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Perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership in Israeli principals

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ABSTRACT
The instructional leadership approach expects school leaders to give top priority to ongoing improvement of teaching quality and academic outcomes. Researchers have found that despite the top-down pressures to assume an instructional leadership role, school principals demonstrate limited direct involvement in such leadership. The current qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews, aimed to expand inquiry into inhibitors of instructional leadership in Israeli principals. Data analysis uncovered that Israeli principals’ perceptions served as key inhibitors of instructional leadership, identifying three main perceptual inhibitors: (1) perceptions regarding principal-teacher relationships; (2) perceptions regarding the role of the principal; and (3) perceptions regarding the goal of schooling. These findings expand the available knowledge by illustrating how for Israeli principals, the inhibitors of instructional leadership did not only involve the constraints and capabilities of school principals but also deep disagreements with the conceptual framework that underpins instructional leadership. Implications and further research are discussed.

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Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners across the world have persistently called upon school leaders to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang 2015; Kaparou and Bush 2016; Park and Ham 2016). This educational leadership approach can be defined as school principals’ focused involvement in a wide range of behaviours aiming to improve the core teaching and learning activities of schooling, which directly affect the achievements of all students (Brazer and Bauer 2013; Neumerski 2012). Accordingly, top priority should be given to student learning and to academic results, while everything else should remain a lesser priority (Rigby 2014). An extensive research base has clearly linked principals’ instructional leadership to positive school outcomes, including improved teacher practices and higher student achievements across a variety of organisational contexts (e.g. elementary, middle, and high schools;
public, private, and public charter), spatial contexts (e.g. urban/suburban), and temporal contexts over the last four decades (e.g. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon 2014; Heck and Hallinger, 2010; May and Supovitz 2011). In light of the ample evidence on this leadership approach’s benefits, scholars vigorously contend that contemporary school principals should enact instructional leadership as one of their key responsibilities (Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom 2010; Murphy and Torre 2014; Neumerski 2012).

Nevertheless, research findings identified a worrying gap between the widely voiced expectation for school principals to lead learning and daily professional practice in schools (Hallinger and Murphy 2013). While some school principals do consider improvements to teaching/learning as key components of their role, many principals continue to treat curriculum and instruction as issues of secondary importance (Goldring et al. 2008). Recent studies have shown that the time devoted by principals to instructional leadership has not changed much in the last 40 years (Goldring et al. 2015; Murphy et al. 2016), with some reports indicating only about 6–8% of principals’ time allocated to such activities (e.g. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb 2010; May and Supovitz 2011) and other reports showing slightly higher rates of 13% (Grissom, Loeb, and Master 2013) up to 19% (Camburn, Spillane, and Sebastian 2010; May, Huff, and Goldring 2012). Although research on principals’ time utilisation has inherent limitations (Lee and Hallinger 2012), these studies illustrate the substantially lower prioritisation of instructional leadership by principals than that advocated by leadership scholars and professional standards (Camburn, Spillane, and Sebastian 2010).

As Murphy et al. (2016, 462) recently asked: ‘Given the considerable acknowledgment regarding the importance of instructional management and the widespread, multi-action initiatives to ratchet up its importance in schools, why do researchers consistently document marginal improvement at best?’ As elaborated below, a few possible inhibitors of instructional leadership – factors that may hinder principals from undertaking deep involvement in direct efforts to improve teaching and learning – have been discussed in the existing literature (e.g. Cuban 1988; Goldring et al. 2015; Hallinger and Murphy 2013). However, empirical research on school leadership must not ignore the importance of considering national context (Clarke and O’Donoghue 2017), because socio-cultural factors account for differences in how principals perceive their role (Hallinger 2018). Therefore, the current study sought answer to the question of what the inhibitors of Israeli principals’ instructional leadership are. This study may contribute to the extension beyond prior contexts in which inhibitors of instructional leadership have been studied.

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 is responsible for 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 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 (Capstones 2008). Recent studies have suggested that despite Israel’s top-down pressures to enact instructional leadership, school principals continue to demonstrate limited involvement in instructional leadership regarding curriculum and instruction (Glanz et al. 2017; Shaked 2018).

To prepare the substrate for this study, the following section seeks to conceptually interpret the meaning of instructional leadership. Next, the fundamentals of instructional leadership and its influences are discussed. Finally, previously identified inhibitors of principals’ actual implementation of instructional leadership policy in their practice are reviewed. Altogether, the present study utilise these literatures on instructional leadership to broaden the existing knowledge about inhibitors of instructional leadership in Israeli principals.

**Conceptualisation of instructional leadership**

In recent years, the role of the school principal has evolved and expanded (Murphy et al. 2016). Most importantly, instructional leadership has assumed a central rather than peripheral place in the hierarchy of roles played by principals (Hallinger and Murphy 2013; May and Supovitz 2011). 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 (Brazer and Bauer 2013). Today, as instructional leaders, principals are asked to focus on promoting best practices in teaching and learning so that students achieve academic success (Hallinger 2011; Neumerski 2012). In fact, current school principals must combine traditional school management duties, such as budgeting, scheduling and facilities maintenance, with the additional challenge of deep involvement in teaching and learning, seeing instructional leadership and school improvement as their primary responsibility (Rigby 2014).

Over the years, researchers have provided a multitude of conceptual frameworks to capture instructional leadership (May and Supovitz 2011; Murphy et al. 2016; Supovitz, Sirinides, and May 2010). One of the most widely used in research (Hallinger and Wang 2015), Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) conceptual framework consists of three dimensions for this leadership role, which are delineated into ten instructional leadership functions: (1) The dimension of defining the school mission incorporates two functions: framing the school’s goals and communicating the school’s goals. (2) The dimension of managing the instructional programme includes three functions: coordinating curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. (3)
The dimension of developing a positive school learning climate is broadest in scope, including five functions: protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learning, promoting professional development, and maintaining high visibility.

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

**Fundamentals and influence of instructional leadership**

The instructional leadership framework is based on the underlying premise that the desired ultimate goal of schooling is academic achievement, involving aims such as broadening and deepening students’ knowledge base across various subjects; developing learning skills like creative and analytical thinking, reading, writing, information mapping, and summarisation techniques; promoting students’ love of learning; cultivating enquiring minds; and sparking students’ curiosity (Biesta 2009, 2014, 2016; Pritchard 2013). It is by virtue of this basic underlying goal that school leaders are expected to focus their efforts on leadership behaviours geared toward improving teaching and learning through ongoing close management of curriculum and instruction (Shaked 2018).

Today we know that instructional leadership affects conditions that create positive learning environments for students (Hallinger and Murphy 2013). Research has discovered a linkage between principals’ instructional leadership and their students’ achievements (Blase and Kirby 2009; Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon 2014). The effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was found to be three to four times as great as that of transformational leadership, which involves motivating and inspiring followers and holding positive expectations for them (Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). The instructional leadership framework arose from the close connections identified between teachers’ quality of instruction and students’ academic outcomes (Murphy et al. 2016). Research findings have been clear: Teaching quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student outcomes (Hattie 2009; Wahlstrom and Louis 2008). Such high quality instruction, which is a prerequisite for the students’ results that are especially valued in today’s era of school leaders’ accountability for school outcomes, requires constant nurturing and guidance by the
school’s instructional leader (Stein and Coburn 2008). Therefore, instructional leadership effects on learning are achieved indirectly by affecting people, work structures and processes, school culture (Hallinger and Murphy 2013), and other factors that, in turn, influence student outcomes (Louis et al. 2010).

Inasmuch as the influence of the principal’s instructional leadership on student academic performance is mediated by the principal’s influence on teacher practices, the capacity to build good principal-teacher relationships may be seen as vital for instructional leadership. Through healthy, positive principal-teacher relationships, instructional leaders can engage with teachers in productive and respectful conversations about the quality of teaching and learning (Le Fevre and Robinson 2015; Robinson 2010; Tschannen-Moran 2014). Indeed, positive principal-teacher relationships were shown to help teachers adopt more effective teaching practices (Alsobaie 2015), demonstrating a critical role in the improvement of student achievements (Price 2015).

Good principal-teacher relationships may also allow for a distributed perspective in instructional leadership, where an empowered group of talented teachers is specifically tasked with leadership roles in the form of coaching and developing others (Spillane et al. 2015). In addition, healthy principal-teacher relations may manifest in the development of a strong professional learning community, where teachers work collaboratively toward common goals, co-construct and share knowledge, and reflect on individual practices (Hord 2009). The importance of relationships for instructional leadership ‘is evident from the fact that leadership is, by definition, a social process’ (Robinson 2010, 16).

Previously identified inhibitors of instructional leadership in contemporary practice

Considering principals’ real-time reluctance to pick up the mantle of instructional leadership in schools despite professionals’ implementation of multifaceted initiatives to increase principals’ pursuit of these leadership behaviours (Goldring et al. 2008, 2015; Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten 2013), the question arises: Why has so little progress been made? Three main inhibitors to progress have been mentioned in the literature. First, principals 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, Spillane, and Sebastian 2010). Observers have noted that instructional leadership often conflicts with tasks involved in the day-to-day management of schools (Cuban 1988). Moreover, while instructional leadership tasks require uninterrupted blocks of time for activities such as planning, writing, conferencing, observing, analysing curriculum, and developing professional growth activities for staff, the average workday of principals is characterised by fragmentation of activities and brevity of attention to issues (Murphy et al. 2016).
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 knowledge’ – which refers to which teaching methods are effective in which contexts, how students learn specific subjects, and so forth (Goldring et al. 2015). ‘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 and Louis 2002, 97). As Hallinger and Murphy (2013, 9–10) noted, ‘Successful instructional supervision and curriculum leadership require skill sets that typically go beyond those possessed by any one individual in the school.’

Third, deep-seated organisational 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 (Cuban 1988, 37):

Embedded in the DNA of the principalship is a managerial imperative. Efforts taken by principals to act in ways that depart from this managerial or conservative orientation are likely to face overt and covert resistance from above and below, as well as inside and outside the school.

Cuban (1988) went on to assert that principals who would lead learning have limited formal authority to act and must contend with professional norms, which decree the classroom as the domain of teachers. Therefore, principals often informally trade authority over curriculum and instruction for compliance by teachers on other issues.

Overall, researchers believe that ‘Most principals have a strong intention … to engage in the tasks of instructional leadership’ (Hallinger and Murphy 2013, 10). This intention, however, is not realised because of pressures exerted on school principals and their insufficient capabilities (Cuban 1988; Goldring et al. 2015; Hallinger and Murphy 2013). A powerful set of forces draw principals away from engagement in instructional leadership (Cuban 1988; Murphy et al. 2016; Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten 2013). According to the existing literature, these forces include:

- Time constraints related to the hectic task environment in which principals work;
- Lack of knowledge needed to lead teaching and learning; and
- The school’s structural complexity, leads to opposition to instructional leadership.
Scholars have noted that the exercise of school leadership is situated in both an organisational and cultural context (Lee and Hallinger 2012). National contexts influence principals’ practices, because ‘Different socio-cultural contexts evidence different value sets as well as norms of behaviour’ (Hallinger 2018, 11). Therefore, this study sought to examine the extent to which Israeli principals’ inhibitors of instructional leadership are similar or different from that reported elsewhere (primarily in the USA). The current study may add to the available knowledge on inhibitors of instructional leadership, expanding the understanding of Israeli principals’ lack of progress in assuming their instructional leadership role, despite the top-down pressures to do so.

Method

This study is qualitative in nature, in order to provide rich textual descriptions of factors that may inhibit instructional leadership in school principals. Qualitative interview methodology and content analysis were selected, to enable in-depth understanding of principals’ behaviour and the reasons governing that behaviour (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016).

Interview measure and procedure

In semi-structured interviews aiming to explore the inhibitors of instructional leadership, the interviewer developed and used an ‘interview guide’ comprising key preplanned questions and targeted topics, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses when possible. Thus, the interviewer could ‘respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic’ (Merriam 2009, 90). The interviewer intentionally avoided mention of the term ‘instructional leadership’ to prevent priming interviewees to frame their discussions in this light. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

For ethical reasons, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the study at any point in time (but none exited). Pseudo-names were assigned. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality and gave written consent. Interviews, which generally lasted one hour, were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of a four-stage process – condensing, coding, categorising, and theorising. First, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014), seeking out the relevant utterances on the topic of instructional leadership. In the second stage – coding – each segment of data (ranging in magnitude from one sentence to an entire page) was assigned a
code (a word or short phrase), which was designed to be summative and essence-capturing (Tracy 2013). Many of the coded were repeatedly used throughout data sets. This stage was both data-driven and theory-driven, based on a priori meanings (such as time constraints, instructional knowledge and organisational norms) as well as on inductive ones developed by directly examining interviewees’ articulated views on instructional leadership (Marshall and Rossman 2011; Rossman and Rallis 2012). In the third stage – categorising – similar utterances that shared some characteristic were grouped together into ‘families’ according to their general meaning, thus enabling definition and labelling of categories. Finally, the theorising stage aimed to reach an abstract conceptual construct of the categories derived in the previous stage, and to decipher both how they were interconnected and how they influenced each other (Richards and Morse 2013).

To ensure the appropriateness of sampling and data collection and analysis, two educational leadership professors evaluated and critiqued the researcher’s decisions, providing additional perspectives of their own regarding research design and data interpretation. In addition, using the member check method (Koelsch 2013), all interviewees were asked to check both accuracy and interpretation. As in any qualitative exploration, attention was paid to how the researcher’s background and personal experience might impact theoretical and methodological perceptions concerning the inquiry. In line with the recognised importance of reflective journals in qualitative research (e.g. Ortlipp 2008), the researcher wrote a personal reflective research log throughout the study to ensure critical thinking.

**Findings**

Analysis of qualitative data revealed that Israeli principals’ perceptions served as key inhibitors of instructional leadership. In the Israeli context, perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership, which were based on the way principals think about the need for instructional leadership and its effects, played an especially important role. Specifically, the current study identified three perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership in Israeli school principals: (1) perceptions regarding principal-teacher relationships; (2) perceptions regarding the role of the principal; and (3) perceptions regarding the goal of schooling. Findings, presented next, are supported by participant excerpts.

**Perceptions regarding principal-teacher relationships**

The first perception articulated by Israeli school principals that the current data analysis identified as an inhibitor of instructional leadership concerned principals’ fear that instructional leadership could damage principal-teacher relationships. This notion was mentioned by eight principals (20% of the sample).
From these interviewees’ perspective, positive principal-teacher relationships are of utmost significance but may be undermined if principals maintain systematic review of their teachers’ practice. Beatrice, an elementary school principal in her seventh year in office, explained: ‘Principals should pay attention not only to the educational work that needs to be carried out, but also to their relations with the teaching staff, and you can’t simultaneously supervise the teachers and nurture your relationship with them.’

Four principals claimed that building up a school’s high productivity requires not only discovering how to get the job done effectively but also fostering positive principal-teacher relationships; therefore, they argued that controlling the teachers’ work closely is not recommended. Elizabeth, with five years of experience as an elementary school principal, articulated her dilemma clearly:

To produce school graduates with the highest possible achievements, we necessarily have processes designed to monitor teaching quality … [however] good principal-teacher relationships are [also] important for student achievement, and these two things are not really compatible, because close monitoring inevitably spoils relationships.

Like Elizabeth, two other principals also worried mainly about the prudence of closely monitoring instruction. George, an elementary school principal with 17 years of principalship experience, articulated this conflict. On the one hand, he espoused monitoring: ‘To lead my school to academic success, I have to follow the advice of the old adage, “Don’t expect what you don’t inspect.” If teachers’ work is not inspected, I should not expect real improvements.’ However, when he inspected his teachers repeatedly, he could not create ‘a friendly place to work, where people share a lot of themselves.’ Similarly Anne, a middle school principal with five years of leadership experience, said: ‘Our school is like one big family. Teachers feel at home here almost right away. If I were to observe classrooms regularly, like I’m asked to do, it might substantially change our family-like community.’

Two principals claimed that relationships are just as important as meeting performance standards. Diana, an elementary school principal in her seventh year in office, said: ‘For me, success is not in terms of achievements and grades; it is in terms of team climate and concern for people. As a principal I emphasise high cohesion and morale … I prioritise teamwork, participation, and consensus.’ Rachel, with two years of experience as a high school principal, asserted that principals should limit instructional leadership activities even if that causes a certain decrease in academic results: ‘Even if it lowers our achievements a bit, I believe a principal should be patient and considerate. You work with people here; it’s not a machine.’

In short, while these principals indeed ascribed importance to improving teaching and learning, they also feared that activities aimed at achieving this goal might negatively affect their relationships with teachers, which they
considered to be essential for a well-functioning school. Therefore, they only partially enacted instructional leadership.

**Perceptions regarding school leaders’ roles**

The second perception articulated by Israeli school principals that the current data analysis identified as an inhibitor of instructional leadership concerned the principal’s role. While the instructional leadership approach expects principals to be significantly involved in the development of curriculum and instruction in order to improve pupils’ performance, 14 interviewees (34% of the sample) believed that principals should focus mainly on other areas.

Three study participants emphasised the role of the principal as a bridge to the extra-school world, which includes – among others – the Ministry of Education, the local municipal authority, the school board, and the parents committee. Linda, with four years of experience as a high school principal, explained: ‘While the entire staff is taking care of what is going on inside the school, I am the only contact person with all the outside parties. Therefore, this is a central component of my work.’ In addition, two participants underscored the area of resource and budget management as demanding substantial time from the principal throughout the school year.

More broadly, seven principals perceived their leadership role as one of enabling teachers to do their jobs rather than interfering with teachers’ work. Considering instruction to be well handled by teachers and the school’s middle leaders, these interviewees expressed the belief that their main role is to give teachers the means to carry out their work and to establish the conditions that would allow teachers to succeed. Esther, an elementary school principal with 17 years of experience as principal, said that her main task is to ‘facilitate.’ She explained: ‘To do a good job, teachers need proper conditions. When I take care of all the necessary resources and create an atmosphere of discipline in the school, teachers can do the good work they know how to do.’ Margaret, a high school principal with four years of experience, similarly said: ‘I give my teachers wide latitude so that they can do the job as best they know. Otherwise, I simply distrust them.’ From her point of view, instruction is a matter for the teachers to tackle alone, and her involvement might be perceived as a lack of trust in her teachers, because ‘Our teachers are talented and experienced professionals, and we have to treat them as such.’ It should be noted that Margaret’s utterance might be seen as reflecting not only her point of view regarding the principal’s role but also regarding principal-teacher relationships mentioned above.

Margaret went on to explain her limited involvement in teaching practices by the fact that she could not be an expert in all the various subject areas taught in her school: ‘I’m an English teacher. What do I understand about physics, biology, or Arabic? How can I test these teachers and criticize their work?’ Two other principals considered their involvement in teaching and learning as ineffectual for
improving actual instruction in the school. They felt that their involvement could not make any impact because of the intransience of teacher behaviour, as described by Lisa, an elementary school principal with seven years of experience: ‘People do not change.’

Overall, these participants perceived the principal’s desired role as focusing mainly on setting up the proper conditions for teachers in terms of logistic arrangements, budget, and discipline, as well as adapting organisational activities in order to conform to the expectations of external stakeholders. Therefore, they did not agree with the main claim espoused by the instructional leadership approach – whereby principals must engage primarily in activities that are clearly designed to improve teaching and learning.

Perceptions regarding the goal of schooling

The third perception articulated by Israeli school principals that the current data analysis identified as an inhibitor of instructional leadership concerned the instructional leadership framework’s underlying premise. In their interviews, nine study participants (22% of the sample) claimed that principals should not become too focused on improving teaching and learning (instructional leadership’s basic assumption) because they upheld that ensuring students’ learning and academic success is not the most important thing a school should do. For these principals, school’s primary task is non-academic – to meet students’ emotional needs, impart moral values, and support their social integration.

One interviewee who highlighted the non-academic goal of schooling 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. Four other interviewees argued that while schools must indeed teach their students through academic instruction, their first and foremost goal should be to develop students morally and promote their desired character traits such as responsibility, self-control, integrity, decency, and good manners. Robert, a high school principal with 14 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 develop students’ ability to distinguish between right and wrong.’ Similarly Sandra, a principal of a high school with six 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.’

Two interviewees 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 by teaching students to navigate social interactions with peers and helping them become productive community members who work
not only toward their own interests but also on behalf of public interests. Importantly, these principals wanted their students to learn to be tolerant and accept people who differed from them.

Two interviewees maintained that principals should devote time to ensuring that their schools develop students’ identity. Charles, a religious high school principal with three years of experience, concentrated on his students’ religious identity: ‘For me, developing our students’ religious identity is the most important thing we do here, because religious identity provides them a perspective from which to view everything, including academic studies.’ Barbara, with seven years of experience as a middle school principal, said: ‘High achievements are essential, but they are foundations only. Above them, we have to build the really important thing, which is the personality of the student.’

Not surprisingly, participants who emphasised school’s main task as a non-academic one described themselves as devoting a significant part of their time to humanistic value-driven leadership. For them, inasmuch as student learning and attainments are not the ultimate goal of schooling, instructional leadership is important for principals, but not the most important priority among their activities.

Discussion
This qualitative study identified three perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership in Israeli principals. These inhibitors relate to the ways in which Israeli principals regard, understand and interpret instructional leadership and its implications. First, the current findings pinpointed Israeli principals’ perceptions that instructional leadership renders a negative effect on principal-teacher relationships. About 20% of the interviewed principals feared that instructional leadership in general, and the monitoring of teaching quality in particular, could damage their relations with teachers, especially because principals considered their good working and personal relationships to be crucial for school improvement efforts. Second, with regard to Israeli principals’ perceptions about the principal’s roles, the current outcomes demonstrated that many (34%) of the participating principals perceived their instructional leadership role as of secondary importance only, upholding the need for principals to focus their efforts mainly on student discipline, school logistics, finances, resources, and liaison with external stakeholders. Third, with regard to Israeli principals’ viewpoints on the main goal facing schools today, the current findings indicated that a substantial minority of the interviewed principals (22%), who ascribed considerable importance to the non-academic, humanistic, socialising goals of schooling, did not highly prioritise the domain of improving their schools’ teaching and learning.

These findings expand the existing literature by providing possible new insights into the disinclinations of instructional leadership on the ground. The
first perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership, regarding principal-teacher relationships, sheds light on the complicated mutual influences between instructional leadership and principal-teacher relationships. Previous studies have emphasised the importance of healthy principal-teacher relationships for principals’ effective instructional leadership (Le Fevre and Robinson 2015; Tschannen-Moran 2014). The necessity of healthy principal-teacher relationships for instructional leadership stems from the fact that the influence of principals on students is mainly indirect (Murphy et al. 2016), through influence on teachers’ practices that, in turn, influence student learning and results (Supovitz, Sirinides, and May 2010; Thoonen et al. 2012). Therefore, the capacity to build productive relationships with teachers may be seen as vital for instructional leadership (Robinson 2010). The findings of this study, however, illustrated how the desire to create positive relationships with teachers might serve as an inhibitor of instructional leadership. Inasmuch as some of the current study’s participants were preoccupied with the potential damage caused by instructional leadership to their good relations with teachers, they have somewhat reduced their involvement in improving teaching and learning. These findings reveal the complex interrelationships between instructional leadership and principal-teacher relationships.

The second perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership, regarding the role of the principal, may be related to inhibitors of instructional leadership proposed in the existing literature. One principal (Margaret), who explained her perception of the principal’s role as differing from an instructional leadership role, cited her lack of specialised knowledge about the various subject areas taught in her school – corresponding with the limited pedagogical knowledge barrier described in the literature as inhibiting instructional leadership (Goldring et al. 2015; Spillane and Louis 2002). As Hallinger and Murphy (2013, 9) claimed, ‘Even the most skillful high school principal cannot be knowledgeable in all of the disciplinary domains that comprise the secondary school curriculum’. Moreover, principals’ claim that their responsibility is to allow teachers to do their jobs rather than interfering with teachers’ work may be seen as reflecting organisational norms that view teaching quality as an area of teachers alone. These norms were also mentioned in the research literature as an inhibitor of instructional leadership (Cuban 1988; Goldring et al. 2015; Murphy et al. 2016). However, overall, the principals who voiced role-related perceptions expressed mainly a low degree of agreement with the basic underpinnings of the instructional leadership role. They had a different opinion about the priorities of principalship, slightly diminishing the importance of their direct involvement in issues of teaching and learning. Therefore, the current principals’ discourse may add new perspectives to the complex influence of principals’ time constraints on their prioritisation of instructional leadership. As aforementioned, principals are said to lack available time to be involved in improving curriculum and instruction, mostly because of the press of other responsibilities (Camburn,
Spillane, and Sebastian 2010; Cuban 1988; Goldring et al. 2015; Hallinger and Murphy 2013). One may claim that time considerations are linked with principals’ disagreement with the concepts of instructional leadership. It is possible that in some way time limits appeared to inhibit instructional leadership because principals did not fully identify with its underlying notions.

The third perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership, regarding the goal of schooling, was hardly discussed in the existing research literature (Shaked 2018). In order to properly understand the instructional leadership framework, we have to examine the relations between school leaders’ instructional leadership tendencies and a crucial question about the main goal of schooling: Toward what ultimate goal does ‘good’ education strive? Identifying the primary objective of schooling holds wide-ranging implications, both theoretical and practical. Yet, schooling’s main goal has hardly been investigated. Biesta (2009, 36) 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.’ In particular, the ultimate target of schooling have barely been examined in direct relation to its conceptual ramifications for instructional leadership (Shaked 2018). Findings of the current study suggest that exploration of the link between instructional leadership and schools’ main goal permits us to explore how perceptions of principals shape their instructional leadership practices.

Overall, this study suggested that in the Israeli context, principals’ perceptions might 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 advocacy of researchers and policymakers (Glanz et al. 2017; Shaked 2018). Slightly differing from inhibitors yielded by prior research, conducted mainly among principals from the USA (e.g. Camburn, Spillane, and Sebastian 2010; Goldring et al. 2015; Murphy et al. 2016), the inhibitors of instructional leadership found in the current study in Israeli principals do not only involve the constraints and capabilities of school principals. To a large extent, these perceptions reflect deep disagreements with the conceptual framework underlying instructional leadership.

To explain the connections between culturally specific features of the Israeli context and the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership found in this study, further research is required. However, it may be argued that the importance ascribed to close interpersonal relationships in Israel, and the informal atmosphere that prevails in workplaces, explain principals’ fear that instructional leadership could damage principal-teacher relationships. The importance attached to close interpersonal relationships may also explain why principals emphasise the school’s role in developing students’ emotional well-being and giving them the social tools needed for functioning within society. The traditional character of Israeli society can be a reason why principals prioritise
the goal of developing students morally and cultivating their desired traits, as well as developing their identity.

If the current findings are validated in future research, they hold practical implications. If scholars and policymakers want principals to actively work toward producing improvements in teaching and learning, then principals’ perceptions regarding instructional leadership should receive greater attention. Developing aspiring principals’ evidence-based perceptions about instructional leadership may increase the likelihood of performance at the instructional level. Helping principals shape perceptions regarding school leadership is also relevant for actual inservice principals’ professional development and even for experienced principals as they continuously consolidate their leadership knowledge in the face of dynamic changes in perceptions of and expectations from their role.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix A: 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 one hour, 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 characterises you as a principal?
3. If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?
4. As a principal, what are your priorities in your work?
5. How is your time divided between the different areas under your responsibility – and why?
6. What guarantees quality instruction in your school?
7. Who is responsible for improving teachers’ practices in your school, and how is that done?
8. As a principal, how do you rate instruction among the various areas requiring your attention – and why?

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