*For School Turnaround in Centralized Systems of Education:*
*A Case Study of Bahrain Public Schools*

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**Abstract**
The past decades have witnessed a remarkably consistent effort by educational policy makers and the Ministry of Education of Bahrain to reform schools by holding them more publicly accountable for enhancing student performance and overall school improvement. With the establishment of the Education & Training Quality Authority (BQA) in 2008, public schools went under intensive inspection reviews conducted by the BQA. Public schools are currently under their fourth cycle of school reviews (with each cycle averaging 4 years). Within the period of the school review cycles, were underperforming schools able to improve to good or better? If so, what are the best practices and common trends of these turnaround schools? The study reported in this paper considers this issue within a highly centralized education system, using the example of Bahrain. This study utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach to gain a better understanding of how the district, school leadership and staff managed to successfully turn schools around within a centralized system of education.


Keywords: School Turnaround, School Improvement, Bahrain, Centralized Education System

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**Introduction**

Recent international literature offers convincing evidence that enhanced school autonomy, accountability and school led improvement strategies can be effective, especially when promoting equity across schools (Deppeler & Ainscow, 2016; Ehren & Perryman, 2018). This approach calls for educational practitioners to be given a certain level of autonomy in order to assess their own contexts and enact school led improvement plans, however for school leaders in more centralized systems of education this can be difficult to achieve (Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020).

School principals' role as "change agents" or "turnaround leaders" has gained importance over the years, playing a central role and link between government-driven reforms and school internal innovation (Brauckmann & Schwarz, 2014). However, school leaders do not operate in isolation and contextual factors and educational governance structures have to be considered as well. In a school system characterized as centralized, the form of a model of school change undertakes top-down directives, where the Ministry or state leads and the practitioners implement, while the majority of stakeholders are often passive recipients of schooling for as Constantinou & Ainscow (2020, p. 5) state *decisions to do with the curriculum, books, student registration or, even, the selection, recruitment, promotion, transfers and training of staff, are all prescribed and managed centrally."*

Even within centralized systems of education, one of the most prominent global policy trends is the devolution of powers to site level, where responsibilities have been shifted from local or national bureaucracies to school principals (Bush, 2018). With this responsibility comes an increase in leadership scope as principals have to exercise administrative functions such as financial management and staffing issues which were previously undertaken centrally. Furthermore, top-down and more centralized forms of accountability do not factor in the position of schools that operate within networks and the collaboration between schools towards a common goal, often discounting the fact that collaboration is built on lateral non-hierarchical relationships and structures (Ehren & Perryman, 2018).

However, it is important to note that school structures should not be simply conceptualized as either 'centralized' or 'decentralized' because school organizational structures often combine elements of both modes of governance (Boyd & Crowson, 2002). For even within a school system perceived and often characterized as centralist, examples can be found where school leaders achieve agency and take action to promote school transformation and turnaround. School-based action research, with an emphasis on inquiry, collaboration and networks can increase a school's capacity to improve despite the barriers created by centralized policy making (Burns & Köster, 2016). This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach to gain a better understanding of how a school leader was able to improve their school from within a centralized system of education in Bahrain public schools.

**School Improvement & Turnaround in the Arab Region**

Across the Arab region efforts towards improving schools have been heightened by unsatisfactory student standard achievements and the collective realization that schools have been failing to reach their most important goal – that of student learning (Al-Barwani, 2011). Schools across the Middle East face key challenges that can be summarized by three main points according to the UNDP (2016): an increase in educational disparity between countries; a persistent decline in the quality of education (despite a constant increase in per capita

education expenditure) and finally a mismatch and gap between labor market needs and educational outputs.

School turnaround in the Arab region is a relative concept because the improvement and development of schools across the region is still an ongoing issue. Furthermore, in the majority of Arab states and more specifically countries of the GCC, planning and decisions related to the school curriculum, syllabus, teacher recruitment, training and examinations are highly centralized in ministries of education. The hierarchies established in a centralized system ultimately give little power or accountability to teachers or school communities (Chapman & Miric, 2009). This centralization makes school turnaround a difficult notion to achieve on a school level, and instead is mainly linked to overall systemic education reform and school improvement initiatives across the districts or governorates.

Educational reform in Arab countries, as mentioned previously, is seen as the sole responsibility of governments and ministries of education and not of educators at the school level (Akkary & Rizk, 2014). Hence, planning for education reform and ultimately school turnaround and improvement is left to government officials, politicians and educational consultants. As such educators and school leaders simply act as executors of top-down educational reform initiatives without displaying a real sense of accountability in the school improvement process (El-Amine, 2005). As educational reform and school turnaround policies are mainly rooted on perspectives taken from Western literature and practice, educators across the Arab region question their applicability in their local contexts because these reforms disregard many local values and social perspectives in education (Oplatka & Arar, 2017). Furthermore, numerous scholars argue that the majority of the current reform initiatives across the Arab region are driven by political agendas that are not linked with the priorities and needs of educational practitioners and school cultural contexts (Abi-Mershed, 2010; Akkary, 2014; Mazawi, 2009).

Over the past thirty years, countries across the Arab region have adopted neoliberal economic policies to various degrees that included privatizing state owned industries, opening up to foreign investment flows, relaxing trade barriers and reforming tax regimes (Hanieh, 2015; Morgan, 2017). According to Bogaert (2013, p. 215) *"this shift away from state-developmentalism to neoliberal governance has undermined the quality of public schools, eroded the teaching profession, and contributed to increases in social inequities."* Additionally, the shift to market oriented economic policies is linked to the emergence of an educational market place in the Arab region, the spread of privatization of education and the decrease of public expenditure on education (Hartmann, 2013; Sobhy, 2012). Class and social inequalities are intensified when families purchase education in the form of private schools and tutoring, where parents across the Arab region believe that private schools deliver an enhanced learning environment and instruction as opposed to public schools (Buckner & Hodges, 2016; Morgan, 2017). As such socio-economic and geographic inequalities are exacerbated across the Arab region when students from disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated in low-quality public schools while more well off students attend private schools (Jorman & Murray, 2010).

**Bahrain Public Schools Context**

Public schools in Bahrain are centralized and free of charge for all Bahraini citizens with educational facilities and services financed by the Government of Bahrain. The public school education system comprises nine years of basic instruction, split into primary and

intermediate education, followed by three years of secondary education on either a general or vocational track (Oxford Business Group, 2020). Public schools across the Middle East and the Arab Region are segregated by gender due to cultural and religious factors (Robinson et al., 2021), however higher education institutions and private schools are usually coeducational.

There has been a current drive towards private school enrollment to pursue an international curriculum and a higher quality education. Private school enrollment rates have increased to 32% of total students in 2018 compared to 28% in 2012 (GFH, 2020). The private education sector has also been growing to meet the increasing demand from expatriate students who are not eligible to attend local public schools which ultimately creates socioeconomic differences in terms of access to education and shared parental concern over the affordability of schooling (Ridge et al., 2015). In regards to student demographic and socio-economic status, 26% percent of the total population fall below the poverty line according to the Bahrain Expenditure and Income Survey (Central Information Organization, 2018). However, it is important to note that countries measure poverty in different ways internationally, and in terms of Bahrain the poverty line falls below any household with an income less than half of the national average income, which amounts to 500 BHD *(approximately £1000)* per month/per household (Abdelbaki, 2011). Furthermore, Bahrain stands out as the only Gulf country that provides free public education to all nationals and non-nationals without any restrictions, with expats making 50% of public school students (UNESCO, 2019) this creates a unique dynamic of student diversity in public schools across the Arab Region.

**Overview of Case Study School A**

School A is a primary boys school that includes grades one through five. This primary school was established in 1996, and caters to the majority of primary male students in its vicinity. It is a large school, with a large campus catering to over 1000 students. The school is located in one of the most densely populated cities in the Southern Governorate, with a population of roughly 38,000 (Ministry of Information Affairs, 2020). The city is one of two large housing projects developed in Bahrain to meet the increasing demand for housing, as a welfare state, by providing small houses and apartment units to national citizens of low income (Remali et al., 2016).

The school's enrollment in the 2019/2020 school year was 1120 students. There are 93 staff members, a principal, and two fulltime assistant principals. Thirty percent of its student qualify for free school meals. Its ethnic demographics are: 72% Arab (Gulf Region), 22% Middle-Eastern (Yemeni 11%, Syrian 5%, Egyptian 4%, Jordanian 2%), and 6% South-Asian.

**The Principal**

Before being appointed as the current principal of School A, principal A had been serving as a principal for another boys primary school with a track record for improving that school (according to inspection reports) from Satisfactory (3) to Good (2). As such, she was assigned to School A since there was an upcoming follow up inspection to be held the following year by the BQA after the school had received its rating as Inadequate (4) in 2015.

Principal A is very energetic and active, several who work with her state that she hardly ever sits down. She makes it a point to be visible and available to parents and students during drop

off and pick up, and highly emphasizes the importance of instructional leadership. Because there are two fulltime assistant principals assigned to School A, most of the administrative matters such as overseeing facilities, student discipline and matters related to technology management are assigned to the assistant principals, thus freeing Principal A to fulfill the role of an instructional leader.

## Methods

The collected data was based on an original qualitative empirical research study undertaken though the examination of a successful 'turnaround' case study school as indicated by inspection reports. The school was selected based on its inspection report rankings, focusing on schools that have rapidly improved (two ratings higher) between the previous school review cycles from either 'Inadequate' or 'Satisfactory' to 'Good' or 'Outstanding.' A multi-perspective study methodology was followed where data were gathered from a wide range of school stakeholders, such as ministry officials, inspectors, the school leader and teachers employing a common, semi-structured interview protocol for the case study school. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the case study school:

| Data | School A |
|---|---|
| **School Stage** | Primary |
| **Gender** | Boys |
| **Governorate** | Southern |
| **Number of Students** | 1162 |
| **Previous Inspection Ranking** | 4 |
| **Latest Inspection Ranking** | 2 |

Table 1 Characteristics of Case Study School

## Main Findings

Even though schools in Bahrain operate in a more restrictive centralized system, without the ability or autonomy to enact various school improvement initiatives or policies at a local school level, examples of school leadership turning schools around prove that leaders do leave an impact. In regards to this study's case school, the biggest factors that have led to the school's improvement are the influence of a newly appointed 'turnaround leader' (Liu, 2020), addressing the needs of diverse students (Harris, 2009) and an overall sense of resilience and agency (Wosnitza & Peixoto, 2018).

## Turnaround Leadership

For over almost four decades, school effectiveness literature has recognized the vital role of the school principal and leader in managing the school, facilitating effective teaching practices and striving to attain satisfactory outcomes for students (Chapman et al., 2016; David et al., 2000; Edmonds, 1979). Research suggests that leadership is the second most important school-based factor for student achievement after teacher quality (Leithwood, Patten, et al., 2010). Turnaround leadership is related to the kind of school leadership required for turning around and improving a consistently low-performing school (Fullan,

2005). Even though school principals and leaders might not directly impact student achievement, they do set the vision and goals for the school, develop professional learning communities, engage stakeholders and make important organizational decisions that affect student's achievement through a "ripple effect" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

In regards to School A it was noted by several accounts, including inspection reports, that since 2008 there has been instability in school leadership and staff, especially that of the school's principal. A new principal in 2015 was appointed after the school received a rating of Inadequate (4), this was a principal with a previous track record in turning around another poorly performing school and was appointed in order to attempt to improve the school:

I had experience with school turnaround in the school I was working for previously and on that account I was requested by the Ministry of Education to be transferred to my current school and improve it for the upcoming inspection visit (School Principal, October 20, 2022). Furthermore, not only did the principal had the necessary experience in school turnaround, but she also made herself visible and was an avid instructional leader. Many studies have captured the importance of instructional leadership, however in general work on this topic indicates that the closer leaders are to teaching and learning processes, the more likely they are to make a difference in student learning (Robinson et al., 2007). Not only did school staff comment on how visible and involved the new school principal was in teaching and learning processes but this was also reflected on by a BQA Inspection Agency official:

> *The principal was characterized by understanding the strengths and areas for improvement within her school. Why? Because she went into the classrooms, she observed, she participated in some aspects, she gave feedback and that was a very positive practice. We don't want the principal to be sitting in her office all day long.*
> (BQA Inspection Agency Official Interview, August 13, 2022)

Underperforming and turnaround schools need to be staffed with educators and leaders who are inclined and able to make essential changes, and at times leaders must be reassigned for a successful reform to occur (Liu, 2020). Leadership change has constantly been a topic of much discussion and a key factor in turnaround literature; the entire school staff in an underperforming school may not need to be replaced but often it is essential that the school leader does (Hassel & Hassel, 2009). As such pressure on school principals and leaders have never been more intense, with some school systems requiring that school principals need to rapidly build school capacity and improve student achievement outcomes to maintain employment (Meyers & Hambrick Hitt, 2017).

Ultimately, there is no denying the importance of high-quality leaders to the success of any school, and it is possible that chronically low-performing schools need those types of leaders even more (Meyers & Hambrick Hitt, 2017). The noteworthy work by Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010) examined the successful impact of leaders in low-performing schools, looking into what turnaround leaders did to achieve this and how they did it. Furthermore, Duke (2015) studied the challenges school leaders faced in preventing decline, his work led to producing a guide for leaders to use during the school turnaround process.

**Student Diversity**

Bahrain stands out as the only Arabian Gulf country that provides free public education to all nationals and non-nationals without any restrictions, with expats making 50% of public

school students (UNESCO, 2019) this creates a unique dynamic of student diversity in public schools across the Arab Region. Overall, the non-national population across the Gulf States are largely expat workers, given the relatively high labor force participation rates: 80% in Bahrain, 55% in Qatar and an average of 47% in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Mohammed, 2017). Furthermore, research has shown that students from the poorest homes and of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to have worse school results and to drop out of school more frequently than students that come from better off families (Sirin, 2005). In the case of the majority of Bahrain public schools, non-national students and those of diverse backgrounds tend to be of lower socio-economic statuses with the majority being eligible for free school meals.

What was unique about this case study school is that despite the large number of students and large percentage of diverse students with low socioeconomic statuses, the overall school climate remained unaffected. As such, an investigation of how a school has managed to reduce the impact that student background factors have on academic achievement and learning outcomes can be a useful measure of overall school effectiveness (Kyriakides et al., 2019). The school leadership made an active effort to build the organizational capacity of the school in ways that were culturally appropriate:

> *Our school has a large percentage students from different cultural backgrounds and we tried to ensure that they received the appropriate support which was a program specifically for Arabic as a second language learners which was called "I love Arabic". Even though the Ministry does not provide Arabic as a Second Language Teachers, staff members within the Arabic Department were dedicated to work with students who needed further support. Students would receive extra support during breaks, free periods or extra curriculars to focus on learning Arabic as a second language.*
>
> (School Improvement Team Focus Group, November 23, 2022)

However, the successful work of highly dedicated educators cannot alter the fact that students of diverse backgrounds in Bahrain Public schools are disadvantaged. Firstly, because the majority of students come from lower socio-economic statuses and speak Arabic as a second language. Secondly, because they often attend schools in deprived districts with large housing projects and fewer resources that better off schools in neighboring districts. Furthermore, the student demographic in schools keep changing year after year depending on intake for as highlighted by one Ministry of Education official:

> *Schools are a very complex environment. Sometimes the student demographic in a school can change entirely year by year. One year you have the majority of students who are local, Arabic speakers and then the next year you can have up to 80% non-Arabic speakers who come from other nationalities. This shift can completely take the school leadership off focus since they will be dealing with the new student demographic.*
>
> (Ministry of Education Official Interview, August 15, 2022)

Studies focusing on ethnic inequality across various school settings have outlined that a broader provision for linguistic and socio-cultural diversity is necessary (Ainscow, 2016; Harris, 2009). A transformation of Bahrain Public Schools toward increased inclusiveness demands comprehensive strategies of whole school reform to tackle ethnic inequalities. Such

strategies must affect not only schools at a local level, but also their wider institutional settings on a macro level.

**Agency & Resilience**

According to (Wosnitza & Peixoto, 2018, p. 335), *"resilience should not be understood as something someone has or does not have but as a toolbox an individual brings to a specific situation, a box of tools and resources that helps a person to solve a problem."* It was made clear through case study observations and interviews with school staff that the school leadership's unwavering sense of resilience and agency was a key factor, or 'tool', to the school's turnaround. As mentioned earlier, because the schools operated within a centralized system, school leaders did not have the autonomy or power to enact change directly in many areas required for overall school improvement such as human resources, facilities and curriculum changes. As such, it was up to the school leadership to pursue those changes no matter what it took, with whatever resources or tools that was within their reach as demonstrated by this quote from the school's principal:

> *I think that one of the biggest factors that might have made me have a good track record in improving schools is the fact that I was "relentless and resilient" to the point where Ministry officials had a nickname for me "حنانة" (which is a local dialect term for the word 'nagger'). Where there was a matter of shortage of staff or resources needed I would actively try to seek that out from the central district and even when the Minister of Education would visit our school I would clearly state our needs and shortages. Whereas other school leaders might not actively speak up or seek out the shortages and resources the school might need.*
>
> <div align="right">(School Principal, October 20, 2022)</div>

Steiner, Hassel, Hassel et al. (2008) indicated four underlying competencies of successful turnaround principals which include a motivation to achieve the end results, strong influence on others, problem solving and high confidence in leadership. However, what is interesting about leaders within the current context is that not only did they need to have the ability to problem solve within their 'toolbox' of skills but they needed the ability to think 'outside of the box', maneuver bureaucratic hurdles, lead with limited resources and the lack of autonomy of working within a centralized system of education. Leadership is stressful, even more so for principals tasked with the burden of turning around a perceived failing school according to inspection reports. Flintham (2008) outlines the need for school leaders to have 'high levels of resilience'. Definitions of resilience include references to persisting in the face of adversity, staying positive, having inner resourcefulness and showing the ability to bounce back and recover quickly from setbacks (Steward, 2014). These traits were demonstrated and observed not only by the feedback received from research participants within the case study school but also outlined in inspection reports:

> *During the first two weeks of her appointment, she did not lock herself up in the office or hold endless meetings. She was actually out and about the entire school. Visiting classrooms and holding informal discussions with staff across the campus related to school improvement.*
>
> <div align="right">(School Staff Member, November 24, 2022)</div>

> *The school principal and overall leadership were able to display a 'cultural change' across the school. Especially when it came to organizational and administrative*

*matters of school improvement, enhancing professional learning communities and ensuring the overall professional development of teachers while linking its effect in classrooms and overall student achievement.*

<div align="right">

*(BQA, 2019)*

</div>

The concept of agency, is crucial in exploring roles and identities in relation to school change and improvement. According to Biesta (2015, p. 626) *"agency is not something that people can have but is something that people do. More specifically, agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves."* In other words, it is important to acknowledge the ecological conditions, context and circumstances to fully understand the phenomenon of agency and how agency can be achieved in educational settings (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Capacity building for overall school improvement must therefore consider the ecological relationships between educators and their organizational environment (Priestley et al., 2015). In hierarchy governance systems which are more often based on authority as opposed to trust and accountability, this level of agency can be hardly achieved for as Ehren and Bachmann (2020) conclude *"when an accountability exercise is riddled with deception, in transparent decision-making, blame games, hidden agendas or misuse of power on the side of the accountability agent, trust in the accountability system is clearly broken."* Furthermore, research has highlighted that hierarchal control reduces teachers and school leaders' flexibility to adapt their work to local context and needs; where ultimately they are more motivated to hold on to their positions as opposed to their commitment to their work (Freidson, 2001).

**Conclusion**

This study has briefly explored how a case study school was able enact school improvement strategies and turnaround within a centralized education system. Central to this discussion was the ability of the school leadership to enact agency despite the restrictions set upon them, tackle student diversity and demonstrate attributes of 'turnaround leadership.'

When considering the process of school improvement and turnaround in more hierarchical, centralized systems of education, it is important to understand how trust, accountability and capacity feature in the governance of such education systems (Ehren & Baxter, 2020). Hierarchical centralized systems of education, such as that of where this study's case study school presides in, are those which are closely managed and monitored from the center with strong top-down control of all aspects of the educational system (Levy, 2018). Within such a state model of centralized accountability and control, head teachers, teachers and members of the education community become significantly reliant on central authority for decisions and initiatives concerning their work and teaching role with little room for accountability and agency (Fullan, 2016). As Ehren & Baxter (2020, p. 37) further elaborate *"holding teachers accountable for standards without providing them with resources to implement these standards is also a guarantee for trust-relations to break down."*

When educators and professionals can fully participate in the development and execution of formal accountability measures, have choices and discretion of their own initiatives, and the hierarchical relations are experienced as meaningful relationships based on trust, only then can a system improve even if operating under a more centralized system of education.

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