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LEADING TURNAROUND AND IMPROVEMENT IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA

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Improving the fortunes of low-performing schools, often in the most challenging circumstances, remains a persistent and pervasive challenge in many education systems (Meyers & Darwin, 2017). Turnaround schools, as they have become known, continue to be the subject of considerable international research interest and policy attention (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Herman, 2012; Jensen & Sonneman, 2014; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). Turnaround schools are often located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and can face a myriad of challenges including poor facilities, fragile leadership, insufficient teaching resources, and low teaching
quality (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Harris & Chapman, 2004; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). Typically, such schools can be very resistant to change and, all too frequently, the students who attend these schools are caught in a cycle of disadvantage and deprivation (Meyers & Darwin, 2017).

Scanning the international school-turnaround literature highlights that the empirical evidence largely embodies and reflects a Western perspective and that most of studies of turnaround schools have been undertaken in Western education systems, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe. Most notably, the evidence base on school turnaround in Asia remains relatively limited, particularly in developing countries. Consequently, this chapter outlines the findings from a small-scale, exploratory, comparative study of leading school turnaround in Malaysia and Indonesia. This study outlines the turnaround process in each context from the perspective of principals and teachers in a small sample of schools. The aim of this chapter is to offer insights into the turnaround process in each setting and to provide illustrative insights into the process of leading school turnaround in Malaysia and Indonesia.

In terms of structure, the chapter commences with an overview of the literature on school turnaround and subsequently provides contextual details about Malaysia and Indonesia. Details of the methodology are outlined next, followed by a discussion of the findings drawing upon data from the project. Key themes and reflections are presented with some concluding comments and observations.

THE LITERATURE

Within the international literature, definitions of a "turnaround school" vary, and "no single definition of school turnaround exists" (Hochbein & Mahone, 2017, p. 15). It is generally accepted, however, that the term refers to schools that have significantly improved their performance from a very low threshold. The idea of turnaround schools was first established by the school effectiveness and school improvement movement in the 1970s and 1980s, largely but not exclusively in the United States, by leading writers on the topic (Stringfield 1995, 1998; Stringfield et al., 2008) The central aim of this particular strand of the international knowledge base was to help poor and minority students in low-performing schools reach their potential by creating a safe, organized educational environment where results significantly improved (Duke, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2011).

Looking at the available literature, it is evident that terms such as takeover, turnover, restructuring, reconstitution, and redesign are used interchangeably to define how low-performing schools are improved and transformed. In their work, Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, and Tallant, (2010) define
impact of these strategies over time (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010; Meyers & Darwin, 2017; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Other analyses indicate that effective turnaround leadership involves a combination of instructional, transformational, and managerial leadership behaviors (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

Research evidence also points to the fact that turnaround leaders have a clear mission and vision for their schools and focus on creating collaborative cultures among staff as they work toward these goals (Leithwood et al., 2010). Evidence also underlines that effective turnaround leaders support teachers both personally and professionally to build the internal capacity for change within their school and to foster professional capital (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Harris & Chapman, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2010; Ross & Glaze, 2005). Additionally, high levels of organizational trust have been shown to be a critical component of a successful school improvement and effective turnaround leadership (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

While many scholars recognize the importance of strong and purposeful leadership in securing and sustaining school turnaround (Leithwood et al., 2010), exactly how this is enacted in very different settings and contexts attracts far less interest and scrutiny. As noted earlier, most of the literature focuses upon turnaround schools is located within Western educational settings, particularly North America and the United Kingdom. In contrast, the literature on school improvement and turnaround within Asia remains relatively sparse (e.g., Chapman, 2016; Cheng & Tam, 2007; Dimmock, 2003; Harris, 2015).

MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA

Before moving onto details of the project, there are important background and contextual features to outline about the two countries that are the focus of this school turnaround study. Turning first to Malaysia, with regard to educational performance, Malaysia scores significantly lower in international assessments like TIMSS and PISA, when compared to its high-performing Asian counterparts such as Singapore or Hong Kong (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2013; Performance Management and Delivery Unit, 2010; Siddiquee, 2014). Only Indonesia performs less well than Malaysia in these international assessments (Mayberry, 2015).

Consequently, increasing concerns about educational performance in Malaysia resulted in a Malaysian Educational Blueprint (2013–2025) for school improvement. In addition, there has also been a concerted effort to address the issue of failing or struggling schools. At present, in Malaysia, public schools are divided into seven performance bands, from Band 1 (the
Research is clear: School leadership quality matters. However, our knowledge of effective school leadership remains limited in at least three substantial ways. First, our understanding of school leadership effectiveness generally and school principal effectiveness specifically is limited to Western contexts, primarily North America and western European ones. Second, even in the confines of Western research and context, there has been relatively little specific focus on effectively leading low-performing schools. Third, even the conceptualization of leadership—do we mean the school principal, an administrative team, or a broader school leadership team—is a key factor in how we define and respond to the challenge of leading in low-performing schools. *International Perspectives on Leading Low-Performing Schools* advances discussion and disseminates knowledge and global perspectives on what school leadership looks like, how it is enacted and under what circumstances, and when or where lessons might be portable.

We anticipate *International Perspectives on Leading Low-Performing Schools* will have a wide appeal for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners considering school leadership and how to support it effectively. The chapters suggest a noticeable level of convergence globally on how to lead low-performing schools effectively. Yet, there are clear political and culture differences that add significant gradation to how school leaders might enact best practice locally or inform policymakers and systems leaders about how to set up school leaders for success and subsequently support them. This book is one of the first that prioritizes the universality and nuance of leading low-performing schools globally.