

Why Principals Sidestep Instructional Leadership

The Disregarded Question of Schools' Primary Objective

ABSTRACT: Principal educators' and policy makers' predominant expectation from school principals to serve as instructional leaders—who engage primarily in a wide range of activities that clearly focus on improving teaching and learning for all students—has scarcely been applied in practice by principals in today's schools. Researchers have found several reasons for this gap between professional recommendations and actual principal behavior. The current qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews with 41 Israeli principals, suggests one more explanation for today's reality of principals' limited engagement in instructional leadership: Some principals uphold a non-academic definition of schools' major goal—focusing on students' well-being, social skills, values, etc.—and thereby claim that improvements in teaching and learning should not be at the top of the school administrators' priorities. This goal as a possible mechanism underlying principals' noncompliance has not been investigated to date.

KEY WORDS: Instructional Leadership, School Principals, Goals of Education

In recent decades, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have called upon principals at the school site level to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012). Such leadership may be defined as “the effort to improve teaching and learning for PK–12 students by managing effectively, addressing the challenges of diversity, guiding teacher learning, and fostering organizational learning” (Brazer & Bauer, 2013, 650). Simply put, principals are expected to focus on promoting best instructional practices so that all students achieve academic success (Hallinger, 2011; Neumerski, 2012; Rigby, 2014).

Address correspondence to Haim Shaked, PhD, Hemdat Hadarom College of Education, Netivot, Israel, 8771302. E-mail: haim.shaked@hemdat.ac.il.

Yet, this widely voiced expectation that school principals should act as instructional leaders has only partially become a reality in actual schools. Research has indicated that while some school leaders do engage in instructional leadership and do consider improvements in teaching/learning as key components of their role, many other principals continue to treat curriculum and instruction as issues of secondary importance (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008). Many principals appear to devote a very limited amount of time to instruction-related activities (Hornig, Klaskik, & Loeb, 2010; May et al., 2012; May & Supovitz, 2011)—less time than advocated by leadership scholars and professional standards (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010).

Looking back at the decades-long professional campaign designed to make instructional leadership the principal's core responsibility, several renowned scholars (Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016, 462) recently asked: "Given considerable acknowledgment regarding the importance of instructional management and widespread, multi-action initiatives to ratchet up its importance in schools, why do researchers consistently document marginal improvement at best?" A few possible answers to this question have been suggested, as reviewed below (e.g., Camburn et al., 2010; Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016). The current study aimed to expand inquiry into possible reasons for this gap between professional recommendations and actual principal behavior.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Policy makers assume that after launching an educational policy, school teams will become familiar with it and adjust their practices to its guidelines while taking part in the necessary additional professional training; however, this cannot be taken for granted (Loeb, Knapp, and Elfers, 2008; Terhart, 2013). Gaps in implementation of policies may be understood through the concept of street-level bureaucracy, which was first presented by Lipsky (1969). In the end, policy implementation comes down to the street-level bureaucrats. These street-level bureaucrats are civil servants who interact and communicate with the general public. Inasmuch as they are responsible for making decisions that are appropriate for clients and their situations, they also use their own discretion. The use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats cannot be removed from everyday practice because of the complexity and uncertainty involved in human service work. Thus, policy implementation is not only a top-down process; in fact, street-level bureaucrats contribute to this process, leaving their "fingerprints" on policies received from above (Carrington, 2005; Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipski, 2010).

When it comes to school principals, the view of principals as local policy makers may serve as a framework for exploring gaps in policy implementation (Flessa, 2012; Levin & Datnow, 2012). School principals' position is basically that of standing at the school doorstep, between the extra- and intra-school worlds (Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet, 2011; Maxcy, Sung-tong, & Nguyen, 2010). As a mediating agent who must walk the tightrope between inside desires and capacities and outside demands and expectations (Schechter & Shaked, 2017; Louis & Robinson, 2012), the principal often determines whether the school will bridge or alternatively buffer external influences (Kohansal, 2015; Paredes Scribner, 2013; Rutledge, Harris, & Ingle, 2010). Different principals may relate to the exact same policy in different ways in terms of content, focus, and intensity (Koyama, 2014). They adhere to external guidelines; nevertheless, quite often they actually alter them to some extent (Diamond, 2012). They often interpret policy in idiosyncratic ways; thus they are justifiably not to be regarded as mere gatekeepers (Salter, 2014), but rather as local policy makers, who unofficially play an active role in adjusting external policy to suit their own perceptions (Spillane & Kenney, 2012).

The present study explores gaps in the implementation of instructional leadership policy. For this purpose, the following section will present the fundamentals of instructional leadership. The next section will discuss gaps in implementation of instructional leadership. To suggest a new explanation to this gap, the last section will deal with schools' primary objectives.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND BENEFITS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The instructional leadership framework arose from the close connections identified between teachers' quality of instruction and students' academic results (Murphy et al., 2016). Research findings have been clear: Teaching quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student outcomes (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Lewis, 2008). Namely, schoolchildren's achievements depend crucially on their teachers' effectiveness, more than many other school factors like curricular programs or student grouping patterns (Hattie, 2009; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). Such high-quality instruction, which is a prerequisite for the students' results that are especially valued in today's era of principals' accountability for school outcomes, requires constant nurturing and guidance by the school's instructional leader (Blase & Kirby, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

Instructional leadership may be explained succinctly as the principal's deep and direct involvement in teaching and learning. Principals who act as

instructional leaders are intensely involved in curricular and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement. Summarizing existing research on the methods that principals use to harness instructional leadership to meet their school goals, Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) culled five core domains: (a) building and sustaining a school *vision* that establishes clear learning goals and garners schoolwide—and even community-wide—commitment to these goals; (b) *sharing leadership* by developing and counting on the expertise of teacher leaders to improve school effectiveness; (c) leading a *learning community* that provides meaningful staff development; (d) *gathering data* for utilization in instructional decision making; and (e) *monitoring* and encouraging curriculum implementation and quality instructional practices by spending time in classrooms. Practically, as a leader of instructional change and improvement, the principal is expected to engage in activities such as “monitoring/observing instruction, school restructuring or reform, supporting teachers’ professional development, analyzing student data or work, modeling instructional practices. . . [and even] teaching a class” (Goldring et al., 2008, p. 340).

Research has established links between the principal’s instructional leadership behaviors and students’ achievements (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). Notably, the effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was found to be three to four times as great as that of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire, empower, and stimulate teachers (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). These empirical links between the principals’ involvement in instruction, the high quality of instruction, and students’ achievements have led to the broadly voiced call by scholars on contemporary school principals to view instructional leadership as their primary responsibility and top priority, on a consistent basis (Blase & Blase, 2004; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Murphy et al., 2016; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Neumerski, 2012; Robinson et al., 2008). Accordingly, educational systems’ demand for principals to assume central responsibility for instructional leadership has been spreading across the world (Rigby, 2014; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010).

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Despite researchers’, policy makers’, and educators’ substantial contribution to aggressive campaign efforts since the 1980s, which 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; Murphy et al., 2016). Although some principals do enact instructional leadership, many others do not

(Goldring et al., 2008). Investigating principals' daily logs, May and Supovitz (2011) found that the scope of principals' instructional leadership activities varied from one school to the next, but, on average, principals spent only 8% of their time on such activities. Similarly, Horng et al. (2010) reported that principals appear to allocate a limited percentage of their time to instruction-related activities such as day-to-day instruction tasks (6%) and more general instructional program responsibilities (7%). Exploring 100 urban principals across 3 school years, Grissom, Loeb, and Master (2013) also found that only 13% of principals' time was directed to instructional leadership. In each of two other studies, only 19% of principals' time was dedicated to providing instructional leadership in their schools (Camburn et al., 2010; May et al., 2012). Goldring and her colleagues (2008, 2015) concluded that although literature, policy, and rhetoric in the field have been calling on school leaders for decades to focus on instructional leadership, research suggests that principals are simply not picking up the mantle of instructional leadership.

Considering this gap between professionals' implementation of evidence-based, long-standing, multifaceted initiatives to increase principals' pursuit of instructional leadership in schools, in contrast to principals' real-time avoidance of these leadership behaviors, a major question arises: Why has so little progress been made? Three main barriers to progress have been mentioned in the literature. First, principals are said to lack sufficient time to engage directly in attempts to improve teaching and learning (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016), largely because of ongoing structural limits on principals' time that pressure them to attend to other issues like building operations or student affairs (Camburn et al., 2010). Moreover, while instructional leadership tasks require uninterrupted blocks of time for activities such as planning, writing, conferencing, observing, analyzing curriculum, and developing professional growth activities for staff, the average workday of principals is characterized by fragmentation of activities and brevity of attention to issues (Murphy et al., 2016; Prytula et al., 2013). Inasmuch as considerable time is spent on unplanned and crisis-oriented issues, principals' efforts to work on instructional matters seldom reach fruition during day-to-day school operations.

Second, principals have been described as lacking the explicit knowledge base and skill set needed to function as instructional leaders—their “instructional leadership content knowledge”—which refers to how students learn specific subjects, which teaching methods are effective in which contexts, and so forth (Goldring et al., 2015; Stein & Nelson, 2003). “Without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well . . . school leaders will be unable to perform essential school

improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development” (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 97).

Third, deep-seated organizational norms, which see instruction as a domain of teachers alone, push principals away from instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2015). These norms have been described as deterring principals from encroaching on the territory of teachers and relinquishing their position in the in-school hierarchy (Murphy et al., 2016, 462):

When school leaders “left teaching,” they immediately set themselves up as something different from teachers and an occupation different from teaching. They were no longer teachers. They did not want to be teachers. They were not in the teaching business . . . They were managers and administrators.

The current study found a fourth possible barrier to principals’ lack of progress in assuming the instructional leadership role, despite the widespread top-down pressures to do so: their perceptions about the ultimate, primary goal of schools. Therefore, the following section reviews the literature on schools’ primary objectives.

SCHOOLS’ PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

To explore principals’ perceptions about schools’ core responsibility, an initial discussion is needed concerning the gamut of functions that schools actually perform. Biesta (2009, 2014, 2016) identified three major functions of schools: qualification, socialization, and individuation. *Qualification* refers to providing children with the knowledge, skills, and understanding that will enable them to execute a wide range of actions. This function of schools ranges from provision of very specific qualification (e.g., training students for a particular skill or technique, or for a particular job or profession) to much more general qualification (e.g., when learners become acquainted with modern culture or Western civilization). Inasmuch as this function includes, among other things, preparing adults for the world of work, it is an important justification for funding public education, because by qualifying students, education contributes to economic growth.

Socialization refers to the many ways in which, through education, students become members of and part of a particular social, cultural, and political “order.” This function is sometimes actively pursued by schools, for example with regard to the transmission of particular norms and values or in relation to the continuation of particular religious traditions. However, even if socialization is not schools’ explicitly declared aim, it remains a major implicit function. For example, research has shown that schools typically convey a “hidden” curriculum, referring to norms, values, and

beliefs that are communicated in schools without aware intent (Jerald, 2006).

Individuation refers to encouraging students to remain independent of social, cultural, and political orders. This function hints to students that they need not simply be a “specimen of a more encompassing order” (Biesta, 2009, p. 40). However, it is debatable as to whether all education in fact contributes to such individuation.

These three school functions have implications for the role of the principal. For the *qualification* function, instructional leadership is required. Principals should engage in work that either directly or indirectly focuses on improving classroom teaching and student learning. They have to be hands-on leaders, who are engaged with curriculum and instruction issues work directly with teachers, and often present in classrooms. For the *socialization* and *individuation* functions, on the other hand, the principal does not need to be instructional leader. He/she should place emphasis on pleasant atmosphere, safe environment, good interpersonal relationships and students’ well-being.

Of these three school functions, what is the most important? Apparently, the public expects schools to perform qualification, socialization, and individuation simultaneously (Tichnor-Wagner & Socol, 2016). As Labaree (2010, 1) lamented about parents’ and community members’ expectations:

We want schools to provide us with good citizens and productive workers; to give us opportunity and reduce inequity; to improve our health, reduce crime, and protect the environment . . . The system never seems to work the way we want it to, but we never give up hope that one day it will succeed.

However, within the formal education system itself, the contemporary era of measurement and accountability in education is based on a belief that what matters most is academic outcome, that is, qualification. Today’s education policies focus on student achievement as measured by test performance: “In the end, every element of an effective accountability system must be evaluated by one and only one criteria: did it help students learn and achieve more than they might have without the system?” (Reeves, 2014, 1). One of the most prominent manifestations of this worldwide reliance on achievement tests is evident in the considerable influence wielded by international comparative studies such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) or the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Findings of these studies, which are intended to provide information about how national education systems perform academically compared to those of other countries, are widely

utilized by national governments to inform educational policy and funding (Baird et al., 2016; Engel & Frizzell, 2015). Thus, educational policy around the world today requires that schools focus primarily on assuring student learning and academic success (i.e., on the school's qualification function), particularly in a small number of curricular domains deemed crucial for twenty first century success, such as language, science, and mathematics (Hannaway & Hamilton, 2009; Hargreaves & Braun, 2013).

Similarly to Biesta (2009, 2014, 2016), other researchers have also sought to define possible goals of education. Based on Lamm (1976), Harpaz (2010, 2014) claimed that the super-goals of instruction are referred to as socialization, acculturation, and individuation. Each of these super-goals prioritizes one of the three foundations of the human experience— society, culture, and individual—and derives its goals from it. The goal of socialization is to socialize the students to a certain society through imparting certain behaviors that will help them function and succeed in it. Acculturation aims to impart not a specific mode of behavior but rather values and principles that will shape character traits and thus supervise behaviors. These values and principles are embodied in texts representing a preferred culture. Individuation differs essentially from the two previous super-goals in that through its prism, the image of The Educated Person is not related to a defined content, but rather to his/her fulfillment of his/her specific nature, or creation of his/her own unique world. According to Harpaz (2010, 2014) it is impossible to prioritize these three super-goals, however it is also impossible to combine them.

Altogether, the present study utilized these literatures on instructional leadership and on the main task of schools to understand why the intense prior efforts to foster principals' actual instructional leadership behaviors have been disappointing on the ground.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The national school system in Israel serves about 1.6 million students (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The Israeli State Education Law, which was enacted in 1953 and amended several times, outlines a variety of objectives for the public school system (The State of Israel, 2000). These objectives cover a very wide range of areas, reflecting the expectation that schools perform qualification, socialization, and individuation of students simultaneously (Labaree, 2010; Tichnor-Wagner & Socol, 2016). There is no explanation as to what is most, or more, important on this list, or how the different goals may correspond with one another. It is an ambiguous and vague policy; hence, its impact on principals' practices is limited

(Gibton, 2011). According to Blass (Blass, 2010; Blass & Adler, 2009), the current governmental-organizational Israeli system inevitably causes gaps between formal goals of education and actual reality. The process from policy making to the actual implementation of the policy is complex and can be affected by various factors.

Moreover, principals are not necessarily aware of this list. Instead, the primary role of Israeli school principals is determined by Capstones, the institute that determines the contents of principal preparation programs and of novice principals' mentoring in Israel. This institute explicitly voices the expectation that principals should serve as instructional leaders in order to improve the education and learning (i.e., qualification) of all students. Four additional managerial areas were recommended by Capstones (2008) to support this instructional leadership function: designing the school's future image—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 the surrounding community. These four managerial areas somewhat echo the aforementioned core domains of instructional leadership (Stronge et al., 2008), which also deal with building and sustaining a school vision that establishes clear learning goals, garnering wide commitment to these goals, and providing meaningful staff development.

METHOD

This study utilized qualitative interview methodology and content analysis to provide rich textual descriptions of the reasons why many school principals do not apply instructional leadership in their practice (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016).

PARTICIPANTS

Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of 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). Maximal differentiation sampling was implemented in this study regarding principals' sex, age, years of experience, education, school level (elementary, middle, high), and school community's socioeconomic status. Participants were recruited through regional superintendents. The study sample did not begin with a rigid number of participants, and it developed on an ongoing basis as the

study progressed (Taylor et al., 2016). Altogether, 63 school principals were approached, until 41 principals (13 males and 28 females) were obtained, who could represent diverse sampling. Participating principals had 8–36 years of educational experience ($M = 22.92$, $SD = 6.14$), which included 2–24 years of experience as principals ($M = 7.31$, $SD = 4.79$). Most of the 41 participants ($n = 30$) held a master's degree, with 10 principals holding only a bachelor's degree and 1 principal holding a Ph.D. Participants were principals of elementary schools ($n = 21$), middle schools ($n = 3$), and high schools ($n = 17$), working in all seven Israeli school districts.

INTERVIEW MEASURE AND PROCEDURE

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer developed and used an “interview guide” (i.e., list of questions and topics needing to be covered) that also enabled “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, 90). Key questions were pre-planned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses when possible.

The interview aimed to explore the reasons why principals do not demonstrate instructional leadership. However, it intentionally avoided mention of the term “instructional leadership” to prevent priming interviewees to frame their discussions in this light. Thus, the interview included questions such as: “As a principal, what are your priorities in your work?”; “If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?”; “Who is responsible for improving teachers’ practices in your school, and why?”; and “As a principal, how do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention—and why?”

For ethical reasons, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the study at any point in time (no one exited). They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (pseudo-names were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent, based on understanding of the research aim. Interviews, which generally lasted 1 hour, were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was a four-stage process—condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. First, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), seeking out the relevant utterances about schools’ main task and instructional leadership. At the second stage—coding—each segment of data (utterance) was coded according to

its meaning (Tracy, 2013). This stage, in contrast to the previous one, was data-driven and not theory-driven, as it was not based on a priori codes but rather on inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives about schools' main task and instructional leadership articulated by participants (Flick, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After having captured the essence of utterances in the second stage, in the third stage—categorizing—similar utterances were assembled into clusters in order to generalize their meanings and derive categories. 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).

To properly evaluate the soundness of the data, a member check (Koelsch, 2013) was also conducted: 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 allowed for 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 41 interviewees (34 percent) changed their answers, clarifying their former remarks or adding to them.

In addition, as in any qualitative exploration, attention was directed to how my background and personal experience might inform theoretical and methodological perceptions concerning the inquiry. 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, two educational leadership professors evaluated and critiqued my assumptions, providing additional perspectives regarding data interpretation.

FINDINGS

Our data analysis procedure revealed that many of the study participants' utterances corresponded to the three main reasons described in the literature for why principals do not enact instructional leadership: principals' lack of sufficient uninterrupted time, deficits in leadership content knowledge, and deep-rooted organizational norms (Camburn et al., 2010; Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016; Prytula et al., 2013). Regarding time constraints, for example, Naomi, an elementary school principal with nine years of experience, said: "*Principals cannot spend time in classrooms because of a lack of time and lack of control over how they spend their time.*" Regarding knowledge deficits, for instance,

David, an elementary school principal with four years of experience, depicted himself as having only limited relevant instructional knowledge: *"Before I was appointed here, I was a high school teacher, and the truth is that it's very different. Today I already know how to talk with younger children, but I'm still not really familiar with what and how they learn."* He explained that as a result, *"All the instructional issues are treated by my deputy."* Fredrick, a high school principal with 12 years of experience, expressed the organizational norms: *"Teachers know their work well. The principal should allow them to do their work by handling operations and discipline."* Although participants were not asked directly about their reasons for relegating instructional leadership behaviors to a low priority, 59% ($n = 24$) of the principals mentioned time constraints, 29% ($n = 12$) mentioned content knowledge deficits, and 36% ($n = 15$) mentioned norms.

In addition, a relatively large percentage of study participants, 39% ($n = 16$), mentioned a previously under-investigated source of explanations for why they were involved in instructional leadership only to a limited extent: their perception of school's main task. In their interviews, this substantial proportion of study participants claimed that principals should not be too focused on improving teaching and learning because ensuring students' learning and academic success is not the most important thing a school is to do. For these principals, a school's primary task is a non-academic one, i.e., to meet students' emotional needs, support their social integration, and impart moral values.

These interviewees ascribed primary importance to the school's role in developing students' emotional well-being, including their sense of belonging and safety, happiness in the present, and optimism regarding the future. Moreover, these principals often distinguished between "instruction" and "education," claiming that schools are indeed required to teach their students through academic instruction (i.e., qualification), but that their first and foremost goal should be to edify students by developing them morally and promoting their humanistic and adaptive character traits such as responsibility, self-control, integrity, decency, and good manners (i.e., socialization). Robert, a high school teacher with 21 years of experience, clarified this view: *"Yes, schools should teach students literacy, math, foreign languages and science, but above all and before anything else, we must foster personal responsibility and arouse a sense of mission."*

In particular, interviewees who emphasized school's main task as a non-academic one noted that a school is a mini-community reflecting the larger, more mature society. Therefore, these principals upheld that schools should give their students the social tools required to function within their society, for example, teaching students to navigate social interactions with

peers from different backgrounds and helping them become productive community members who work not only toward their own interests but also on behalf of public interests. Sandra, a principal of a religious high school with nine years of experience, asserted: “*Prioritizing students’ academic progress is based on a narrow point of view, which considers schools as only preparing students for college and the workforce. Raising young people of values is no less important.*” Similarly, Pamela, a principal of a religious elementary school with seven years of experience, distinctly disagreed with the emphasis given to grades and achievements: “*It is short-sighted to define a school’s success based on student achievements alone. Test scores are not all that matters.*” Indeed, principals of religious schools often drew attention to the school’s role in formulating a religious identity and imparting values (six out of eight principals of religious schools).

More broadly, these participants who espoused school’s chief non-academic aim claimed that schools play a significant role in preparing students for their future participation in the democratic process, in instilling loyalty to their homeland, and in increasing awareness concerning social justice. Jack, an elementary school principal with six years of experience as principal, explained his rationale for upholding this view:

Learning is very important, but it should be seen as a means to an end. We spend so much time measuring what our students know that we have so little time left to focus on who they are. We should not be surprised, then, if they become people we don’t like or respect, or if we end up worrying about their future contribution to society.

These interviewees who highlighted the non-academic aim of schooling emphasized that principals should devote time to ensuring that their schools “*promote pupils’ emotional well-being*” (Patricia, an elementary school principal with 12 years of experience), “*help students to become responsible and caring citizens*” (Susan, a high school principal with six years of experience), and “*develop students’ ability to distinguish between right and wrong*” (Austin, a high school principal with four years of experience). Not surprisingly, these participants described themselves as devoting a significant part of their time to humanistic value-driven leadership.

DISCUSSION

This study suggested a previously under-researched reason that may help to explain why many contemporary school principals continue to demonstrate very limited involvement in instructional leadership regarding curriculum and instruction, despite the widely voiced long-term advocacy of researchers and principal educators. As mentioned

above, the literature has proposed three main barriers to progress in this area: a small amount of time free of interference, the lack of needed pedagogical knowledge, and deeply implanted organizational norms (Camburn et al., 2010; Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016; Prytula et al., 2013). The current study outcomes uncovered a possibly prevalent fourth barrier: Principals who ascribe considerable importance to the non-academic, humanistic, socializing goals of schooling do not highly prioritize the domain of improvements in their schools' teaching and learning. This finding among 39% of interviewed participants indicates that many principals' reluctance to engage in instructional leadership activities does not necessarily result only from time constraints, lack of ability, or organizational norms but also may stem from perceptions about the main task facing schools today.

The instructional leadership approach's underlying premises regarding the desired ultimate goal of schooling have not yet been discussed in the extant literature. However, according to the current participants' perspective, this leadership approach is based on the conceptual underpinning that the ultimate responsibility of schools is to ensure students' learning and academic success. It is by virtue of this basic assumption—upholding that schools should first and foremost provide a wealth of knowledge and information, offering students a place in which to learn about new subjects and acquire learning skills—that principals are expected to focus their efforts on leadership behaviors geared toward improving teaching and learning through ongoing management of curriculum and instruction. In this context, the instructional leadership framework is consistent with the exigent outcome-based accountability environment, which is also based on a belief that what matters most is academic results (Baird et al., 2016; Engel & Frizzell, 2015; Reeves, 2014). The findings of the present study suggest that some principals found it difficult to identify with the premise that students' mastery over subject-matter academic achievements should be schools' ultimate goal, which they view as underlying the prominent call for instructional leadership. Instead, they pinpointed emotional, social, and value facets of schooling as its main goal. Findings of this study suggest that school context and characteristics (such as the religious identity of the school) interact with this choice of goals, creating gaps between expectations and reality of instructional leadership. However, this interaction requires further research.

The question of which school function is of most importance—qualification, socialization, or individuation—holds wide-ranging implications for educational policy; yet, it has hardly been discussed by researchers and policy makers. Biesta (2009) pointed to “the remarkable absence in many contemporary discussions about education of explicit attention for what

is educationally desirable There is very little explicit discussion, in other words, about what constitutes good education” (p. 36). Thus, while the practical ways in which principals can enact instructional leadership have been widely explored in the literature (e.g., Blase & Blase, 2004; Duke, 1987; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016; Sheppard, 1996; Supovitz et al., 2010), the assumption that academic qualification is schools’ core function has been taken for granted. The current finding—that principals may strongly endorse either socialization or individuation functions rather than qualification as the ultimate goal of their work—points to a lack of consensus among school principals regarding the fundamental underlying premise of instructional leadership.

This study outcome illustrates how some principals appear to relate to external policies through buffering strategies rather than bridging strategies (Kohansal, 2015; Maxcy et al., 2010; Paredes Scribner, 2013; Rutledge et al., 2010). Rooted in organizational and institutional theory, the concept of buffering refers to cases where school leaders respond to threatening external influences by trying to insulate themselves, whereas the concept of bridging refers to principals’ attempts to adapt organizational activities to conform with external stakeholders’ expectations (Gössling, 2011; He, Tian, & Chen, 2007; Johnson, Mirchandani, & Meznar, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2016; Su, Mao, & Jarvenpaa, 2014). In this study, a substantial group of interviewed principals appeared able to insulate themselves from the decades of aggressive campaign efforts to make instructional leadership a key role, by maintaining their prioritization of school’s non-academic goals over academic goals.

Principals’ insulation from top-down policy may be motivated by moral dilemmas between adhering to the expectations of the system and working for the well-being of their students without absolutely supporting policies and practices that are unproductive and unjust (Wang, 2016). Faced with more and more dilemmatic situations, principals are becoming more creative in deciding what to endorse, what to block, and what to ignore in schools as they carry out their own educational agenda (MacBeath, O’Brien, & Gronnal, 2012). Increasing workload, uninspiring compliance, and competing accountability requirements seem to have exacerbated such behavior (Starr, 2011). Perhaps because of moral dilemmas, participants of this study maintained their prioritization of humanistic socialization functions over qualification functions.

This study’s findings suggested an additional reason why, even in the face of persistent top-down policy prescriptions, school principals are often positioned as gatekeepers, standing at the school gate and controlling which policies actually pass through it (Flessa, 2012; Salter, 2014). Moreover, principals may be regarded as local policy makers who interpret policies

creatively, serving as street-level bureaucrats who leave their “fingerprints” on policies received from above (Schechter & Shaked, 2017; Shaked & Schechter, 2017; Spillane & Kenney, 2012). Therefore, different principals may relate to the same policy in ways that differ in content, focus, and intensity (Koyama, 2014; Levin & Datnow, 2012; Louis & Robinson, 2012). Inasmuch as principals try to insulate themselves from external influences, they meet the expectation for instructional leadership only superficially, without internalization and real change. Serving as local policy makers, principals often choose their areas of focus based on their own vision and values, buffering the demand to concentrate on improvements in teaching and learning. They attribute more importance to socialization than to qualification, prioritizing the school’s non-academic goals.

The current findings expand the literature by providing possible new insights into the motivations and disinclinations of instructional leadership’s potential enablers on the ground. However, this study had several limitations. First, data were collected in the particular Israeli context, requiring future investigation of cross-cultural validity. Replicating this study in various sociocultural contexts will enable generalization of the findings to broader populations, possibly substantiating their international validity. Second, this research focused on principals’ verbal perceptions regarding instructional leadership; hence, further research could complement these qualitative data with more objective empirical methods such as direct observations of principals’ behavior. Third, a comparison of this study’s findings according to principals’ demographic variables (e.g., sex, education, experience) and school characteristics (e.g., primary/secondary level, socioeconomic status) was beyond the scope of the current study. Further research could explore how context interacts with this choice of goals and creates gaps between formal and informal dynamics. Finally, explicit assessment of principals’ perceptions regarding schools’ major task, including quantitative measurement, would also be useful to complement the current data that emerged from qualitative interview methodology and content analysis.

If the current findings are validated in future research, they hold practical implications. If scholars and policy makers want principals to actively work toward producing improvements in teaching and learning, then the school’s primary objective should become an explicit topic for discussion, and possible varying purposes of schooling—such as democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labaree, 2010; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Tichnor-Wagner & Socol, 2016)—should become an integral part of discourse in principal preparation programs and mentoring processes. Moreover, to enhance principals’ utilization of bridging rather than buffering or insulating strategies, both present and future principals should receive professional legitimacy for engaging more actively in

qualification-oriented instructional leadership while continuing to fulfill their preferred socialization- and individuation-oriented school functions.

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Haim Shaked is vice president for academic affairs and head of the Department of Education, Hemdat Hadarom College of Education, Netivot, Israel. As a scholar-practitioner with 17 years of experience as school principal, his research interests include instructional leadership, system thinking in school leadership, and education reform. His book (co-authored by Chen Schechter) *Systems Thinking for School Leaders: Holistic Leadership for Excellence in Education* was published recently by Springer Press. haim.shaked@hemdat.ac.il.