



Exploring Private School Principal's Role in School Turnaround: Insights from a Qualitative Case Study in Karachi

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: November 19, 2025
Revised: December 14, 2025
Accepted: January 04, 2026
Available Online: January 14, 2026

Keywords:

Teaching practices, school turnaround, classroom management, leadership style, leadership goals, semi-structured interviews, low Performing schools

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the role of a private school's principal leadership in the turn-around of a formerly underperforming school. The selected private school had exhibited a three-year trend of marked progress since leadership change. The purpose of the study was to identify and analyse the effectiveness of the strategies and decisions of the principal as the pedagogic leader to achieve institutional goals and student outcomes. The research utilized a qualitative exploratory research approach in an attempt to attain in-depth insights of the phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool to gather information from the principal and five teachers who had worked under both principals, the previous and the present. The interview findings were supported by classroom observations, general observations and document review revealing the effectiveness of leadership practices in school improvement. The research thus provides empirical support about the implications of the change of leadership at the selected private school.



Introduction

Background of the Study

Over the past two decades, private schooling in Pakistan has become one of the largest providers of education not only in cities, but also in towns. Private schools, as opposed to public schools have to manage their finances without state funds, relying heavily on fee revenue, parental satisfaction, and internal management systems for their survival (Andrabi, Das & Khwaja, 2010). The quality and stability of leadership in such schools become significant for efficiency and sustainability. Studies continue to confirm that school leadership plays a key role in shaping school culture, teacher performance, and overall learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership

changes in private schools, specifically when the leader is also the owner of the school may substantially affect school direction, administrative procedures, and stakeholder trust. International literature considers such transitions as possibilities for school turnaround, enabling new leader to reduce shortcomings, reset priorities, and execute new strategies (Herman et al., 2008; Day & Sammons, 2016).

The study was conducted on a private school that had been struggling academically and financially for over three years due to poor management and high student dropout rates under its previous owner-principal. The new leader assumed dual responsibilities as both owner and principal. After taking charge, the new leader brought about various changes at administrative level, instructional planning, discipline, communication, and financial planning. This study investigated how her vision, leadership style, management tactics, and personal qualities influenced the school positively.

Problem Statement

Most private schools in Pakistan suffer from leadership instability, poor budgeting, untrained staff, and inconsistent educational quality. When such schools suffer from long-term downturn, they tend to undergo changes in ownership or leadership however; Hitt and Woodruff (2018) argue that there are insufficient experienced principals with the necessary dispositions to lead the turnaround of low-performing schools. There is limited research on how new owner-principals manage problems they inherit, introduce reforms, and lead school turnaround in the private sector. In the absence of substantial researches, not much is known about how a leader influences school turnaround. This study addresses this gap by examining a school that experienced a drastic change under a new leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative and exploratory study is to determine which leadership practices and approaches of the new owner-principal were effective in achievement of goals during the change periods or restructuring.

Research Questions

1. How did the new principal manage to deal with the problems and challenges that were passed down to her?
2. To what degree have the new practices influenced the school in a positive manner?
3. How did the teachers who had worked under the principal perceive the change?

Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons:

- For private school leaders: It develops an understanding of effective leadership practices that can support school turnaround.
- For educational managers: It emphasizes strategies for improving school culture, pedagogical approaches, and financial security.
- For policymakers and training institutions: It can inform leadership development programs conducted in private schools.
- For researchers: It adds to the limited literature on leadership change and school improvement within Pakistan's private education sector.

Delimitations of the Study

- The study focused on one private school; hence, the findings cannot be generalized to all private schools.
- Data was gathered from only the principal and teachers of a single school.
- The study only focused on the role of leadership and management practices not considering other potential factors that may have contributed to the school's success.
- Financial and policy documents were not shared or remained incomplete.
- Observations limited to teaching practices, student engagement, integration of technology, and overall school environment.

Scope of the Study

- The study is likely to highlight the leadership roles of the principal in private school setting
- Policy makers, school administrators and school owners can benefit directly from the study
- Pedagogic leaders can change their leadership style for positive change in schools
- Researchers in the field of pedagogic leadership can learn to manage their schools effectively

Literature Review

The study reviewed leadership styles and approaches for operating schools, reorganization processes, and resource management practices, which formed part of the theoretical framework for the study. It includes the related literature on leadership and management practices that significantly affect the school policies and culture especially when the school is in dire need of the change.

Characteristics of a Turnaround Principal

According to Peck and Reitzug (2014), the concept of a turnaround principal refers to a leader who demonstrates rare and specialized skills in transforming underperforming schools into improving educational environments. Meyers and Hitt (2017) argue that it is reasonable to question that turnaround principals can lead certain schools more effectively than they can lead other principals, including competent ones. Leithwood (2012) presents a framework of effective leadership based on three core personal resources: cognitive, social, and psychological. Cognitive resources include problem-solving expertise and knowledge of classrooms and schools, while social resources involve understanding and managing one's own emotions and those of others. Psychological resources refer to traits such as initiative, creativity, and responsible risk-taking, supported by optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience. Together, these resources explain how effective leaders influence school improvement (Leithwood, 2012).

Leadership and School Culture

School leadership is a major contributor in school success, right after classroom teaching (Leithwood et al., 2020). Bush and Sargsyan (2020) highlight that effective leadership is essential for cultivating school culture, motivating both teaching and non-teaching staff, and establishing systems that support teaching and learning. In the context of private schools, principals face additional responsibility, as they must balance instructional leadership with organizational management. Studies on school improvement signify commitment to ethics as the primary agent of sustainable organizational change, where leaders value student learning and equity rather than administrative control (Fullan, 2011). Therefore, developing collegial relationships among teachers evidently promotes trust, teamwork, and a willingness to accept change.

Educational Change

Educational change is a dynamic and collaborative process. Among the most significant experts in this domain, Fullan argues that sustainable change is determined by moral purpose, relationship building, and profound cultural shift rather than administrative level reforms alone (Fullan, 2001; 2002). Leaders should also be prepared for unexpected challenges, because the first six months are usually bumpy no matter how perfect the change plan is.

Educational Administration

Educational administration is concerned with strategic planning and management within an institution to achieve academic and organizational objectives. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) argue that administrators must apply evidence-based knowledge while staying sensitive to the contextual factors of schools. According to the authors, theory offers an organizational model to comprehend organizational behavior and decision-making, whereas research presents research-based evidence for effective practices. Integration of informed judgment and contextual knowledge enables administrators to address complicated challenges, improve school effectiveness, and promote continuous improvement within educational systems.

Leadership Styles Relevant to School Improvement

Researchers note that effective leaders do not rely on a single leadership style, but rather tailor their approach to specific organizational needs and contexts. Engelbert and Wallgren (2016) argue that task- vs. people-oriented approaches vary according to situation and individual differences, while Gill's work on leadership practice highlights the diversity of styles leaders may adopt. Similarly, management scholars such as Robbins and Coulter (2013) and Mullins (2007) assert that no one style fits all contexts, and that leaders must adapt depending on organizational conditions and goals. Drawing on the theoretical studies by Cobbinah and Eshun (2025) and Lawrence (2024), this section discusses leadership styles in educational context.

Transformational Leadership

They are leaders who bring inspiration, energize the school community, and bring improvement in the academic life of the learners.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership focuses on improving teaching and learning outcomes by providing strong guidance in curriculum development, teacher support, and fostering a Rigorous academic environment. Leaders in this role emphasize continuous professional Development for teachers and set high academic expectations for students and educators.

Strategic Leadership

School leaders can have a systematic view of the school through proper planning and effective decision-making.

Distributed Leadership

They are school leaders who identify the problems, but make suggestions or leave subordinates to decide what to do and how to do it.

Participative Leadership

School leaders who discuss and analyze issues with the involvement of their staff. They involve their teachers in every Decision-making while ensuring that consensus is reached as to what must be done and how it must be done.

Ethical Leadership

In educational settings, ethical leadership extends beyond compliance with rules to include a commitment to justice, care, and the holistic development of learners and staff (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive case study design because the research intends to understand lived experiences, meanings, and perceptions (Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews, document review, and limited non-participant observations provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and helped triangulate interview data, enhancing reliability and credibility of findings.

School Context and Setting

School X is located in the district central, Karachi. It is a co-education, private school. It was known to be a low performing school for many years until 2023, when the new administration owned the school. The number of students increased from 100 students to 300 students during the three- year period. The school has classes from nursery to class 10. The teachers are given 5 to 6 periods of 35 minutes per day. Some teachers are at school on Saturdays for preparation of events, assessments and lesson planning. All classes have students with mixed abilities and class sizes are relatively small. The school management enjoys complete autonomy over administrative and financial management. This is because the principal of the school is also the owner.

Population and Participants

The study population includes the following:

The Principal

The principal is a qualified female aged 37. She has a Master's degree in Inorganic Chemistry. In addition to her academic qualifications, she earned a B.Ed. degree and attended multiple training sessions. Besides her good academic and professional qualifications, she has experience for running another school. Prior to becoming the principal of this school, she headed a primary school. She has a teaching experience of about 18 years and a 10-year experience as a principal.

Teachers

Teachers who have worked under both principals because their personal experiences provide richer and more relevant insights. All teachers are trained in their respective fields of specialization with a chartered and recognized master degree.

Sampling Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Due to the small teacher sample population, the study used purposive sampling, to ensure that only the most relevant participants were selected. Teachers served under both the principals, for four

years at the school, two during the new principal and at least one during the previous principal. These criteria allowed participants to provide meaningful reflections on leadership changes and their impact. Due to the small size of target population, the researcher interviewed all five eligible teachers. Additionally, the owner principal was interviewed as the central case.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The study primarily collected data through semi-structured interviews, providing flexibility yet maintaining consistency among participants. The interviews focused on leadership transition, challenges, management strategies, financial decisions, staff development, changes in school culture, and her vision for school improvement. Each interview lasted for 25-30 minutes.

Document Review

Besides semi-structured interviews and observations, significant school documents were reviewed. These included the following documents:

- Teacher error reporting form
- Absence information form
- Parents' concerns and complaint form
- Class arrangement competition report
- Parent Concerns and Complaint form

Non-Participant Observation

Short, non-intrusive observations were conducted in:

- Staff room
- Classrooms
- Principal's Office
- Laboratories

Photographs and Images (Supplementary data)

The researcher took photographs during observations and images posted by school administration on Facebook page were used to document various events and activities. The photographs were treated as secondary documentary evidence. The sole purpose of using photographs as evidence was to support and contextualize findings derived from interviews, observations and document analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers obtained permission from the owner-principal to carry out the study. In the consent letter, the investigators clarified the objectives of the study and invited eligible teachers to take part. The study also ensured that all participants were fully aware of the study purpose and all were free to quit at any time without having to sign an undertaking in any form. It was also ensured that during the data collection process, no individual participant was forced to select a maneuvered response. All had the freedom to respond to questions during the interview and observations convenient time to conduct interviews. The audio recording of interviews, with written consent. As well as transcription of recordings verbatim was ensured per the research, protocol. The school management had the data that they could without any stress or fear of being exposed in any manner. The researchers ensured that the data was reliable and valid and could be used only for the sake of research purpose only. Data confidentiality, safety and security were also ensured.

Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps framework, data collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. During the familiarization and initial coding phases, in vivo coding was used to preserve participants' voices conveying the true essence and meanings of their own words. Coding process targeted leadership practices, organizational changes, management strategies, school culture, and teachers' perceptions of improvements. Patterns were examined across participants to identify common themes and unique experiences. Drawing on Saldaña's (2016) guidelines, the findings from the thematic analysis are presented using participant's quotes and interview excerpts. In the discussion chapter, these themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions, relevant leadership theories, and existing studies on school improvement.

Data Analysis

The interview data obtained from the principal and five teachers (A–E) were analyzed thematically later to be interpreted through educational leadership theories such as instructional, transformational, strategic, distributed, adaptive and ethical leadership.

Emergent Themes from Teacher's Responses

Theme 1: Strategic Restructuring

All teachers reported that previously the school lacked structure but as soon as the new principle took over clear routines were introduced.

Supporting Evidence:

“When I assumed the principal ship there were multi-grade classrooms, staff shortage, absence of computer and science labs, and insufficient classrooms. I had to immediately address these issues so I separated classes grade wise, hired subject teachers, established the laboratories and introduced course outlines that were missing previously.” (Principal)

Teacher **A** noted that the school was in a very bad state and lagged structure, which the principle reorganized systematically.

According to teacher, **D** there was an evident teacher burnout, which led to staff turnover.

“She addressed the issue of staff shortage by quickly hiring new teachers”. (C)

Teacher **C** and **D** both reported an increase in salaries minimizing work stress and discontent.

Leadership Link

This theme reflected instructional and strategic leadership by introducing order and clarity for school improvement.

Theme 2: Integration of Technology and Learning Resources

The new principal focused on improving the physical and instructional resources of the school, particularly technology and laboratory facilities. The use of technology in teaching and learning surfaced as a recurring theme specially for improving classroom instruction and student engagement.

Supporting Evidence:

“I have started working on a new program of teaching robotics for which I have acquired necessary materials.” (Principal)

Teacher **A** mentioned the introduction of computer labs, LED screens, and educational displays in classrooms.

Teacher **E** who teaches science subjects in classes 9 and 10 highlighted the immediate provision of laboratory equipment required for science practicals and board examinations.

Teacher **C** reported that to support learning in younger students, multimedia was introduced to teach through visual methods.

Leadership Link

This theme reflects instructional leadership in modernizing teaching practices and promoting contemporary learning strategies.

Theme 3: Teacher Wellbeing, Welfare, Ethical Responsibility

Teachers highlighted a prominent change in leadership style from fear-based management to support and encouragement. They that the principle is supportive in difficult times and makes efforts to support her staff financially and morally.

Supporting evidence:

“It is my duty to look after these teachers. After all we are a team and I consider myself their leader.”(Principal)

“She provided financial assistance to me when my father was hospitalized”. (B)

“I am continuing my studies along with working here, therefore I need some days of for exams. My request for leave is never denied nor is my salary deducted for the days I am taking off from school.” (C).

Leadership Link

This theme highlights strategic, financial, and ethical leadership practices ensuring sustainability, retaining staff, and effective resource management.

Theme 4: Professional Development and Instructional Effectiveness

Teachers highlighted that the new principal focuses on lesson planning and expects her teachers to go into the classrooms well prepared for the lesson delivery. The principal’s vision is to inspire and motivate teachers through mentoring. She provides guidance and constructive support to improve teaching practices.

Supportive evidence

“I send my teachers to various workshops so that they can grow professionally, learn contemporary pedagogies and use their knowledge and skills in classroom teaching.”(Principal)

Adding further, she said she prefers that her teachers to do lesson planning before going into the classrooms as she feels planning is the key to successful instructional practices and enhances student outcomes. According to her, she tries to gather information about various workshops, and training programs available in the city. Teacher **A** reveals that the principal regularly monitors the

teachers by being on the round and provides constructive feedback, appreciating our strengths while identifying areas for improvement.

“She is very serious about planning and wants us to plan our lessons to avoid any confusions during the lesson delivery”. (B)

Leadership link

This theme is manifested in instructional leadership, as the focus of the principal is to improve teaching practices along with student outcomes.

Theme 5: Open Communication and Participative Approach

Teachers indicated that the new principal frequently held either group or individual meetings to hold discussions on school priorities, seek advices, and offer feedback.

Supportive Evidence

Principal quoted, *“Although I may not involve the teachers in certain higher level financial decisions, I discuss matters with them pertaining to the availability of material resources, making course outlines and syllabus, and finalizing dates for events, exams and other extracurricular activities.”* She further added that she has a very good team that supports her, gives helpful suggestions and understands her vision of academic excellence along with holistic development of the students.

“I never felt the need to take appointments to approach her. If the issue is not urgent, we approach the coordinator who then passes on our message to the principal. However, when we feel the need to talk to her urgently, we never hesitate.” (A)

According to teacher **D** she interacted with the new principal through regular meetings and ongoing discussions. She likes to openly communicate with her staff, inviting our views and feedback on various matters.

“I give her suggestions for the betterment of the school and for elevating the standards of teaching practices to which she responds positively.” (E)

Leadership Link

This theme highlights participated and distributed leadership, with the principal including teachers in decision-making, recognizing their input in addressing challenges. It also aligns with transformational leadership fostering trust and confidence. Teachers highlighted the fact that the principal is quite approachable and readily available for any kind of discussions, academic or personal.

“She is always there in difficult times, saying come to me if you have a problem and I will try to support you.”(D)

“Even when a staff member leaves the job, she is supportive, giving them proper farewell.” (B)

Leadership integration

The theme aligns with transformational leadership because the teachers are able to engage with the principal due to her welcoming behaviour making the teachers feel trusted and empowered.

Theme 6: Improved student Engagement and Student Outcomes

Teachers noticed that students have become more confident, engaged, and creative, actively participating in both; studies and co-curricular activities. Due to the joint efforts of the principal and the teachers, students have become more confident, and there is an evident improvement in their grades.

Evidence

“The school is located where people have low socio-economic status and the parents are also not educated. Therefore, students exhibited low self-esteem and they were initially hesitant to express themselves in classrooms, address assemblies, or participate in co-curricular activities but now they’re changing for the better.”(Principal)

Teacher **A** also pointed out that previously, the students were not confident to speak in the classrooms or assemblies.

“Round the year various competitions, events, and sports activities are conducted in which students actively participate.”

Leadership Integration

Extracurricular activities reflect instructional and participatory leadership, giving the students a chance to prove their skills and show their capabilities.

Theme 8: Strategic Resource Allocation and Financial Management

Teachers highlighted the role of financial decisions in resource allocation, teacher salaries, promotional events, and overall school improvement. Despite financial issues passed down to her by the previous administration, the principal’s focus remains on allocating funds for the available of resources to ensure sustainable resource management.

Evidence

“I constantly struggle to arrange finances for providing material resources and organizing events and even for salaries but I make an effort to do so from limited amount of money generated through student fees.” (Principal)

She further added that she is quite optimistic about school progress, both financially and academically. *“For sure, the school has definitely come along way.”*

“Whatever materials and resources I need, the principal tries her very best to provide them on time.” (A)

“We get an annual increase in salary and we are very happy with it.”(E)

Leadership integration

This theme reflects instructional leadership since the focus is to provide all the essential resources and materials to improve instructional practices and student achievement.

Findings

Findings from Responses

Participants highlighted vital changes in leadership approaches, structural organization, teaching practices, and staff well-being. Overall, the findings reveal that the struggling school has steadily progressed under the current principal's leadership. The key findings of the study are presented below.

School Restructuring and Instructional Effectiveness

Findings suggest there has been a significant change in the structure and learning within the institution brought about by the new principal.

Use of Technology to Support Teaching and Strategic School Management

The integration of technology helped to promote better practices in lesson delivery, communication, and record-keeping practices. As a result, classroom instructions became even more engaging and efficient to influence the learning atmosphere overall.

Support and Motivation for the Staff Members

There was an obvious shift in the leadership approach regarding appreciation, support and care, which created a favorable working environment.

Enhancing Teacher's Professional Development

The findings underscored a growing focus on professional growth and capacity building. The new principal encouraged continuous professional development through training programs, peer collaboration, and guidance.

Participatory and Inclusive Decision-Making Practices

The study found that the teachers were included in planning and school-level decisions, which developed a sense of ownership and accountability among them. This shared leadership approach promoted shared responsibility for school improvement.

Collaboration and Team Work

The findings further revealed the development of a school culture of collaboration and mutual trust. Regular meetings between the principal and teachers resulted in teamwork, conflict minimization, and fostered a shared vision for the school's betterment.

Increased Emphasis on Co-Curricular Activities

An additional finding relates to the expanded focus on co-curricular activities. The findings indicate that when students are provided opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities, their confidence, interpersonal skills and school attachment develops.

Effective Resource Allocation and Financial Management

Findings point towards the inclination of leadership towards provision of resources essential for teaching and learning. Allocating a considerable amount of funds for the materials and teaching resources reflects leadership's long-term viability.

Progress in Student Outcomes

The findings reveal the growth mindset of the principal since the participants indicated improvements in student engagement, attendance, confidence, and academic achievement implying that the leadership practices of the new principal has a positive and sustained impact on students' learning experiences.

Summary of findings from Observations and Document Review

Non-intrusive classroom observations of three lessons, grade 4 science, grade five social studies, and grade 8 English was conducted for approximately 20 to 30 minutes and general observations outside the classroom supported the semi structured interview themes. The theme of instructional practices was reflected in the use of lecture method, discussion and question-answer based techniques, activity-based learning and constructive feedback provided by the teachers. The theme of positive teacher-student relationship was highlighted through the use of respectful language, students' attentiveness and enthusiasm, maintaining discipline and order without harshness or a sense of fear. The interview theme of leadership visibility and supportive instructional leadership was reflected by the principal's monitoring and supervision for the motivation of teachers and the students. The theme of collaborative school culture and open communication was reinforced through frequent and open engagement between teachers and the principal. Integration of technology and use of instructional resources was reflected by the use of laptop by the teacher during a science lesson.

Analysis of the administrative records revealed an efficient system of accountability, supervision, and communication. The teacher error reporting form demonstrated professional responsibility, accountability and transparency. The absence information form highlighted the practices of effective planning and resource allocation. The parents' concerns and complaints form reflected the schools' priority to promote constructive engagement with parents. The classroom arrangement competition form indicated organizational criteria implying that the school appreciates innovation, creativity and engagement. Teacher's observation form indicates performance monitoring, professional growth, teaching quality, and accountability.

Summary of Findings:

The findings from observed practices and management documents helped triangulate the study. They highlighted the leadership's vision for change through shared decision-making (distributed leadership), motivating and supporting teachers (transformational leadership), enforcing accountability (instructional leadership) and flexibly adjusting to organizational needs (adaptive leadership) and emphasizing teacher and student well-being (ethical leadership).

Altogether, these findings demonstrated how strategic reforms, empathy-driven practices, participatory decision-making, and a focus on both academic and non-academic aspects of school collectively contributed to the transformation of a previously low performing school into a progressively improving one. This case underscored the central role of adaptive, responsive and collaborative leadership in achieving sustainable school reforms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the opinions and experiences shared by the interviewees, it is recommended that principals should make decisions that encourage the students and teachers. Emphasis should be laid on the enhancement of quality teaching and learning. The leader may employ a variety of approaches to bring out the best amongst the teaching staff by capacity building, such as praise,

inclusion in decision making and providing professional autonomy. Continuous professional development of teaching staff can be done through visits to other schools, attending workshops and training programs or peer support schemes. The principal can build positive relationships with parents, building a perception that the school is part of the community, rather than a separate entity. The school leader has to also lay emphasis on teachers' and students' needs and encourage others to lead by fostering a culture of co-operation and teamwork. It is the leader's foresightedness as well as strategic and financial planning that leads the school on the road to success.

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