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Boundaries of Israeli Assistant Principals’ Instructional Leadership

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Abstract
Whereas school principals’ instructional leadership has received research attention, assistant principals’ instructional leadership role has been relatively neglected. The current research explored those instructional leadership responsibilities that assistant principals do not perform. Data collection included interviews with a diverse sample of 34 Israeli assistant principals. Data analysis was a four-stage process of condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. This study emphasizes the need for a framework that specifically defines the instructional responsibilities of assistant principals, possibly while excluding instructional practices that involve strategic leadership, authority, and personnel management. Implications and further research are discussed.

Recent decades have witnessed researchers’, policymakers’, and practitioners’ urgent calls upon school leaders to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Instructional leadership can be defined as an educational leadership approach whereby school leaders are actively involved in a wide range of activities aiming to improve teaching and learning for all students (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Simply put, instructional leadership requires school leaders to focus their efforts directly onto the core activities of schooling—teaching and learning—which affect student achievement (Neumerski, 2012). According to this approach, top priority should be given to student learning and academic results, while everything else is of lesser priority (Rigby, 2014).

In practice, both head principals and assistant principals, as central members of the school leadership team, face demands to demonstrate instructional leadership (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017). However, the literature on instructional leadership has focused mainly on head principals (Hallinger, 2011), while relatively neglecting assistant principals’ instructional leadership roles and responsibilities (Garrard, 2013; Norton, 2015). Available research on assistant principals is limited, both regarding their educational leadership role in general (Lee, Kwan, & Walker, 2009) and their instructional leadership practices in particular (Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, & Wang, 2017).

Specifically, the research literature has not yet discussed those aspects of the widely recommended instructional leadership role in which assistant principals should or should not be involved, and, likewise, those aspects in which they are actually involved in schools. Although quite a few scholars have explored the scope of instructional leadership responsibilities among head principals (Blase & Blase, 2004; Duke, 1987; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016; Sheppard, 1996; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010), the scope of assistant principals’ instructional leadership has not been investigated to date (Rhonda, 2016; Whitteman, 2013). To narrow this gap in the existing literature, the current study aimed to map out those particular areas of the instructional leadership role in which assistant principals do not become involved, to identify which areas assistant principals perceive as outside their purview.

The current study on the boundaries of instructional leadership as perceived by assistant principals was conducted in the Israeli context. The role of the assistant principal is not well defined...
in Israel. There is no job description or delineation of duties. At the same time, the authority of the assistant principal is not clear, too. Specific responsibilities and powers vary greatly depending on the school (Arar, 2014). While the Israeli education system is entering an era of standardization and accountability (Oplatka, 2017), the head principal is the only one who is accountable to the authorities for the school’s functioning and results, while the assistant principal has no more accountability than any other school teacher.

Practically, the Israeli Ministry of Education (2009) recommended that the responsibilities and tasks of assistant principals should ensue from the definition of school principals’ responsibilities presented by Capstones (2008), the institute spearheading school principals’ development in Israel. According to this definition, the primary role of Israeli school principals is to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve all students’ education and learning. Four additional areas of management support this function: designing the school’s future image by developing a vision and bringing about change; leading the staff and nurturing its professional development; focusing on the individual; and managing the relationship between the school and its surrounding community (Capstones, 2008). The Israeli Ministry of Education (2009) endorsed dialogue between the principal and assistant principal concerning the Capstones (2008) definition, in order to determine the assistant principal’s areas of responsibilities and tasks to undertake. Decisions about the assistant principal’s duties and their scope should be made according to the unique characteristics and needs of each school, based on the discretion of the school principal regarding the priorities required in the given local context. However, it should be noted that these Israeli Ministry of Education and Capstones recommendations provide no clear, explicit guidelines concerning the exact areas of instructional leadership for which Israeli assistant principals should take responsibility.

The current study seeks an answer to the question of which areas of instructional leadership assistant principals are reluctant to perform. As a platform for this study, the following section first conceptualizes instructional leadership in head principals. Thereafter, instructional leadership in assistant principals is discussed. Finally, the authority and powers of assistant principalship in general are examined. These literatures are utilized to broaden the existing knowledge about functions of instructional leadership that remain solely the responsibility of head principals, without involvement of assistant principals.

**Instructional leadership in head principals**

Present-day school head principals are expected to become instructional leaders, facilitating the improvement of teaching and learning (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; May & Supovitz, 2011; Walker & Slear, 2011). Research has discovered clear linkage between principals’ instructional leadership and their students’ achievements (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). The effect of an instructional leadership approach on student outcomes was found to be three to four times as great as that of the transformational leadership approach, which involves motivating and inspiring followers and holding positive expectations for them (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Thus, scholars contend that contemporary school principals should enact instructional leadership as one of their core responsibilities (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Neumerski, 2012). The requirement for principals to assume responsibility for instructional leadership has been spreading across educational systems throughout the world (Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Park & Ham, 2016).

Over the years, researchers have provided a multitude of frameworks to capture instructional leadership in head principals (Blase & Blase, 2004; Duke, 1987; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016; Sheppard, 1996; Supovitz et al., 2010). The conceptual framework of instructional leadership presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) is one of the most widely used in research (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Hallinger, Wang, & Chen, 2013). This framework consists of three dimensions for this leadership role, which are delineated into ten instructional leadership functions: (1) The dimension of defining the school mission incorporates two functions: framing the school’s goals and communicating the school’s goals. The principal is responsible for ensuring a clear mission, which focuses
on all students’ academic progress, and for disseminating this mission carefully to staff. (2) The
dimension of managing the instructional program includes three functions: coordinating curriculum,
supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. This dimension focuses on
the principal’s role in coordinating and controlling the school academic program. (3) The dimension
of developing a positive school learning climate is broadest in scope, including five functions:
protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learning,
promoting professional development, and maintaining high visibility.

Summarizing existing research related to the practices that principals use to enact instructional
leadership, Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) pointed to five main domains: building and
sustaining a school vision that establishes clear learning goals and garners school-wide—and
even community-wide—commitment to these goals; sharing leadership by developing and count-
ing on the expertise of teacher leaders to improve school effectiveness; leading a learning
community that provides meaningful staff development; gathering data for utilization in instruc-
tional decision-making; and monitoring curriculum and instruction by spending time in class-
rooms in order to effectively encourage curriculum implementation and quality instructional
practices.

Four distinct paths, along which the influence of successful school leadership practices can flow in
order to improve student learning and academic, were described by Leithwood, Jingping, and Pollock
(2017). These paths are rational (knowledge and skills of teachers about curriculum, teaching, and
learning); emotional (how teachers feel about their job, their ability to make a difference, their and
their colleagues’ commitment levels); organizational (structures, policies, and culture surrounding
learning); and family (the involvement of family members in student learning and the school). Each of
these four paths is populated by key conditions. Selecting the most promising conditions, a task
requiring knowledge of both relevant research and local context, and improving their status are among
the central challenges faced by school leaders intending to better student learning and results.

Instructional leadership in assistant principals

Traditionally, assistant principals are heavily involved in the schools’ day-to-day operations. These
individuals may be the ones who arrange a replacement for an absent teacher, keep order in the
cafeteria, and deal with discipline problems (Norton, 2015). However, as schools face an era of
greater accountability, assistant principals’ role in monitoring teachers on raising academic results
has become more imperative (Arar, 2014; Bukoski, Lewis, Carpenter, Berry, & Sanders, 2016).
Inasmuch as standardized testing continues to assume a prominent place in education systems,
the principal is no longer capable of facing the growing requirements and expectations for school
effectiveness alone; the assistant principal must help in meeting the constant demand for improving

However, only a few studies have directly explored the instructional leadership responsibilities
and practices of assistant principals, mostly in unpublished doctoral dissertations (e.g., Atkinson,
2013; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Rhonda, 2016; Whiteman, 2013). The limited available findings have shown
that both head principals and assistant principals perceive the latter as exhibiting instructional
leadership behaviors at a high frequency (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017). In addition, both head principals
and assistant principals reported more engagement in instructional leadership responsibilities and
felt more pressured under the current era of accountability and state assessment than before
(Howard-Schwind, 2010). Thus, it appears that assistant principals may actually be regarded as
instructional leaders who work to improve teaching and learning, but what remains unknown is
what boundaries may characterize their actual instructional leadership practices (Garrard, 2013; Leaf
& Odhiambo, 2017).
The complexity of assistant principalship

As mentioned above, in contrast to the large number of studies relating to the principal's role and contribution to school performance, research has been limited exploring the assistant principal's considerable influence on the development of well-performing schools (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Bukoski et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2009; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Read, 2011). Little research has attempted to provide a full "conceptual framework of understanding assistant principalship" in general (Lee et al., 2009, p. 188). Thus, the assistant principal is referred to in the literature as the "forgotten leader" (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004, p. 225).

From the school's micro-politics perspective (Ball, 2014), the positioning of assistant principals as number two in the hierarchal system holds intrinsic complexity because it is devoid of the status that the position of principal entails (Petrides, Jimes, & Karaglani, 2014). In comparison with school principals, assistant principals have much less access to sources of influence. Coercion, reward, and legitimate powers are reserved to the principal (Oliver, 2005). Assistant principals are expected to provide support—both personal and professional—to the principal, while also standing at the front lines to face various challenges (Williams, 2012). Although assistant principals are members of the principal's inner circle and an active party to school decision-making processes (Fields & Egley, 2005), they are constrained by the political dynamics of their school structure, which leaves them as marginalized leaders (Garrard, 2013; Norton, 2015). Thus, the position of the assistant principal in the organizational hierarchy is inherently conflictual (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009).

This fundamental ambiguity in the role of assistant principals invites different interpretations and expectations on the side of the principal, the professional and managerial staff, the community, the parents, and the students (Craft, Malveaux, Lopez, & Combs, 2016; Mertz, 2006). In addition, assistant principals have been cited in educational research as feeling unprepared for their leadership role, noting a lack of training that specifically targets their daily tasks (McDaniel, 2017; Pate, 2015). Research has shown that while assistant principals desire and recognize the need for meaningful, relevant professional development (Allen & Weaver, 2014), they express concerns related to time demands and to the contents of such development activities (Oliver, 2005). Few professional development programs are available specifically focusing on the needs of assistant principals, and in fact, "assistant principals are rarely afforded the breadth of professional development opportunities that teachers and principals receive" (Oleszewski et al., 2012, p. 267).

Given the ambiguity of assistant principals' official instructional-leadership role definitions (Capstones, 2008; Israeli Ministry of Education, 2009), along with the complexity of their managerial/leadership role as number two in the hierarchal system (Petrides et al., 2014), and in light of the crucial role attributed to them by preliminary research for collaborating with the head principal to implement instructional leadership (Atkinson, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2010), the current study investigated the limits of instructional leadership perceived by Israeli assistant principals in their elementary and middle schools.

Method

This qualitative study was designed to provide rich textual descriptions of the complexities depicting participants' instructional leadership. Interview methodology and content analysis explored the meanings that participants attached to their instructional leadership role (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of the data, maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell, 2014), also known as heterogeneous sampling, was used. This purposive sampling technique captures a wide range of perspectives, gaining greater insights into a phenomenon by contemplating it from various angles (Merriam, 2009).

Participants

Maximal differentiation sampling was implemented regarding assistant principals' gender, age, years of work experience, education, ethnicity, school level (elementary/middle), school community's
socioeconomic status, and school district. The study sample did not begin with a set number of participants but rather developed on an ongoing basis as the study progressed (Taylor et al., 2016), yielding a final maximally diverse sample of 34 assistant principals involved in improving teaching/learning.

Altogether, 59 assistant principals were approached, of whom 37 consented to undergo interviews. Of these 37 interviewees, 34 were found who could represent diverse sampling. The final sample of 34 participants comprised 25 females and 9 males. The majority (n = 31) held a masters degree, and 3 held a bachelors. On average, they had 22 years of educational experience (SD= 5.93; range: 8–34), including nine years as assistant principals (SD= 5.85; range: 2–24). They were assistant principals of 26 elementary schools and eight middle schools, spanning all seven Israeli school districts. Table 1 summarizes study participants’ demographic information.

### Table 1. Study participants’ demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseud Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Experience as Assistant Principal</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Education</th>
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Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with the interviewer developing and using an “interview guide” (i.e., a list of questions and topics to be covered) which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Key questions were preplanned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses whenever possible.

The issues discussed during the interview concerned the practices that assistant principals did or did not employ to improve teaching and learning. Particularly to determine the boundaries of
participants’ instructional leadership activity, the interview sought to reveal in which instructional leadership areas assistant principals reported involvement, and in which areas they reported lack of involvement and for what reason. The term “instructional leadership” was not mentioned by the interviewer, in order to avoid priming interviewees to frame their discussions in terms of this concept. Instead, interviewees were asked about their engagement in activities aiming to improve instruction. Sample questions included: As an assistant principal, what are your priorities in your work? Who is responsible for ameliorating teachers’ practices in your school—and how is that done? What is your most powerful strategy for bettering instruction? What actions that ensure the best academic performance of your school are you authorized to do? What steps that create a high-performing teaching team are not under your responsibility? What actions related to improving teaching quality do you not engage in, and why? These questions led the interviewees to describe their instructional leadership, pointing to instructional leadership behaviors from which they consistently kept away.

All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the study at any point in time. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (pseudonyms were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent based on their understanding of the purpose of the study. The interviews generally lasted one hour and were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis.

**Data analysis**

The data analysis in this study was a four-stage process of condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. At first, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), choosing interviewees’ relevant utterances about instructional leadership. At the second stage—coding—each utterance was coded according to the aspect that it represented (Tracy, 2013). This stage was both data-driven and theory-driven, as it was based on a-priori codes as well as on inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants regarding instructional leadership (Flick, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After having captured the essence of utterances in the second stage, the third stage—categorizing—consisted of assembling similar utterances into clusters in order to generalize their meanings and derive category definitions. Finally, the theorizing stage aimed to reach a conceptual construct of the categories derived in the previous stage, and to see how they were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of one abstract construct (Richards & Morse, 2013).

A member check (Koelsch, 2013) was conducted to properly evaluate soundness of the data. Thus, all participants’ transcripts were sent back to them, along with a request that they evaluate their responses and make any necessary additions or modifications. This strategy facilitated the examination of the descriptive data versus participants’ reactions, thus endorsing and solidifying principals’ perceptions regarding instructional leadership. During the member-check procedure, 14 out of 34 interviewees (41.1%) changed their answers, clarifying their former remarks or adding to to them.

In addition, attention was directed, as in any qualitative exploration, to the potential influences that researchers’ background and personal experience may exercise on the theoretical and methodological perceptions concerning the present inquiry. Inasmuch as reflective journals have been recognized as an important aspect of qualitative research (Etherington, 2004; Ortlipp, 2008), I wrote a personal reflective research log throughout the study to ensure critical thinking. Furthermore, a panel of three educational leadership professors was formed to evaluate and comment on my research assumptions, providing additional optional perspectives regarding data interpretation.

**Findings**

At the focus of the current study, qualitative data analysis revealed that, beyond their reported areas of activity, the participating assistant principals perceived themselves as consistently refraining from
three types of instructional leadership activities: those involving strategic leadership, those involving authority, and those involving personnel management. Importantly, the assistant principals’ avoidance of these three activity areas was by agreement with their principals. Assistant principals did not express a sense that their principals were not allowing them access to those roles, and at the same time they did not describe themselves as refusing to perform tasks expected of them by their principals. Assistant principals were not interested in engaging in these activities, and their principals agreed to this. The interview data regarding these out-of-bounds types of instructional leadership activities are presented below, supported by participant excerpts. Table 2 captures the number and percentage of participants mentioning each type.

### Activities involving strategic leadership

Over half of the interviewees (19 participants; 55.8%) reported that they did not engage in instructional leadership activities that they deemed were in the compass of strategic leadership. They left activities that required taking responsibility for the “big picture” to their principals. One such strategic-leadership-related instructional leadership area that assistant principals did not undertake was the establishment of the school’s instructional mission. When it came to setting the school’s instructional goals and objectives, assistant principals perceived themselves as not standing at the forefront. Their interview responses clearly revealed that they saw the principal as in complete charge of the process of setting school goals, while they saw themselves mostly as advisers. For example, Donald, with 18 years of teaching experience, including three years as an assistant elementary school principal, said: “The principal, not me, is responsible for establishing a vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students. I’m definitely in a fairly senior position at school, but I’m number two rather than number one.” Similarly, Bob, with 26 years of teaching experience, including 12 years as an assistant middle school principal, commented: “The principal leads our staff collaboratively to build the school’s vision around student achievement. This is her job, not mine.”

Inasmuch as the creation of the school vision was seen as beyond the assistant principals’ range of responsibility, when their principal did not prioritize instructional improvement, study participants felt limited in their ability to render change in this area. Elizabeth, with 32 years of teaching experience, including 19 years as an assistant elementary school principal, described herself as believing deeply in the importance of improving instruction but as largely constrained in her ability to contribute to her school’s teaching and learning because of her principal’s lack of focus on this goal: “It’s impossible to significantly advance school processes that the principal doesn’t fully believe in. It’s clear to me that pedagogy is the most significant thing, but as long as my principal is not entirely with me, I can’t really promote it.”

In particular, assistant principals considered the principal as solely responsible for the connection between the extra-school world and the school’s instructional mission. This external world included the school board as the immediate formal authority and employer of both the principal and school staff; the parents, either as individuals or in the form of a parents’ committee as an organized actor; policymakers at the national and regional levels; and the local community. The current interviewees considered it the principal’s “business” to work with all these stakeholders as partners for creating an instructional vision and to communicate the existing vision to them. Linda, with 17 years of teaching experience, including four years as an assistant elementary school principal, explained: “I believe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Instructional Leadership Activities</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities involving strategic leadership</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities involving authority</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities involving personnel management</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I will be a school principal one day, and probably it will be pretty soon, but for now everything that is related to external relations—only the principal deals with it.” Unlike some other assistant principals who said they were not interested in becoming principals, Linda viewed her role as a stepping-stone to becoming principal. However, as long as she remained assistant principal, she planned on leaving the relations with the extra-school world to her principal.

Another aspect of strategic leadership that interviewees reported frequently leaving to their principals was the task of leading instructional discussions. Assistant principals seldom led meetings and discussions, even when those meetings pertained directly to instructional issues for which they were responsible. Martha, with 22 years of teaching experience including nine years as an assistant middle school principal, explained: “I do a lot of one-on-one pedagogical work. But when it comes to meetings, it’s his [the principal’s] job to run them…. He does it well, but it’s not just that. It’s just something I don’t do.”

### Activities involving authority

Almost half of the study participants \( n = 16; 47.1\% \) indicated that activities involving activation of authority was another instructional leadership area that they often left to their principals. Assistant principals expressed the belief that the principal is the one person in the school who has both the right and the “clout” to tell people what to do and what not to do. Thus, one of the most prominent examples given by interviewees in relation to authority concerned the establishment of instructional guidelines. When it was necessary to set instructional guidelines for staff, assistant principals often asked their principal to issue those guidelines. These guidelines dealt with areas such as “Using a range of teaching methods and materials for inclusive teaching” (Anne, with 20 years of teaching experience, including seven years as an assistant middle school principal) or “Ensuring there is alignment between learning outcomes and teaching methods” (Deborah, with 24 years of teaching experience, including 10 years as an assistant elementary school principal).

Interviewees mentioned several motivations for seeking the principals’ authoritative position when transmitting rules or policies to the school staff. For example, Esther, with 29 years of teaching experience, including 16 years as an assistant elementary school principal, asserted that teachers responded with more deference to guidelines when issued by the principal than when issued by the assistant principal: “I have an excellent status at school, and I am very authoritative toward the teachers; however, as soon as the principal publishes instructions, they are treated differently.” Ebony, with 20 years of teaching experience, including four years as an assistant elementary school principal, emphasized the formality of the principal’s authority: “It’s not a matter of whether they obey my orders or not. These pieces [guidelines] govern the day-to-day occurrences that happen in our buildings, so they must be issued by the most senior person in the school.” Similarly, Kate, with 19 years of teaching experience, including five years as an assistant elementary school principal, believed that in regard to instructional policies there is no room for collaborative leadership: “I know that today we talk about ‘distributed’ leadership [making air quotes with her fingers]. However, school policies and procedures are the essential parts of any school, and so must be issued by the principal.” From this perspective, as the most authoritative figure in the school, the principal should lead from the top rather than the center.

Interviewees noted that even when they themselves had initiated instructional guidelines, they preferred the guidelines to be disseminated formally through the principal’s office. Pam, with 28 years of teaching experience, including nine years as an assistant middle school principal, explained the process: “The pedagogical guidelines that our principal sends to teachers are usually things I tell her to send. But I want them to come from her.” Likewise, Robert, with 18 years of teaching experience, including eight years as an assistant elementary school principal, claimed that he was the one who wrote the pedagogical instructions, and the principal only sent them: “In fact, the person who really promotes teaching and learning in our school is me. The role of the principal is only to make sure that people follow our pedagogical policy.”
An additional area that assistant principals left in the hands of principals was the handling of “rebellious” teachers who resisted the assistant principals’ instructional guidelines. Study participants considered themselves to be viewed by teachers with respect, to hold authority over teachers. They were not afraid to tell teachers what to do and even to scold them when they did not perform their jobs properly. However, when a teacher systematically did not follow their pedagogical instructions, assistant principals often involved the principal. Ruth, with 30 years of teaching experience, including 10 years as an assistant elementary school principal, described a veteran teacher whose fixed beliefs about teaching led her to resist new teaching methods aiming to improve student outcomes: “She didn’t agree to implement a pedagogical program that I led, claiming that we were wasting money on something that would be replaced in few years.” When the teacher continued to resist despite Ruth’s attempts to reason with her, Ruth asked the principal to talk to her: “Obviously, it’s much harder for teachers to say no to the principal. Hard cases I always transfer to his treatment. He’s the manager, so he’ll find a way to handle it.”

Similarly, assistant principals often asked their principals for approval of their instructional decisions, as shown in the following excerpts: “I am responsible for the professional development of the teachers, but before I finally decide on a course I make sure my principal thinks like me” (Barbara, with 22 years of teaching experience, including seven years as an assistant elementary school principal); “I do not decide on my textbooks alone, though I can. I want the principal to be my partner in the decision making” (Noah, with 20 years of teaching experience, including 11 years as an assistant elementary school principal); “I decided which students would receive scholastic help, but in any case of doubt I involved the principal” (Susan, with 19 years of teaching experience, including three years as an assistant middle school principal). These examples illustrate how assistant principals seek out their principal’s approval rather than feeling free to make decisions alone.

Activities involving personnel management

Another instructional leadership area that assistant principals usually did not handle, human resources management, was mentioned by 13 study participants (38.2%). Study participants believed that an instructional leader should make sure that only those who are able to provide good teaching become part of the school staff. They said that although they were involved in teacher selection and hiring, this area was clearly managed by the principal. Some assistant principals participated in screening resumes, interviewing, or observing candidates’ demonstration lessons. However, the final hiring authority was always the principal’s. Rachel, with 27 years of teaching experience, including two years as an assistant elementary school principal, clarified: “Hiring isn’t something our principal does solo. She invites mid-level leaders to participate in this process. However, it will be her culpability if the person turns out to be deficient, so the final decision is always hers. We’re just advisers.”

Interviewees reported that they were sometimes involved in teachers’ periodic performance evaluations or decisions about teachers’ tenure because the principal delegated some of his/her own evaluation responsibilities to them, but in these, too, final authority rested solely with the principal. To decide whether or not to grant tenure to a novice teacher, principals are expected to conduct classroom observations and to use their impressions from these observations as evidence for rating the teacher’s performance. Assistant principals sometimes helped their principal in observing lessons taught by probationary teachers and reporting their impressions to the principal. However, the decision remained the responsibility of the principal alone, who would complete the formal written evaluations and resolve tenure status.

Israeli principals are also asked to evaluate teachers who are candidates for promotion to higher salary ranks. Interviewees clearly left this task to their principals. Lisa, with 24 years of teaching experience, including 21 years as an assistant elementary school principal, explained: “Teacher evaluation is a very sensitive issue, which can cause real damage to interpersonal relations. The principal has no choice but to deal with it, but as long as I am not a principal, I run away from it.”
Monica, with 11 years of teaching experience, including four years as an assistant elementary school principal, justified why she was not in a position to carry out such evaluations despite her administrative role in the school: “I’m a teacher and she’s a teacher, so how can I evaluate her? The principal is above all of us, but I’m actually a teacher just like her.” This excerpt reflects many assistant principals’ view of themselves as equal to other teachers on staff, without considering their administrative role as granting them higher status than their teacher peers. From this perspective, there is a fundamental difference between the principal and the assistant principal. The principal is one level above everyone else, while the rest are at the same level.

The dismissal of ineffective teachers is actually difficult to perform in Israel because of the national unionized teacher tenure policy (Author, In press). Therefore, this potential instructional leadership strategy does not occur often in schools. However, the interviewees who did mention the process of dismissing a teacher as having been carried out in their schools clarified that the principal alone dealt with the firing, not the assistant principal. Stephanie, with 22 years of teaching experience, including 11 years as an assistant elementary school principal, explained: “Firing a teacher is something so unpleasant that I’m not really willing to deal with it. That’s why there’s a principal, so he’ll do these difficult things.” Assistant principals reported that they advised the principal regarding this matter and served as the principal’s confidante but did not consider themselves part of the decision.

Discussion

This article sought to identify the areas of nonengagement in assistant principals’ instructional leadership. Findings indicated that assistant principals perceived themselves as consistently refraining from three major types of instructional leadership activities: (a) those involving strategic leadership, such as shaping the school instructional mission, communicating it to the extra-school world, and leading meetings; (b) those involving authority, such as issuing instructional guidelines and setting boundaries for teachers; and (c) those involving personnel management, such as selecting new teachers, evaluating existing teachers, and firing ineffective teachers.

The current findings clearly show that the scope of assistant principals’ instructional leadership appears much narrower than that of principals. Principals and assistant principals who are involved together in their schools’ instructional leadership seem to engage in fundamentally different areas. Unfortunately, as noted above, the literature has not yet explicitly examined how the frameworks suggested for head principals’ instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 2004; Duke, 1987; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016; Sheppard, 1996; Supovitz et al., 2010) and how the methods utilized by principals to enact and exhibit instructional leadership (Stronge et al., 2008) may be manifested differently by assistant principals. The current qualitative outcomes provide unique preliminary evidence to begin delineating patterns of instructional leadership dynamics among the various leaders collaborating in schools.

Specifically, this study’s findings suggest that the positioning of assistant principals as number two in the school’s hierarchal system seriously limits the scope of their instructional leadership. Accordingly, their reported instructional leadership practices do not include activities characterized by leading the organization as a whole, exercising authority, conducting relationships with the world outside school, or managing personnel. These roles are left to the principal, who remains the ultimate leader of the school. As such, the current sample of assistant principals described a pattern of behavior corroborating prior research that pinpointed assistant principals’ much lower access to sources of power and influence than their principals (Oliver, 2005), as well as the marginalizing constraints imposed by the political dynamics of their school structure (Garrard, 2013; Norton, 2015). Thus, the instructional leadership of assistant principals may be seen as instructional sub-leadership, which lacks the power, status, and authority afforded by the principal position.

In the current era of accountability, head principals expect assistant principals to help them in monitoring teachers in order to improve student outcomes (Arar, 2014; Bukoski et al., 2016).
Inasmuch as the principal cannot face the growing requirements for school performance alone, the assistant principal must help in meeting the exigent demands for high achievement (Kwan & Walker, 2011; Oleszewski et al., 2012). However, findings of this study suggest that the influence of the assistant principal has not sufficiently evolved over recent years. Unlike the principal, assistant principals do not perceive themselves as possessing ample authority in the eyes of the school team. Assistant principals’ insufficient micro-political power among teachers appears to limit the scope of their instructional leadership practices. These findings raise several questions: Do assistant principals want to increase their influence? What makes assistant principals perceive their role in this way? How does the assistant principal’s role perception affect the school as a whole? Further studies are needed to answer these questions.

This study holds both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study emphasizes the need for a framework that specifically defines the instructional responsibilities of assistant principals, possibly while excluding instructional practices that involve strategic leadership, authority, and personnel management. The findings of this study advance a grounded theory regarding assistant principals’ instructional leadership preferences. Although assistant principals have a clear instructional perspective, they tend to choose actions that do not involve headship. While assistant principal may be seen as an entry-level position in instructional leadership, assistant principals do not wholeheartedly accept the position of leader, which entails the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. Thus, the existing frameworks for principals’ instructional leadership cannot fit assistant principals as is (Garrard, 2013). Rather, new instructional leadership frameworks should account for the complex division of roles in the school’s senior management team. According to this study’s findings, instructional leadership frameworks for assistant principals should not include the dimension of defining the school mission, which is the first dimension in Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) instructional leadership framework for principals, mentioned above, and corresponds to the first domain of Stronge, Richard, and Catano’s (2008) framework, building and sustaining a school vision. Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) functions of supervising and evaluating instruction, and coordinating curriculum, which is compatible with the fifth domain in Stronge et al.’s (2008) instructional leadership framework for principals, monitoring curriculum and instruction, are only partially implemented by assistant principals.

At the same time, this study’s findings may also be seen as a call to change the existing situation. Despite aggressive campaigns that have aimed to make instructional leadership a key component of the principal’s role (Prytula, Noonan, & Hellsten, 2013), recent studies have shown that the time principals devote to instructional leadership has not changed much in the last 40 years (Goldring et al., 2015; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Murphy et al., 2016). Thus, both scholars and practitioners should find ways to expand the instructional power of assistant principals. Without extending the instructional responsibilities of assistant principals, head principals alone will likely not be able to lead school transformation. To this end, understanding the professional development needs of assistant principals and designing appropriate training programs to help them lead improvements in teaching and learning may significantly enhance school success (McDaniel, 2017; Pate, 2015). Importantly, principals should give preference to the cultivation of assistant principals. Principals already spend a great deal of time and energy supporting their teachers and helping them grow professionally, and they need to spend the same amount of time and energy on the development of their assistant principals. Just working beside a principal each day is not enough; assistant principals need more intentional help to reach their potential (Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007).

Extending the instructional roles of assistant principals is important due to considerations about the present and considerations about the future. First, with regard to the present, assistant principals are often those figures in the school who act as the driving force behind attempts to improve teaching and learning quality, which can significantly influence student achievements (Barnett et al., 2012; Bukoski et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2009; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Read, 2011). Second, with regard to the future, in many cases school principals of tomorrow start out as the assistant principals of today (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Serving as assistant principals may be a preliminary landmark
along the professional path of school principals. Treating today’s assistant principals as potential future principals highlights the importance of providing them with varied explicit opportunities for gradual instructional leadership development. Put differently, the current division of labor is less than optimal in terms of facilitating assistant principals’ readiness to later take on the mantle of head principalship.

Compared with prior research, this study provides novel data on the instructional leadership of assistant principals. However, it has several limitations. First, the data were collected within a particular context, thereby requiring further study to test for cross-cultural validity. Study replication in various sociocultural contexts, in terms such as power distance (the extent to which the lower ranking individuals of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally), individualism (as opposed to collectivism), masculinity (as opposed to femininity), uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation would be advisable to allow for the findings’ generalization to broader populations and to substantiate their inter-contextual and international validity. Second, as with any self-reporting, the current methodology offered little control over the possibility that respondents may provide socially desirable responses. Further research could complement assistant principals’ self-reporting with more objective data on their instructional leadership practices, such as direct observation. Interviewing head principals or ordinary teachers about assistant principals’ instructional leadership may also complement assistant principals’ self-reporting. Third, future research would do well to explore if the findings of this study can be explained by study participants’ characteristics such as experience, professional development, or school characteristics. Longitudinal studies, including repeated data collection among the same assistant principals at different points in time during their career, would also be useful in revealing development of instructional leadership capacities.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**


