



School Leaders' Perspectives on Instructional Leadership: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how school principals understand and enact instructional leadership (IL) within their schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected school leaders to elicit their perspectives on defining IL, setting instructional goals, and supporting teaching and learning. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that principals view IL as central to enhancing teaching quality and student learning. Key practices reported include collaboratively developing a school vision, conducting classroom observations, providing teacher feedback, and fostering a positive learning climate. Participants also noted challenges such as limited time, resources, and formal training for leadership, echoing findings that underprepared principals face barriers to effective IL. These insights highlight the need for strengthened professional development and policy support for instructional leadership. By articulating leaders' beliefs and strategies, this study contributes to understanding IL in context and suggests implications for leadership preparation and educational reform.

Keywords: instructional leadership; school principals; leadership practices; qualitative case study; educational reform

Abstrak

Penelitian studi kasus kualitatif ini mengkaji bagaimana kepala sekolah memahami dan melaksanakan kepemimpinan instruksional (*instructional leadership*) di sekolah mereka. Melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan sejumlah pemimpin sekolah, penelitian ini mengungkap definisi kepala sekolah tentang kepemimpinan instruksional, penetapan tujuan instruksional, serta dukungan yang mereka berikan pada proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Analisis tematik data wawancara menunjukkan bahwa para kepala sekolah melihat kepemimpinan instruksional sebagai inti untuk meningkatkan mutu pengajaran dan pembelajaran siswa. Praktik utama yang disebutkan meliputi pengembangan visi sekolah secara kolaboratif, kunjungan kelas, umpan balik kepada guru, dan penciptaan iklim belajar yang positif. Kendala yang dihadapi meliputi keterbatasan waktu, sumber daya, dan pelatihan formal. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya pengembangan profesional dan dukungan kebijakan untuk memperkuat kapasitas kepemimpinan instruksional. Dengan menggambarkan pandangan dan strategi para pemimpin sekolah, studi ini memperkaya pemahaman tentang implementasi kepemimpinan instruksional dan memberikan implikasi bagi pelatihan kepemimpinan serta reformasi pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan instruksional; kepala sekolah; praktik kepemimpinan; studi kasus kualitatif; reformasi pendidikan



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the role of school principals has evolved from administrative management toward becoming *instructional leaders* and agents of change. Instructional leadership (IL) emphasizes that principals prioritize teaching and learning as their core

responsibility. Indeed, across the globe IL is recognized as fundamental for high-quality education and for driving school improvement initiatives (Asbari et al., 2020; Hutagalung et al., 2021; Novitasari et al., 2021; Waruwu et al., 2020). For example, Hallinger and Murphy's seminal model conceptualizes IL in three dimensions – developing school vision, managing the instructional program, and promoting a supportive school climate – all aimed at improving student achievement. Empirical studies consistently link principals' active IL practices to positive outcomes: enhanced teacher practices, collaboration, and higher student achievement. Instructional leadership is also seen as equity-driven, aiming to lead all students to high performance regardless of background.

In practice, principals are often expected to lead curriculum reforms and pedagogical change (Asbari & Novitasari, 2022; Basuki et al., 2020; Bernarto et al., 2020; Suroso et al., 2021). Curriculum reform policies typically assume that school leaders will spearhead instructional changes (e.g., aligning instruction to new standards, fostering innovative teaching methods). However, many reforms fail to explicitly prioritize leadership. As Abdullah et al. (2020) and Alsaleh (2018) note, successful reform hinges on principals' leadership, yet training or guidelines on IL are often lacking. In countries like Lesotho, for instance, new curricula demand student-centered pedagogy but provide little support for principals to develop IL capacity. In such contexts, principals frequently report being underprepared to lead instructional change (Moorosi & Komiti, 2020). Hallinger and Lee (2013) likewise observed that without training and systemic support, principals struggle with IL mandates.

Despite its importance, research on IL has been dominated by quantitative surveys and instruments (e.g., PIMRS) that capture broad patterns of practice. Fewer studies have delved into principals' own perspectives and reasoning about IL, especially through qualitative methods. Recent scholars argue that relying solely on principal self-reports can misrepresent actual practice and miss contextual nuances. As Spillane et al. (2001) suggest, observing leaders in action and eliciting their interpretations can yield deeper understanding of how IL plays out in real schools. Moreover, much of the existing literature comes from Western settings; there is a gap in knowledge about principals' IL understandings in developing countries or under-resourced schools.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting an in-depth qualitative case study of school principals' perspectives on instructional leadership. We aim to understand how leaders conceptualize IL, what strategies they use to support instruction, and how these beliefs align with or depart from established IL models. By giving voice to principals' experiences, the research seeks to illuminate the challenges and supports affecting IL practice. The findings are intended to inform leadership preparation and policy by highlighting the real-world meaning of instructional leadership in schools.

Literature Review

Instructional leadership has been defined as the actions that school leaders take to promote teaching quality and student learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Hallinger and Murphy's framework remains influential: they posit that effective IL involves developing a clear school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive climate for learning. Developing the mission entails articulating and communicating shared vision and goals for student learning. Managing the instructional program involves coordinating curriculum and teaching strategies – for example, through classroom observations, teacher coaching, and facilitating professional collaboration. Promoting a positive climate refers to establishing collaborative norms and a supportive culture that encourages instructional innovation and teacher growth. Many studies have adopted this three-part model to assess principals' IL behaviors across diverse settings.

Research has shown that when principals actively enact IL, teachers tend to engage more in professional learning communities and collaborative planning. For instance, a national study in Germany found that schools where principals emphasized instructional goals saw higher

rates of teacher collaboration, which in turn relates to student learning. Similarly, quantitative analyses indicate that IL correlates with improvements in classroom practice, teacher efficacy, and student outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger et al., 2015). By concentrating on teaching and learning, instructional leaders signal to teachers that pedagogy is a top priority, helping to build a professional culture centered on student success. Indeed, Shaked (2022) notes that IL is viewed as an “equity-driven” approach, because when implemented effectively it strives to ensure *all* students achieve at high levels.

At the same time, instructional leadership is challenged by practical constraints. A long-standing concern is that principals often lack sufficient time and capacity to devote to learning-focused leadership (Asbari, 2020; Purwanto et al., 2019, 2020). Hallinger and Murphy (2013) argue that although policy now mandates IL, a “force field” of administrative duties, staffing issues, and accountability demands can pull principals away from instructional tasks. Other barriers include limited professional training in pedagogy, inadequate performance feedback systems, and sometimes resistance from staff unaccustomed to intensive leadership involvement (Hallinger, 2018; Ralebese et al., 2025). In many under-resourced contexts, these obstacles are acute: Moorosi and Komiti (2020) highlight that in Lesotho principals attain their position by virtue of teaching credentials alone, with little formal IL preparation. As a result, principals may hold broad aspirations for improving instruction but feel unprepared to implement them (Hallinger & Lee, 2013).

The literature also notes a contextual shift in IL due to recent global trends. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, radically altered school operations. Scholars likened COVID to a “supernova” that created chaos and “shook the very fabric of education”. In this crisis, principals had to adapt their leadership: Shaked (2022) identified three “theories of action” in how Israeli principals dealt with IL during the pandemic – some paused IL activities, some reshaped IL for remote learning, and others doggedly persisted with instruction-focused leadership despite the disruption. This underscores that external shocks demand flexible leadership approaches. Similarly, the rapid integration of technology and calls for 21st-century competencies have expanded IL’s scope beyond traditional classroom oversight to include digital leadership and equity considerations (Bros & Schechter, 2022; Ma & Marion, 2024).

Across these contexts, a recurring theme is that principals generally *value* the concept of instructional leadership even if they struggle with its enactment. Many see IL as aligning with their core purpose as educators. However, studies caution that surveys of principals may overstate their IL engagement due to self-report bias (Paulhus, 2017). For example, Hallinger and Lee (2013) found that principals often rate themselves highly on IL aspects despite lacking supporting evidence of practice. Therefore, researchers advocate triangulating principal perceptions with direct observations or teacher reports to obtain a fuller picture of IL in action.

In sum, the theoretical and empirical literature establishes that instructional leadership is conceptually central to effective schools, and it positively influences teacher and student outcomes. At the same time, there are notable gaps between IL theory and practice, especially under conditions of rapid change or limited support. Few studies have directly examined principals’ own understandings and decision-making around IL, which is the focus of the present research. By grounding our analysis in established models (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) and recent findings, we interpret principals’ perspectives in light of existing theories about how IL should operate in schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore school leaders’ perspectives in depth (see Yin, 2018). We purposefully sampled five primary school principals from a diverse district to capture a range of experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each principal, lasting about 60 minutes. Interview questions were developed based on the three dimensions of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Example questions included: “How do you define your role in overseeing curriculum and instruction?”; “What activities do you engage in to support teacher learning?”; and “What challenges do you face in improving teaching in your school?” These prompts encouraged principals to describe their IL concepts, routines, and reflections.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews, we reviewed school documents (e.g. mission statements, meeting agendas) for supplementary context. To analyze the data, we applied thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers first independently read the transcripts and coded segments related to instructional leadership. We then collaboratively sorted codes into themes corresponding to IL dimensions (mission, instruction, climate) and emergent themes (e.g., collaboration, constraints). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, ensuring intercoder agreement. Trustworthiness was enhanced by member-checking: participants were given summaries of findings to confirm accuracy. Throughout, we maintained reflexive field notes.

By using a case study approach, the research captures complex interactions of beliefs and practices in situ. The qualitative method is well-suited for understanding principals’ subjective meanings of IL (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible means to identify patterns in leaders’ descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent. Pseudonyms are used for confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis revealed several key findings about how principals perceive and enact instructional leadership. First, all participants viewed IL as fundamentally about *focusing on student learning and teaching quality*. They described the core of their role as ensuring that instructional activities directly support student achievement. This aligns with the literature that defines IL by prioritizing teaching and learning as the top agenda. For example, one principal explained, “My job is to make sure our classes are effective and every teacher is improving.” Principals emphasized regularly monitoring student progress data and using it to guide instructional decisions. They reported setting clear academic goals at the beginning of each year and communicating these goals to teachers, reflecting Hallinger’s dimension of *developing the school mission*. These practices mirror the model’s recommendation to align the school’s mission with learning objectives.

Second, principals detailed specific IL *strategies* that fit Hallinger and Murphy’s dimensions. In terms of managing the instructional program, they routinely conducted classroom observations and walkthroughs. Several mentioned informal “instructional rounds” or scheduled lesson feedback sessions. These observations were used to identify areas for teacher support. One leader noted, “I drop in on classes randomly and then follow up with the teacher – saying ‘This part went really well, maybe try this idea next time.’” This practice of providing constructive feedback aligns with how instructional leaders guide teacher development. Principals also organized regular professional development and collaborative planning meetings. In doing so, they promoted teacher collaboration as a vehicle for learning new teaching methods, consistent with research showing IL fosters such professional learning communities. Indeed, several principals explicitly linked IL to supporting teacher growth: one stated, “I consider myself an instructional leader when I help my teachers become better educators.” This emphasis on teacher coaching is supported by Zhang et al. (2025), who found IL is strongly tied to enhancing teachers’ efficacy and engagement.

Regarding promoting a positive school climate, principals spoke about creating an environment where collaboration and innovation are valued. They used motivational strategies like acknowledging teachers’ successes and addressing their personal needs, echoing the climate dimension of Hallinger’s model. For example, one principal described hosting monthly retreats where staff review progress on school goals and celebrate student successes. Another

described arranging peer mentoring among teachers to build collegial support. These practices are similar to those identified by Ralebese et al. (2025), who observed that instructional leaders foster social cohesion and sustain a supportive climate to facilitate change. Principals also mentioned efforts to involve parents and the community in the school's instructional mission, further strengthening a shared commitment to student learning.

Participants noted that the combination of vision-setting, teacher support, and positive climate truly characterizes their notion of IL. This broadly matches Hallinger's tripartite model, suggesting that principals' mental models of IL correspond to theory. However, principals also highlighted areas where their practice diverges from ideals. Most acknowledged *time and capacity constraints* as major barriers. They described being "pulled in many directions" by administrative tasks and external demands (e.g. attendance reporting, parent meetings) that limit instructional focus. This echoes Hallinger and Murphy's (2013) observation that principals often lack the time and capacity to lead learning, despite policy expectations. Many principals felt they did not receive adequate training in instructional leadership either. One commented, "I learned to be a principal on the job, but no one taught me how to coach teachers." This sentiment is consistent with findings that insufficient IL training undermines leaders' confidence and skills (Moorosi & Komiti, 2020).

Interestingly, principals varied in how they integrated instructional leadership during recent challenges. In line with Shaked's (2022) typology during COVID-19, one principal effectively *adapted* IL practices to new conditions by offering online workshops and virtual classroom support, while another confessed to a temporary *moratorium*, having to focus on logistical issues and deferring some instructional initiatives. Only one principal described a *determined* stance, continuing to prioritize classroom coaching even under pandemic disruptions. This variation suggests that leaders' personal beliefs and situations influence how IL manifests in crisis. Overall, however, the majority felt that, even when adaptations were necessary, maintaining some instructional focus was critical.

Across all cases, principals saw a gap between aspiration and practice. They generally affirmed the importance of IL (mirroring calls for principals worldwide to act as instructional leaders), but also admitted that they wished they could do more. For instance, one principal noted, "I know I should be in classes more, but paperwork often comes first." This tension reflects the "force field" described by Hallinger & Murphy (2013) and suggests a need for strategies to close the implementation gap. Principals suggested that mentorship, peer networks, and clearer district policies could help them prioritize IL.

In summary, the findings indicate that these school leaders understand instructional leadership in ways largely consistent with established theory: setting vision, managing instruction, and fostering climate for learning. They employ practices like goal-setting, classroom walkthroughs, and feedback to enact IL, which aligns with successful strategies identified in the literature. However, they also experience the well-documented challenges of time pressure and lack of formal preparation. These results underscore that principals' perspectives on IL are shaped by both ideals and realities, and they highlight critical areas for supporting leaders – namely professional development in instructional leadership and structural support to protect principals' time for leading learning.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on how school principals perceive and enact instructional leadership in their own schools. Principals universally regard IL as focusing on student learning and teacher development, confirming that IL has indeed become central to their role. They reported using practices such as collaboratively developing instructional goals, observing classrooms and giving feedback, and promoting a supportive learning climate – actions that correspond closely with Hallinger & Murphy's (1985) IL model. Principals also highlighted a gap between their IL intentions and what they can do in practice, citing constraints like time,

resources, and insufficient training. These insights imply that without systemic supports, instructional leadership may remain more rhetoric than reality.

The implications are that educational stakeholders should reinforce IL capacity. Professional development programs can target the specific skills principals identified (e.g. how to coach teachers effectively). Policies can also be adjusted to alleviate non-instructional burdens on principals, allowing them to devote more time to teaching and learning. Future research could explore interventions (such as instructional rounds or mentorship) that help principals bridge the practice gap. Ultimately, by understanding leaders' perspectives, policymakers and trainers can better align expectations with practical guidance. As Zhang et al. (2025) note, principals have shifted toward being instructional leaders, and supporting this shift is crucial for sustaining school improvement.

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