



Leading the Improvement of Underperforming Schools: Reviewing the Contemporary Evidence

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Abstract

The international evidence base concerning the improvement of schools considered to be underperforming is diverse and wide-ranging. Schools that fail to meet acceptable levels of performance, often measured in standardised ways, regularly fall under scrutiny and frequently are in receipt of local or national interventions. This article reviews the contemporary evidence to ascertain how far leadership remains a critical factor in the turnaround process. This article is not a systematic review of the literature, and does not claim to be, rather it draws upon a selected evidence base to explore the influence of leadership on the improvement of underperforming schools. The article offers a current lens on leading the improvement of underperforming schools and adds to the knowledge base by providing seven new themes based on the evidence considered.

Introduction

The educational reform agenda in many countries reflects an ongoing interest in the relationship between school leadership and improved learner outcomes. As the OECD¹ notes, ‘School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling’(p9)

The international literature underscores the importance of contextual understanding and knowledge in the successful enactment of school leadership in the most challenging circumstances (e.g. Leithwood, & Riehl, 2005; Barnett, & Stevenson, 2016; Clarke & O’Donoghue 2016; Clarke, & Wildy, 2004 Gu & Johansson, 2013 Meyers, Thessin, & Stosich, 2022). There is an expansive literature on the successful leadership of schools located in high poverty locations or areas of significant deprivation (Mulford, 2007| Author,

¹ [Improving School Leadership \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/education/Improving_School_Leadership/)

2016; Author and Thomson, 2006; Ylimaki, et al 2007 McGee, 2021). It is well documented that growing up in poverty can have detrimental effects on educational progress and attainment hence it is important to consider how to improve schools located in areas of rural, inner city or coastal deprivation (Thrupp,2015). It is not the case, however, that all schools in such areas are underperforming, there are many schools in high poverty contexts that continue to succeed against the odds. It is generally accepted, however, that the challenges facing schools in areas of high deprivation are acute and that the young people who attend these schools often face intense challenges and multiple barriers to learning (Author and Author, 2022).

In addition, it is clear that inequality and inequity, in education, are associated with, and exacerbated by, living in poverty and deprivation (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). The disproportionately negative influences of poverty on the learning and life chances of certain groups of young people is a major concern, globally (Author and Author 2020). While equality and equity are often used interchangeably and even synonymously, they are in fact related but distinctively different.

The term equity refers to the provision of fairness and justice in education while equality means providing the same educational opportunities to all. Both are important, of course, but even with the same opportunities to learn, some children and young people face acute barriers to learning and are often multiply disadvantaged simply by virtue of their race, ethnicity, special needs or sexuality. Consequently, equitable education means removing all barriers to learning and ensuring that all young people, whatever their background or circumstances, can access education in ways that ensures personal success and achievement. (Ketikidou, & Saiti, 2022).

Meeting appropriate levels of achievement and attainment, over time for *all* students is now a key educational consideration and policy priority in many countries (Sahlberg & Cobbold, (2021). A focus on equity in education inevitably means considering educational performance and by implication attention inevitably turns to schools, particularly those considered to be underperforming. For some writers, these schools are 'high need schools' (Barnett, & Woods, 2021) while for others underperforming schools signal deeper societal issues and cultural issues that are complex and powerful (Adams et al, 2022).

Within the literature, underperforming schools, however defined and categorised, have attracted a variety of labels, over the years, including schools in difficulty, schools facing

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3 challenging circumstances, failing schools, schools in special measures and turnaround
4 schools (Vangronigen, Meyers, & Brandt, 2022). Whatever label is applied, most often the
5 stock response to improving such schools tends to be a combination of additional funding and
6 a range of support measures aimed at helping them make progress. Evidence suggests that
7 while extra funding may be necessary to help underperforming schools, in the short term, it is
8 insufficient to secure improvement in the long term (Meyers, 2020). A quick look at the
9 school improvement evidence base reinforces that many underperforming schools, once
10 persistently low performing, will remain so, despite being supported in innumerable ways
11 (Meyers and Darwin, 2017; Author et al 2020).

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19 The international evidence base also shows how difficult it is for a school that has turned
20 around to sustain improvement over time (Meyers, 2020). After the support, resources and
21 attention fall away, most underperforming schools quickly return to normative practice,
22 unless there has been radical and sustained set of internal changes accompanied, most often,
23 by a complete overhaul of leadership (Johnson, 2020).

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29 No single, universal definition of an underperforming school exists, as the contextual factors
30 and measures vary considerably from context-to-context (Johnson, 2020). It is clear,
31 however, that underperforming schools will have visibly moved through various stages of
32 decline where their ability to accomplish their primary educational goals has steadily and
33 visibly diminished. Evidence suggests that school failure tends to be a steady and an
34 incremental downward spiral rather than a sudden unexpected, plummet in performance (Parett
35 and Budge, 2020).

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41 The signs of school decline are always apparent but when left unattended or ignored then a
42 steep downward trajectory is inevitable. Stopping this decline, however, is perfectly possible
43 given the early warning systems that such schools display but often interventions only occur
44 when the school is failing so badly that the situation cannot be ignored any longer
45 (Leithwood, Author & Strauss, 2013).

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51 Many of the issues that contribute to school decline are well known (Parett and Budge, 2020).
52 As noted already, it is no accident that many underperforming schools are in areas of high
53 poverty and significant deprivation. This is not to excuse their performance levels in any way,
54 or to diminish it, but simply to offer important contextualisation and explanation.
55 Underperforming schools frequently face a myriad of socio-economic problems associated
56 with factors that reside outside the school gate. The evidence suggests that underperforming
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3 schools are not only ill equipped to deal with these social problems but also find themselves
4 overwhelmed with the sheer range of issues that they face (Berkovich, & Grinshtain, 2022).

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7 The desire to tackle underperforming schools too quickly can mean that any real or in-depth
8 diagnosis of why the school has declined so badly in the first place is bypassed. The rush to
9 'fix the problem' often results in the deployment of turnaround or improvement strategies
10 that are superficial, inappropriate, or simply the wrong fit for the issues that an
11 underperforming school may face (Murphy and Bleiberg, 2018).

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14 The literature on evidence-based practices in schools consistently underlines that
15 underperforming schools are often pressurised into better performance through an amalgam
16 of scrutiny, prescription, school self-evaluation, rather than through approaches that meet the
17 specific needs of the school (Brown, & Malin, 2022). Frequently, underperforming schools
18 are forced to respond to multiple layers of accountability without the inadequate support
19 needed to deal with the complex, contextual challenges that they face (Roland, 2017).

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22 The school improvement literature over the past 30 years has steadily reinforced that there is
23 no single lever for reversing the under-performance of any school, there is no silver bullet.
24 Yet the evidence consistently points to the importance of leadership as a key driver in
25 reversing the fortunes of under-performing schools (Creemers, Peters and Reynolds, 2022). It
26 is suggested that a balance of leadership support and challenge is needed which is bespoke
27 and appropriate to contextualised school needs. Blanket, top-down, turnaround solutions tend
28 not to work long-term, plus they can sometimes be damaging to schools that are already in a
29 vulnerable or fragile state (Murphy and Blieberg, 2018).

30 31 32 **Review of the Literature**

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35 This review of selected, contemporary evidence about underperforming schools, aims to
36 focus upon the role of leaders and leadership in the process of school improvement. Hence
37 this review has deliberately selected literature which specifically comments on the role of
38 leadership in school improvement and turnaround. Indeed, most of the evidence over the past
39 decade (2010-2021) that has focused on school turnaround or turnaround schools, points
40 towards the centrality of changes in leadership and leadership practices as being critical to
41 ongoing improvement and success (Murphy, & Bleiberg, 2018).

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44 This is not a systematic review of the literature (Valverde-Berrocoso, et al, 2020) but rather,
45 this article provides a review of selected contemporary evidence (2010-2020) focusing upon

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3 the role of leaders and leadership in the improvement of underperforming schools. As noted
4 earlier, the literature on underperforming schools is located under various labels and is
5 understood in very different ways. On balance, it has been proposed that the evidence base on
6 under-performing schools is fragmented by terminology, diverse in research approaches and
7 variable in terms of the solutions or advice it proposes (Meyers and Sadler, 2018).
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12 While some seminal reviews of the literature, that have focused on improving schools in
13 challenging contexts, have stood the test of time (e.g., Muijs et al, 2004; Potter et al, 2002) on
14 balance, much of the evidence pre 2010 tends to reflect very different policy contexts
15 accompanied by specific interventions that no longer exist. Therefore, this review, focuses
16 specifically on the contemporary evidence, over the past decade, about leading the
17 improvement of underperforming schools.
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24 Within the scope of this review, it was not possible to look at all the available evidence and
25 writing on this topic, so some explicit selection criteria were deployed to make the review
26 process both focused and manageable. This review focused initially on the evidence
27 available within peer reviewed articles in reputable journals and subsequently, included
28 selected books and some indicative reports too offer some insights into other forms of
29 evidence on the subject.
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35 The review discounted opinion pieces, blogs, and other media simply because of the
36 unreliability of quality and content. Book chapters do not feature because many of the
37 chapters already appear in the books that are included; hence, this removes the potential of
38 duplication and repetition. It is fully acknowledged that by using such narrow selection
39 criteria, important work may be excluded or missed and that work in other languages does not
40 feature. Such limitations are fully accepted but the aim was not to produce a systematic
41 review of the literature but rather to ringfence contemporary evidence that focused
42 specifically on the leadership aspect of improving underperforming schools. The next section
43 of this article outlines the review process adopted and explains how the literature was
44 selected.
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Review Process

In this review, the data retrieval and analysis process followed the literature review method guidelines outlined by Kitchenham (2004)² that also corresponds to the PRISMA (2008)³ review methodology, which is as follows:-

- (1) Setting Keywords
- (2) Selecting databases
- (3) Defining search criteria
- (4) Selected articles
- (5) Analysis framework
- (6) Extracting information from the articles into the analysis framework

As noted earlier, the evidence base on under-performing schools is located under a wide variety of labels or descriptors. Hence there were two cycles in searching refereed journal articles using specific keywords in cycle one and then extending the key words in cycle two. The second cycle was instigated as the first cycle elicited very little contemporary evidence using the terms that were allocated.

Cycle 1

- “School* Caus*⁴ Concern*”
- “school* difficult**”
- “school* “challeng*”
- “school* fail*”
- “Special measure” AND school
- “low-perform*” OR “low perform*” school

² Kitchenham, B. (2004) Procedures for Performing Systematic Reviews, Keele University 33 1-26

³ Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG (2008) The PRISMA Group. Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 2008;6:e1000097. 10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097

⁴ The asterisk (*) is placeholder for any unknown or wildcard terms. For example, “challeng*” returns any word starts with recruit (i.e. challenges, challenging....)

Possibly, some of these identifiers are no longer in common use in the contemporary writing about underperforming schools.

In cycle 2, the generic term 'school turnaround' was used as this is a topic that continues to engage scholars in contemporary, empirical research and enquiry, particularly in the USA. In addition, the search term 'leading underperforming schools' was used to elicit articles that focused specifically on leadership issues.

Cycle 2

- "Turn* around"
- 'Turnaround'
- "Leading underperforming schools"

In terms of searching the academic literature, it was decided to use a range of reliable and extensive databases to identify relevant articles. These databases were cross-checked to ensure that all the retrieved information was accurate. EBSCOHOST was used for cycle 1 and 2 of the review process. The databases explored within EBSCOHOST include:

- British Education Index (BEI)
- ERIC
- Education Abstracts
- Education Administration
- Academic Research Complete

The search was subsequently extended to include Web of Science and Google Scholar for cross checking.

The inclusion or selection criteria for the review process relating to academic journals were as follows:

- Source: journal articles only
- Search Dates 2010 -2020
- Language: English
- Search in article: title against the keywords in cycle 1 and cycle 2
- Sources: only peer reviewed journals indexed as SCOPUS or ISI

The search for articles also included Google Scholar (GS) because it indexes the full text or metadata of scholarly literature across an array of publishing formats and disciplines. The search in Google Scholar concentrated on the prominent keywords such as “School Turnaround”, “Underperforming Schools’ ‘Leading School Improvement’ The process of searching in Google Scholar went through the following steps:

- 1-Setting keywords
- 2-Use advanced search option and search commends (e.g. AND, OR)
- 2-Search title
- 3-Narrow the date range of research
- 4-Extract the most up to date and relevant papers

The data retrieval and analysis process for all journal articles followed four steps:

- *Identification* -studies identified in the initial results of the electronic literature search.
- *Screening* - studies that did not fully meet the inclusion criteria were excluded and duplicate results were removed from the list.
- *Eligibility* - abstract screening for each output was conducted to ensure only relevant and appropriate articles were selected for the next stage.
- *Inclusion* – full PDFs of the selected articles were read to ensure they remained relevant and appropriate for final selection.

As Appendix 1 shows, the initial results from the journal search were significantly higher than the final list of articles selected. This is because many of the articles that appeared in the identification stage were irrelevant on closer inspection (e.g., many articles contained the word “school” or ‘improvement’ but did not focus explicitly on underperforming schools). Also, many articles were duplicates and therefore were removed. Hence, despite a large number of hits initially in the search, the rigorous filtering process for quality, direct relevance, and appropriateness in relation to the explicit focus on leadership, resulted in 19 articles being selected.

Within the review, a separate section was included for books using Google Books and Google Scholar. The selection process followed the same contours of the search for articles on Google Scholar. The aim of this process was to get an indicative sense of the contemporary writing, in the form of books, about leading the improvement of underperforming schools. It was notable that most of the contemporary books on this subject

largely come from a North American context where the policy focus at state and district level remains firmly fixed on school turnaround.

In addition, certain reports were selected for inclusion in this review, simply to illustrate that there is a body of evidence outside the academic literature that focuses on issues of leadership in the improvement of underperforming schools. Again, these selected reports are indicative and they are included only to offer an insight into the type of material that exists outside academic writing. In summary, the search elicited the following results.

Type of output	Number of outputs
Article (ISI and SCOPUS)	19
Books	16
Reports	10
Total	45

Table 1: Total number of resources

Each of the pieces was read in detail by all team members and individual summaries were shared and cross-referenced in relation to specific leadership issues and commentary. An analysis of all the documents was then undertaken using constant comparison which focused specifically upon illuminating the leadership issues that emerged from each piece, cross-referenced against the entire body of selected evidence. Inductive content analysis was used by the researchers to identify themes that emerged from the raw data through repeated examination and comparison.

The leadership themes were noted in terms of frequency of occurrence and prominence in the evidence selected. This inductive content analysis analysis and the constant comparison approach taken across the selected evidence ensured that the emergent themes were strongly represented and reflected across the selected pieces. (Kibiswa, 2019).

The findings from this contemporary review of the evidence are presented in the form of seven key themes that directly relate to leading the improvement of underperforming schools. The implications for policy, research, and practice, arising from the findings from this review, are then outlined.

Key Themes

This review generated seven themes based on the selected evidence, that related specifically to the leadership in the improvement of underperforming schools. Collectively, these seven themes reflect the way that leadership is understood and enacted within schools that are underperforming. It is recognised that this review was undertaken prior to COVID 19 and therefore does not reflect the leadership issues and perspectives that appear more recently in the literature about school leadership within the pandemic.

Theme 1- Capable Leadership

There have been countless studies, over successive decades, that have reached the same basic conclusion about the improvement of all schools but particularly those deemed to be underperforming. Essentially, this review reinforces that leadership matters most in securing a reversal in the fortune of schools in the most difficult circumstances and that leadership is pivotal in the improvement of under-performing schools (Duke, 2015; Leithwood, Author and Strauss, 2010; Meyers and Darwin, 2019; Adams et al, 2021).

More broadly, evidence outside this review reinforces how leadership is ‘second only to the curriculum and teaching in its effect upon student learning’ (Leithwood, Author and Hopkins, 2008; 4). There is not a single example of an organisational turnaround, anywhere in the world, without leadership being at the forefront of the change and a critical component in the improvement process.

In terms of the evidence specifically in this review, Chapman and Muijs (2013) underscore the importance of capable and competent leadership as the cornerstone of securing improvement in schools facing considerable challenges. Their work highlights that there are a range of actions, behaviours, and priorities that leaders in such schools consistently demonstrate that are associated with better performance and outcomes. These include:

- Leading Instruction
- Assessing Teacher Performance
- Using Data for Improvement
- Strengthening School Community
- Building Strong Relationships

- Leading Teams

Chapman and Muijs (2013) suggest that successful leadership in the improvement of underperforming schools is driven by a strong commitment to equity and an inherent sense of deep moral purpose. They propose that the type of effective leadership needed to improve an under-performing school is inherently driven by a profound and compelling sense of social justice.

Clifford (2013) emphasises the importance of an investment in the professional development and skill set of 'turnaround' leaders who are charged with the improvement of schools considered to be under-performing. While it is accepted that good leadership is simply good leadership, irrespective of context, it is also posited that turnaround leadership demands a certain set of bespoke skills and dispositions that go far beyond the good leadership practices seen in schools that are not under-performing (Adams et al 2021). Yet, 'turnaround' leadership skills and practices rarely feature explicitly in generic professional learning programmes for school leaders or in qualifications for headship/principalship (Steiner and Hassel, 2011). It would seem imperative, therefore, that bespoke training, support and professional learning is required for those leaders charged with improving under-performing schools.

Theme 2 –Leading Change

Henry et al (2020) point towards the importance of school leaders needing an explicit, well understood, and consistent theory of action (or model of change) to guide their work with underperforming schools. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of all partners being clear about the model of intervention and expectations of engagement, so that sensible, realistic, leadership decisions can be made to ensure that sustainable improvement follows.

Henry et al (2020) note that in underperforming schools, leaders have to work with the staff they have rather than the staff they might want or need. They emphasise the importance of leaders building confidence in their staff, so they see the potential not only change but also to lead some aspect of change. In addition, they posit that leaders of underperforming schools need a practical, working model of change that is coherent, co-ordinated, and clearly communicated to all those in the school.

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3 The evidence in this review underlines that all too often, external support mechanisms are put
4 in place for underperforming schools without a clear, shared, well understood model of
5 change which in turn, makes the process of improvement, for leaders of such schools fraught
6 and far more difficult to achieve. Hill (2016) highlights the importance of leaders of
7 underperforming schools having an integrated framework that guides any model of change or
8 improvement, reinforcing that without clarity around the purposes of improvement precious
9 little will be achieved in the end.

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16 Meyers and Hitt (2016) note the need for leaders of underperforming schools to build a
17 change process on a clear diagnosis of the real issues and challenges that the school faces.
18 They suggest that identifying the root causes of underperformance is critically important, if a
19 workable turnaround plan is to be put in place and successfully implemented by school
20 leaders.
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25 Contemporary evidence suggests that much of the support for underperforming schools is
26 geared towards improving attainment levels in certain subjects or tackling weak teachers or
27 improving attendance rather than addressing the fundamental structural and cultural issues
28 that the school faces. Diagnosing the root cause of underperformance is therefore a critical
29 skill that school leaders need to have, if the right improvement strategies are to be put in
30 place for sustained improvement to be secured (Meyers and Darwin, 2017).
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38 39 **Theme 3 Leading Capacity Building**

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41 Meyers et al (2020) suggest than an appropriate balance of support and challenge, for staff, is
42 required from leaders of underperforming schools to move their school forward effectively
43 and productively. A consistent theme across the selected literature focused upon how most
44 turnaround efforts fail simply because the main emphasis is upon schools to turn themselves
45 around without adequate, specialist or contextualised leadership support (Murphy and
46 Bleiberg, 2018:Backstrom, 2019).
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52 Building capacity throughout the system to support underperforming schools is highlighted in
53 the selected evidence as being fundamentally important. The evidence suggests that sustained
54 improvement requires specific expertise and additional resources, co-ordinated by the leader,
55 at the point of need. Most underperforming schools are in receipt of support not in control of
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3 it. In other words, they get what they are given, and this is not necessarily what they need or
4 want. Murphy and Bleiberg, 2018).

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7 Guidance on supporting 'schools causing concern' features heavily in England where the
8 term is still used widely and guidance is still specifically available (DFE, 2018;2019;2020).
9 In Wales, guidance is also available about the identification and intervention processes
10 required of those leading underperforming schools (Education Achievement Service, 2019).
11 Estyn 2015, Estyn, 2017 and Joint Education Service, 2020). These reports lay out the
12 statutory responsibilities of different agencies to assist with improvement and offer insights
13 into the way leaders are expected to support underperforming schools.
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20 Such guidance, however, pays relatively little attention to the quality of the support on offer
21 to schools or the extent to which the different agencies involved have a common approach or
22 a shared view about what exactly needs to happen. Without a common, shared, joined up
23 approach, it is possible that under-performing schools could receive conflicting views from
24 different agencies simply adding more layers of confusion for school leaders.
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29 Payer et al (2014) point towards the importance of districts being ready to support
30 underperforming schools. They highlight the concept of 'school readiness' as a critical part of
31 improvement underlining that the system needs leadership capacity and the collective
32 capability to support schools in their turnaround journey.
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37 Rhum and Redding (2014) reinforce the importance of state-wide engagement and support in
38 the improvement process, arguing that any school failure is actually a system failure. Payer
39 et al (2014) similarly highlight the importance of district wide leadership support for schools
40 that are underperforming and note that while most of the literature in the USA focuses on the
41 improvement of inner-city schools, the situation in small, rural schools can be equally
42 challenging.
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48 Tao and Lin (2020) focus on the potential and possibility of school-to-school networks as a
49 basis for capacity building and supporting schools in difficulty. Similarly, Chapman and
50 Muijs (2013) highlight the benefits of a federated approach to schooling that builds
51 improvement capacity within and across schools.
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55 Reding and Nguyen (2020) offer a meta-analysis of the evidence base concerning the
56 relationship between turnaround strategies and student outcomes. They conclude that the
57 leadership that improves underperforming schools focuses on capacity building strategies that
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3 create professional capital within the school (i.e. teaching proficiency, teaching ability and
4 teaching capability). They argue that creating more professional capital within the school is
5 more likely to produce improvements in student outcomes than focusing valuable leadership
6 attention on changing structures or processes within the school.
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10 **Theme 4 Leading Collaboration**

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13 The evidence from this review suggests that multi-agency intervention to support under-
14 performing schools can prove to be useful but only if this is underpinned by a shared model
15 of change and absolute clarity around the responsibilities of each party. Such collaborative
16 approaches have been used successfully to improve the outcomes of learners facing
17 challenges that are socially complex and multi-faceted (Author and Allen, 2011).
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23 In the fields of medicine and social work, multi-agency, collaborative working is well
24 developed. Collective problem solving, mutually supported intervention and collaborative
25 action is now commonplace in other disciplines (Butt et al, 2019; Humphreys, et al, 2018;
26 Stevens et al 2021)
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30 Makgato and Mudzanani (2018) emphasise the importance of leaders investing in
31 collaboration and collaborative practices as a central part of school turnaround. They point to
32 the importance of authentic collaboration, built on trust as an important catalyst for sustained
33 change and improvement. The evidence about multi-agency working in other fields highlights
34 that it needs to be more than just mutual co-operation if it is to work effectively. Evidence
35 shows that for multi-agency work to be most effective, in the support of under-performing
36 schools, it must go beyond representation at meetings, forms of loose co-operation or simply
37 information sharing.
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45 The evidence from this review suggests that the boundaries of multi-agency expertise need to
46 overlap carefully and to be carefully constructively if this support is to add any real value to
47 improving underperforming schools. To be most effective, multi-agency support must be
48 more than a just a committee of representatives from different agencies. It has to offer
49 carefully targeted, collaborative intervention and support that combines expertise effectively,
50 clearly, and productively (Stevens et al 2021).
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55 Chapman and Muijs (2013) note that schools collaborating with other schools has proven to
56 be an effective strategy for improving under-performing schools. They note that if sufficient
57 resource and expertise is offered through such collaboration, the potential for improvement
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3 can be significant. In the case of an underperforming school, therefore, the choice of a partner
4 school or schools is key to ensure that the advice and support given is appropriate to the
5 growth state of the school and the **type of community it serves.**
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9 Evidence from this review reinforces that underperforming schools can improve quickly with
10 the right leadership and the right support but if improvement is to be sustained, both the
11 leadership and support mechanisms need to be in place, long term. Peurach and Neumerski
12 (2015) note the importance of a functional system around the school and the need for
13 ‘turnaround partners’ who can actively support the turnaround efforts of school leaders in
14 reliable and practical ways, in the long term.
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23 **Theme 5 Leading Community**

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25 Hitt and Meyers (2018) note that in the last ten years interest has shifted from turning around
26 schools to sustaining school improvement. In their work, they highlight the importance of
27 community engagement in securing lasting, positive change. They point to the importance of
28 school leaders engaging with the external community and seeing them as part of the solution
29 not part of the problem.
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34 Tao and Lin (2020) underscore the way in which community networking between schools
35 can build powerful a community of improvement to support school leaders. Similarly,
36 Chapman and Muijs (2013) highlight the importance of links between schools, in the form of
37 federations, and the links across schools to their wider communities as being a critical
38 component of securing successful school turnaround.
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43 **On balance, the school improvement evidence confirms that community engagement is**
44 **pivotal in school turnaround and that parents/carers as part of that community can**
45 **collectively and significantly lift learner aspirations and academic performance** (Potter,
46 Reynolds and Chapman, 2020). The evidence also reinforces how parents and community
47 remain critical contributors to better school performance, **and how school leaders engaging**
48 **positively with their local community can secure significant gains in performance**
49 (Massachusetts Department, 2016).
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Theme 6 Leading for Consistency

This review of evidence suggests that underperforming schools need leadership that offers stability not leadership that is transitory. Meyers (2020) highlight how leaders of underperforming schools need to have a consistent approach to school turnaround that is multi-directional and builds upon the interdependencies in the system. Furthermore, Meyers (2020) highlights the importance of leadership, particularly, at district or local authority level, in providing this consistency of approach that supports the school in its turnaround efforts.

Meyers and Sadler (2018) similarly point to the importance of clarity and consistency of leadership, at the district or local authority level, in securing better outcomes for underperforming schools. Meyers and Hill (2017) note the importance of the greater involvement of all agencies in contributing to a consistent and collective approach to improving underperforming schools in the long term.

Van Gronigen and Meyers (2021) explore the limitations of short-term approaches to school improvement planning, by the school leader, advocating the need for leadership approaches that build confidence and reflect consistency. Their results show a slightly positive yet statistically insignificant association between short-term school improvement planning and student achievement. Willis (2010) reflects on how far any labelling of underperforming schools is any basis for improvement given the negative connotations that can accompany such terminology (e.g. schools in special measures). Willis (2010) also highlights how inconsistencies in the school improvement approaches aimed at helping schools can often prove to be counter-productive.

Theme 7 Leading for Continuity and Sustainability

Meyers (2020) emphasises the importance of school leaders investing in planning for ongoing change and the need for them to think beyond the initial turnaround phase to the sustainability phase. Meyers (2020) notes that most turnaround successes tend to be very short lived simply because little thought is given by school leaders to continuity and maintaining the improvement. Meyers and Smylie (2017) note that drastic disruption by school leaders, in the initial phases of recovery, does not necessarily equal improvement, long term. They propose that too many leaders in schools in difficulty take radical and dramatic

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3 approaches to securing better outcomes, in the short term, that fail to serve them well over the
4 longer term.
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7 Ylimarki et al (2014) highlight the importance of system-wide leadership support for schools
8 to help them go beyond the turnaround stages. They highlight the importance of school
9 leaders investing in the necessary planning, resource allocation and personnel changes needed
10 for sustainable school improvement from outset. Zavadsky (2012 & 2013) emphasise the
11 importance of district leadership involvement in turnaround and the responsibilities that
12 reside with those leading at the district level. It is proposed, therefore, that districts or local
13 authorities have a central role to play in supporting school leaders in securing and scaling up
14 turnaround processes.
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17 To conclude, Meyers and Hill (2017) note that there two essential objectives in relation to
18 leading school turnaround. Firstly, school leaders need to help their organisation to set a new
19 direction and secondly, school leaders need ensure that others move consistently in that
20 direction, in the short, medium, and long term. The implications of the findings from this
21 review of selected evidence for policy, research, and practice will be discussed next.
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23 24 25 **Implications for Policy** 26

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28 The implications for policy from this selected literature are far reaching and clear. Firstly, the
29 evidence points towards the need for specific, and bespoke investment in the skills of
30 'turnaround' school leadership as being centrally important. This review has reinforced,
31 through the seven themes, that leadership is the critical component in the improvement of any
32 underperforming school, so investment in training for this specific leadership role would
33 seem to be imperative and critically important.
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36 Secondly, the evidence underlines how leaders in underperforming schools need an explicit,
37 well understood, and consistent theory of action (or model of change) that guides their
38 actions and informs the interventions they introduce. At a policy level, there needs to be
39 absolute clarity, along with specificity, about the model of change that leaders will deploy
40 and cast-iron guarantees of system support and engagement to support this approach, in the
41 short, medium, and long term. The responsibility for improving under-performing schools is
42 a system wide responsibility, as noted earlier.
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45 Thirdly, the evidence reveals that a balance of support and challenge for school leaders is
46 required if underperforming schools are to move forward. So at a policy level, over-challenge
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3 and undue pressure without appropriate, relevant, and timely support is likely to be counter-
4 productive and damaging to the school, as well as the school leader. One alternative is to
5 build capacity throughout the system to support underperforming schools which will require
6 co-ordinated expertise and targeted resources aimed at supporting schools in difficulty.
7 Collaboration among agencies has been shown to be essential to help under-performing
8 schools move forward. Collective support can prove useful but only if this co-ordinated
9 effectively so the collective expertise available is appropriately shared and deployed.
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16 Fourthly, understanding the causes of school underperformance and intervening,
17 appropriately, at an early stage in school decline, is far preferable than waiting for the school
18 to reach its lowest point before any external intervention or action occurs. At a policy level,
19 therefore, early warning systems need to be in place and appropriate resourcing needs to be
20 deployed quickly at the early signs of school decline.
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25 Underperforming schools do reverse their fortunes but only with the right support. If
26 improvement is to be maintained, effective support mechanisms need to be in place for
27 school leaders over the long term. The implication for policy is the need to ensure that school
28 leaders are appropriately supported by the system throughout the process of turnaround to
29 ensure that schools do not revert to normative practices once essential support is withdrawn.
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34 Finally, poverty remains an important factor in the lives and life chances young people.
35 School leaders working within high poverty contexts, therefore, have higher degrees of
36 challenge and extra hurdles to overcome. The effects of poverty, therefore, must be fully
37 acknowledged by those working at the policy level and acted upon, through dedicated
38 resourcing, support, and authentic multi-agency working that brings collective expertise and
39 joint solutions (Trujillo and Renee, 2012)
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45 **Implications for Research**

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47 The implications for research from this review concern the nature, scope, and quality of the
48 leadership research base in relation to leading the improvement of underperforming schools.
49 It is suggested that more longitudinal research studies are needed that more accurately
50 capture exactly how school leaders deploy and enact the processes of improvement in an
51 under-performing school, over time. Also, this review includes empirical work, largely
52 undertaken in the West, that capture a particular moment on the school leader's improvement
53 journey. Consequently, more detailed studies are needed that capture and describe the
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3 turnaround process in detail, as well as more studies about leading underperforming schools
4 from countries that are currently under-represented in the international evidence base.
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7 One acknowledged limitation of this review is that it draws only on work that is presented in
8 English. There are undoubtedly other studies in other languages that are not represented here
9 but could add significantly to the knowledge base on leading improvement in
10 underperforming schools. More comparative studies are therefore required to generate more
11 fine-grained evidence about the improvement of underperforming schools across very
12 different contexts.
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18 In addition, contemporary evidence about the external support mechanisms that prove to be
19 most effective in supporting school leaders in the improvement of their schools would be
20 really beneficial. Future studies that focused on this aspect could make a valuable
21 contribution to the leadership knowledge base. In summary, larger, longitudinal, multi-
22 method, comparative studies would contribute significantly to the nature, quality and
23 reliability of the empirical evidence concerning the impact of school leadership on
24 underperforming schools.
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33 **Implications for Leadership Practice**

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35 This review has found that leadership remains a key contributor to the improvement of
36 underperforming schools. It has reinforced how school leaders can, with the right support,
37 turnaround schools in the most challenging of circumstances. The review has emphasised that
38 for those leading underperforming schools, it is imperative to connect with colleagues in
39 other schools for advice, insights, and expertise. Professional support, advice and expertise
40 from colleagues in other schools has been shown to be a valuable resource for those leading
41 the improvement process suggesting that networks and networking offer a potentially
42 powerful lever for school leaders,
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50 This review has reinforced that is important for school leaders to recognise that the school is
51 part of a system and therefore any underperformance is not just the responsibility of the
52 school. The evidence from this review suggests that multi-agency support in the shape of
53 effective collective, competent, and co-ordinated action can help school leaders significantly
54 in the pursuit of improvement and its realisation. The evidence also underlines that building a
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3 positive climate of trust within the school, and the wider community, is an important, first
4 essential step for leaders faced with significant improvement challenges.

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7 This review reinforces that for those leading underperforming schools, there is no blueprint or
8 ring-binder, each school is different, as each school, each context, each community is
9 different. Every underperforming school improves in its own way at its own pace. Exerting
10 more and more external pressure on school leaders to improve therefore will ultimately prove
11 to be counterproductive for them and their school. The body of evidence in this review
12 suggests that school leaders need to steadily build confidence in the possibility of recovery,
13 they need to bring people with them, they need to address the most urgent issues facing the
14 school openly and honestly.

21 Coda

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23 In summary, this review highlights that under-performing schools improve when there is
24 clear, focused, and capable leadership, at all levels. They improve when there is a leadership
25 focus on pedagogy and a consensus among staff to work together to create a new culture that
26 propels positive change. Under-performing schools tend to improve when there is clear,
27 consistent, and compassionate leadership not just for the turnaround phase but for the long
28 term.

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31 The contemporary evidence highlights that underperforming schools do not improve through
32 fear, bullying, over reporting or punitive judgments. The balance of pressure and support is
33 an imperative skill for those leading all schools but especially those that are underperforming.
34 It is also, without question, a fundamental responsibility for the wider system to ensure that
35 the balance between pressure and support, on school staff and their leaders, remains
36 proportionate.

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39 Covid 19 shone a spotlight on educational inequity (Author and Author, 2020). It has been a
40 stark reminder that the challenges of growing up in a poor household are acute and damaging,
41 both socially and educationally. Schools that serve populations of children who come from
42 poor or disadvantaged urban, coastal or rural settings generally face the worst effects of
43 poverty on educational attainment.

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46 This review has underlined how school leadership is *the* key resource, for improving schools
47 in areas of disadvantage. It has shown that engaging parents and the wider community is
48 important for the school leaders and that this core work can have very positive outcomes on
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3 learners' achievement, well-being, and self-esteem. This review has also underlined how
4 parents and community members can support students' learning, if the school leader has the
5 will, skill and persistence to engage them.
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9 There is a great deal of evidence, in this review, that highlights how school leadership is key
10 to creating the conditions where young people can achieve their potential, irrespective of
11 background, context or setting. The evidence in the last decade pinpoints how successful
12 leaders in underperforming schools actively build collaboration, consensus, and community.
13 The evidence reinforces how such school leaders model compassionate but constructive
14 leadership, in the pursuit of transforming children's lives.
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20 The selected literature, in this review, underlines the critical role of school leadership in the
21 improvement of any failing or underperforming school, whether in an area of deprivation or
22 not. It consolidates that school leadership remains the most important contributory factor for
23 successful school turnaround.
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30 **Acknowledgement**

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33 This literature review was funded by the Welsh Government.
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Appendix 1

Keywords	Sources	Identification	After Screening	Eligibility and inclusion
School AND <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • failure • trouble • challenging, difficulties • under-performing 	EBSCOHOST	375	36	5

• low performing				
School causing concern	EBSCOHOST & Google Scholar	10	7	1
School Turnaround	EBSCOHOST Google Scholar & WoS	402	92	11
Special measures	EBSCOHOST	25	13	2
Total		812	148	19