



# TURNING AROUND ‘STUCK’ SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND: EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN EXTREMELY CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES

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## Abstract

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This paper presents a two-year qualitative multi-site case study in six English state-funded schools (three primary and three secondary). These schools were identified by Ofsted as ‘stuck’ after failing their inspections for more than a decade but managed to turnaround their overall inspection effectiveness, despite the wider contextual challenges. Drawing from an analysis of 50 documents, 22 interviews and focus groups with school leaders, we detail the schools’ trajectories and leadership practices that allowed leaders to improve schools’ overall effectiveness. Staff from ‘un-stuck’ schools described a combination of 1) distributed leadership, 2) moral purpose, 3) stabilising teams, 4) external support, 5) building trust, 6) positive relationships with parents and the community, 7) vision of high expectations, 8) systematic approach to improve behaviour, and 9) strong internal governance and accountability that allowed their significant improvement. These characteristics contribute to our understanding of effective turnaround leadership of schools working in disadvantaged contexts.

**Keywords:** Stuck schools; failing schools; school effectiveness; disadvantaged schools; turnaround leadership; turnaround schools.

## Resumen extendido

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Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso de dos años, cualitativo y multi-sitio en seis escuelas financiadas por el estado inglés (tres escuelas primarias y tres secundarias). Estas escuelas fueron identificadas por la Oficina de Estándares de Educación, Servicios y Habilidades de los Niños (Ofsted, en inglés) como “estancadas” por reprobación sus inspecciones por más de una década, antes de hacer un cambio radical a la eficiencia general de su inspección. Luego de realizar 50 análisis documentales, 22 entrevistas y grupos focales con líderes educativos, detallamos para cada una de las escuelas “des-estancadas” su tipo y ubicación; su trayectoria de mejora de inspección, y las características del liderazgo y acciones de mejora que, de acuerdo con sus líderes, ayudaron al cambio de la escuela a pesar de los desafiantes contextos en los cuales operan. En general, los líderes de las escuelas “des-estancadas” (directores, docentes y otros directivos) describieron nueve aspectos clave que informaron la mejora de su trayectoria de inspección: 1) Propósito moral: el personal era apasionado y con una fuerte vocación para esforzarse por marcar una diferencia, especialmente para los estudiantes más desaventajados; 2) Liderazgo distribuido: Los líderes orquestaron el desarrollo de docentes “de producción local” para dirigir la escuela; 3) Equipos Estabilizadores: el compromiso y estabilidad de los líderes envió un mensaje a las partes interesadas de que estaban dedicados a quedarse y mejorar la escuela; 4) Apoyo externo; los líderes recibieron apoyo emocional, técnico, práctico y profesional de diversos amigos críticos (inspectores de Ofsted, MATs, escuelas locales y socios externos); 5) Construyendo confianza: los líderes construyeron confianza interna (entre sus estudiantes, familias y docentes) y externa (fortaleciendo vínculos con otras escuelas, la comunidad y agencias externas) que mejoró la reputación de la escuela; 6) Relaciones positivas con las familias y la comunidad; ya que las relaciones con las familias y cuidadores eran un desafío permanente, los líderes crearon formas positivas y diversas de comunicación que mejoraron la participación constructiva; 7) Visión de Altas expectativas: los líderes implementaron altas expectativas a través de enseñanza, aprendizaje y currículum consistentes; 8) Enfoque sistemático para la mejora del comportamiento: los líderes enfatizaron la importancia de disciplina clara y compartida y la implementación consistente de políticas de conducta; 9) Fuerte gobernanza y rendición de cuentas internas: los líderes tenían gobernantes sólidos y otros amigos críticos que escudriñaban y proveían retroalimentación para la mejora. En general, las seis escuelas del estudio de caso compartían desafíos similares

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y usaron estrategias análogas para superar el fracaso de la inspección, las que estaban alineadas en términos generales con la literatura respecto de liderazgo de turnaround, resiliente y efectivo en contextos desventajosos. Dar un vuelco radical a una escuela de bajo desempeño crónico demanda no sólo las actitudes, características y perspectivas del personal clave, sino que éstas deben estar combinadas con pasos cruciales que transformen la visión, capacidad y cultura de la escuela. A pesar de que los hallazgos proveen una mirada más optimista de lo que los líderes pueden hacer para mejorar y desafiar la noción de “estancamiento” como una condición fija y que se explica por las carencias de la escuela, un sistema escolar basado en la excepcionalidad del liderazgo para realizar un cambio radical en las escuelas no es sostenible, ya que los liderazgos de turnaround necesitan ser desarrollados dentro del sistema, entre las culturas y estructuras escolares. Debido a que muchos países, como en el caso de Chile, han implementado sistemas de inspección inspirados en el modelo inglés, esperamos que las implicancias de estos hallazgos pueden iluminar la discusión respecto de impactos no deseados de los sistemas de inspección de altas consecuencias, particularmente para las escuelas que trabajan en contextos más desfavorecidos.

Palabras clave: escuelas estancadas; escuelas reprobadas; efectividad escolar; escuelas vulnerables; liderazgo de turnaround; escuelas de turnaround.

## 1. Introduction

English state-funded schools are routinely inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), an independent government agency. After conducting school visits and analysing school data, Ofsted classifies schools' overall performance into four grades: Outstanding (grade 1), Good (grade 2), Requires Improvement (grade 3) and Inadequate (grade 4). These judgements are publicly available through inspection reports. Ofsted intends to positively impact education by holding schools accountable and identifying areas for improvement. However, despite this objective, 580 state-funded schools have continued to fail their inspection between September 2005 to August 2017 and were identified by Ofsted as 'stuck'. Despite Ofsted's policy priority on 'failing' schools, 2 to 3% of schools nationally have been systematically stuck or graded as less than good ('Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement') since 2005, without improving.

Although one of the key factors influencing inspection's effectiveness to bring about improvements is the perceived accountability pressure, Ofsted school inspection is imposing more accountability pressure on schools than any other European country (Hofer et al., 2020). This characteristic has been critiqued for creating a culture of fear, naming and shaming, contributing to teacher recruitment and retention crisis, among other unintended effects (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015), particularly in the most deprived contexts (Wilkins & Antonopoulou, 2020). Recently, the detriment on stakeholders' wellbeing reached a tragic level as Ofsted inspections have been recognised as a contributing factor of a Headteacher's suicide.

Previous studies (Ehren et al., 2023; Munoz-Chereau, Hutchinson et al., 2022) describe how 'stuck' schools faced initial challenges that increased their likelihood of a failing outcome, such as being located in a deprived region with a disadvantaged student population. The initial Ofsted designation as 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' created further challenges to improve as it became more difficult to recruit high quality teachers, schools faced high teacher turn-over and an increasingly more deprived student intake. Inspection grades also create a stigma that makes even more difficult to improve. As described by Hanson (2017), "the outcomes of an Ofsted inspection produce a labelling process, through which the public image and identity of a school become distorted and manipulated, at both the macro and micro levels" (p. 102). However, our qualitative study of 16 'stuck' schools showed how six of these schools managed to improve their inspection outcome over time (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2022). This paper draws on the data from this study to analyse the leadership in these schools and

how school leaders (headteachers, teachers and governors) managed to improve their Ofsted grade. We first present our literature review of effective and resilient leadership in disadvantaged contexts before we explain our methodology and present our findings.

## 2. Literature Review

This section draws on the fields of school effectiveness and school improvement (SESI), and educational leadership to interrogate the international research evidence on school failure, and effective turnaround leadership in disadvantaged schools.

### 2.1. Schools failing to meet accountability targets

Although research on leadership in disadvantaged schools is needed for scientific and ethical reasons, it is an under-researched field. Arguably this lack of evidence “resides predominantly in the inherent sensitivity and complexity of the terrain. Schools where the academic performance is below average and who fail to meet the accountability target are often also the ones that face multiple forms of disadvantage; as a result, they are the least likely to be open to critical scrutiny or exposure” (Muijs et al., 2004, p. 150).

Schools categorised as ‘schools in challenging circumstances’ tend to be on the one hand ‘failing’ an accountability threshold, and are often also located in deprived socioeconomic contexts. Hargreaves (in Dederling, 2018) and Muijs et al. (2004, recognise that “it cannot be denied that there is a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement” (p. 150). This relation has been found in various studies in England. Matthews and Sammons (2005) and Hutchinson (2016) for example concluded that schools that fail their Ofsted inspection have a higher proportion of pupils on free school meals (FSM) than those with a good inspection outcome. When having to meet targets that don’t account for internal and external factors beyond their control (e.g. high levels of deprivation, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, high staff turnover and pupil mobility), schools in challenging contexts have, according to Willis (2010, p.147), “no chance at all in succeeding in the current system of standards-based reform”. In the absence of proper controls for school composition and context, schools with large numbers of vulnerable students, will appear to perform at a lower level and, as a result, are depicted as failures in the education system (Munoz-Chereau, González et al., 2022).

Competing and conflicting definitions of 'under-achieving' schools have been operationalised over time. Multiple terms used in policy and research qualify these schools as 'failing',

'underperforming', 'very weak', 'intractable', 'coasting', 'sink', 'chronically low-performing' and 'stuck' are but a few. According to Carpenter et al. (2017) "these terms endorse deficit conceptualizations of schools and school communities but lack useful operational clarity" (p. 291). Some of the definitions point to school performance at one point in time (failing, underperforming, weak), while others include an element of time (chronically low-performing), distinguishing between low-performing schools that improve or are 'moving', and those that do not and who are 'stuck'.

Different authors (Ko et al., 2012; Collinson, 2010; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005) attribute the distinction between 'moving' and 'stuck' to Rosenholtz (1989) who studied schools' longitudinal trends in student learning outcomes and their (in)capacity for academic improvement. Stuck schools are characterised by deepening detachment, resigned pessimism, spirit paralysis, a stagnation of vision and learning impoverished for students and staff, lack of common goals and relevant dialogue among colleagues, complacency and staff's frustration, failure and tedium projected on students (Rosenholtz,1989). This deficit definition does not provide a blueprint for improvement because it focuses on what 'stuck' schools lack, without paying attention to what these schools can do. From this definition it also follows that schools can be 'stuck' at any position of the effectiveness hierarchy. Interestingly, studies have explored not only 'stuck' schools located in disadvantage areas, but also in affluent ones. A single-case study in a secondary school located in USA in an advantaged context was characterised by maintaining the status quo through holding narrow perceptions of learning, suppressing inquiry and self-examination, relying on a culture of dependency and distrust, and exercising minimal reaction to parental pressure and state policies (Collinson, 2010). A quantitative study conducted in Hong Kong examined the impact of leadership and school improvement capacity by analysing trends in school relative progress/value-added data over a 3-year period (2006-2008) coupled with school staff survey data in a convenient sample of 39 secondary schools. After conducting Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Discriminant Analysis, they concluded that more than half of schools were 'stuck' (56%), whilst the remaining 44% moved. Focusing on these 'stuck' schools, most of them remained the same (59%), whilst the rest declined over the period. Moreover, professional learning communities and the school's workload predicted school 'stuck'/moving status. Focusing on leadership, resource management was the only relevant dimension to explain this difference. However, none of these factors on its own distinguished between moving/stuck schools (Ko et al., 2012).

While these studies underscore that a school can be 'stuck' in any socioeconomic context if it maintains the status quo instead of improving, the way Ofsted has classified schools as 'stuck' only refers to their performance on the inspection framework. 'Stuck' schools in their definition are those that were systematically judged below the 'good' standard over four consecutive

inspections, spanning for more than a decade. Although in most cases inspection catalysed improvement in the least effective schools, “more than one school in seven of those identified as having serious weaknesses continued to decline and slid into the special measures category within a few years, despite the official attention drawn to their need for improvement” (Matthews & Sammons, 2005, p. 167). The authors stressed that “the real challenge, and where it is probably more difficult to attract the most effective Headteachers, is in those schools that are not high profile, where socio-economic circumstances are not good and making progress is just as hard. It is these schools, often having serious weaknesses, that need focused attention in future” (Matthews & Sammons, p. 174).

## 2.2. Effective turnaround leadership in disadvantaged contexts

Within the field of educational effectiveness and improvement a growing body of literature is suggesting that generic leadership practices need to be situated and adapted (Leithwood et al., 2020), especially when applied to challenging contexts (Hirsh et al., 2023). There seems to be no ‘one size fits all’ type of effective leadership that is suitable for all schools and new conceptualisations are emerging that replace the prior approaches which often focused on narrow problem solving (Day, 2014). Moreover, researchers are increasingly reporting different practices of leaders working in more and less advantaged communities. “The sets of skills and attributes used by successful principals in more disadvantaged schools is different from, and more complex, than those in more advantaged schools” (Day, 2014, p. 642). In line with a situated understanding of school leadership, Hirsh et al. (2023) reported in a study conducted in Sweden that to maintain the resilience of their organisation, leaders in deprived schools were “present, gatekeeping, sheltering, collaborative, and compensatory” (p. 1). Faced with persistent levels of challenge, leaders intensively applied greater combinations of strategies, and a wider range of (inter)personal skills than those working in advantaged communities (Day, 2014). Yet this comes at a cost, as leaders working in challenging schools are likely to be less experienced and stay for shorter periods than those in more advantaged communities (Day et al., 2020).

Whilst leaders’ resilience to face persistent challenges is important, it is not enough to effectively turnaround schools. Meyers and Hitt (2017) conducted a systematic review oriented to identify the characteristics of successful turnaround leaders. Drawing on 18 empirical studies, they stressed the following 12 attitudes, traits and perspectives that turnaround leaders possess: 1) Belief that positive change can and must happen; 2) Strong moral mission; 3) Determination or Courage; 4) Competitiveness; 5) Willingness to disrupt Complacency; 6)

Responsiveness or Urgency; 7) Systems thinker; 8) Hope and Enthusiasm; 9) Ethical guide; 10) Effective communicator; 11) Relationship builder; and 12) Adaptability.

Meyers and Hitt (2017) also provided three areas comprising the following 12 turnaround leadership domains found in the literature: i) Utilizing vision and strategic leadership: Establish, shape, and drive a vision focused on high academic expectations; Identify, analyse, and respond to causes of school decline and failure; Navigate policies that, on the surface, limit their ability to lead effectively or their teachers' ability to provide high-quality, differentiated instruction; Make unilateral decisions as necessary. ii) Building capacity with support and accountability: Secure significant, purposeful opportunities for teachers to develop and grow; Cultivate leadership in administration and faculty; Focus on improving culture and instruction specifically in literacy and mathematics; Leverage data effectively to make strategic administrative and instructional decisions; Focus intensively on driving instructional improvement; and iii) Shaping of culture: Create or improve a climate that is safe and focused on teaching and learning, Generate quick wins to publicly demonstrate changing priorities and that improvement is possible; and Develop authentic relationships with parents and the community broadly. In summary, when the characteristics and the critical steps of successful turnaround leaders are taken together, they expand previous work on effective leadership and point to their exceptionality, pushing further the notion of what does it mean to be an effective leader. Whilst every turnaround leader is effective, not every effective leader can turnaround a school.

### 3. Methods

The aim of the qualitative multiple-case study is to explore leadership characteristics in a sample of primary and secondary schools that managed to improve after more than a decade of failing Ofsted inspections and being classified as 'stuck'. Staff in these 'un-stuck' schools are uniquely positioned to comment on their improvement journeys and this study therefore presents their experiences and views of improvement of school quality in disadvantage contexts. By listening to stakeholders' voices, a novel way of approaching a matter of public policy is developed (Bacchi, 2012).

#### 3.1. Data and sampling

We implemented multiple-case studies, as the focus was to explore similarities and differences among cases (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). The strength of this qualitative method is that it pays attention to the complexity of each case's context, and it is useful to obtain in-depth

information relating to issues and events in their natural background (Crowe et al., 2011). Conversely, the limitation is that it does not allow to generalize the findings to schools with other inspection trajectories.

From the overall population of 580 ‘stuck’ schools identified through quantitative analysis reported elsewhere (see Munoz-Chereau, Hutchinson et al., 2022), we selected a criterion based or purposive sampling (Patton, 2002; Ritchie et al., 2003). We identified 6 ‘un-stuck’ schools (three primary and three secondary). These schools received a below good inspection grade between 2005 to 2018, followed by a good inspection grade between 2019 to 2021. From those ‘un-stuck’ schools willing to take part, we prioritized variation across schools’ inspection trajectories, level, type and regional location as a way of maximizing sample variation.

**Table 1**

*Un-stuck schools’ level, type and regional location*

Un-stuck schools	Level	Type	Regional location
School I	Primary	Maintained	Yorkshire & the Humber
School J	Primary	Academy	North West
School K	Secondary	Academy	Yorkshire & the Humber
School M	Primary	Academy	Yorkshire & the Humber
School N	Secondary	Academy	London
School O	Secondary	Academy	Yorkshire & the Humber

As detailed in Table 1 the multi-site case study sample is formed by 6 ‘un-stuck’ schools: schools I, J, M, K, N and O. Overall, three are primaries and three are secondaries. One is maintained, and five are academies. Four are located in the Yorkshire & the Humber area, one in the Northwest, and one in London. Although all case study schools are in different towns and cities, for anonymity reasons we report only their regional location. Regarding their inspection trajectory, all ‘un-stuck’ case study schools did not have a linear improvement but a more varied pattern of inspection outcomes which fluctuated between grades 3 (Requires Improvement) and 4 (Inadequate), with their latest inspection being graded a 2 (Good).

### 3.2. Data collection

As detailed in Table 2, we combined two data collection methods.

**Table 2**

*Data collection methods*



Un-stuck schools	Inspection reports	School documents and websites	Interviews and focus groups
School I	9	1	4
School J	12	1	4
School K	6	3	4
School M	5	3	3
School N	5	1	4
School O	3	1	3
TOTAL	40	10	22

### 3.3. Inspection reports, school documents and websites

We analysed school documents to reconstruct historically the trajectory of change for each case study. More precisely, we analysed 50 documents (40 Ofsted inspection reports and 10 documents and websites provided by case study ‘un-stuck’ schools).

### 3.4. Inductive and deductive approach to interviews and focus groups

In each ‘un-stuck’ case study school, we collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups to obtain in-depth information about stakeholders’ perspectives. We conducted 22 interviews and focus groups with headteachers, teachers, and parent governors (longest in post). These individual and group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for the analysis. In each interview and focus group, we asked participants to explain and reflect on their school’s trajectory of change after the initial failing Ofsted inspection grade.

### 3.5. Analysis

To explore resilient leadership practices in these schools, we implemented intra-case analysis for each school (Miles et al., 2014) by breaking down the transcriptions into smaller pieces of information and comparing the pieces for similarities and differences before regrouping them under overarching themes. We coded the data using NVivo software.

## 4. Findings

This section describes the six ‘un-stuck’ case study schools: three primary (schools I, M and J) and three secondary (schools K, N and O) that used to be ‘stuck’ 2005-2018 but received a good overall grade in their latest full inspection (2018-2021). We detail for each ‘un-stuck’ school (1) its type and location; (2) its improving inspection trajectory, and (3) its leadership characteristics and improvement actions that according to stakeholders helped them turnaround.

## 4.1. Primary un-stuck schools

### 4.1.1. School I

#### 4.1.1.1. School I type and location

School I is a maintained primary mixed school located in the Yorkshire & the Humber.

**Table 3**

*School I improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School I									
Inspection dates	2008	2011	2011	2012	2012	2014	2016	2017	2018	2018
Inspection type	Full	Full	Monitor	Full	Monitor	Full	Full	Monitor	Full	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	4	making inadequate progress	3	not effectively dealing with the risk	3	3	Taking effective action	2	2
Head change	Teacher	HT	HT	HT 2	HT	HT 2	HT	HT	HT 3	HT
		1	1		2		2	2		3

#### 4.1.1.2. School I improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 3, School I has been ‘un-stuck’ since 2018. In the last decade it received nine Ofsted inspections: six section 5 (four grades 3 (RI), one grade 4 and one grade 2), and three section 8 monitor visits. These were negative (making inadequate progress in 2011, and not effectively dealing with a risk in 2012) and positive (taking effective action in 2017). In the last full inspection, School I became ‘un-stuck’ when it received an overall good judgement as well as good grades in all the sub-dimensions.

#### 4.1.1.3. School I leadership characteristics and improvement actions

##### *a) Headteacher change*

The Headteacher joined the school in 2011 in a secondment to help the previous leadership team. She/he was then the acting head in 2016 and was appointed the Headteacher in 2018, becoming the third Head between 2008-2018.

*b) Distributed Leadership*

External support helped the school implement distributed leadership, followed by a growth in staff’s confidence when provided with the opportunity to lead at their level.

*c) External support*

Stakeholders described a range of external support provided by the Local Authority (LA) school effectiveness partner, and an academy within a local Teaching schools alliance. The school received support in leadership, and teaching and learning throughout the year groups.

*d) Building trust*

According to School I’s stakeholders, the turning point to become ‘un-stuck’ was trust provided by an Ofsted inspector, followed by an honest account of some assessment data fabrication that had been implemented by the previous leadership teams. *‘When the lead Ofsted inspector rang me to talk about the school and wanted my SEF [Self-Evaluation Form] I said, ‘Well sadly I can’t send it you because I’m having to totally rewrite it because it’s a work of fiction’* (Un-stuck school I, primary, maintained, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher). Then, they improved behaviour management, consistency in teaching and learning, and enhanced overall academic expectations. The school is now highly regarded as a good school among its community and has growing numbers of pupils on roll.

#### 4.1.2. School M

##### 4.1.2.1. School M type and location

School M is a sponsor-led academy mixed primary school located in Yorkshire & the Humber. It is part of a middle-sized Multi-Academy Trust with 8 other schools. Before School M opened in 2014 as an academy, it was a maintained school who closed after receiving a grade 4 in 2013.

**Table 4**

*School M improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School M predecessor	School M			
Inspection dates	2010	2013	2017	2018	2019
Inspection type	Full	Full	Full	Monitor	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	4	3	Taking effective action	2

Head Teacher change	HT 1	HT 2	HT 4	HT4	HT 4
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#### 4.1.2.2. School M improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 4, School M became 'un-stuck' in 2019. Between 2010-2019 school M received 5 inspections: four full section 5 inspections (one grade 2, two grade 3 and one grade 4) and one monitor visit in 2018, which concluded that the school was making good progress. Ofsted's inspection in 2019 judged the school to be Good, with Outstanding areas of its work in Leadership and Management, and Personal Development.

#### 4.1.2.3. School M leadership characteristics and improvement actions

##### *a) Headteacher change*

The Headteacher has been in post since 2017 and is the fourth Headteacher in the last decade. The Headteacher joined the school a few months before receiving the grade 3 inspection.

##### *b) Moral purpose*

The sense that children growing in disadvantaged contexts require better education was a key driver for the Headteacher to take the post. *'To be honest, it's when you visit, and you see young people, and their faces, and them in person, and you get that sort of feeling that it's not good enough – it's got to move forward. These children and young people deserve a much better deal. And so, I then applied for the job to become the principal'* (Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

##### *c) Stabilising the team*

From 2017 onwards the school formed a stable team of staff who is committed and motivated to make a difference in the life of children. *'They [teachers] could choose to work in places where it's much easier to work. But they've got a real moral purpose for what they do. They're committed to making a real difference. They've seen the change that they've engineered for young people. And I think that kind of intrinsic motivation is far more powerful. And, I don't think addictive is the right word, but it almost is. It really does motivate you to do a really good job, when you think, oh gosh, it was hard, and there was a lot of demand there in terms of what was needed. But it's making a genuine difference. And I think I'm lucky to have a really good staff body, and that's their main driver and motivator really'*(Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

##### *d) Distributed leadership*

According to stakeholders, School M was able to become 'un-stuck' given the strong leadership from the Headteacher who managed to distribute it across staff.

*'I would say one of the real strengths of the school, and one of the reasons that I think we got the 'outstanding' for leadership, is that it is genuinely distributed. I have strength across my team now, and expertise across the staffing in different areas. And I do think that they feel largely quite united as a staff body. They work for the children, but they work for one another as well. And I think they recognise that they work hard, but the leaders work very hard too. So, there's a sense of being – I don't like the phrase but – in it together, in many ways'.* (Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*e) External support*

External support was provided by the LA to school M's predecessor, and by the MAT since 2014. Stakeholders recognised the strong support received from the MAT. *'I think having those networks, say, across the Trust of other leaders, to link with, to get guidance from, or to step into the school and support roles at critical points has been really important for the school as it's moved forward (...) I'm not on my own, I'm not isolated, I'm not supposed to know everything to the best level. I've got to have the motivation and the skills to engineer it, but I can go and ask, and I can seek support where required (...) if you were to ask me, would I as a principal have been able to transform this school on my own, no, I wouldn't have been. I've had to utilise and draw on that support from within the school, and then around me from those other networks as well. I think if I sat and thought about it, it exemplifies so many times, and I think that would have been a real barrier and stumbling block, had we not had that intervention, or support, or somebody to link with, with expertise to give the right advice and to help us to be time efficient as well.'* (Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher). The school also benefitted from a major investment in its buildings through a capital programme of £1.1million that helped to increase the popularity of the school among the local community.

*f) Systematic approach to improve behaviour and the curriculum*

Stakeholders explained how improving the behaviour policy was key to enhance the rest of the aspects needed to turnaround. *'I firmly believe that the systematic approach to improving behaviour we introduced at the start of the academic year, together with the greater stability of staffing and better communication with parents, is positively influencing the quality of teaching and learning'* (Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*g) Positive relationships with parents and the community*

A critical aspect in the turnaround journey is to enhance positive communications with families. *'One thing that I was really keen to do right from the start, is no matter how challenged it was in*

*terms of the amount we felt we had to do, we must engage with parents on positive communication. So, we do things like praise phone calls, where we’re ringing you, and parents are, “What are you ringing me for, is there a problem?” “No, we’re ringing to tell you that your child has been absolutely fantastic. They’ve worked with such commitment, we’re so proud,” and keeping building those relationships to enable us to have the time to really work on moving the school forward and build that trust in that way’.* (Un-stuck school M, primary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

### 4.1.3. School J

#### 4.1.3.1. School J type and location

School J is a maintained religious primary mixed school located in the Northwest of England.

**Table 5**

*School J improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School J											
Inspection dates	2006	2010	2010	2011	2013	2013	2014	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019
Inspection type	Full	Full	Monitor	Full	Full	Monitor	Full	Monitor	Monitor	Full	Monitor	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	4	satisfactory progress	3	3	began to take action	3	not taking effective action	taking effective action	3	taking effective action	2
Head Teacher change	HT 1	HT 2	HT 2	HT 2	HT 2	HT 2	HT 2	HT 2	HT 3	HT 3	HT 3	HT 3

#### 4.1.3.2. School J improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 5, School J received twelve Ofsted inspections: seven section 5 (one grade 2, five grades 3 (RI), one grade 4) and five section 8 monitor visits. The monitor visits were positive (satisfactory progress in 2010; began to take action in 2013; and taking effective

action in 2015 and 2018), and negative (not taking effective action in 2014), which propelled a change in Headship. In the last full inspection in 2019, it became 'un-stuck' when receiving an overall good judgement as well as good grades in all the sub-dimensions.

#### 4.1.3.3. School J leadership characteristics and improvement actions

##### *a) Headteacher change*

The Headteacher has been in post since 2014, after joining the school in 2011 as Deputy Headteacher. S/he is the third Headteacher over the last decade.

##### *b) Building trust*

According to School J's stakeholders, the turning point to become un-stuck was trust. *'The Ofsted Inspector, I don't know why, but he was just so lovely, and I felt supported, and I could ring him up at any time, and he used to say to me "Send me that document" and "Send me this" and "You've got to do this, now come on. Stop crying, you haven't got time to cry". "Come on you can do this". He was really good'*. (Un-stuck school J, primary, academy, North West, Headteacher).

##### *c) External support*

Support was provided by an outstanding local school, and by an Ofsted inspector, followed by a Deputy teacher that joined the SLT team. It was also provided by a neighbouring school that was a few steps ahead of the improvement journey. *'He [The Ofsted inspector] also linked me up with this wonderful woman in another school. And I went to her school and she says "we're in exactly the same position, this is what we did, follow those things and it will start you off"'* (Un-stuck school J, primary, academy, North West, Headteacher).

##### *d) Systematic approach to improve behaviour and the curriculum*

Together they improved behaviour and the curriculum, which was consistently implemented across the school. *'I met a wonderful woman who came in and she became my Deputy, and together we just slowly but surely just turned it round. We got behaviour sorted. We got a proper curriculum. Bought in something for the staff to follow so that everybody was doing exactly what the – it was consistencies. Things needed to be consistent'*. (Un-stuck school J, primary, academy, Northwest, Headteacher).

## 4.2. Secondary un-stuck schools

### 4.2.1. School K

#### 4.2.1.1. School K type and location

School K is an academy converter secondary non-selective mixed school located in Yorkshire & the Humber. In 2016 School K converted into an academy, forming part of an academy cluster with thirteen other schools. Before that, it was another academy and previously, a community college that closed in 2014 after receiving a grade 4 inspection.

**Table 6**

*School K improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School K predecessor				School K	
	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2019
Inspection dates	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2019
Inspection type	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	4	3	4	3	2
Head Teacher change	HT 1	HT 2	HT 3	HT 3	HT 4	HT 5

#### 4.2.1.2. School K improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 6, School K received six Ofsted inspections: six section 5 (one grade 2, three grade 3, and two grades 4) and no section 8 monitor visits. In the last full inspection in 2019 it became ‘un-stuck’ by receiving an overall good judgement as well as good grades in all the sub-dimensions.

#### 4.2.1.3. School K leadership characteristics and improvement actions

##### *a) Headteacher change*

The Headteacher has been in post since 2019 and is the fifth Head over the last 12 years.

##### *b) External support*

The school managed to become ‘un-stuck’ after a five-year period of support from a local outstanding school.

##### *c) Stabilising the team*

*‘A significant number of staff, investment and leadership came into [School K], which has now left it in a place where there’s a low staff turnover, there’s a good number of leaders who have been at the school for a significant period of time. We’re now starting to attract a better catchment of children because of the good reputation. And all of the things that spiral the*



*wrong way, start to spiral the other way when things are on the front foot if you like’ (Un-stuck school K, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).*

#### 4.2.2. School N

##### 4.2.2.1. School N type and location

School N is an academy converter secondary mixed nonselective school located in London. In 2014 School N converted into an academy, forming part of a multi-academy trust (MAT) with thirty-five other schools. Before that, it was a community college that closed after receiving a grade 4 inspection in 2013.

Stakeholders are aware that their location also helped the school to become un-stuck. *‘Most London schools had actually improved before our school had. London has been ahead of the game with the school improvement, and the investment. [The school] was like a forgotten school, which is just so heart-breaking and why it’s been so joyful to do the work that we’ve done here’ (Un-stuck school N, secondary, academy, London, SLT member).*

**Table 7**

*School N improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School N predecessor			School N	
Inspection dates	2009	2010	2013	2017	2019
Inspection type	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	3	4	3	2
Head Teacher change	HT 1	HT 1	HT 2	HT 3	HT 3

##### 4.2.2.2. School N improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 7, School N received five Ofsted inspections: five section 5 (one grade 2, three grade 3, and one grade 4) and no section 8 monitor visits. The last full inspection in 2019 granted an overall good judgement as well as good grades in Outcomes, achievements and standards; Teaching, learning and quality of provision; Behaviour, personal development and wellbeing sub-dimensions, and Outstanding in Leadership and Management.

##### 4.2.2.3. School N leadership characteristics and improvement actions

###### *a) Headteacher change*

The current Headteacher has been in post since 2017 and is the third one over the last decade.

*b) Stabilising the team*

The first steps to become 'un-stuck' were to restructure the staff to meet the needs of the children and hire a new leadership team. Now school N has a strong and stable team of staff. It has kept a stable senior leadership and home-grown their own middle leaders (Heads of departments and Heads of year).

*c) External support*

The Headteacher started turning around the school with the support of the MAT, where they used to work as a school improvement leader. These changes coincided with the school moving to a new building. *'We had that uplift... It was so momentous for our families and our children to leave that horrible building and go into an absolutely beautiful building'* (Un-stuck school N, secondary, academy, London, Headteacher).

*d) Vision of high expectations*

The leadership team promoted a clear vision of high expectations of a great school that will transform life chances through education, address the behaviour, and make children proud of the school.

*e) Systematic approach to improve behaviour and the curriculum*

The team has built the curriculum and the behaviour system, which is the hallmark of their approach. *'We believe that structure liberates and that, by having really clear, purposeful routines and expectations that are delivered and communicated with our children with love and respect, children feel safe to learn. Some people call it "tough love" (...) we have very clear expectations. We have silent line-up at the beginning of the day, after break and lunchtime, which gives that moment of mindfulness (...) They walk in silence, through the corridors. The first 15 minutes of a lesson is in silence, as you focus in on your work'* (Un-stuck school N, secondary, academy, London, Headteacher). However, those pupils that don't follow the strict discipline, are excluded *'We do exclude children, when they don't meet our expectations (...) in the environment we work in and with our community, that structure is really important (...) it gives that kind of predictability and the consistency that allows children to be themselves, and express themselves, and not be distracted, in the school day. It makes sure every learning second counts'* (Un-stuck school N, secondary, academy, London, Headteacher).

### 4.2.3. School O

#### 4.2.3.1. School O type and location

School O is an academy converter secondary non-selective inner-city mixed school located in Yorkshire & the Humber. In 2014 School O converted into an academy, forming part of a cluster with three other schools. Before that, it was a community college that closed in 2013 following a grade 3 inspection.

**Table 8**

*School O improving inspection trajectory and leadership*

Criteria	School O Predecessor	School O	
Inspection dates	2013	2017	2019
Inspection type	Full	Full	Full
Overall effectiveness/Findings	3	3	2
Head Teacher change	HT 1	HT 2	HT 3

#### 4.2.3.2. School O improving inspection trajectory

As can be seen in Table 8, school O has received three Ofsted inspections between 2013-2019: three section 5 (one grade 2 and two grades 3) and no section 8 monitor visits. In the last full inspection in 2019 it received an overall good judgement as well as good grades in Outcomes, achievements and standards; Teaching, learning and quality of provision; Behaviour, personal development and wellbeing sub-dimensions, and Outstanding in Leadership and Management.

#### 4.2.3.3. School O leadership characteristics and improvement actions

##### *a) Headteacher change*

The current Headteacher joined the school in 2017 as an assistant principle and has been in post since 2019. S/he is the third Head over the last decade.

##### *b) Moral purpose*

Stakeholders mentioned the moral purpose of their roles in transforming the school *‘It’s a very morally driven school and the needs of the student (...) actually that has been the focus for recruitment and establishing values with anybody that we recruit. And we’re recruiting the right people for the right reasons’*. (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

##### *c) Stabilising the team*

In order to improve, a sense of a stable team needed to be regained. *‘My point of view then was that I took my role on as, in terms of establishing, sort of, behaviour strategies across the*

*school in line with expectations across the trust'* (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*d) Distributed leadership*

Stakeholders made clear that the improvement journey was not a solitary work, but a distributed one. *'The key had been to work our middle leadership, to ensure that we had clear strategies (...). So, we did systematic things where we worked with our middle leaders to make sure that they understood the rationale behind what we were doing. And then, when we got to the first Ofsted (...) they did recognise that strategies were in place to be able to transform the academy over a longer period of time (...).'* (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*e) External support*

School O's stakeholders argued that the sustained support provided by the Local Authority, a national leader of education and his trust, and external agencies, allowed them to become 'un-stuck'. They supported mathematics, science and subject leaders' skills and leadership. With their support, previous Headteachers started turning around the school, but improvements were embedded by the current Headteacher.

*f) Strong internal governance and accountability*

The centrality of trust and internal accountability was expressed as *'The governance has been the overarching strongest element to this academy in terms of being held to account by people who are experts in their field. And we, you know, it's done with rigour. And it's very well organised. It always has been, and I think that- I think that from the point that I was there, I think that was a key- that was a key element to the trust with establishing a strong governance. And for me, it was one of the biggest tells of how that school was going to- going to improve. Because we knew that, as leaders, we were held to account. We were questioned, the data was scrutinised. And it was done by people who were experts in their field. And that- I think that was a big thing'* (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*g) Vision of high expectations*

How the school culture was shaped by the Headteacher's vision was key. *'Students understood the basics in terms of behaviour, and got the culture right, the culture for learning. And I think the students came along with us with regards to that, and therefore, the teaching staff came along with us. The culture of the academy allowed the teaching to organically start to develop. And the strategies around research driven, and teaching and learning focuses (...). We're doing*

*things to get the best outcomes for our students.'* (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

*h) Positive relationships with parents and the community*

Confidence appeared to expand from the school to its stakeholders. *'Our student numbers rapidly increased because we were getting an understanding from the local primary schools about what we were doing. From middle leaders- the reputation from middle leaders was allowing them to reach out to teachers to give them confidence- good teachers to come to the academy, and work here with confidence, knowing that they could teach without having to worry too much about culture, about the classroom culture. And I think that that enabled an organic growth of- of all the communicators which allowed us go into 2019 with a real confidence that we would achieve good. And actually, in some elements, that we were pushing for an outstanding judgement'* (Un-stuck school O, secondary, academy, Yorkshire & the Humber, Headteacher).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This study analysed turnaround leadership in six schools that improved their Ofsted outcome after more than a decade of failing their inspections and being identified as 'stuck'. Despite these schools faced common challenges conspiring against their improvement over the previous decade -such as high deprivation of their student population, high teacher turnover, under-subscription, and bad reputation- detailed elsewhere (Munoz-Chereau, Hutchinson et al., 2022) leaders implemented improvement journeys to turn schools around until obtaining a good inspection grade.

Overall, it took at least a decade for these schools to be judged as 'good' by Ofsted. During this period, each 'un-stuck' school had between 3 and 5 headteachers, so although current leaders had been at least in post two years before turning the school around, any of them had fully experienced the school's improvement trajectory. This is the case because the most common improvement strategy after receiving a failing inspection is to fire the headteacher. In only one case (school N) the headteacher had experienced turning around a previous school within the same MAT. For the rest of them, it was a steep risk and learning curve.

Leaders of the six 'un-stuck' schools were truly exceptional, as they managed to succeed where their predecessors had failed by transforming previously sinking schools into good ones. The notion that effective leaders are key to turnaround learning organizations is critical, especially

in the presence of primary and secondary schools with chronically 'stuck' inspection trajectories. Overall, leaders of the six 'un-stuck' schools described nine key aspects that informed their improvement inspection trajectory. These were:

- 1) Moral purpose: staff were passionate and felt a strong vocation to work hard to make a difference, especially for the most disadvantaged students;
- 2) Distributed leadership: leaders were orchestrators of the development of 'home-grown' teachers to lead the school;
- 3) Stabilising teams: leaders' commitment and stability sent the message to stakeholders that they were devoted to stay to improve the school;
- 4) External support: leaders got support from diverse critical friends (Ofsted inspectors, MATs, local schools and external partners). This support was emotional, technical, practical and professional.
- 5) Building trust: leaders built trust internally (among their students, parents and teachers) and externally (strengthening links with other schools, the community and external agencies) that enhanced schools' reputation;
- 6) Positive relationships with parents and the community: while the relationship with parents and carers was an ongoing challenge, leaders created positive and diverse ways of communication that enhanced constructive engagement;
- 7) Vision of high expectations: leaders implemented high expectations through consistency in teaching, learning and the curriculum;
- 8) Systematic approach to improve behaviour: leaders stressed the importance of clear and shared discipline and consistent implementation of behavioural policies;
- 9) Strong internal governance and accountability: leaders had strong governors and other critical friends that scrutinised and provided feedback for improvement.

The first five elements were common to all the case study schools, while the remaining four appeared at least once in leaders' reflective narratives about the turnaround process. Interestingly, these elements featured in both primary and secondary academies and maintained schools. Hence, the six case study schools shared similar challenges and used analogous strategies to overcome inspection failure, which are broadly in line with the literature on turnaround leadership. As Meyers and Hitt (2017) stressed, turning around a chronically under-performing school requires not only key personal attitudes, traits and perspectives, but these need to be combined with crucial steps to transform the school's vision, capacity and culture.

Our findings provide a more optimistic account of what leaders can do to improve and challenge the notion of 'stuckness' as a fixed condition and one that is explained by what these

schools lack (Ko et al., 2012; Collinson, 2010;; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005; Rosenholtz, 1989). The improvement journeys described in this paper indicate the various leadership attributes and processes by which leaders effectively turnaround schools.

However, a school system that relies on leadership exceptionality to turnaround schools is not sustainable, as turnaround leadership needs to be developed within the system through school cultures and structures. A policy shift oriented to reduce the culture of inspection fear, naming and shaming and other unintended negative effects of Ofsted inspections is urgent, particularly for schools working in the most deprived contexts.

Despite its contribution, this study does have limitations, such as its small sample size and the uniqueness of 'un-stuck' schools; these schools are by no means a representation of all English schools or of those receiving a failing Ofsted grade, but only represent around 2-3% of all state-funded schools in England. Future research could increase the sample size to explore the trajectories of other English 'un-stuck' schools, as well as compare their inspection trajectories and leadership characteristics with turnaround schools in other educational systems with similar inspection regimes in order to expand the knowledge-base. Hence, these findings do not necessarily reflect how schools in general improve their inspection outcome, or the type of leadership materializing in challenging contexts more broadly, but add to the literature of schools with previous chronically 'stuck' inspection trajectories. By exploring the improvement trajectories and characteristics of effective leadership in primary and secondary disadvantaged 'un-stuck' schools in England, this study adds to the knowledge base of situated effective leadership practices needed to turnaround schools.

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