

A paradoxical approach to instructional leadership

A paradoxical approach

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Abstract

Purpose – Perceptual inhibitors to instructional leadership are based on disagreements with the premises of instructional leadership. This study explored how the paradoxical approach, which advocates “both/and” approach to conflicting demands, may moderate the influence of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The current study is qualitative in nature. Study participants were 30 Israeli school principals, representing the larger body of Israeli principals in terms of sex, age, years of experience, education and school level. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis included a two-step theory-driven coding process.

Findings – This study found that the paradoxical approach allowed school principals to hold conflicting perspectives on instructional leadership simultaneously. Thus, it has reduced the effect of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership, as it permitted principals to delay the decision between the expectation to fulfill the role of instructional leader and their disagreements with it.

Originality/value – Despite prolonged pressures, school principals demonstrate limited involvement in instructional leadership, in part because of perceptual inhibitors. The findings of this study can be used in dealing with these inhibitors.

Keywords Instructional leadership, Perceptual inhibitors, A paradoxical approach, School principals

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Introduction

Organizations, as complex systems, are rife with conflicts and contradictions (Johansen, 2018). While these contradictions may be seen as “either/or” challenges, where leaders evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of different options and make tough decisions, paradoxical leader behavior entails a “both/and” approach, which supports contradictory elements simultaneously by leveraging the advantages of each option separately and building on their synergistic potential (Pearce *et al.*, 2019; Zhang and Han, 2019). To date, research has not yet empirically examined the paradoxical approach in school leaders. The present study explores the relevance of the paradoxical approach to instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership concerns an ongoing deep involvement of school principals’ indirect efforts to improve teaching and learning for all students (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Neumerski *et al.*, 2018). Instructional leadership is a crucial factor in facilitating and promoting the academic progress of students (Glickman *et al.*, 2017). However, policymakers’ and principal educators’ expectation from school principals to serve as instructional leaders has hardly been applied in practice by principals in today’s schools (Goldring *et al.*, 2008; Goldring *et al.*, 2015). Researchers have suggested several reasons for this discrepancy between professional recommendations and actual principal behavior (Aas and Brandmo, 2016; Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Shaked (2019a) has found one more explanation for today’s reality of principals’ limited engagement in instructional leadership: perceptual inhibitors, which reflect principals’ deep disagreements with the conceptual framework that underpins instructional leadership. The current study is looking for an answer to the following research question: *how school principals’ paradoxical approach may make the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership less conclusive?*



Specifically, this study focused on Israeli school principals. The national school system in Israel serves about 1.6m students (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013) and is similar in many ways to that of the USA (BenDavid-Hadar, 2016). Israeli school principals are clearly expected to be instructional leaders; however, as in other countries, they do not demonstrate instructional leadership to a satisfactory degree (Shaked, 2018), in part because of perceptual inhibitors (Shaked, 2019a). The current study examines how the paradoxical approach may tone down Israeli school principals' perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership.

Theoretical background

Paradoxical approach

Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 386) defined paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Such elements seem logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent, and even absurd when juxtaposed.” The paradoxical approach is grounded in the premise that these tensions represent opportunities for, rather than threats to, organizational growth and prosperity (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Instead of striving to resolve tensions within the organization in ways such as trade-off, with leaders choosing between alternatives, each of which has its pros and cons, or a compromise, which is based on concessions on all sides, leaders have to “foster a deep appreciation and respect for paradoxical tensions” (Lewis *et al.*, 2014, p. 63), valuing the positive energy enabled by paradox (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Through a paradoxical approach, leaders provide a guiding direction while emphasizing the need to address, adjust to and excel at managing tensions (Lewis *et al.*, 2014). This approach helps individuals, groups and organizations to be flexible and resilient (Schad *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, it fosters more dynamic decision-making and creative solutions to problems (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018). Thus, paradoxical leaders seek to proactively surface tensions as an integral part of decision-making processes (Lavine, 2014). Importantly, the paradoxical approach in people management was associated with increased proficiency, adaptivity and proactivity among employees (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), enabling to sustain long-term effectiveness (Lewis *et al.*, 2014).

The extent to which leaders engage in the paradoxical approach was found to be positively related to their systems thinking (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). When it comes to school principals, the paradoxical approach may be seen as reflecting *adopting a multidimensional view*, which is one of the characteristics of systems thinking in school leadership. *Adopting a multidimensional view* involves contemplation of several aspects of a given issue simultaneously (Shaked and Schechter, 2014, 2017). Each element or part within the vast and complex school system as a whole is regarded by holistic principals, who perform at the systems level, as having a context that influences it; therefore, there is always more than one reason, explanation, implication or answer related to that part or element of interest (Shaked and Schechter, 2017). This perspective may lead to holding inconsistencies simultaneously and paradoxical approach.

While research on educational leadership deals with various paradoxes (e.g. Golann, 2015; Bush, 2016), the paradoxical approach of school leaders is rarely discussed in the existing literature. Raynor (2013) called upon school leaders to “be a paradoxical leader” (p. 103), who work at the “edge of chaos,” where the system has optimum ability to change with the least amount of effort. Similarly, Watson (2013) recommended embracing paradox in school leadership, doubting some prevalent assumptions, such as the need for principals to ensure a shared vision based on common values. However, the paradoxical approach in school leadership has not been investigated empirically so far. To narrow this gap in the available knowledge, the current study explores the paradoxical approach of school leaders concerning their role as instructional leaders.

Dimensions and challenges of instructional leadership

This study is based on the widely accepted framework of instructional leadership presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and Hallinger and Wang (2015). This conceptual framework is composed of three dimensions. First, *defining the school mission* refers to the principal's role in setting clear, assessable school academic goals and assuring commitment to these goals throughout the school community. Second, *managing the instructional program* concentrates on the principal's responsibility for coordinating and monitoring teaching and curriculum throughout the school. Third, *developing a positive school learning climate* concerns the principal's responsibility for developing a culture of ongoing improvement and high standards and expectations for students and teachers (Hallinger and Wang, 2015). Importantly, leadership for learning may be seen as the conceptual evolution of decades of diverse instructional leadership research (Boyce and Bowers, 2018). Leadership for learning requires a focus on learning as an activity in which everyone is a learner. The potential for leadership stems from compelling learning experiences, while opportunities to exercise leadership promote learning (MacBeath, 2019).

Researchers have pointed to a considerable gap between the expectation for school principals to apply instructional leadership and their actual practice (Aas and Brandmo, 2016; Prytula *et al.*, 2013). While some principals do regard the improvement of teaching quality and student learning and achievement as the key element of their role, other principals approach curriculum and instruction as areas of secondary importance (May *et al.*, 2012; Goldring *et al.*, 2008, 2015). The research literature discusses three main inhibitors of instructional leadership. First, principals lack sufficient time to engage directly in improving teaching and learning (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Prytula *et al.*, 2013). Second, principals lack the knowledge base required to work as instructional leaders (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Stein and Nelson, 2003). Third, deep-seated organizational norms, which define principals as not in the teaching business and consider instruction as an area of teachers alone, push principals away from instructional leadership (Murphy *et al.*, 2016).

Besides these inhibitors, which involve constraints and limited capabilities of school principals, perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership, which reflect deep disagreements with the instructional leadership approach, also have been identified. These inhibitors, which serve as explanations for principals' limited involvement in instructional leadership, relate to how principals regard, understand and interpret instructional leadership and its implications. Shaked (2019a) identified three perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership as follows: (1) Principals fear that instructional leadership in general, and the monitoring of teaching quality in particular, can damage their relations with teachers, which they considered particularly important. (2) Principals consider 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. (3) Principals ascribe much importance to the nonacademic, humanistic, socializing goals of schooling, rather than to the domain of improving their schools' teaching and learning (Shaked, 2019a).

While the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership were identified, coping with them has not yet been discussed (Shaked, 2019a). This study seeks to add to the instructional leadership literature by exploring the paradoxical approach of school principals who are expected to become instructional leaders, in order to generate new understandings of how perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership can be moderated.

Method

The current study was qualitative to provide detailed textual descriptions of the paradoxical approach related to the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership. Qualitative research

is most appropriate when the overall aim is to describe a phenomenon and when the available knowledge on the phenomenon is limited.

Participants

A purposive sampling, rather than a convenience or random sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), was used in this study, where the goal was for the sample to be similar to the larger body of Israeli principals in terms of sex, age, years of experience, education and school level (elementary, middle, high). The population of Israeli principals consists of 67% female principals and 33% male principals. Israeli principals have an average of 11 years of experience as school leadership, and their average age is 50. As for their education, 8% of Israeli principals have no academic degree, 35% have a bachelor's degree and 65% have a master's degree or higher. Regarding the school level, 61% of Israeli principals work in elementary schools, while 39% work in middle and high schools (Capstones, 2012).

Principals were recommended for participation in this study by colleagues and students of the author, as well as by other study participants. However, they were included in the study only if their participation matched the characteristics of the larger population. Therefore, the current study involved 30 principals, 21 females and nine males. Participants had 3–27 years of experience as principals ($M = 10.09$, $SD = 6.07$). They were between 31 and 62 years old ($M = 48.02$, $SD = 8.04$). One principal had no academic degree, nine principals held a bachelor's degree, 19 principals held a master's degree and one principal held a doctorate. They served in elementary schools ($n = 18$), middle schools ($n = 3$) and high schools ($n = 9$), working in all seven Israeli school districts.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This “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 and Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). The questions for the interview were preplanned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses when possible. Although the interviews sought to explore the application of instructional leadership, the interviewers intentionally did not mention the term “instructional leadership” to avoid priming participants to frame their discussions in this light. Therefore, questions were asked, such as: “As a principal, what are your priorities in your work, and how were they determined?” “If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?” “Who is responsible for improving teaching practices in your school, and why?” and “As a principal, how do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention– and why?”. Interviews with principals generally lasted one hour and were audio-taped for later transcription.

Data analysis

Data analysis included a two-step coding process, which was theory-driven, i.e. based on *a priori* codes (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). In the first step, relevant utterances that might represent instructional leadership, based on the conceptual framework of instructional leadership, were sought. A rereading of study participants' utterances suggested that they might be indicative of the paradoxical approach. Therefore, in the second step, the utterances identified at the previous stage were examined to see if they reflected the paradoxical approach. The next stage was theorizing, aiming to transcend the findings toward a conceptual construct. While the coding process allowed to get up from the diversity of data to the shapes of the data, the sorts of things represented, the theorizing stage allowed to get up to more general, higher-level, and more abstract constructs. Charmaz (2006) explained it in a slightly unique way: “Coding generates the bones of your analysis; theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (p. 45).

Findings

Analysis of qualitative data revealed that the paradoxical approach enabled school principals to hold conflicting perspectives regarding instructional leadership at the same time. Therefore, the paradoxical approach moderated the effect of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership because it allowed principals who did not fully agree with the need for instructional leadership and its effects to put aside the decision between the expectation to demonstrate instructional leadership and their disagreements with it and maintain them simultaneously. The following sections illustrate a paradoxical approach to each of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership mentioned above, supported by excerpts typifying participants' own voices.

Instructional leadership and principal–teacher relationships

The first perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership stems from principals' belief that close principal–teacher relationships are of utmost significance and may be undermined if they maintain a systematic review of their teachers' practice. The current data analysis identified a paradoxical approach regarding this inhibitor in six school principals. These principals invested in developing close relationships with their teachers. At the same time, they have regularly supervised their teachers' work, knowing that this supervision makes it difficult to establish positive relationships with them. Instead of choosing to have close relationships with teachers by avoiding monitoring their work, they did both things simultaneously.

For example Diana, an elementary school principal in her seventh year in office, described herself as investing a great deal in fostering her positive relationship with the teaching staff: "I do not forget to take an interest in the health of sick teachers and family events of teachers, both happy and unfortunate"; and "I greet teachers every morning at the school entrance and sit in the teachers' room during the breaks". However, she described herself as monitoring teachers' practices: "The most effective way I have found to monitor teachers' work is to sit in their classes. Then there must be a one-on-one conversation, pointing out strengths, areas where improvement is needed, and ways to improve". She was aware that "teachers hate to be observed when teaching," and therefore, "my observations and my criticism of teacher work do not make me a favorite of teachers." It did not bother her, because "the teachers and I are not here to make friends. We have a job, and it is my responsibility to make sure our work is done best." From Diana's perspective, relationships between the principal and her teachers are essential, and so she nurtures them. At the same time, to produce school graduates with satisfactory academic results, processes designed to monitor teaching quality are needed. These two things are not fully compatible because close monitoring might spoil relationships. Nevertheless, Diana dealt with both issues simultaneously, demonstrating the paradoxical approach.

Similarly, George, an elementary school principal with 17 years of principalship experience, described his relationship with teachers as characterized by "mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together and have each other's back." However, he supported monitoring students' learning progress: "If students' results are not systematically inspected, and teachers are not held accountable for their students' achievements, I should not expect real improvements." He understood that when he "inspect teachers repeatedly," he could not "create a friendly place to work." The contradiction between describing the atmosphere as involving "mutual trust and friendship" and a place that is not "a friendly place to work" reflects the paradoxical approach.

Instructional leadership and other managerial responsibilities

The second perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership lies in principals' belief that they do not have to be focused mainly on instructional issues but rather on other areas, such as setting up the proper conditions for teachers in terms of logistic arrangements, budget and

discipline as well as being a bridge to the extra-school world. Paradoxical behavior regarding this perceptual inhibitor was found in the current qualitative study in five school leaders.

Linda, with six years of experience as a high school principal, did not prioritize one of her tasks over another but rather regarded each of them as a top priority. About school safety, she said: "Protecting the students from bullying, harassment, violence and substance usage is the most meaningful element of my work" Regarding the relationships with external stakeholders she said: "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 job." She also said about the improvement of student learning: "Broadening and deepening students' knowledge base across various subjects is our mission as a school, so my main mission as a principal is to ensure high-level student learning." Instead of ranking her duties as a principal in order of importance, which might have resulted in a low rating of instructional leadership, Linda considered many of her roles as "the most important thing I do as a school principal," reflecting paradoxical approach, which advocates a both/and proposition to conflicting demands.

Margaret, an elementary school principal with 14 years of experience, argued that she did not have to monitor teacher work: "My teachers learned the profession and gained experience, so I trust them to do the job properly." While she slightly diminished the importance of her direct involvement in issues of teaching and learning, she also considered it imperative to know what was going on in the classrooms: "I have to correctly recognize the performance of each teacher" because "I do not want to make a mistake by not knowing what is happening in classrooms." When the interviewer asked her about this contradiction, she mentioned a well-known Jewish story about a rabbi who was asked to decide on a dispute between two of his followers and told each of them "You're right." The rabbi's wife, who listened to the conversation, asked how both could be right, and the rabbi answered, "You're also right." Using this story, Margaret showed that she was aware of her paradoxical approach, solving the apparent logical failure with humor.

Instructional leadership and the nonacademic goals of schooling

The third perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership concerns principals' argument that they should not become too focused on instructional issues because the school's primary task is nonacademic – to meet students' emotional needs, impart moral values and support their social integration. Paradoxical behavior regarding this conflict was found in five school leaders, who emphasized the academic and nonacademic responsibilities of schools simultaneously.

Like Linda in the previous section, Robert, a middle school principal with 12 years of experience, rated some of the school's tasks as most important. He 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. He also claimed that schools need more than anything to develop students morally and promote their desired character traits such as responsibility, self-control, integrity, decency and good manners. At the same time, he placed the learning and achievement of the students as a top priority of the school: "The school's first and foremost goal is to teach students literacy, math, and science." Barbara, with nine years of experience as an elementary school principal, argued: "The primary role of schools is to deliver classroom instruction that helps students learn." At the same time, she also asserted: "Prioritizing student achievement is based on a very narrow point of view, which considers schools as only preparing young people for higher education and employment. Developing their emotional well-being, including their sense of belonging and safety, is no less important."

David, an elementary school principal with 11 years of experience, described himself as devoting a great deal of time to programs designed to give students the social tools required

to function within their society, for example, teaching students to navigate social interactions with peers from different backgrounds and helping them become productive community members who work not only toward their benefits but also on behalf of public benefits. At the same time, he also depicted himself as paying attention to his schools' academic and nonacademic goals simultaneously. He said he was deeply involved in a wide range of instructional leadership activities, such as aligning curriculum, assessment and instruction and using data to improve learning.

Discussion

This study sought an answer to the question of how the paradoxical approach could serve as a neutralizing or counterbalancing force against principals' perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership. Findings showed that the relevance of the paradoxical approach stemmed from the fact that each of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership is based on a tension between instructional leadership and other duties, responsibilities and priorities of the principal. The paradoxical approach facilitated a "both/and" approach to these tensions, where principals were not required to decide between different options. Therefore, the paradoxical approach allowed principals not to turn their opposition to instructional leadership into avoidance of implementation.

The findings of this study illustrated how the paradoxical approach to instructional leadership was realized when study participants were working on different tasks at the same time, which may be seen as reflecting the well-documented multidimensional nature of the principal's work (Prytula *et al.*, 2013). The average workday of principals is characterized by fragmentation of activities and brevity of attention to issues. The working day is usually not long enough for principals to do all the functions they are expected to do (Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Walker and Qian (2006) wrote figuratively: "The dominant modern myth portrays the school principal as an underpaid workhorse tangling with the conflicting demands of instructional leadership, bureaucracy, official mandates, and adverse interest groups" (p. 298). While this description clearly criticizes the broad spectrum of competing demands imposed on the principal, the paradoxical approach demonstrated in this study values the opportunities created by tensions and contradictions (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Instead of looking for principals' coherent and logical priorities, the paradoxical approach respects conflicting priorities that are not entirely consistent (Zhang *et al.*, 2015).

As human beings, principals have an internal need for consistency. Naturally, they experience cognitive dissonance when faced with apparent contradictions, which triggers the desire to remove the discomfort (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). According to this study, however, school reality forces them to feel more comfortable in situations with underlying tensions or conflicting demands. They understand that goals and expectations from inside and outside the school are complex and interconnected. Success in such an environment requires them to employ a paradoxical approach. Instead of eliminating tensions, they learn to accept them, feel comfortable with them and see them as an opportunity.

The paradoxical approach to instructional leadership found in study participants may be considered to emerge from systems thinking. Specifically, it relates to one of the characteristics of systems thinking in school leadership – *adopting a multidimensional view*, which involves seeing various aspects of any given issue simultaneously (Shaked and Schechter, 2014, 2017). Because a school is inherently a complex system, each and every element within it is viewed by principals who perform at the systems level as having a wide variety of roots and conclusions (Shaked and Schechter, 2017). The multidimensional view allows for a paradoxical approach, which opposes the "either/or" approach to school leadership. Insofar as principals do not have to choose the correct explanation, but rather to consider many options, they also do not have to choose one side of the conflict, but rather to appreciate the paradoxical tension.

As aforementioned, the paradoxical behavior regarding the first perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership was found in six study participants: regarding the second perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership in five study participants and regarding the third perceptual inhibitor of instructional leadership in five study participants. Overall, 16 out of 30 study participants demonstrated the paradoxical approach to instructional leadership. However, the importance of the findings lies not in their high prevalence, but rather in the fact that they offer a way of dealing with the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership. Inasmuch as a large pool of research links principals' instructional leadership to positive school outcomes, including improved teacher practices and higher student achievement rates, across a variety of organizational, spatial, and temporal contexts (Glickman *et al.*, 2017), finding ways to overcome the instructional leadership perceptual inhibitors may be seen as contributing to the available knowledge. Practically, principals must try to develop a paradoxical approach to instructional leadership. Instead of seeing instructional leadership as contradictory to other principal duties, and thus avoiding applying it fully, principals should handle different responsibilities together. Furthermore, it is advisable to discuss the paradoxical approach to instructional leadership with prospective and current principals at various stages in their careers, such as preparation programs, mentoring programs provided to novice principals and professional development as principals. In this way, it seems possible to reduce the effect of the perceptual inhibitors of instructional leadership.

Future research would do well to explore differences between principals in terms of gender, experience and education by using a larger sample and quantitative methods. In addition, as the data were collected in a particular context, further research is required to generalize the findings to broader populations and establish cross-cultural and international validity. As with any self-report, the current method offered little control over the possibility that respondents might provide socially desirable responses. Future research using techniques such as direct observation may complement principals' self-reporting with more objective data on their paradoxical approach to instructional leadership. Interviews with various stakeholders, both from inside and outside the school, about the principal's paradoxical approach to instructional leadership may also complement principals' self-report. Longitudinal studies, including repeated data collection in the same principals at different points in their career, would also be useful in revealing the development of a paradoxical approach to instructional leadership.

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