

Between center and periphery: instructional leadership in Israeli rural schools

Leadership in
Israeli rural
schools

Haim Shaked

Hemdat College of Education, Netivot, Israel

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Abstract

Purpose – Instructional leadership is a major part of the responsibility of principals who achieve promising results in school improvement. This paper aims to explore the inhibiting factors for instituting instructional leadership in elementary schools located in rural areas in Israel.

Design/methodology/approach – The participants of this qualitative study were a diverse sample of 64 rural school principals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis proceeded in a three-stage process that involved condensing, coding and categorizing.

Findings – This study revealed that rural principals refrain from practicing instructional leadership because of two specific inhibiting factors: relationships within the community, which make it difficult for them to implement a school leadership policy that includes monitoring and control and characteristics of parents, who disagree with the instructional leadership's emphasis on learning and achievement.

Originality/value – The findings of this reinforce argument that propose context as an under-used theoretical lens for understanding differences in principals' practices across different contexts.

Keywords Instructional leadership, Rural education, Principals, Israeli schools

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

School leadership is shaped by numerous aspects of the school context, such as national values and norms (Shaked *et al.*, 2021), accountability-based policies (Daniels, 2019), family expectations (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020) and students' socio-economic background (Tan, 2018). Therefore, school leadership cannot be explored through the lens of a generic set of leadership principles alone; the contextual features must also be taken into account (Miller, 2018). However, the empirical research on school leadership emphasizing the importance of being sensitive to contextual power is scant (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). In too many cases, the school leadership literature focuses on "what works" rather than "what works in a specific context" (Hallinger, 2018a).

This study examines how context influences instructional leadership, an educational leadership approach in which school leaders are regularly and actively involved in defining the school mission, managing the instructional program and developing a positive learning climate to improve teaching and learning (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger and Wang, 2015). Importantly, instructional leadership in elementary schools is different from instructional leadership in high schools (Louis *et al.*, 2010). This difference can be related to various school characteristics, such as the fact that high schools are often more crowded than elementary schools or that teachers at high schools are usually specialized in one particular subject matter (Hallinger, 2012). Inasmuch as when it comes to instructional leadership, we cannot treat elementary schools in the same way we treat secondary schools (Gedik and Bellibas, 2015), and this study focuses on elementary schools.

Although instructional leadership as a framework for the role of the principal is being researched and implemented today in a wide range of contexts (Hallinger, 2018b; Kaparou and Bush, 2016), we still do not have sufficient knowledge about how its application is affected by different contextual characteristics (Shaked *et al.*, 2021; Goldring *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, the current study explores the contextual influences on the inhibiting factors for



instructional leadership implementation. Despite the well-documented correlations between the principal's instructional leadership and improved school performance, including better teacher practices and higher student outcomes (Glickman *et al.*, 2017; Jacobson, 2011; May and Supovitz, 2011; Quinn, 2002; Supovitz *et al.*, 2010), a significant number of principals see instructional leadership as only of secondary importance (Goldring *et al.*, 2015, 2019). Researchers found that because of several inhibiting factors (Murphy *et al.*, 2016; Prytula *et al.*, 2013), only a small portion of principals' time was devoted to instructional leadership activities (May *et al.*, 2012; Grissom *et al.*, 2013). The current study aims to reveal possible influences of the school context on instructional leadership inhibiting factors.

The focal area of the current study is the inhibiting factors of implementing instructional leadership in rural areas. Compared to urban areas, education in rural areas is relatively inferior (Glover *et al.*, 2016; Preston *et al.*, 2013). The achievements of rural students are lower, their dropout rates are higher and many of them fail to graduate from high school. Fewer rural students pursue post-secondary education as compared to their counterparts in urban areas (Byun *et al.*, 2012; Marré, 2017). Gaps between rural and non-rural education are explored in many countries (e.g. Corbett and Gereluk, 2020; Cuervo, 2016; du Plessis and Mestry, 2019; Yue *et al.*, 2018). The limited available knowledge on instructional leadership in rural areas (Wallin and Newton, 2013; Wiczorek and Manard, 2018) was the motivation for this study.

This study was conducted in rural elementary schools in Israel. The Israeli school system serves about 1.6 million students and consists of three tiers: elementary school (grades 1–6, ages 6–12), middle school (grades 7–9, ages 12–15) and high school (grades 10–12, ages 15–18) (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2021). Israeli principals' ultimate responsibility is to serve as instructional leaders to improve all students' education and learning (Capstones, 2008). Disparities between rural and non-rural schools in Israel are significant (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019a). The following section discusses the research literature pertinent to this study and presents the Israeli context.

Theoretical background

Conceptualization of instructional leadership

Principals as instructional leaders prioritize involvement in improving teaching and curriculum over managerial tasks (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). At the core of instructional leadership is the strong impact of teaching quality on student learning and achievement (Murphy *et al.*, 2016). The quality of teaching, which is undoubtedly the most important school-related factor influencing student performance (Hattie, 2009), requires constant coordination and supervision by the school's instructional leader (Glickman *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, researchers and practitioners alike expect school principals to demonstrate instructional leadership (Neumerski *et al.*, 2018).

The most prevalent framework of instructional leadership was presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Hallinger and Wang (2015). This framework consists of three dimensions that include ten functions. First: Defining the school mission relates to the principal's responsibility to set clear, assessable school instructional goals and ensure dedication to these goals throughout the school community. This dimension comprises two functions: (1) framing the school's goals and (2) communicating its goals. Second: Managing the instructional program relates to the principal's responsibility to coordinate and supervise the school's teaching and curriculum. This dimension comprises three functions: (3) coordinating curriculum, (4) overseeing and evaluating instruction and (5) monitoring student progress. Third: Developing a positive school learning climate relates to the principal's responsibility to develop a culture of continuous improvement and high standards and expectations for students and teachers. This dimension comprises five functions: (6) protecting instructional

time, (7) providing incentives for teachers, (8) providing incentives for learning, (9) promoting professional development and (10) maintaining high visibility.

Research has pointed to a significant gap between the expectation from principals to be involved in instructional leadership and how they actually practice it (Aas and Brandmo, 2016; Grissom *et al.*, 2013). Four main types of instructional leadership inhibiting factors are discussed in the literature. First, principals do not have enough time to engage directly in improving teaching and learning (Prytula *et al.*, 2013; Goldring *et al.*, 2015). Ongoing structural constraints on principals' time pressure them to address other issues such as building operations or student affairs (Camburn *et al.*, 2010). Second, insufficient knowledge about teaching and learning also serves as a barrier to practicing instructional leadership (Goldring *et al.*, 2019; Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Without a thorough comprehension of what quality teaching is, school leaders cannot perform essential school improvement functions (Spillane and Louis, 2002). Third, perceptual inhibiting factors of instructional leadership, which reflect principals' deep disagreements with the instructional leadership approach, also push principals away from instructional leadership (Shaked, 2019). These inhibiting factors relate to how principals regard, understand and interpret instructional leadership and its implications. Fourth, deep-rooted organizational norms, which define principals as not being part of the teaching staff and consider instruction as a teacher-only field, challenge instructional leaders' work. These norms have been described as deterring principals from encroaching on teachers' territory and relinquishing their position in the in-school hierarchy (Cuban, 1988). These norms also make principals see themselves as having completed the teaching period and moving to a new occupational field, in which teaching occupies only a secondary place (Murphy *et al.*, 2016).

Since school leadership is context-dependent (Miller, 2018), its exploration should not ignore contextual influences. Thus, the research on instructional leadership in general, and especially its inhibiting factors, lies in exposing how instructional leadership's application varies across the world and is shaped by various contexts (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018b). In many cases, instructional leadership inhibiting factors cannot be understood without an in-depth inquiry into the influence of contextual factors (Shaked *et al.*, 2021). This study is designed to document how the rural context molds the inhibiting factors of instructional leadership.

Rural school leadership

Rural school principals face a wide range of commonly-found challenges (Preston *et al.*, 2013). Children in rural areas enter school with less advanced academic skills than children in non-rural areas (Miller and Votruba-Drzal, 2013). Their motivation as students is lower (Hardé and Hennessey, 2010), and so is their belief that they will be in school several years later (Snyder *et al.*, 2009). It is also difficult to recruit and retain good teaching staff (Lock *et al.*, 2012). Teachers in rural schools are often insufficiently trained (Monk, 2007). They do not have enough opportunities to participate in meaningful professional development (Glover *et al.*, 2016), and their access to instructional technology continues to be limited (Howley *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, rural principals have lower autonomy perceptions than non-rural principals (Beesley and Clark, 2015). These challenges may explain higher principal turnover rates in rural districts than in other districts (Hansen, 2018).

Significantly, rural principals' instructional leadership may be influenced by the principal-teacher relationships characterizing rural schools, which are based on close, warm interpersonal connections (Lock *et al.*, 2012; Preston and Barnes, 2017; Wallin and Newton, 2013). Rural principals prefer a relational leadership style along with care-focused decision-making. They express a need to take care of the well-being of teachers, employing a "power with" instead of "power over" leadership structure (Bartling, 2013). Rural principals

stress their importance as sources of support for teachers, buffering external constraints to effective learning and assessment. They believe that instructional leadership is best practiced when managed collegially rather than bureaucratically because the bureaucratic environment is incompatible with rural professional contexts' familial nature (Renihan and Noonan, 2012). Rural principals appeared to be more accessible, compared to urban principals (Preston, 2012). They believe that informal, impromptu meetings with teachers are precious for understanding staff professional development needs (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012).

Rural principals' relationships with parents and communities are also significant. For rural principals, communication and involvement with parents and the community are essential (Latham *et al.*, 2014). Rural principals see the enjoyment of having close relationships with the local community as a positive feature, yet having to deal with community tensions and assuming community leadership roles is considered daunting (Lock *et al.*, 2012). Rural communities expect principals to be visible at school and in the community, whether they reside in the community or not. This visibility means that the principals are essentially "on the job" at all times, serving as role models. As such, the principals realize that their behaviors and those of their family members need to meet community members' expectations and fit the professional role of a school principal (Bartling, 2013). Also, expectations placed upon rural principals to be visible and engaged cause them to struggle in balancing their professional and private lives (Wieczorek and Manard, 2018).

According to Preston and Barnes (2017), successful rural principals promote people-centered leadership and nurture interpersonal relationships with teachers, parents, students and community stakeholders. Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the inhibiting factors of instructional leadership that characterize rural schools? Given that this topic has not been sufficiently researched so far (Preston and Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek and Manard, 2018), answering this question may narrow gaps in the existing empirically-based knowledge on instructional leadership, holding both theoretical and practical implications.

Research context

This study explores instructional leadership among Israeli principals who run schools in rural areas. Around the world, rural areas are defined in both policy-oriented and scholarly literature according to a variety of characteristics, such as relatively small population size, low population density and geographic distance from metropolitan areas (Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Cuervo, 2016; Hopkins and Copus, 2018; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). In Israel, rural areas are measured according to the peripherality index. This index is calculated for each locality as a weighted sum of two components: proximity to other localities (weighing 2/3) and proximity to the Tel Aviv district, the most densely populated Israeli district, with a population of 1.35 million residents (weighing 1/3). Israel's localities are classified into ten clusters – from cluster one, which includes the most peripheral localities, to cluster ten, which includes the most central authorities. The localities in clusters 1 to 4 are defined as the periphery (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019b). The present study explores peripheral localities, calling them rural areas.

The international phenomenon of achievement gaps between rural and non-rural students (du Plessis and Mestry, 2019; Marré, 2017; Yue *et al.*, 2018) is also evident in Israel. The proportion of Israeli students eligible for a high school diploma in central localities is 80.6%, while in peripheral localities this number is only 74%. The proportion of students whose high school diploma meets universities' admission requirements in central localities is 72%, while in peripheral localities it is 63%. In addition, the percentage of high school graduates entering higher education institutions among those living in central localities is 48%, compared with 43% among those living in peripheral localities (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019a).

The achievement gaps within the Israeli school system, which are very large, have hardly diminished over the years (OECD, 2019).

To close achievement gaps, instructional leadership is needed (Glickman *et al.*, 2017; Jacobson, 2011). Therefore, Israeli principals are called upon to become instructional leaders (Shaked, 2019). Four areas of dimensions constitute the framework for instructional leadership in Israel: designing the future image of the school – developing a vision and bringing about change; leading the team and nurturing its professional development; focusing on the individual and managing the relationship between the school and the surrounding community (Capstones, 2008). However, the application of instructional leadership in Israeli rural schools has not been examined, hence the need for this study.

Method

The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because its overall aim is to describe a phenomenon, about which there is sparse knowledge (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, this study utilized interviews, which are widely held to be a useful way of understanding the beliefs, experiences and worlds of informants because they provide unique access to the actual world of study participants, who in their own words describe their activities and opinions (Mann, 2016; Rossman and Rallis, 2017). The following sections describe the study sample, how information was gathered and analytical strategies.

Study participants

As mentioned above, the study participants were principals who worked in rural elementary schools in Israel, i.e. schools in localities defined as periphery according to the Israeli peripherality index (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019b). Principals were recommended to be participants in this study by colleagues and students of the author and other study participants. However, heterogeneous sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) was also implemented in this study regarding participants' age, sex, seniority and academic degree. The goal was to "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113). Therefore, the present study included 64 principals, 46 women and 18 men. They were aged between 36 and 61 years old ($M = 49.13$, $SD = 6.53$) and had 2–29 years of experience as principals ($M = 10.72$, $SD = 6.21$). Two principals did not have any academic degree, 20 principals held a bachelor's degree, 40 principals held a master's degree and two principal held a doctorate.

Data collection

The author collected the data through semi-structured interviews. This allowed him "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 interview questions were pre-planned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions arising from previous answers whenever possible. The interviews, which usually lasted one hour, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were also conducted, as needed, to clarify questions that arose during a review of interview transcripts.

The interview protocol was reviewed by two researchers, who were experts in educational leadership, as well as by two school principals to ensure that it was understandable and consistent with the study's purpose. Although the interviews were intended to explore instructional leadership, the term "instructional leadership" was intentionally absent from the interview so as not to cause participants to respond in this setting. Therefore, questions were asked such as "As a principal, what are your priorities in your work?"; "If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?"; "Who is responsible for improving

teachers' practices in your school – and how is that done?"; "As a principal, how do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention – and why?"

For ethical reasons, the study participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they could leave the study at any point (no one chose to leave) and were promised confidentiality (pseudonyms were assigned). They were asked to provide written consent based on an understanding of the study's purpose.

Data analysis

Data analysis, which the author conducted, was a three-step process: sorting, coding and categorizing. It began with the necessary sorting (Miles *et al.*, 2014) to search for statements related to the research topic. Subsequently, each statement was coded according to its meaning (Tracy, 2013). This stage was data-driven because it did not utilize *a priori* codes but rather inductive ones, developed by directly examining the participants' perspectives as they were expressed. After capturing their essence, similar statements were gathered into clusters to generalize their meanings and produce categories. Then, the member-check method (Koelsch, 2013) was employed, in which all interviewees were asked to review the data analysis to ensure both accuracy and interpretation. As with any qualitative data analysis, attention was paid to how the researcher's background and personal experience might affect his data interpretation. Recognizing the importance of reflective journals in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008), the author wrote a personal reflective research log throughout the study to ensure critical thinking.

Findings

This study sought to identify the inhibiting factors of instructional leadership that characterize schools in rural areas. Qualitative data analysis revealed that the study participants' statements corresponded to the above-mentioned four main reasons described in the literature as reasons why principals do not fulfill their instructional leadership role. Regarding principals' lack of sufficient uninterrupted time, for example, Alice, with 19 years of experience, said, "My chronic lack of time is the main reason why I do not engage in improving the quality of teaching as I would like." Regarding deep-rooted organizational norms, for instance, Elizabeth, with two years of experience, said, "As a principal, my job is to provide teachers with the necessary conditions so that they can do the job they know how to do well." With seven years of experience, Michael expressed a perceptual inhibiting factor of instructional leadership: "Yes, teaching methods are important. But before anything else, I talk to teachers about the values we must instill in our students." Philip, with 14 years of experience, described himself as lacking the necessary knowledge to be involved in instructional leadership: "When teachers have a question about the curriculum, I often have no knowledge that will allow me to answer it, beyond common sense."

In addition, the study participants mentioned two explanations that have not been extensively investigated for why they only adopted instructional leadership's tasks to a limited extent. These were related to the rural context within which their school leadership took place: the relationships within the community and the characteristics of parents. These two inhibiting factors of instructional leadership are presented in the following sections, supported by quotes from the interviews with the study participants.

Relationships within the community

One reason that rural principals only partially demonstrated instructional leadership, which was revealed during the qualitative data analysis, was their belief that the principal–teacher relationship required for instructional leadership does not match their community's characteristics. According to the study participants, whereas instructional leadership

involves monitoring and controlling, rural schools need a friendly atmosphere. This idea was mentioned by 16 participants.

The study participants claimed that in rural areas, “everything is less formal” (James, with eight years of experience). Esther, with 15 years of experience, said that in her school, “There is less emphasis on established authorities or multiple levels of hierarchy. Rather, authority is equal among all staff members.” Elaine, with seven years of experience, asserted, “Finding the right balance of informality and professionalism can be tricky. The informality creates a pleasant atmosphere, but sometimes I feel that the price paid by reduced professionalism is too high.”

The study participants also said that in rural communities, the principal and teachers were neighbors in a small locality and had known each other for many years. Thus, there are limits to the authority the principal can exercise. Karen, with two years of experience, explained, “I meet the teachers not only at school but also at the grocery store, the playground and the swimming pool. Our relationship cannot only be professional.” Similarly, with two years of experience, Kimberly said, “I will not be a principal here forever. And I will have to live with these teachers in the same community for many years to come. There are things I cannot do.”

The study participants argued that because of their community’s characteristics, they could not force their opinion on the teachers: “It is very difficult for me to introduce changes in curriculum and teaching methods if the teachers oppose them” (Dorothy, with four years of experience, asserted); “I cannot force my instructional goals on them. I have to compromise” (Charles, with five years of experience); “They do not always understand that in the end, I’m supposed to be leading the school’s instructional direction. They expect me to adapt” (Barbara, with 16 years of experience).

From the study participants’ point of view, close supervision of teachers’ work, as required under instructional leadership, did not match their school’s atmosphere with the emphasis on interpersonal relationships. With 14 years of experience, Patricia argued that classroom observations were problematic in her school: “From the teachers’ point of view, observations mean that I do not trust or appreciate them, which is insulting to them. So I avoid it.” Sharon, with eight years of experience, found it challenging to evaluate teachers properly: “Teachers expect me to give high ratings in teacher evaluation, even to less effective teachers. For them, even if there are problems, they should not be reported, and the teachers’ livelihoods must not be harmed.”

Characteristics of parents and community

Another reason found in the interviews conducted in this study for why rural principals implement instructional leadership only to a limited extent was their sense that instructional leadership’s priorities do not match the preferences of their students’ parents. From the study participants’ perspective, whereas instructional leadership expected principals to put student learning and achievement in the first place, parents ascribed less importance to these issues. This idea was mentioned by 18 participants.

According to the study participants, rural parents did not see academic achievements as a matter of paramount importance, and therefore they did not want their children to be under academic pressure and feel overloaded. They described rural parents who argued that “There are too many requirements” (Bob, with 16 years of experience); “Children are constantly barraged with educational expectations to be met” (Carol, with 11 years of experience); “Kids have no downtime at all. They cannot go outside and play because of the amount of homework they have to do” (John, with 16 years of experience).

The study participants claimed that rural parents do not attach importance to academic results because it does not matter to them whether their children continue to higher education. With 15 years of experience, Gloria said, “Quite a few parents here do not have academic

degrees, nor is it imperative to them that their children have academic degrees.” Similarly, Deborah, with six years of experience, said, “They are not the type of parents who aspire for their children to work in prestigious professions, such as engineers or high-tech workers. It does not really interest them.”

According to the study participants, teachers at rural schools are part of the community, and therefore they often hold similar views to those of the students’ parents. Sandra, with four years of experience, said, “When I bring up for discussion the claims of parents that students should not be pressured too much, some teachers agree with them. Not only do parents not attach much importance to academic success, but some of the teaching staff also feel the same way.” Similarly, with 13 years of experience, Linda said, “I used to work in the center of the country, and the teachers here have a different perception of their role. They do not let students work hard.” Margaret, with two years of experience, heard a similar position from the head of the local authority: “Many heads of authorities are pressuring principals to show rapid improvement in student achievement. In our area, however, it’s not really of any interest.”

Some study participants agreed, at least to some extent, with parents’ and teachers’ opinion that learning and achievement, which are at the heart of instructional leadership, are not the only issues that should be at the top of the principal’s priorities. Moreover, they believed they needed to tailor their school leadership to the expectations of the school community. Monica, with 19 years of experience, explained, “Principalship needs to adapt to the community it serves. You cannot go against the parents. That is why my school pays a lot of attention to extracurricular activities and not just learning and outcomes.”

Discussion

Study limitations and further research

While the qualitative methods used in this study offer insights on instructional leadership in rural areas, this study has several limitations that call for further research. First, since the rural principals who participated in this study all worked within the Israeli school system, it is necessary to replicate this study in various countries to examine its findings’ generalizability. Second, data collection allowed this study to provide detailed textual descriptions of the perceptions of the principals. However, further research using techniques such as direct observation can complement the principals’ self-reporting with more objective data on instructional leadership in rural areas. Interviewing school middle leaders and teachers about their principals’ instructional leadership may also complement the principals’ self-reporting. Third, interactions between rural principals’ instructional leadership and variables such as age, sex, seniority and academic degree were not significant in this study. However, such interactions may be found in future research using a larger number of participants.

Interpretation of the findings

This study aimed to identify the inhibiting factors of implementing instructional leadership that characterize schools in rural areas. Data analysis has shown that in addition to the four reasons mentioned in the research literature for why principals are not sufficiently involved in instructional leadership, rural principals refrain from applying instructional leadership because of two inhibiting factors directly related to the nature of the rural area in which they work.

The first inhibiting factor of instructional leadership in rural schools is the principals’ belief that instructional leadership requires a principal–teacher relationship that is incompatible with their relatively small community’s friendly nature. The conceptual framework of instructional leadership, developed by [Hallinger and Murphy \(1985\)](#), does not assign fundamental importance to cultivating close relationships. The three dimensions of

this framework – defining the school mission, managing the instructional program and developing a positive learning climate – emphasize aspects of authority and control, such as supervision, evaluation and monitoring. Therefore, instructional leadership is “a directive and top-down approach to school leadership” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 337). This leadership model is primarily characterized as a task-oriented leadership that does not emphasize motivating teachers, building lasting relationships with them and ensuring their satisfaction and general well-being (Shaked, 2020). According to this study’s findings, the family-like, warm relationships that characterize rural communities make it challenging to implement instructional leadership. Rural schools tend to have an informal atmosphere with direct communication among individuals who operate on a first-name basis. Power is decentralized, and principals rely on teachers’ experience and expertise (Preston and Barnes, 2017; Wallin and Newton, 2013). Norms of workplace equality set unwritten boundaries concerning how principals can apply instructional leadership as a hierarchical leadership approach. While instructional leadership focuses on setting clear expectations and supervising teacher work, the informality and prolonged acquaintance prevalent in rural contexts have led to a reduction in the study participants’ involvement in improving teaching and learning.

The second inhibiting factor of instructional leadership in rural schools is the principals’ sense that instructional leadership principles differ from their community’s priorities. While instructional leadership attaches utmost importance to students’ learning and results, the parents saw these issues as less important. Instructional leadership takes it for granted that the overarching goals of schooling are student learning and academic success (Shaked, 2020). This focus on knowledge and performance is not surprising. The contemporary era of measurement and accountability in education is based on the assumption that what matters most are the academic results: “In the end, every element of an effective accountability system must be evaluated by one and only one criteria: did it help students learn and achieve more than they might have without the system?” (Reeves, 2014, p. 1). This study’s findings suggest that rural communities believe that schooling’s non-academic goals – such as to meet students’ emotional needs, impart moral values and support their social integration – are no less important. Notably, principals of rural schools find it difficult to go against their community’s beliefs and values. Their involvement in the community and the central role they play in it (Latham *et al.*, 2014; Wiczorek and Manard, 2018) do not allow them to express a different position from what is customary in the community, so they give up – at least to some extent – on improving teaching and learning in their schools.

According to the research literature, one of the reasons why instructional leadership fails to gain a solid foothold in the role of principals is organizational norms that view the classroom as the domain of teachers. These norms discourage principals from infringing on teacher autonomy (Cuban, 1988). In addition, these norms cause principals to see their role as unrelated to teaching and learning, as explained by Murphy *et al.* (2016, p. 462), “When school leaders’ left teaching, they immediately set themselves up as something different from teachers and an occupation different from teaching. They were no longer teachers. They did not want to be teachers. They were not in the teaching business.” The current study’s findings refine this decontextualized explanation for how organizational norms shape the contours of principal leadership practice by linking them to broader cultural values and norms. Placing organizational norms in the broader context of societal norms and perceptions provides enhanced theoretical leverage. Therefore, this study claims that the norms characterizing rural areas adversely influence the application of instructional leadership because they limit the legitimacy of principals to oversee teachers’ work and push for an increase in academic achievement. Accepting their communities’ norms and values, rural principals rarely criticize the teachers’ work and are not fully committed to best practices of teaching and learning and high results. Principals avoid instructional leadership activities to conform to the worldview of teachers, parents and the entire rural community.

The school leadership research specializing in contextual characteristics is limited (Hallinger, 2018a). The current study exposed the contextual influences on the inhibiting factors for instructional leadership implementation, showing that the generic set of inhibiting factors of instructional leadership found in the existing literature is insufficient to fully explain the partial application of instructional leadership in rural schools. Therefore, it reinforces arguments that the cutting-edge research on school leadership lies in revealing how school leadership's implementation varies across and is shaped by the values, norms and cultures of different societies (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). As this study illustrates, research on school leadership in general, and especially instructional leadership and its inhibiting factors, cannot be complete without considering the context (Miller, 2018).

Practically, this study suggests that policymakers should consider how to streamline and refine instructional leadership to the local context's values and norms. Making necessary policy adjustments may facilitate acceptance and increase the impact of instructional leadership in various contexts. In addition, helping principals understand the contextual interpretation of instructional leadership is relevant 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.

Conclusion

This study was designed to identify the distinctive inhibiting factors of instructional leadership in rural schools. Findings show that beyond the previously explored explanations for why principals insufficiently demonstrate instructional leadership, rural principals refrain from applying instructional leadership because of two specific inhibiting factors: the relationships within the community, which make it difficult for them to implement a leadership approach involving supervision and control, and the characteristics of parents, who disagree with the superiority conferred by instructional leadership on learning and achievement. These findings show that instructional leadership inhibiting factors that could not be understood in isolation from the school context. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding and implementation of instructional leadership, tailored to different contexts, is required.

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Corresponding author

Haim Shaked can be contacted at: haim.shaked@hemdat.ac.il