sustain turnaround efforts. Starks (2018) appears to provide an answer and offers three practical solutions. In the first place, he suggests that by policy a school which is the subject of a turnaround effort should have Turnaround Team established. One of the tasks of this Turnaround Team is that of maintaining the sense of urgency about the change. Starks (2018), who himself served

as a principal of “failing” school, which was the subject of turnaround policy, contends that by having this team in place, the responsibility for sustaining the turnaround effort is squarely laid in the laps of chosen individuals. This approach is akin to the establishment of the change management team of which Kotter (1995) speaks in his eight-step approach to implementing and managing change.

A second solution to which Starks (2018) points is the need for external policy level support. The need for external level support is related to how change efforts are embedded in an organization. This external support which would come from the district, regional office, or central ministry level would be material, as well as tactical and strategic. This issue is a vital and real one given the absent or lukewarm support that Principal B reported when asked whether he thinks the Ministry of Education was supportive of his efforts.

A third level of reinforcement which Starks (2018) found to be effective in sustaining turnaround efforts was community support. Community support is required in order to organically connect the change effort to the culture and ethos of the school.

Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) identify the key elements of transformational leadership, among them individualized attention. Among the effects of this leadership behavior is the creation of a sense of belonging among members of a group. This sense of belonging in turn generates a shared commitment towards the goals of the organization. Students at School B spoke emphatically about the fact that both their teachers and principal relate to them personally, demonstrate genuine interest in their well-being and progress and thus create a culture in which they are moved to work harder. One member of the group argued that this culture was not what obtained when she first entered the school. Her views were corroborated by most of the other members of the focus group.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study found that sustaining turnaround efforts has been exceedingly difficult for the two schools. While most staff members support the objective, both principals report that the effort is highly dependent on their direct presence and inputs and neither principal expressed confidence that if they were to leave the school the turnaround effort would be sustained or maintain momentum. The study used data from interviews with both principals and focus group discussions among members of staff and students.

While the principals contend that the lack of commitment of key

staff members is a factor is the sustainability of the efforts, and are supported by some staff members, there is the alternative view that the principals have not sufficiently empowered staff members and as such the turnaround effort revolves heavily around them. The study has shed light on what may be described as the incubation period for attaining sustainable organizational change as well as the critical importance of embedding distributive leadership and shared power in the operations of an organization if transformational efforts are to be sustained. The key lessons from the experiences of both schools highlight the need for the following steps which are recommended to leaders of organizations seeking to undertake transformational efforts.

- (1) Ensure that communications, actions, and policies convey to all members of staff that they are collective owners of the change agenda;
- (2) Establish a permanent or long-term Turnaround Taskforce to keep awareness of a sense of urgency and to identify those areas of activity which need attention in order to keep the momentum for the change;
- (3) Empower all members of staff with the relevant level of authority to act in furtherance of the change agenda, with confidence and the freedom from fear of being overruled;
- (4) Implement a succession plan through training and assignment of selected staff to lead special programs and initiatives including providing support to other members of staff.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. How would you characterize the teaching and learning environments of the schools between 2015 and 2017 compared to 2010–2015?
 - (a) Remind us of the conditions in which you found the teaching and learning environment when you assumed the principalship.
 - (b) What were the general attitudes of staff and students to the situation at hand?
 - (c) What were the areas that you decided to give the greatest attention and effort and why?
 - (d) How did staff and students respond to you efforts?

(e) What strategies did you use to bring people on board?

(f) How would you describe the teaching and learning culture at this time?

2. *What factors, in the opinions of stakeholders, account for the teaching and learning environments of the schools since 2015?*

(g) What are the ways in which you engaged stakeholders in exploring the changes that have occurred since 2015?

(h) What are their opinions about the changes?

(i) What are their perspectives on the impact these changes have had on the teaching and learning environment?

(j) How would you describe their attitudes and expectations for the future?

3. *Is there evidence to suggest that the environments that have emerged in the schools since 2015, can be sustained, and if so, what is the evidence?*

(k) What are the changes that have taken place in the school since 2015?

(l) How sustainable are these changes?

4. *What are the strategies that the leadership of the schools have employed to attain and sustain the transformation of their schools?*

(m) What are the steps that you have taken to sustain these changes?

(n) What will be the evidence that these changes are sustained?