

# Ensuring Teachers' Job Suitability: A Missing Component of Instructional Leadership

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## Abstract

Instructional leadership can be defined as an educational leadership approach whereby the school principal is involved in a wide range of activities aiming to improve teaching and learning for all students. Surprisingly, the literature about instructional leadership practices has not mentioned school leaders' practices for hiring appropriate teachers and for determining whether existing teachers are the "right people" for the job. This suggests that instructional leaders are not necessarily expected to ensure that the right people are on board. The current study's goal was to explore principals' perceptions regarding their role in ensuring teachers' job suitability and its relation to instructional leadership. Data collection included interviews with a diverse sample of 59 Israeli principals. Data analysis revealed that school principals perceived the issue of teacher hiring/firing as complicated. Therefore, they often regarded related tasks—such as deciding which attributes are most important for effective teachers, determining how such effective teachers can be proficiently screened for hire, and executing dismissal of ineffective teachers—as impossible or impractical. The current study suggests that this perception led principals to refrain from considering the activities involved in ensuring teacher suitability as means to improve teaching and learning. Practical implications and further research are discussed.

## Keywords

instructional leadership, teacher hiring/firing, human resources, school principals

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In recent years, the role of the school principal has evolved and expanded (Murphy Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016). Most importantly, principals are now increasingly expected to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; May & Supovitz, 2011), which 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, 2011, p. 650). Not too long ago, principals were mostly responsible for keeping students safe, enforcing school policies, and fostering relationships with the world outside school. Practical daily tasks such as ordering supplies and creating bus schedules were common (Glanz, 2006). Today, as instructional leaders, principals are expected to focus on promoting best practices in teaching and learning so that students achieve academic success (Rigby, 2014).

Scholars over the decades have labored to determine the elements of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016; Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010), exploring how school leaders go about influencing their students’ performance (e.g., Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010a, 2010b; Robinson, Hehopa, & Lloyd, 2008; Smerdon & Borman, 2009). Unexpectedly, ensuring that the “right” teachers are on staff is rarely mentioned in the literature as a component of instructional leadership. That is, although models of instructional leadership incorporate several ways for achieving improvement in teachers’ practices, these models do not include the fundamental role of hiring the best available teachers and firing inappropriate teachers.

Granted, the topic of teacher quality and teacher hiring is discussed in the literature (e.g., Engel, Cannata, & Curran, 2018; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Kim, 2017). The existing research examines the characteristics of teachers associated with an increase in student achievement, the characteristics of schools and districts that successfully recruit and retain teachers, and the types of policies that show evidence of efficacy in hiring good teachers (e.g., W. K. Ingle, 2009; S. Liu, Xu, & Stronge, 2016). However, the task of making sure that the teachers who are under the responsibility of the principal are suitable for their job was hardly mentioned in the literature as a component of the principal’s instructional leadership role. Therefore, the current study explored principals’ perceptions regarding their educational work in ensuring teachers’ job suitability, with the aim of understanding how their hiring/firing duty may relate to their instructional leadership role.

The current study focused on Israeli school principals. The national school system in Israel serves about 1.6 million students (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013) and is similar in many ways to that of the United States (BenDavid-Hadar, 2016). The primary role of Israeli school principals as articulated by Capstones, the institute that spearheads school principals’ development in Israel, is to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve the education and learning of all students. Four additional areas of management support this 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 (Capstones, 2008).

As in many western countries, Israel has a policy of teacher tenure that restricts principals' ability to fire teachers, requiring a "just cause" rationale for dismissal. Beginning teachers are automatically placed on probation for 2 years, during which the teacher is evaluated. During their second year, the principal must decide if beginning teachers will be granted tenure. Once given, tenure is transferred from district to district, such that a teacher who leaves one district for another will maintain that tenure. Teacher with tenure who faces dismissal for "just cause" is given a chance to defend their case. Proponents of this policy claim that it protects teachers from being fired for nonwork-related reasons and also attracts many teachers to the teaching profession. On the other hand, opponents of tenure claim that it encourages complacency among teachers, who do not fear losing their jobs. The removal of poorly performing teachers is so difficult that most schools end up retaining their bad teachers (Lavy, 2010; Yariv & Coleman, 2005).

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Instructional Leadership*

Instructional leadership, which entails deep involvement in teaching and learning, assumes instruction's significant influence on student performance (Murphy et al., 2016). Indeed, research findings are clear: Teaching quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student outcomes (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Lewis, 2008). Namely, the achievements of schoolchildren depend crucially on their teachers' effectiveness, more than many other school factor such as curricular programs or student grouping patterns (Hattie, 2009; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Wayne & Youngs, 2003).

Such high-quality instruction, which is a prerequisite for student progress and achievement, requires constant instructional leadership (Blase & Kirby, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008). In fact, scholars contend that contemporary school principals should see instructional leadership as their primary responsibility (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Supovitz et al., 2010). As such, the principal's role can no longer focus mainly on noninstructional issues like student discipline or fund-raising (Murphy & Torre, 2014). Instead, school principals today must combine traditional school leadership duties—such as budgeting, scheduling, and facility maintenance—with the central challenge of enhancing teaching and learning quality (Robinson et al., 2008; Walker & Slear, 2011).

Although instructional leadership is a key part of the principal's job and principals are central figures in school efforts to improve teaching (Glanz, 2006), the influence of principals on students is mainly indirect, mediated by the instructional program and the school culture (Murphy et al., 2016). Principals who enact instructional leadership do so by influencing teachers' teaching strategies (Supovitz et al., 2010), promoting

the development of loyalty and satisfaction among teachers (Blase & Kirby, 2009), and other factors that, in turn, influence student outcomes (Louis et al., 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the priorities espoused by the principal that accentuate teaching and learning are felt by the entire staff, becoming the priorities throughout the school. Robinson, Hehopa, and Lloyd's (2008, p. 668) meta-analysis of research on effective school leadership shows that instructional leadership has a significant impact on student outcomes, thereby accentuating the importance of principals' focus on "the quality of learning, teaching, and teacher learning."

### *Components of Instructional Leadership*

Over the years, researchers have provided a multitude of frameworks to capture instructional leadership (May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016; Supovitz et al., 2010). Summarizing existing research related to the methods that principals use to exhibit and 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 communitywide—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 curriculum and instruction by spending time in classrooms in order to effectively encourage curriculum implementation and quality instructional practices.

The conceptual framework of educational leadership presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) is one of the most widely used in research (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). This framework consists of three dimensions for this leadership role, which are delineated into 10 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: supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, 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, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning.

Without specifying "instructional" leadership, some other authors have described relevant school leadership facets that influence student learning in particular (e.g., Bryk et al., 2010; Smerdon & Borman, 2009). The model of Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) included setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. An earlier model by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) featured goals, culture, participatory

decision-making, and connections to parents and communities, along with the practices needed to bring these ingredients to life in schools. Robinson and her colleagues (2008) pointed to five leadership dimensions that affect a range of student outcomes: (a) establishing goals and expectations; (b) resourcing strategically, which involves aligning resource selection and allocation with prioritized teaching goals; (c) planning, coordinating, and evaluating the teaching and curriculum; (d) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and (e) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

### *Ensuring Teachers' Suitability for the Job*

The aforementioned various frameworks for instructional leadership all concur in their emphasis on principals' central task of enhancing teachers' capacity to teach. Toward that end, the principal is expected to provide incentives for teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), to develop the expertise of teacher leaders (Stronge et al., 2008), and to create a learning community that encourages teachers to develop professionally (Leithwood et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). Yet, surprisingly, the task of ensuring that those teachers in the principal's employ were in point of fact suitable for this complex and significant job was not mentioned in the literature as a component of effective instructional leadership. Thus, whereas the quality of teaching activity received major emphasis in instructional leadership models, the quality of those people actually hired to work as teachers in the school was virtually nonexistent with regard to teachers' own relevant attributes.

The "right" attributes for working as an effective teacher were discussed in the teacher quality literature. They may include high intelligence—analytic ability, capacity to gain subject-matter expertise and to master education-related knowledge; teaching skills—explaining ideas and concepts clearly, motivating and sustaining student interest, using active-learning techniques, and acting as a facilitator to encourage and guide learning; interpersonal skills—classroom management capability, caring, empathy, and tolerance for diversity; motivation—having passion and reasons for being a teacher; and so on (Connell, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; L. Liu, 2009; Smith, 2015). Likewise, teachers on staff who are unintelligent, untrained, unmotivated, burnt out, and so forth are likely to be conducive to poor student achievement and precluding staff development and growth (Nixon, Packard, & Dam, 2016; Ruth, 2014; Winters, 2012).

Some of the studies on teacher quality touch on conceptual frameworks such as fit (person–job fit, person–organization fit, and person–group fit) that are appropriate when considering suitability (Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, & Thompson, 2010; K. Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011). One of the key questions regarding teachers' suitability is whether teaching ability is inherited (innate) or learned (acquired). If good teachers are made, not born, then principals do not need to focus on determining who to hire and fire but rather can focus on expanding the abilities of any teachers currently at hand. However, good teachers are, apparently, both born and made. We know that

teaching skills can be studied, practiced, and ultimately improved (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Wiens & Ruday, 2014). At the same time, consistent differences in teaching effectiveness within cohorts of beginning teachers emerge early and remain intact for years (Atteberry, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Presumably, good teachers are born with personality characteristics that develop via experience but that also are enhanced by specific information that only education can provide (Harrison, Smithey, McAfee, & Weiner, 2006).

Using economic terms, ensuring teachers' job suitability may be seen as representing neoliberalism, which focuses on economic efficiency while workers' rights are considered impediments to maximum performance (Fleming, 2016). Neoliberalism is "capitalism with the gloves off" (McChesney, 2011, p. 8), meaning that neoliberalism is pure capitalism, without workers' rights and organizations. In building capitalist society, labor commodification may be seen as a core process (Maddison, 2008). Therefore, one may argue that when we speak about human capital rather than human beings, teachers, as well as other workers, are commodified. They are treated—at least conceptually—as things to be bought, sold, traded, or invested in (Ginsburg, 2012). Inasmuch as in most countries, an absolute majority of teachers are women (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011), commodification and exploitation might be two sides of the same gendered coin (Mezzadri, 2016).

Moreover, ensuring teachers' fundamental job suitability may be seen as standing in contrast to the deep belief in the ability of all teachers to be effective. As teachers of teachers, educators in teacher preparatory training indeed must believe in the learning potential of all preservice teachers admitted into their programs (Wiens & Ruday, 2014). Policy makers should also remember that teaching ability can be significantly developed, as Darling-Hammond (2006, p. ix) explained

One of the most damaging myths prevailing in American education is the notion that good teachers are born and not made. This superstition has given rise to a set of policies that rely far too much on some kind of prenatal alchemy to produce a cadre of teachers for our nation's schools—and far too little on systematic, sustained initiatives to ensure that all teachers have the opportunity to become well prepped.

School principals, however, should not miss out on the opportunity to utilize hiring and firing practices as a tool for improving the quality of instruction. To achieve the most effective schools, principals must integrate their belief in teachers' ability to improve practices with an ability to make courageous decisions regarding teacher dismissals (Jacob, 2011; Range, Duncan, Scherz, & Haines, 2012).

However, based on the reviewed instructional leadership models, while contemporary principals are expected to be involved in a variety of activities designed to improve teachers' practices, today's principals are not necessarily expected to ensure that the "right" people—those with the optimal characteristics for success and, crucially, those who do not possess destructive or disruptive characteristics—are those actually teaching in the classrooms, in charge of imparting knowledge and skills to

students. The only component found in instructional leadership models that could be considered relevant to the principal's role in ensuring teachers' suitability to the job was "supervising and evaluating instruction" (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2008). However, these supervisory and evaluative activities were conceived as aiming to provide teachers with concrete feedback on instruction, as explained by Robinson and her colleagues (2008, p. 100): "In high-performing schools . . . teachers . . . reported that their leaders set and adhered to clear performance standards for teaching as well as doing regular classroom observations that helped them improve their teaching." Thus, even this component was not conceptualized as aiming to help principals determine whether or not specific teachers possessed the "right" attributes to be members of the school staff.

Despite its remarkableness, this absence of a conceptual component for ensuring teachers' job suitability was not discussed in the literature about instructional leadership frameworks. To narrow this gap, the goal of the current study was to explore principals' perceptions regarding their human resource management role—for hiring optimal teachers and maintaining only suitable teacher employees—as related to principals' role as an instructional leader in the school.

## Method

### *Study Design*

The present study was qualitative in nature to provide rich textual descriptions of the complexities depicting participants' experiences. Thus, interview methodology and content analysis explored the meanings that school principals attach to issues and situations that involve the role of ensuring teacher suitability.

### *Participants*

Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of data, maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell, 2014), also known as heterogeneous sampling, was used. Maximal differentiation sampling was implemented in this study regarding principals' gender, age, years of experience, education, ethnicity, school level (elementary, middle, and high), and school community's socioeconomic status. The study sample did not begin with a rigid number of participants, developing on an ongoing basis as the study progressed. Altogether, 81 school principals were approached, until 59 principals (23 males and 36 females) who could represent diverse sampling were obtained. On average, principals had 24.26 years of educational experience (standard deviation [*SD*] = 7.23; range: 2–40) that included an average of 10.12 years of experience as principals (*SD* = 6.19; range: 1–35). Most of the 59 participants (*n* = 51) held a master's degree, with six principals holding only a bachelor's degree and two principals holding a PhD. Participants were principals of elementary schools (*n* = 30), middle schools (*n* = 2), and high schools (*n* = 15), working in all seven Israeli school districts. Table 1 summarizes study participants' demographic information.

**Table 1.** Study Participants' Demographic Information.

No. of Participants	Years of Educational Experience	Years of Principalship Experience	Education	Level of School
59 of 81	Average: 24.26 SD = 7.23 Range: 2–40	Average: 10.12 SD = 6.19 Range: 1–35	BA: 6 MA: 51 PhD: 2	Elementary: 30 Middle: 2 High: 15

Note. SD = standard deviation.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, where the interviewer develops and uses an “interview guide,” that is, a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the interview, but also “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). The key questions were preplanned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses when possible. For ethical reasons, 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 (pseudo-names were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent based on understanding of the research purpose. Interviews, which generally lasted 1 hr, were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis.

The first part of each interview concerned the principal’s practices designed to improve teaching and learning. During the interviews, the interviewer intentionally avoided the term “instructional leadership” to prevent priming interviewees to frame their discussions in this light. The second part of each interview concerned ensuring teacher suitability. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was a four-stage process—condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. First, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed, seeking out the relevant portions of data based on the research questions and conceptual framework. At the second stage—coding—each segment of data (utterance) was coded according to the aspect it represented. 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 inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants regarding teacher suitability. After having captured the essence of utterances in the second stage, the third stage—categorizing—consisted of similar utterances that 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



**Table 2.** Number and Percentage of Participants Mentioning Each Complexity of Ensuring Teacher Suitability.

Area of Complexity	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Uncertainty about teacher selection	31	52.5
Unpleasantness of teacher dismissal	37	62.7

the previous stage and to see how they were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of one abstract construct.

## Findings

Analysis of this study's qualitative data revealed that school principals perceived the issue of ensuring teacher suitability to be complicated—involving ambiguity, inconvenience, insufficient knowledge, and tension between advantages and disadvantages. Specifically, as seen next, principals pinpointed two main areas of complexity: uncertainty about teacher selection and the unpleasantness of teacher dismissal. Table 2 captures the number and percentage of participants mentioning each area of complexity. Apparently, these complexities led principals to avoid human resources management tasks, to treat them as impossible or impractical, or to handle them intuitively rather than systematically. Principals did not see human resources management as a means of improving teaching and learning and did not consider human resources management tasks as a component of their instructional leadership.

### *Uncertainty About Teacher Selection*

Overall, this first area of qualitative findings showed that principals perceived teacher selection and hiring as having a significant impact on the quality of teaching at school, but at the same time as an inexact, multidimensional process for which they lacked knowledge, training, and confidence. Around half of the interviewees (52.5%;  $n = 31$ ) mentioned a lack of clarity about valid criteria for deciding which teacher is the “right” person to hire and which hiring methods could best identify such job suitability, perceiving the process of selecting new teachers as providing only limited predictive information about teachers' capability. For example, Edna, with 9 years of experience as a high school principal, argued: “I invest ample time and effort into teacher selection processes. However, sometimes even when you follow all the rules, you may still end up with the wrong person in the job.” Similarly, Rebecca, with 4 years of experience as an elementary school principal, admitted: “Your seemingly perfect hire may turn out to be far from it and you spend years dealing with the consequences.”

Several possible explanations for the hiring process's limited validity were offered. For instance, Scott, with 16 years of experience as a middle school principal, claimed

that the complexity of teacher selection stems from the fact that teachers themselves change and evolve over time:

Hiring new teachers is my best opportunity to influence the quality of my staff. However, novice teachers are inherently incapable of demonstrating high teaching ability, so you can only really get to know them after several years on the job.

Edith, with 8 years of experience as an elementary school principal, provided another explanation for the complexity of teacher selection processes: “The non-cognitive attributes such as motivation, personality, resilience and interpersonal skills, which play an important role in effective teaching, make the selection of new teachers much more challenging.”

Particularly, the effectiveness of some of the common methods used by principals to evaluate teacher candidates was questioned. Rose, with 4 years of experience as an elementary school principal, criticized the efficiency of the customary interview procedure: “The standard interview that starts with ‘So tell me about yourself’ is totally worthless for predicting a candidate’s capability.” Kevin, with 9 years of experience as an elementary school principal, noted that the teacher candidates’ resumes may sometimes have been ameliorated: “A good-looking CV is often professionally prepared, or at least professionally reviewed.”

Some principals (29%;  $n = 17$ ) brought attention to the fact that they had never undergone any explicit, systematic training to effectively select new teachers. Gloria, with 16 years of experience as a high school principal, noted: “I don’t remember the superintendent dedicating time to this severely neglected issue.” Similarly, Bob, with 11 years of experience as a high school principal, expressed his sense that principals in general lack knowledge about how to identify the right teachers: “I guess there are many beneficial ways to hire great workers out there. We simply don’t know them.”

With regard to the broader question of who should be considered the “right” person for the job of teacher, school principals again emphasized the challenge and complexity involved in such decisions. Although as part and parcel of their ongoing leadership roles, these principals were consistently engaged in screening teacher candidates and evaluating in-service teachers, the vast majority of the interviewees (69%;  $n = 41$ ) found it difficult to define and characterize the desired teacher. Study participants’ utterances revealed that part of this complexity roots in the multiple qualifications that are necessary to qualify as a “suitable” teacher. For example, Margaret, with 23 years of experience as an elementary school principal, claimed: “Good teachers are made up of a combination of hundreds of qualities. Each good teacher has her own unique mixture of these qualities.” For Margaret, each good teacher is different, so that there is no one uniform definition of a good teacher. Similarly, Michael, with 7 years of experience as an elementary school principal, elaborated on some of these multiple attributes of “good” teachers:

Teaching demands a lot of qualities, such as knowledge of subject matter and curriculum, knowledge of classroom management techniques, affection for children, willingness to invest above and beyond, ability to work in team, loyalty, and many other things. With all these qualities required, you cannot define what a good teacher is. It is very complicated.

Although Michael did not mention “hundreds” of qualities like Margaret and seemed to make some attempt to weigh various expectations from teachers, Michael also agreed that the numerous merits required from teachers made it almost impossible to genuinely define one. Like Margaret and Michael, Maria, with 3 years of experience as an elementary school principal, believed that the multidimensionality of teacher effectiveness makes it indefinable. In addition, importantly in the context of how instructional leadership is conceptualized, Maria did not accept the claim that effective teachers can be recognized according to their students’ results: “I don’t think that student achievement could determine who is an effective teacher. An effective teacher is actually a multidimensional term, and in my opinion it is even inconclusive.”

In the face of the overwhelmingly large number of possible criteria for evaluating teachers’ job suitability and principals’ aforementioned reported lack of training or formal knowledge in evidence-based screening procedures, some study participants (20%;  $n = 12$ ) appeared to turn to vague instinct, gut feelings, or intuition as an intangible gauge for assessing who might be a “good” teacher: “The main quality I look for is a teacher who will be a kid magnet. I don’t know what makes a teacher a kid magnet, but I know to recognize it” (Sylvia, with 19 years of experience as an elementary school principal); “We sincerely need good teachers. However, a good teacher is not a matter of definitions. When you meet a good teacher, you know that he or she is a good teacher” (Barbara, with 7 years of experience as a high school principal); “My hunches are formed out of my past experience and knowledge. When I have to select a new teacher, I rely on my women’s intuition, and it almost always works” (Diana, with 3 years of experience as an elementary school principal). Relying on unconscious intuition—independent of reasoning, perception, or proof—may reflect a perception of teaching ability as an intangible spark that would attract kids or qualify as a worthy teacher.

Notably, quite a few principals (57%;  $n = 29$ ) believed that the desired characteristics of teachers depend on the specific educational context. With regard to significant school characteristics, for instance, George, with 14 years of experience as a high school principal, claimed that rural areas need different teachers: “I believe that rural education is substantially different. While residents of metropolitan areas are competitive and look mainly for results, our parents have other priorities; thus we need different teachers.” More broadly, Susan, with 22 years of experience as an elementary school principal, stated: “There is no one model of the teacher I want for my school. It depends on the specific class, the school’s needs at that time, the qualities of the teachers I have already, and so on.” For Susan, the characteristics of desired teachers are not absolutes but rather vary according to circumstances.

In sum, for study participants, there is no simple answer to the question of which candidates are most suitable to work as a teacher in their schools and how principals can identify them. The current interviewees revealed that they ascribe importance to teacher selection. However, presently they undertake screening and hiring processes without evidence-based knowledge about such procedures' effectiveness, contending that the task is too complex and the desired qualifications are too indefinable to quantify or prioritize, changing according to the particular context. Thus, the hiring process often relies more on intuition than reasoning.

### *Unpleasantness of Teacher Dismissal*

The qualitative data analysis of school principals' utterances yielded teacher dismissal as the second area of complexity involved in ensuring teacher suitability. Most of the participants (62.7%;  $n = 37$ ) reported that despite the importance of removing ineffective teachers, they often refrained from firing even those teachers who were consistently ineffective. These participants pointed to two major difficulties of teacher dismissal: teacher tenure policy, which restricts the ability to fire teachers, and the interpersonal aspect. These two noninstructional considerations led study participants to avoid engaging in the firing of unsuitable teachers.

First, the current interviewees often claimed (71%;  $n = 42$ ) that teacher dismissal is actually impractical in Israel because of the national unionized teacher tenure policy: "Tenure makes removal of poorly performing teachers, who have actually been proven to be ineffective in the classroom, simply impossible" (Olga, with 11 years of experience as an elementary school principal); "Building a case for dismissal is time-consuming and draining for principals, and after all that lousy teacher remains in the job" (Noah, with 9 years of experience as an elementary school principal); "Firing substandard teachers could be very useful. However, the Teachers Union is perhaps the most powerful lobbying group, so I don't even try" (Michelle, with 9 years of experience as an elementary school principal).

Second, many study participants (39%;  $n = 23$ ) perceived teacher dismissal as one of the principal's most difficult and painful tasks, which never gets easier. For example, Lisa, with 5 years of experience as a middle school principal, described herself as unable to harm a teacher's livelihood:

No school wants bad teachers, but a teacher is also a human being, who needs to be breadwinner. Thus, I'll try to improve weak teachers' practices, but I won't make any teacher destitute. It's really a matter of human lives.

Lisa eschewed teacher dismissal because of the economic damage to teachers. By retaining poorly performing teachers, Lisa agreed to lower her school's teaching quality.

A sentiment often voiced by these principals was the difficulty in firing a poorly functioning teacher due to the warm, long-term relationships among school staff

members. For example, Pamela, with 4 years of experience as principal in the same elementary school where she worked as a teacher for decades, admitted with candor that after so many years of working together, she could not fire an ineffective teacher: "The fact is that she doesn't know how to teach. She is really unprofessional. But since we grew up alongside each other and took part in each other's celebrations and losses, I simply can't tell her to go home." Despite the instructional imperative, Pamela veered away from her role because of the discomfort involved in firing a long-time workmate.

Teacher tenure and the interpersonal aspect may be seen as interrelated. Shirley, with 17 years of experience as an elementary school principal, claimed that the long process required to remove a tenured teacher makes teacher dismissal counterproductive because of the influence of the dismissal procedure on the interpersonal relationships among staff. She explained:

The process of firing a tenured teacher requires years of wrangling, during which the atmosphere in the staff room becomes ugly. I have only two or three really weak teachers. Muddying the waters for years can cause the same damage.

Viewing the entire school team, Shirley believed that her school could tolerate a few weak teachers and thus preferred to dodge a demoralizing conflict-ridden atmosphere among school staff that might ensue if she undertook a dismissal process. Shirley seemed to believe that such a negative "muddy" teacher climate could lead to deterioration in teaching quality, which would end up resembling the current local situation caused by the few poorly performing teachers.

Several principals (8%;  $n = 4$ ) rejected the need for teacher dismissal. David, with 6 years of experience as a high school principal, likened his school to a warm family:

Our school is like one big family. Both students and teachers get a feeling that they belong, feeling at home almost right away. People here feel respected and cared for and if they don't, they'll tell us and we'll resolve it.

Within such a family atmosphere, David claimed that there is no need for teacher dismissal: "Teachers are comfortable coming to me for help. I have never come across a teacher who cannot improve his practices with the proper help." Similarly, Robert, with 7 years of experience as an elementary school principal, claimed that a principal should focus on the bright side of leadership: "I believe that my main means of influence is through positive relationships and positive development of teachers. I seek to increase teachers' intrinsic motivation, appealing to their ideals." Through this lens, he objected to teacher dismissal: "Getting rid of the relatively weaker teachers, which is for me an act of aggression or even violence, does not solve any problem." Unlike other principals, David and Robert did not explain their opposition to teacher dismissal in terms of teacher tenure or the possible negative consequences. Rather, they advocated cultivating a family-like community and emphasized a perception of

effective school leadership as concentrating on positive influences rather than adverse actions such as dismissal. Their perspective may be interpreted as an authentic leadership philosophy but also perhaps may be speculated as possibly rationalizing about why the principal does not fire unsuitable teachers.

In sum, the firing of ineffective in-service teachers was perceived by the current study participants as a potential action characterized by low chances of success and multiple drawbacks. Considering dismissal's difficulty and accompanying disadvantages, principals reported that they most often preferred to retain unsuitable teachers whose instructional quality was not up to par, thus disregarding instructional considerations.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the current study may shed much-needed light on the phenomenon raised by the literature review above, which underscored that the human resource management task of ensuring prospective and in-service teachers' job suitability was notably absent from conceptual frameworks for principals' instructional leadership (e.g., Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2008; Stronge et al., 2008). This study explored principals' perceptions regarding their role as the school's human resource manager—involved in hiring/firing teachers—as linked with their role as the school's key instructional leader who determines teachers' job suitability. Data analysis suggested that school principals consider their hiring/firing role to be exceptionally complicated. On the one hand, principals perceived their human resources management role as having the potential to affect the quality of the teaching staff positively. On the other hand, they perceived the process of teacher screening and hiring as almost impossible to conduct accurately, and they described avoidance of firing ineffective teachers. These findings highlighted the ambivalence and unease with which these diverse principals regarded their human resources management activities—such as deciding which attributes are most important for effective teachers, determining how to screen such effective teachers proficiently, and executing dismissal of ineffective teachers in order to improve the school. Apparently, such uncertainty and apprehension led principals to reject or circumvent those human resources management tasks by avoiding them, by regarding them as impossible or impractical, or by intuiting them via gut instinct instead of methodically as they would instruction-related leadership tasks.

As seen from the current qualitative data, principals apparently perceive the hiring and firing role as too complicated to address effectively; therefore, they do not consider it to be a means for them to improve teaching and learning in the school. Whereas tasks such as encouraging teachers to develop professionally, conducting observations in classrooms on a regular basis, and meeting individually with teachers to discuss student progress are viewed by principals as “doable” tasks that can improve instruction and directly affect student achievement, the task of ensuring the fundamental job suitability of teachers is seen as “hard-to-do,” with limited chances

of success. Thus, actions related to selecting effective teachers to hire and dismissing ineffective teachers are not perceived as part of the instructional leadership toolbox.

It may be claimed that ensuring teachers' job suitability, found in this study as a role performed inadequately by principals, is not so important. If good teachers are made, not born, then principals do not need to focus on determining who to hire and fire but rather can focus on expanding the abilities of any teachers currently at hand. However, as mentioned above, good teachers are, apparently, neither born nor made. Good teachers are the product of a combination of personal proclivities and talents that are supported by the right structures, training, and incentives (Harrison et al., 2006). From a systemic perspective, in a good teacher, these natural capacities and acquired abilities influence each other through a system of mutual interactions (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). This suggests that principals' efforts to improve teaching and learning require not only the professional development of in-service teachers but also the fulfillment of principals' human resources management role, explored in the current study, which involves hiring optimally suited teachers and evaluating current teacher employees' job suitability.

From an economic perspective, ensuring teachers' job suitability may be seen as a neoliberalist approach, which emphasizes performance and final results rather than workers' rights (Fleming, 2016). Like many other countries in the world (Harvey, 2005), during the last decades of the 20th century, the economy in Israel transitioned into a neoliberal model (Maman & Rosenhek, 2009). Those who oppose the violation of teachers' rights may argue that ensuring teachers' job suitability represents commodification of teachers' work, or even teachers themselves, who are perceived as things to be bought, sold, traded, or invested in (Ginsburg, 2012). Moreover, given the high percentage of women among teachers around the world (Kowalski et al., 2011), as well as in Israel (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), commodification and exploitation might be intertwined (Mezzadri, 2016).

As noted above, the importance attributed to ensuring teachers' job suitability may be viewed as contradicting teacher educators' requisite deep belief in all teachers' potential to be effective (Wiens & Ruday, 2014). Policy makers should also remember that teaching quality can be significantly developed (Darling-Hammond, 2006). However, when it comes to school principals, this study's findings show the scales tipping to the other side: Whether in attempts to see the positive in each teacher or as a result of the distress or bureaucracy involved in dismissing those teachers who have been objectively unable to acquire the appropriate skills for achieving desired student academic outcomes, study participants missed out on the opportunity to exploit hiring and firing practices as a tool for improving the quality of the school's teaching and learning. Findings of the current study suggest that as instructional leaders, principals deal too little with management decisions that would ensure that the right people are in place and are holding the teaching jobs in their school.

The current study's outcomes present the complexity of the principal's work in an era of accountability, where the school leader is held personally accountable for bringing about measurable student achievement and for demonstrating bottom-line results

(Hargreaves & Braun, 2013; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). The education system's tenure policy and the diverse forces that are involved in the hiring/firing of teachers should not be ignored. However, the Israeli case illustrates the quandary faced by school principals who on the one hand as instructional leaders must promote their teachers and, through them, advance school achievement and improvement, while, on the other hand, they hardly wield a clear impact or effect on personnel management. The findings of this study indicate that a combination of ambiguity and fear impedes or limits school principals from taking charge of teacher's employment, thereby problematizing the relationship between instructional leadership and teachers' job suitability.

Significantly, study participants reported that they had not explicitly been taught how to screen and evaluate optimal teachers or how to conceptualize and prioritize teacher attributes. Their lack of confidence and knowledge regarding the complexities of this human resource management aspect clearly suggests that principal educators and district supervisors should address principals' needs for explicit training. Appropriate skills and strategies would allow principals to expand their instructional leadership role to focus not only on enhancing the performance of existing teachers but also on the screening of teacher candidates for their potential contribution to teaching and learning and on the evaluation of current personnel's relevant skills and functioning. Specifically, principals should be assisted in defining their desired teacher and in acquiring practical methods to effectively identify the characteristics of this desired teacher. In addition, principals should be encouraged to carefully consider the price of avoiding dismissals of teachers. Such explicit training and guidance should be implemented at all phases of the principal's career—during principal preparation programs, while mentoring novice principals, and in professional development programs for in-service principals. In addition, the current findings may offer important implications with regard to the intractability of existing tenure policies. Policy makers may adopt the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011) recommendations to use more flexible terms of teacher employment and provide schools with more responsibility for teacher personnel management.

Compared with prior studies, the current study provides new data on principals' perceptions of their role as the school's human resource manager as linked with their role as an instructional leader. However, the study has several limitations. First, inasmuch as the findings were collected within a particular context, their cross-cultural validity requires further investigation. This study should be replicated in various sociocultural contexts, enabling generalization of the findings to a broader population and substantiating their international validity. Second, maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell, 2014) was used to capture a wide range of perspectives and gain greater insight into principals' perceptions; however, it is also important to explore the interactions between these perceptions and factors such as gender, seniority, and school level. Third, inasmuch as this study was based on principals' utterances, further research could complement principals' verbally expressed perceptions with more



objective measures such as direct observations to evaluate how they address teacher hiring, suitability evaluations, and firing in their particular school settings.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Protocol*

Thank-you for agreeing to be interviewed. The information you provide in this interview will contribute to my study, which explores the educational work of school principals.

Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form and sign to confirm your consent to participate. You may stop at any time you wish.

I will keep the information you give me confidential. Your name will not appear in my publications. To facilitate my note-taking, it would be helpful to me if I taped our interview. Is that okay with you?

The interview takes about 1 hr, depending on you. If you need to take a break at any time, let me know.

1. Please tell me about your work as a principal. What does it mean to be a principal?
2. What type of school principal are you? What characterizes you as a principal?
3. If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?
4. What guarantees quality instruction in your school?
5. Who is responsible for improving teachers' practices in your school, and how is that done?
6. As a principal, how do you rate instruction among the various areas requiring your attention—and why?
7. What qualities do you desire most in your teachers?
8. How can these qualities be recognized?
9. Do you think your performing teachers are the best available—and why?
10. What do you do when you have a teacher who lacks the proper skills for the job?

Thank-you very much for your cooperation and for your thought-provoking answers.

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