

# Instructional leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Israel

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## Abstract

The instructional leadership approach requires school principals to give top priority to the continuous improvement of teaching quality and academic outcomes. This study explored how principals of elementary schools in Israel fulfilled their instructional leadership role during COVID-19. Data collection comprised semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 36 principals. Data analysis identified three different theories of action. In this study, a theory of action is the conscious or unconscious set of assumptions that explain how principals act professionally in a given situation. According to the first theory of action, *moratorium*, principals temporarily abandoned instructional leadership. According to the second theory of action, *adaptation*, principals changed instructional leadership to suit the specific conditions of COVID-19. According to the third theory of action, *determination*, principals uncompromisingly continued to demonstrate instructional leadership. These findings expand the available knowledge on how school leaders respond and what forms of school leadership practice emerged during COVID-19.

## Keywords

Instructional leadership, school principals, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israeli school system

## Introduction

Instructional leadership is an educational leadership approach in which principals consistently focus their efforts directly on the core activities of schooling—teaching and learning—so that students can achieve academic success (Hallinger et al., 2020; Neumerski, 2018). According to this leadership approach, school leaders are expected to actively participate in promoting the best teaching methods and intensive engagement in curricular and instructional topics (Stronge et al., 2008). Top priority should be given to student learning and academic outcomes, while other areas should remain a lower priority (Glickman et al., 2017).

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Extensive research-informed literature has linked principals' instructional leadership to positive school outcomes, including improved teacher practices and higher student achievements (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger et al., 2015; Hou et al., 2019; Shatzer et al., 2014). Furthermore, instructional leadership reduces social injustice because it strives rigorously to lead all students to high academic performance, regardless of diverse students' potentially marginalizing characteristics. Instructional leadership is an equity-driven approach that promotes excellence for all students, ensuring that each and every student achieves at high levels (Shaked, 2020). Thus, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners worldwide have consistently called upon principals to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang, 2015; Kaparou and Bush, 2016; Park and Ham, 2016). Given the prominence of instructional leadership in educational research, policy, and discourse, the current study investigated school principals' application of instructional leadership during COVID-19.

COVID-19 was a time of profound and fundamental changes in the way education systems operate. This pandemic was likened to a "supernova" (Azorin, 2020) that "created undeniable chaos" (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020: 334) and shook "the very fabric of education" (Harris and Jones, 2021: 243). Particularly, COVID-19 altered the nature of the work of principals (Pollock, 2020): "school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all" (Harris and Jones, 2021: 245). One may claim that these authors largely express opinions too early to know if they are well-founded. However, against this backdrop, this study addressed the following research question: How did school principals apply instructional leadership during COVID-19?

Specifically, this study was conducted within the Israeli national school system, which serves about 1.8 million students in nearly 5000 schools. The Israeli school system consists of three levels: elementary schools (grades 1–6, ages 6–12), middle schools (grades 7–9, ages 12–15), and high schools (grades 10–12, ages 15–18). Compulsory education takes place from kindergarten through 12th grade (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2020). The first wave of COVID-19 in Israel lasted from February to May 2020, including the school system's (full and then partial) lockdown from March 12 to May 19. The second wave lasted from May to November 2020, including the school system's (full and then partial) lockdown from September 18 to December 6. The data for this study were collected from September to November 2020. During this period, Israeli principals were investigated regarding their application of instructional leadership under COVID-19.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Conceptualization of instructional leadership*

The most widely used conceptual framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang, 2015), presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), consists of three dimensions that include ten functions. The dimension of defining the school mission includes two functions: framing the school's goals and communicating the school's goals. The dimension of managing the instructional program includes three functions: coordinating curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. The dimension of developing a positive school learning climate includes five functions: protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learning, promoting professional development, and maintaining high visibility.

Based on an extensive literature review, Stronge et al. (2008) identified five key areas of instructional leadership: building and maintaining a school vision that sets clear learning goals

accompanied by a deep commitment to these goals; sharing leadership by developing the expertise of teacher leaders; leading a learning community that provides significant team development; collecting data for use in instructional decision-making; and monitoring curriculum and instruction by spending time in classrooms to encourage curriculum implementation and quality instructional practices.

The instructional leadership framework is based on the underlying assumption that the desired goal of schooling is academic achievement, involving aims such as broadening and deepening students' knowledge base across various subjects; developing students' learning skills such as creative and analytical thinking; cultivating students' love of learning; and arousing students' curiosity (Biesta, 2009, 2014, 2016; Pritchard, 2013). Such a focus means that the broader development of the young person as a responsible, resilient member of society is minimized in the interests of academic success. The contemporary era of measurement and accountability in education, which has affected schools worldwide, reinforces the academic goal of schooling. Today's education policies focus on student achievement as measured by test performance: "In the end, every element of an effective accountability system must be evaluated by one and only one criteria: did it help students learn and achieve more than they might have without the system?" (Reeves, 2014: 1). By virtue of the academic goal of schooling, principals as instructional leaders are expected to concentrate on improving teaching and learning through the ongoing close management of curriculum and instruction (Shaked, 2018).

Instructional leadership does not focus on supporting teachers' needs and building trust but rather on establishing clear goals and requiring teachers to accomplish them (Shaked, 2022). The power of instructional leadership lies in the fact that it is task-oriented leadership, which focuses on what needs to be done to achieve pre-set objectives (Ayman and Lauritsen, 2018; Miner, 2015). Thus, instructional leadership may be seen as an authoritative approach involving supervision, evaluation, and monitoring, which does not attach primary importance to teachers' needs and difficulties. In other words, instructional leadership is "a directive and top-down approach to school leadership" (Hallinger, 2003: 337).

This study aims to explore the application of instructional leadership during COVID-19. The following section reviews the emerging research on this topic.

### *School leadership during COVID-19*

Several studies have examined school leadership during COVID-19 in different countries. Australian school leaders were navigating the tensions of accountability versus autonomy, equity versus excellence, the individual versus the collective, and well-being versus workload (Netolicky, 2020). Moreover, they made sense of crises by returning to crucial safety and relational aspects of their work. In ambiguous and unclear situations, they sifted the usual complexity of their role through a sharp focus on the core objectives of schools (Longmuir, 2021). South Texas school leaders were generally confident in their preparedness to best serve students, staff, and parents during COVID-19 but felt a lack of resources. The extent of inequality among students complicated their experience (Varela and Fedynich, 2020). Another study conducted in the United States found that principals understood the broad societal impact of COVID-19 on their students and therefore implemented changes and created new organizational routines to support their students. They had to navigate and make sense of guidelines and policies set by top officials and other influential external stakeholders while also engaging in sense-giving with their teachers (Grooms and Childs, 2021). In the United Kingdom, school leaders were facing multiple difficult situations and ambiguity of

COVID-19 with resilience that relied heavily on the strengths of preexisting structures and teams. They were required to provide effective emotional and moral leadership in an unfamiliar and rapidly changing territory. They developed pragmatic, versatile, and personally reassuring approaches to communication with parents, staff, students, and various external stakeholders, all of whom have also encountered exceptional circumstances with varying degrees of resilience (Beauchamp et al., 2021). In vocational schools in Germany, the primary strategies for tackling the COVID-19 challenges were a clear plan of the school leadership in connection with reliable technological infrastructure and the willingness of teachers to use digital teaching methods (Delcker and Ifenthaler, 2021). In New Zealand, the challenges faced by principals included preparing students and teachers for remote teaching and learning for an unknown length of time, supporting the well-being of students and staff, and communicating clearly and compassionately with all stakeholders. Principals' opportunities included strengthening digital teaching and learning, distributing leadership, and resetting direction (Thornton, 2021).

Harris and Jones (2021) suggested seven insights about school leadership during COVID-19. (1) As a result of COVID-19, the methods of school leadership have changed considerably and perhaps, irreversibly. (2) Existing preparation programs will require rethinking and significant change. (3) Self-care will be a priority for school leaders. (4) School leaders will increasingly need to be technologically capable. (5) Crisis management will be a vital skill of school leaders. (6) Communities will be a significant resource for school leaders. Forging stronger bonds with parent and community groups will be needed. (7) The current crisis has shifted school leadership dramatically toward distributed, collaborative, and network practices because it requires more school leaders at all levels to connect, share, learn, and network their way through issues (Harris, 2020).

During the unprecedented time of COVID-19, educators were called to respond in creative ways to meet students' ongoing learning needs (Lopez and Hossain, 2021). However, research about instructional leadership during COVID-19 is scant. Pollock (2020) claimed that principals expanded their roles concerning safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while simultaneously expanding their role as instructional leaders to include being digital instructional leaders. According to Keleş and colleagues (2020), principals as instructional leaders used technological support for teachers, academic support for students, psychosocial support, and parent communication in solving the problems they encountered during COVID-19. McLeod and Dulsky (2021) identified four phases of school leadership's response to COVID-19. (1) A focus on basic needs, including feeding children and families, ensuring student digital accessibility to computers and the internet, and checking in on the well-being of families. (2) Reorientation of the school to deliver instruction remotely, including training teachers in new pedagogies and technologies and establishing instructional routines and digital platforms to facilitate online learning. (3) Paying attention to richer and deeper learning opportunities for students. (4) Looking ahead to future opportunities and helping the school better prepare for future closures.

The limited presence of instructional leadership in the literature on COVID-19 may reflect a substantial rethinking of the nature of leadership in times of crisis. Moreover, in recent years, some scholars have argued that the meaning of instructional leadership should be expanded, coming close to—and possibly overlapping with—other aspects of school leadership such as people management and motivation, school resource mobilization, and strengthening school connections with parents and families. This extended meaning of instructional leadership is sometimes called “leadership for learning.” The leadership-for-learning framework—which integrates several previous conceptualizations of school leadership such as transformational,

instructional, and integrated leadership—is considered by some scholars to be “the conceptual evolution of twenty-five years of diverse instructional leadership research” (Boyce and Bowers, 2018: 161). However, overexpanding the meaning of instructional leadership may make it an excessively inclusive concept that tries to incorporate everything related to school leadership. An overloaded leadership-for-learning perspective relinquishes the unique emphases of the instructional leadership approach, namely principals’ explicit focus on defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and developing a positive school learning climate (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985).

The research-based knowledge on how COVID-19 influenced school leadership in general, and instructional leadership in particular, is only in its infancy, hence the importance of this study.

## **Method**

### *The Israeli context*

The participants of this study were Israeli school principals whose primary role was to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve the education and learning of all students. Four areas of dimensions constituted the Israeli framework for instructional leadership: planning the future image of the school—developing a vision and bringing about change; leading the team and cultivating its professional development; focusing on the individual; and managing the relationship between the school and its surrounding community (Capstones, 2008).

The implementation of this instructional leadership policy framework had a profound effect on preparation programs for school principals, which have been redesigned to train prospective principals as instructional leaders (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2018). The preparation program relies on the following five pillars: (a) improving teaching and learning; (b) designing future schools; (c) team leadership and professional development; (d) evidence-based management; and (e) budget and resource management (Berkovich, 2014). However, there remains a dissonance between the instructional leadership emphasis evident in preparation programs and the subsequent training and socialization experiences of principals. For example, the guidance given to novice principals often focuses on technical and administrative issues rather than on issues related to instructional leadership (Oplatka and Lapidot, 2018). Similarly, instructional leadership receives much less emphasis in the professional development programs offered to in-service principals (Nets, 2017).

Data were collected from September to November 2020, during the second wave of COVID-19 in Israel. The school year began in the Israeli school system on September 1, except in cities in which COVID-19 was rampant. Due to the worsening of COVID-19, a 3-week country-wide lockdown was imposed on September 18, including a closure of schools. Schooling shifted to distance learning, which most often consisted of fully online instruction, using video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meets, and learning management systems, such as Google Classroom or Canvas. Grades 1 to 4 returned to school on November 1. The class size was limited to 18 children. Students were required to present a health declaration signed by their parents, wear masks throughout the day, and eat their meals spaced far apart from one another. Grades 5 and 6 returned to school on November 24, grades 11 and 12 on November 29, and grades 7 to 10 on December 6. After the winter break, on December 20, more than 220,000 students in grades 5 to 12 returned to distance learning in cities with a large number of COVID-19 cases.

## *Participants*

Instructional leadership in elementary schools differs from instructional leadership in high schools (Louis et al., 2010). This may be related to various school characteristics, such as the fact that high schools are often more crowded than elementary schools or that high-school teachers usually specialize in one subject (Hallinger, 2012). Because instructional leadership in elementary schools cannot be examined in the same way as we treat it in high schools (Gedik and Bellibas, 2015), this study concentrates on elementary schools.

The sampling for this study was intended to create a sample that is similar to the population of about 2750 elementary school principals in Israel in terms of age, sex, seniority, and education. Two-thirds of Israeli principals are women and one-third are men. The average age of Israeli principals is 50. They have an average of 11 years of principalship experience. As for their education, 65% of Israeli principals have a master's degree or higher, 35% have a bachelor's degree, and 8% do not have an academic degree (Capstones, 2012).

This study sought to "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 113). Thus, it included 36 principals. To construct the study sample, six superintendents from all six school districts in Israel were asked to recommend possible participants they thought were most capable. However, the principals they recommended for participation in the study were included only if their participation matched the characteristics of the larger population of elementary school principals in Israel (36 participants out of 58 recommended). Accordingly, the present study included 26 females and ten males, who were between 33 and 60 years old, and their average age was 48.92. They had three to 27 years of school leadership experience, and their average experience was 10.45 years. One principal had no academic degree, eleven principals had a bachelor's degree, 23 principals had a master's degree, and one principal had a doctorate. Table 1 presents the information of the study participants.

## *Data collection*

Qualitative interview methodology and content analysis are most appropriate when existing knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation is limited (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this study was qualitative, seeking to reveal the participants' practices, thoughts, and feelings. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring the application of instructional leadership during COVID-19. The researcher, as an interviewer, developed and used an "interview guide" that included key pre-planned questions and targeted topics. Nevertheless, the interviews were also conversational, with new questions arising from previous responses whenever possible. Therefore, the interviewer could "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 111).

The interviewer deliberately refrained from mentioning the term "instructional leadership" so as not to guide the interviewees to frame their discussions in this light (participants were told that the research deals with principalship during COVID-19). In the interviews, open-ended questions related to the COVID-19 context were used, such as "What ensures quality instruction in your school during COVID-19?"; "What do you as a principal do to improve teaching and learning in school during COVID-19?"; "How do you understand your responsibility for students' learning and achievement during COVID-19?" The interviewer tried to come to interviews with deliberate

**Table 1.** Study participants' information.

	Pseudonym	Sex	Principalship experience	Age	Education	District	School size (no. of students)
1	Angela	Female	11	41	MA	North	300
2	Anne	Female	5	49	BA	Tel Aviv	650
3	Barbara	Female	7	44	MA	Haifa	400
4	Bruce	Male	13	46	MA	South	200
5	Carl	Male	14	52	MA	Jerusalem	250
6	Christine	Female	4	50	MA	Haifa	300
7	Cynthia	Female	12	46	BA	Center	350
8	Danny	Male	3	56	MA	Tel Aviv	400
9	David	Male	7	49	MA	North	250
10	Deborah	Female	10	50	BA	North	200
11	Diana	Female	22	60	BA	South	400
12	Dorothy	Female	11	46	MA	Jerusalem	350
13	Douglas	Male	9	51	BA	Jerusalem	450
14	Elizabeth	Female	18	60	BA	Haifa	350
15	Esther	Female	10	57	BA	North	300
16	Gary	Male	12	55	BA	Center	550
17	George	Male	5	46	MA	Tel Aviv	600
18	Gloria	Female	16	51	MA	South	200
19	Jacob	Male	24	60	MA	Center	300
20	Jennifer	Female	16	41	MA	Jerusalem	350
21	John	Male	6	43	MA	Jerusalem	250
22	Kathryn	Female	27	58	-	South	350
23	Laura	Female	14	46	MA	Tel Aviv	250
24	Lisa	Female	4	48	MA	Center	550
25	Marilyn	Female	9	46	MA	South	250
26	Margaret	Female	11	52	PhD	North	150
27	Martha	Female	6	53	BA	Tel Aviv	350
28	Pamela	Female	4	51	MA	Jerusalem	200
29	Phyllis	Female	5	42	MA	Center	450
30	Rachel	Female	14	46	MA	Haifa	300
31	Ronald	Male	9	53	MA	South	150
32	Ruth	Female	4	48	BA	South	450
33	Stephanie	Female	18	47	MA	Tel Aviv	400
34	Susan	Female	4	46	BA	Tel Aviv	350
35	Tammy	Female	3	33	MA	Haifa	550
36	Virginia	Female	9	39	MA	Center	500

naïveté, which means to “exhibit openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 28).

For ethical reasons, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was made clear to them that the superintendent who recommended them as potential participants would not know if they had actually participated in the study. They were promised confidentiality (pseudonyms were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent based on an understanding of the purpose of the study. Due to COVID-19 limitations, the interviews were conducted through Zoom meetings at times that

were convenient for the interviewees, given their workload. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were also conducted, as needed, to clarify questions that arose during a review of the interview transcripts (three follow-up interviews were conducted, with an average length of about 20 minutes).

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis aims to bring order, structure, and meaning to the mass of raw data. For this purpose, the researcher first read the collected data several times to become familiar with it. Then, the necessary sorting was conducted to look for statements related in some way to the application of instructional leadership during COVID-19. As explained by Miles and colleagues: (2014): “Data condensation is not something separate from analysis. It is a part of analysis. The researcher’s decisions—which data chunks to code and which to pull out... are all analytic choices” (p. 12). The dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, presented above in the Theoretical Background, were used to determine what falls under instructional leadership. Subsequently, the statements identified in the previous step were coded. Coding was “the action of identifying a passage of text... that exemplifies some idea or concept and then connecting it to a named code that represents that idea or concept” (Gibbs, 2007: 148). Each statement was linked to a named code that represented an idea or concept (Creswell and Poth, 2018). During coding, a master list of all the codes used in the research study was kept for the codes to be reapplied to new statements each time an appropriate statement was encountered. It was open, data-driven coding rather than concept-driven coding because the researcher did not approach the data with a developed system of codes but instead looked for concepts in the text without a preceding conceptualization and allowed the text to speak for itself (Saldaña and Omasta, 2018). After capturing their essence, the researcher looked for patterns and relationships in the data. Similar statements were gathered into clusters to generalize their meanings and produce categories. The clusters were created several times, each time in a different configuration. It was like “decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on” (Abbott, 2004: 215). In the end, classification according to theories of action was found to be the most appropriate and therefore formed the basis for the Findings section. Then, the member-check method (Koelsch, 2013) was employed, in which the interviewees were asked to review the data analysis. As with any qualitative data analysis, attention has been drawn to how the researcher’s positionality based on his personal experience as a school principal and lecturer in instructional leadership courses might affect his data interpretation (Holmes, 2020). 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 investigated Israeli school principals’ application of instructional leadership during COVID-19. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed three alternative theories of action. Based on the concept coined by Argyris (Argyris and Schön, 1997; Putnam et al., 2014), a theory of action in this study is the conscious or unconscious set of assumptions that a principal holds about their activities, which depicts the beliefs that explain how they act professionally under particular conditions. The three theories of action identified were: (1) moratorium, (2) adaptation, and



(3) determination. Each of these theories of action is presented below, along with the corresponding beliefs and actions, supported by quotes from the interviews conducted during COVID-19.

### ***Moratorium: The focus of instructional leadership on learning and achievement is inappropriate during COVID-19***

The first theory of action found in principals of elementary schools in Israel, mentioned by 19 study participants, was labeled *moratorium*. This theory of action advocates a temporary deferral of instructional leadership.

**Beliefs.** The *moratorium* theory of action included four central beliefs. First, against the backdrop of COVID-19, the well-being of students requires less emphasis on academic achievement. Elizabeth explained: “Many of our students experience emotional distress, so learning goals can wait.” Similarly, David asserted: “As educators, we need first to consider student well-being, which is, in my opinion, an essential area of concern during COVID-19. Thus, academic success is not our top priority right now.” Second, students should not be expected to study properly and achieve high results in distance learning. The learning load must be reduced, and the pursuit of high academic achievements temporarily set aside. Martha claimed: “When the students are at home, they cannot sit all day in front of the screen and learn.” Third, principals should not engage in supervision and control over teaching quality when teachers struggle to transition to remote teaching. Diana explained: “Teachers face many challenges during COVID-19, so the pressure on teaching quality must be released.” Fourth, COVID-19 is a short-term, exceptional situation. Therefore it requires a time-out from instructional leadership. George argued: “In a short time, things will get back on track. When we return to the routine, we will close the learning gap.”

**Actions.** Under the beliefs comprising the *moratorium* theory of action, principals reduced the number of school hours per day. Lisa said: “When we are in distance learning, we shorten the school day. It is impossible to study a whole day in this way.” Principals also gave up some subjects during COVID-19. Jennifer said that in her school: “In each grade, different subjects are taught. At the moment, we are not really taking care of what exactly is taught and what is not.” In addition, principals did not expect teachers to progress in the study material and achieve satisfactory academic results. Instead, they asked them to devote time to social-emotional discourse at the expense of learning. Moreover, principals changed the grading procedures so that students were not given low grades, or they abolished grades altogether.

**Conclusion.** The *moratorium* theory claims that the emphasis of instructional leadership on teaching and curriculum is not appropriate for students and teachers challenged by COVID-19. The emotional stress students face and the difficulties teachers face require the short-term waiver of the requirements for learning and achievements. During COVID-19, principals can, and should, temporarily put aside instructional leadership.

### ***Adaptation: instructional leadership needs to take on a new form during COVID-19, focusing on the transition to distance learning***

The second theory of action, mentioned by 11 principals of elementary schools in Israel, was called *adaptation*. This theory of action involves changing instructional leadership to suit the unique circumstances of COVID-19.

**Beliefs.** The *adaptation* theory of action incorporates three essential beliefs. First, remote teaching is fundamentally different from face-to-face teaching. Therefore, other teaching methods are required. Margaret explained: “Distance learning requires completely different skills from the teacher. Remote teaching can turn students into passive learners. Students often feel disconnected from their teacher and their peers. Teachers cannot just copy regular instructional practices. They need new methods.” Second, teachers need help to cope successfully with the sudden shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode. Rachel explained: “The teachers had never taught online before COVID-19 and did not receive any training to teach remotely. They needed help to survive.” Third, helping teachers learn how to teach online effectively is a fundamental role of instructional leaders during COVID-19. Deborah explained: “When my teachers said after the first wave that most of what they learned about remote teaching was from each other and from their individual research, I realized that I should be meaningful to them.”

**Actions.** Under the beliefs comprising the *adaptation* theory of action, principals mobilized resources to support teachers and make sure they keep students involved. They added instructional coaches and technology problem-solving staff. They also provided different options for professional learning, such as face-to-face, virtual, blended, or asynchronous meetings. For their support to be tailored to the needs of the teachers, they gathered input from them: “The teachers are in a quandary. All I can do is watch and listen closely to understand what they need “ (John). Because the principals believed it was unrealistic to cover the entire curriculum when teachers implemented remote teaching for the first time, they set priorities for instructional goals and clarified what could be given up. In addition, principals abandoned some practices of instructional leadership, which involved monitoring and control, in favor of more supportive methods: “The new scenario required teachers to quickly reconfigure their strategies used for face-to-face instruction. This is not the time to use traditional observation and evaluation protocols because they will not improve learning and achievement. Instead, we should use less evaluative coaching and feedback strategies, which will create an empathetic environment” (Laura).

**Conclusion.** The *adaptation* theory argues that the primary role of an instructional leader during COVID-19 is to ensure that distance learning takes place in the best possible way. Remote teaching is fundamentally different from face-to-face teaching, and therefore teachers need help to make the switch. Instructional leaders have to support teachers with how-to information, practical guides, and professional learning.

***Determination: despite the challenges of COVID-19, principals need to fulfill their instructional leadership role resolutely***

The third theory of action found in principals of elementary schools in Israel, articulated by six study participants, was *determination*. This theory of action recommends continuing uncompromisingly with instructional leadership, even during COVID-19.

**Beliefs.** The *determination* theory of action incorporates four fundamental beliefs. First, COVID-19 may significantly impair student learning and achievement. Students may be substantially lagging behind academically due to the restrictions on the regular operation of the education system and the limitations of distance learning. Second, when COVID-19 ends, no one will give students any

academic relief. They will be required to have the same knowledge and skills as students at other times. Third, efforts should be made to maximize learning during COVID-19. Ronald said: “We cannot throw away a significant portion of our school year. We try to get the most out of learning during COVID-19 to reduce learning loss.” Fourth, instructional leaders must make every effort always to protect instruction, and during COVID-19 in particular. They have to combat teachers’ and students’ natural tendency to give teaching and learning only secondary importance during the pandemic. Esther explained: “I hear those who say that academic pressure should be reduced during COVID-19. I disagree with them because this approach has long-term consequences. If we give up learning, this generation will later have to give up higher education, employment, and income.” Jacob similarly asserted: “One of my important roles as a principal is to protect instructional time strictly. Teachers and students have many reasons to waste teaching and learning time, and I prevent that. COVID-19 is no different in this respect.”

*Actions.* Under the beliefs comprising the *determination* theory of action, principals tried to maintain a learning routine even during COVID-19. They required teachers to progress in the study material at the usual pace, take exams, and give grades. They rejected teachers’ requests to hold only part of the classes and shorten the school day. They made sure that most of the time was devoted to instructional activities, while non-instructional time was minimal. Moreover, they observed online lessons as they used to do in regular classes, both by joining the online class and by watching recordings of the classes. Ruth said: “In order not to have a lost generation in my school, I purposefully insist that the academic progress of our students this year will be the same as in other years.” Anne similarly said: “I observe classes to evaluate teaching quality to ensure that the students get the most effective learning experience. We cannot afford for them to lose because of ineffective teaching during COVID-19.”

*Conclusion.* The *determination* theory of action asserts that principals as instructional leaders must not let COVID-19 cause long-term academic damage. Instructional leadership always involves overcoming inhibiting forces. Even in COVID-19, instructional leaders need to be goal-oriented and focus on the quality of teaching and learning and improving achievement.

## Discussion

This study examined how principals of Israeli elementary schools implement instructional leadership during COVID-19. The findings pointed to three different theories of action, which are the rationales behind the strategies chosen by the principals for the given situation, regarding the application of instructional leadership during COVID-19. The first theory of action was *moratorium*, under which principals have temporarily refrained from instructional leadership because of the socioemotional needs of students and teachers alike. The second theory of action was *adaptation*, under which principals modified their instructional leadership to suit the unique situation of COVID-19 that involved transitioning from face-to-face to online learning. The third theory of action was *determination*, under which principals continued to maintain the quality of teaching and learning in an uncompromising manner. It should be noted that not all the principals who participated in the study could be associated with just one theory of action. Some principals seemed to hold more than one theory of action, expressing hesitation or ambiguity. However, the three theories of action were clearly identified.

What can we learn from the current study's findings on instructional leadership during COVID-19? The pandemic confronted the principals with the question of what is the overarching goal of schooling during a public health crisis, echoing the tension between the academic and non-academic goals of schooling (Shaked, 2018). The academic goals of schooling focus primarily on assuring student learning and academic success, particularly in a small number of curricular domains deemed crucial for 21st-century success, such as language, science, and mathematics (Hargreaves and Braun, 2013). On the other hand, the non-academic goals of schooling include objectives such as meeting the emotional needs of the students, supporting their well-being and social integration, and imparting moral values (Biesta, 2009; Pritchard, 2013). As reviewed above, Longmuir (2021), who examined the ways that Australian school leaders made sense of and responded to situations of crisis and uncertainty that resulted from COVID-19, found that they filtered the usual complexity of their role through a sharpened focus on the core goals of schools. She argued that "leaders return to the humanising purposes of education. They focused on the foundational needs of all members of the community and ensured that these were prioritised before any organisational or learning requirements" (p. 11). The current study suggests that a relatively large number of principals believe that in times of crisis, they should not focus too much on instructional leadership, as it helps them primarily in promoting the academic goals of schooling, whereas the non-academic goals are of greater importance during such times. Although in normal times most principals align with the expectation that they will serve as instructional leaders, in times of a widespread pandemic many principals choose to prioritize the non-academic goals of schooling over the academic goals of schooling, leading to a decrease in their involvement in instructional leadership (Shaked, 2020).

Moreover, during COVID-19, principals ascribed greater importance to teachers' difficulties. Whereas in regular times, the principals required teachers to work hard to ensure the success of their students, during COVID-19 they took into account the extraordinary challenges faced by the teachers and gave up somewhat the demand for quality and effective teaching. In this sense, principals replaced instructional leadership with other forms of leadership, such as transformational leadership, under which principals do not practice the everyday guidance of curriculum and instruction or the monitoring of student learning. They concentrate on building trust, supporting the needs of teachers, and transferring the school's goals to the staff's personal goals (Day et al., 2016). However, a few principals continued to maintain the expectations of teaching quality in an uncompromising manner during COVID-19. These principals believed that instructional leadership means sticking to the school's instructional goals in any situation, even when the conditions are challenging. This theory of action portrays instructional leadership as task-oriented leadership, in which principals are concerned with attaining the instructional goals and are not very sensitive to teachers' needs and feelings (Ayman and Lauritsen, 2018; Miner, 2015). They place emphasis on the instructional tasks at hand, even in disruptive times like COVID-19, taking only partial account of teachers' requests and the challenges they face.

During COVID-19, school leaders understood that several versions of instructional leadership might be needed in different periods. Instead of a generic framework of instructional leadership, which is supposedly suitable at any time, a variety of frameworks should be developed that are appropriate for periods with different characteristics. Just as different versions of instructional leadership need to be developed for different contexts (Shaked et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2018), so too different versions of instructional leadership need to be developed for different periods because the dimensions and functions of instructional leadership required

in ordinary days are not similar to those required when schools are not continuously open and distance learning takes center stage. As mentioned above, Pollock (2020) asserted that during COVID-19, principals moved from instructional leadership to digital instructional leadership. She explained: “As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for supporting and ensuring that effective pedagogical practices and successful student learning happen. Now they are to do this using technological media supported by web applications and platforms” (p. 42). The current study’s findings illustrated how school leaders changed their instructional leadership to suit the transition from face-to-face to remote learning, focusing their instructional leadership role on mobilizing technological information, supporting struggling teachers, and promoting professional development.

Not all principals understood their instructional leadership role during COVID-19 in the same way. They differed from each other in the importance they attached to instructional leadership, their approach to the needs of students and teachers, and their perspective on the impact of COVID-19 on student learning and achievement. These differences reveal gaps in the perception of instructional leadership, unrelated specifically to the COVID-19 epidemic, regarding questions such as to what extent should an instructional leader challenge teachers, what is the significance of academic versus non-academic goals, and what particular place do the functions of monitoring and controlling occupy in instructional leadership application.

COVID-19 has changed school leadership dramatically so that it is “unlikely return to ‘normal’ anytime soon, if ever at all” (Harris and Jones, 2021: 245), and since COVID-19 may be seen as just one example of many possible crises, understanding principals’ theories of action is important. Practically, a clear policy regarding the application of instructional leadership in disruptive times should be formulated, accompanied by the resources needed to implement this policy, including knowledge, time, and budget. This policy should be discussed with prospective and in-service principals in principal preparation programs and professional development processes of acting principals. It may also need to be tailored to the specific characteristics of each country.

Compared to previous studies, this study provides new data on instructional leadership during COVID-19. However, it has a few limitations. First, the data were collected in a particular context: the Israeli school system with specific characteristics related to instructional leadership application (Shaked et al., 2021). Therefore, further research in various sociocultural contexts would be advisable to generalize the findings to broader populations and substantiate their inter-contextual and international validity. Moreover, the findings might have been different in middle or high schools. Thus, further research on these age levels is needed. Second, as with any self-reporting, the current methodology offered little control over the participants’ possibility of providing socially desirable responses. Further research using techniques such as direct observation can supplement principals’ self-reporting with more objective data on their instructional leadership practices. Interviewing teachers and school middle leaders may also complement principals’ self-reporting. Third, this study reflects the situation at a specific point in time—from September to November 2020, during the second wave of COVID-19 in Israel. Thus, this study does not enable an examination of a change in principals’ theories of action throughout the various stages of COVID-19 (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021). Fourth, this study did not identify a correlation between the theories of action and characteristics of the study participants, such as gender, experience, and education. Future research would do well to explore differences between principals in instructional leadership during COVID-19, which might be detected in a study using a larger number of participants.

## Conclusion

The instructional leadership approach expects principals to prioritize the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning for all students. This study sought to answer the question of how principals of Israeli elementary schools fulfilled their role as instructional leaders during COVID-19. Data analysis identified three different theories of action, which are the conceptual ways in which principals have dealt with the responsibilities of instructional leadership during COVID-19. The first theory of action, *moratorium*, involved temporary abeyance of instructional leadership, claiming that the prominence of teaching and learning improvement is not appropriate for students and teachers facing the challenges of COVID-19. The second theory of action, *adaptation*, entailed changing instructional leadership to suit the unique situation of COVID-19, arguing that the foremost duty of the principal during COVID-19 is to ensure that remote teaching is conducted effectively. The third theory of action, *determination*, insisted on continuing with instructional leadership in an uncompromising manner even during COVID-19, asserting that the principal should not allow COVID-19 to cause long-term academic damage. This study contributes to research efforts to explain how principals respond to the crisis and what forms of school leadership practice emerge during COVID-19.


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