

Instructional leadership in school middle leaders

Instructional
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach that emphasizes improving teaching and learning. This study explores how school middle leaders – teachers holding leadership positions in schools, who are responsible for a particular area or discipline of the school’s curriculum – fulfill their instructional leadership role.

Design/methodology/approach – The participants in this qualitative study were 24 middle leaders (subject coordinators) in elementary schools in Israel. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews, and data analysis included three stages: sorting, coding and categorizing.

Findings – The current study points to three main characteristics of instructional leadership in school middle leaders: leading by expertise; leading by collaboration; and leading by example.

Originality/value – At present, there is only scant literature on instructional leadership in school middle leaders. This study suggests that principals and middle leaders, who work closely with each other to provide instructional leadership in their schools, do so in different ways.

Keywords Instructional leadership, School middle leaders, Principals, The Israeli school system

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Principals’ instructional leadership has been linked to higher student achievement, increased teacher satisfaction and improved school climate (Boyce and Bowers, 2018; Day *et al.*, 2016; Hou *et al.*, 2019). Thus, instructional leadership, which includes setting a clear vision for student learning and academic outcomes, working closely with teachers to ameliorate curriculum and instruction and facilitating an effective school culture, is a crucial role of the school principal (Shaked, 2023a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Murphy *et al.*, 2016). The principal as an instructional leader must be involved in activities such as coordinating the instructional program, conducting regular classroom observations and providing teachers with feedback and coaching, supporting school-based teacher professional development, analyzing student data and maximizing instructional time (Glickman *et al.*, 2017; Neumerski *et al.*, 2018; Walker and Qian, 2022).

However, the focus on the principal as the most prominent instructional leader has been challenged (Bush, 2013). As Hallinger and Murphy (2013, pp. 9–10) noted, “Successful instructional supervision and curriculum leadership require skill sets that typically go beyond those possessed by any one individual in the school.” While the principal plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for academic success and in providing instructional leadership, there is a broad recognition that instructional leadership is an organizational function that is shared with other position holders (Hallinger, 2019). This shift in thinking places emphasis on distributed instructional leadership, in which everyone has a role to play in improving teaching and learning (Halverson and Clifford, 2013).

For this reason, school middle leaders, who are teachers with formal leadership responsibilities and are positioned between senior leaders and teaching staff (Grootenboer and Larkin, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023), are an integral part of instructional leadership in the school (Bush, 2023). Effective instructional leadership is layered (Gurr, 2019; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020), so that principals and middle leaders have to collaborate to perform instructional leadership tasks (Bush, 2015). A recent review of about 150 peer-reviewed journal articles



on middle leadership shows a broadly accepted view of middle leaders as instructional leaders (Tang *et al.*, 2022). The current study aims to investigate ways in which middle leaders fulfill their responsibility for instructional leadership. At present, there is only scant literature on this topic (Ogina, 2017).

Specifically, the current study was conducted in the Israeli school system, which serves about 1.95 million students in grades 1–12 attending approximately 5,400 elementary, middle and high schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2023). For the Israeli school system, instructional leadership is a central component of school leadership (Capstones – The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2008; Moshel and Berkovich, 2023). For example, the Ministry of Education stated that “instructional leadership will be the main axis of learning in the preparation program [of aspiring principals]” so that “the program will provide up-to-date and applied knowledge in this field, and especially on the subject of the relationship between the improvement of education, teaching and learning, student achievements and the role of the school principal” (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 5). When it comes to middle leaders, Farchi and Tubin (2019) found that middle leaders in effective schools in Israel devoted much of their time to instructional issues, while administrative practices were of lesser importance.

Middle leadership incorporates various positions (Bassett, 2016; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). In this study, subject coordinators in elementary schools in Israel were interviewed about how they carry out their instructional leadership roles. In the scheme of school management in elementary schools in Israel, subject coordinators are typically experienced teachers responsible for coordinating and overseeing the teaching and learning of a particular subject throughout the school. The exact structure and titles may vary between schools. However, subject coordinators’ assigned roles may include facilitating collaboration among teachers within the subject area, providing guidance and support to teachers, planning and coordinating the delivery of the subject, organizing professional development opportunities, overseeing the assessment and evaluation processes and acting as a point of contact between the school administration, teachers and parents regarding matters related to their subject. Overall, the Israeli subject coordinators play a vital role in ensuring the effective delivery of a specific subject to enhance student learning experiences. To establish the basis for this study, which explores instructional leadership in Israeli subject coordinators, the following theoretical background conceptualizes instructional leadership in both school principals and middle leaders.

Theoretical framework

Principals’ instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is an educational approach, in which the principal concentrates on improving the quality of curriculum and instruction (Shaked, 2023a; Murphy *et al.*, 2016). With instructional leadership, the principal is deeply involved in activities such as setting instructional goals, coordinating the school’s curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, monitoring students’ progress, fostering professional development to enhance teacher capabilities and promoting connections with external stakeholders (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Walker and Qian, 2022). From the perspective of instructional leadership, the primary goal of the principal is to create a school environment conducive to classroom teaching and student learning so that students can achieve academic success (Neumerski *et al.*, 2018).

The significance of the principal’s instructional leadership for student learning and achievement has been evident for decades (Bush, 2023; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). Research has consistently shown that instructional leadership is a critical function of effective school principals and correlates positively with outcomes such as teaching quality, teacher motivation, and student results (e.g. Mitchell *et al.*, 2015; O’Donnell and White, 2005; Shatzer *et al.*, 2014).

This correlation has been validated in various contexts, including elementary, junior high, and high schools, public, private, and public charter schools, and urban and suburban schools. Therefore, principals worldwide are called upon to demonstrate instructional leadership (Shaked, 2023a; Bush *et al.*, 2022; Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Ikram *et al.*, 2021).

The principal's instructional leadership focuses on establishing clear goals and ensuring that teachers accomplish them. The power of the principal's instructional leadership lies in the fact that it focuses on what needs to be done to achieve predefined objectives (Shaked, 2023a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). However, building strong relationships and trust between the principal and the teachers is essential for instructional leadership. When teachers feel comfortable discussing what goes on behind the closed doors of their classrooms, they are more likely to share their successes and failures, which can lead to professional growth and development. In turn, principals can provide constructive feedback to teachers that can help them improve their teaching practices and better serve their students (Shaked, 2023a; Le Fevre and Robinson, 2015).

Relevant knowledge is undoubtedly required for principals' instructional leadership (Lochmiller and Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson, 2020). However, instructional leadership is not based on a familiarity with all the subjects taught in the school, but rather on across-curricular knowledge of teaching and learning. General pedagogical knowledge, relating to classroom management and organizational principles and strategies, and knowledge about learners and their characteristics, are the most important knowledge sets for principals. Knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational ends are also more important than content knowledge (Shaked, 2023b).

The expectations for instructional leadership are mainly directed toward the principal (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). However, there is increasing recognition that instructional leadership needs to be a shared role, for two main reasons. First, principals have insufficient time to carry out such an essential role by themselves because the principal's work also encompasses a wide range of other responsibilities that are both numerous and complex and include tasks of a diverse nature (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). Second, principals may not have a sufficiently deep understanding of all academic subjects, limiting their ability to effectively lead and support teachers in their instructional practices (Bush, 2023). Therefore, viewing school middle leaders as instructional leaders is a necessary condition for school improvement (Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023).

Middle leaders' instructional leadership

Middle leadership differs from principalship because, although middle leaders take on management and pedagogical responsibilities, they do not have organizational responsibility for all elements of school functioning (Bassett, 2016; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). While the principal (and sometimes the senior management team as well) shapes the school's policies and belief system and establishes guidelines, the middle leaders work to implement them and make them a reality (Edwards-Groves *et al.*, 2019; Harris *et al.*, 2019).

Middle leaders may be seen as teacher leaders who "individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (York-Barr and Duke, 2004, p. 288). Teacher leaders often have a deep understanding of effective teaching practices and possess strong leadership qualities, such as communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills. Therefore, they play a crucial role in school leadership by collaborating with administrators, mentoring and supporting fellow teachers and contributing to instructional and curricular development (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). They serve as a bridge between administrators and classroom teachers, helping to foster a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth within the school community (Shen *et al.*, 2020).

Based on a broad literature review, De Nobile (2018) presented a model for middle leadership in schools (see Figure 1). The model distinguishes between the roles middle leaders perform (“What?”) and the ways they implement them (“How?”). At the center of this model is a set of roles, ranging in responsibility from management to leadership: student-focused role, administrative role, organizational role, supervisory role, staff development role and strategic role. Below these roles are the ways in which middle leaders fulfill them: leading teams, managing relationships, managing time, communicating effectively and managing self. The model also points to inputs (on the left), such as people, processes and circumstances, which can affect the work of middle leaders and shows potential outputs (on the right), which can contribute to school effectiveness.

The model of De Nobile (2018) does not explicitly state what the instructional role of middle leaders is. However, the literature views instructional leadership as one of the primary roles of middle leaders (Gurr, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). Middle leaders have the opportunity to influence and support teachers in their teaching practice, and they can play a crucial role in creating a culture of continuous instructional improvement (Bassett, 2016). By working with teachers and school leaders to implement effective instructional strategies and assessment practices, middle leaders can help drive improvements in student achievement and support the development of a strong teaching and learning culture in the school (Bryant and Rao, 2019).

Tang *et al.* (2022) analyzed the middle leadership literature to propose a model that defines the instructional leadership of middle leaders. This model comprises five dimensions: defining departmental purpose and direction, managing and facilitating teaching and learning, creating and maintaining a positive culture, developing and improving the curriculum and promoting teacher learning and professional development. These five dimensions are broken into 16 functions (see Figure 2). The current study used this model to explore instructional leadership in middle leaders.

As mentioned above, De Nobile’s (2018) model not only identifies the roles of middle leaders but also points to how they perform them. However, this model does not specifically mention the role of middle leaders as instructional leaders. At the same time, Tang *et al.*s (2022)

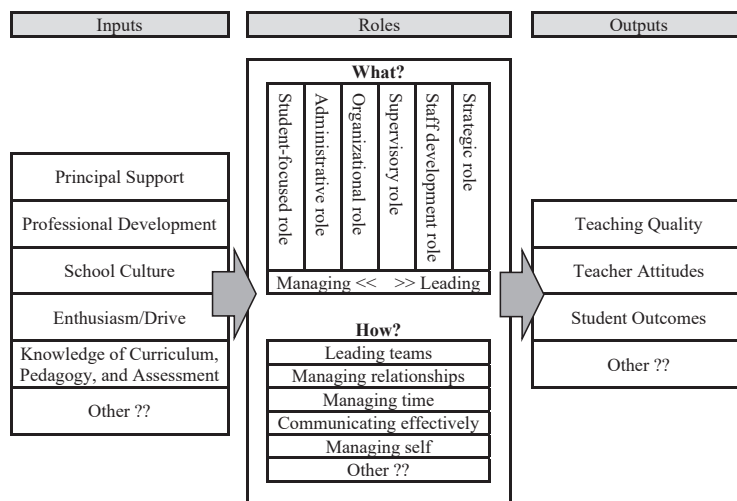


Figure 1.
The middle leadership
in schools model

Source(s): De Nobile (2018)

Defining departmental purpose and direction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forming a vision and setting goals 2. Aligning departmental vision and goals to school strategic direction 3. Communicating and sharing values and goals with teachers and developing a consensus
Managing and facilitating teaching and learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Maintaining teaching quality 5. Creating conditions conducive to improving teaching and learning 6. Fostering student learning and development
Creating and maintaining a positive climate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Promoting shared norms 8. Promoting harmonious relationships 9. Creating a collaborative environment
Developing and improving the curriculum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Setting the direction for curriculum implementation 11. Guiding curriculum implementation 12. Aligning curriculum with school development 13. Improving and innovating curriculum in response to the reform
Promoting teacher learning and professional development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Motivating and supporting teachers to improve their teaching strategies 15. Promoting development opportunities for teachers 16. Facilitating teacher learning

Source(s): Tang *et al.* (2022)

Figure 2.
Instruction-oriented
middle
leadership model

model identifies middle leaders' instructional leadership functions. However, it does not explain how middle leaders carry out these functions. To narrow this gap in the existing literature, the current study explored how school middle leaders fulfill their instructional leadership role.

Method

Qualitative research methods that gather and interpret non-numerical data to understand the experiences and behaviors of study participants are most suitable when the available knowledge about the topic under investigation is limited (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), as in the current study. The following sections describe how the participants were selected, how the interviews were conducted and how the information was analyzed.

Study participants

The participants of this study were middle leaders in elementary schools, since addressing differences in instructional leadership between elementary and secondary (middle and high) schools (Gedik and Bellibas, 2015; Hallinger, 2012) was beyond the scope of this study. The schools were selected because of their accessibility or availability to the researcher. However, the researcher created a sample of elementary schools similar to the larger Israeli school system in terms of districts, school size and socioeconomic level. This means that the diversity of the participating schools in terms of districts, size and socioeconomic level mirrored the diversity that exists in the Israeli education system. Then, the researcher asked the principals to recommend one of the school's subject coordinators who demonstrated instructional leadership. For ethical considerations, the principals were not informed whether the recommended middle leaders agreed to participate in the study. To involve "as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113), the present sample included 24 middle leaders. Of these, three were males and 21 were females, reflecting the proportion of men in the Israeli education system. On average, their age was 42 with 17 years of educational experience. As for their education, 11 had a bachelor's degree and 13 had a master's degree. Table 1 presents information on the study participants. To protect the participants and ensure their privacy was respected, pseudonyms were used. The table also indicates which category of findings (see below) was mentioned by each study participant.

Table 1.
Study participants'
information

	Pseudonym	Sex (female/ Male)	Age	Years of experience	Education (BA/MA)	School size (No. of students)	School district (Center/ Haifa/Jerusalem/North/ South/Tel Aviv)	Leading by expertise	Leading by collaboration	Leading by example
1	Alice	F	48	22	BA	250	N	✓	✓	
2	Amelia	F	45	20	MA	350	C	✓		
3	Beverly	F	51	27	MA	450	C	✓	✓	
4	Charlotte	F	32	7	BA	250	TA	✓		
5	Christina	F	52	29	MA	400	H	✓		
6	David	M	41	16	MA	150	S	✓		
7	Demise	F	35	7	BA	450	J	✓		✓
8	Edna	F	54	30	MA	250	TA			✓
9	Evelyn	F	47	15	MA	500	N	✓		
10	Heather	F	37	8	BA	300	J	✓		
11	Irene	F	30	6	BA	200	TA			✓
12	Jack	M	40	14	BA	350	H	✓		✓
13	Jane	F	28	6	BA	400	H			✓
14	Janet	F	42	17	MA	250	S	✓		
15	Julie	F	55	32	MA	450	J			✓
16	Maria	F	49	24	MA	550	S		✓	
17	Mildred	F	56	33	MA	200	H	✓		✓
18	Nicole	F	43	18	BA	300	N	✓		
19	Rebecca	F	39	11	MA	300	N	✓		
20	Robert	M	31	7	BA	250	C	✓		✓
21	Ruth	F	34	10	MA	300	J	✓		
22	Sharon	F	27	4	BA	650	TA	✓		
23	Sophia	F	53	28	BA	150	C	✓		
24	Tammy	F	44	19	MA	250	S	✓		✓

Data collection

Interviews are a commonly used method in qualitative research as they provide a way of gathering in-depth information and insights from participants. The interviews in this study were designed to explore how middle leaders enact instructional leadership. For ethical reasons, all the participants signed their written consent based on an understanding of the purpose of the study and were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave the study at any time (none did). The semi-structured interviews had a general plan and a set of topics to cover, but the researcher as an interviewer allowed for flexibility and deviations from the script, based on the responses and feedback from the participant, asking follow-up questions, probing further into specific topics and adding additional questions as needed (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

The interviewer intentionally refrained from mentioning the term “instructional leadership” so as not to guide the interviewees to frame their discussions in this light. Open-ended questions were used, such as “What ensures quality instruction in your department?”; “How do you, as a subject coordinator, improve teaching and learning?”; “How do you understand your responsibility for students’ learning and achievement?” All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length of an interview was one hour. To ensure that the data were as complete and accurate as possible, follow-up interviews were conducted as needed to clarify questions that emerged during the review of the transcripts (four interviews with an average length of 15 min).

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: sorting, coding and categorizing. The first two stages, sorting and coding, helped the researcher to identify and organize relevant information systematically, while the third stage, categorizing, enabled the researcher to identify patterns and trends in the data. The first stage was sorting, which “is not something separate from the 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” (Miles *et al.*, 2014, p. 12). This stage was designed to seek statements related in some way to the research question. In the second stage, coding, the researcher reread the identified statements and assigned codes to data segments representing specific concepts or ideas. Open coding was used, which involved assigning “essence-capturing” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4) codes to the data. In the third stage, categorizing, the researcher grouped the coded data segments into categories based on common characteristics. For example, the codes “providing guidance” and “status based on knowledge” were assigned to the “leading by expertise” category; the codes “involving in decision making” and “inviting feedback” were assigned to the “leading by collaboration” category and the codes “personal example” and “walk the talk” were assigned to the “leading by example” category. This stage was iterative, involving several rounds of categorizing, refining and regrouping the data until the researcher felt that the categories accurately and effectively represented the data’s key themes. The categories identified in this stage formed the basis for the findings section.

Findings

The current study explored how school middle leaders (subject coordinators) carry out their instructional leadership responsibility. The qualitative data analysis identified three significant characteristics of instructional leadership in school middle leaders: leading by expertise; leading by collaboration; and leading by example. These characteristics are presented below, supported by participants’ comments.

Leading by expertise

Analysis of the interview data revealed that the first characteristic of instructional leadership in middle leaders was relying on instructional expertise (see [Table 1](#)). The middle leaders who participated in the present study leveraged their deep understanding of their field to generate progress, as said Naomi: “Try to imagine a teacher without this expertise serving as a subject coordinator. You will probably conclude that it is impossible.”

The instructional expertise enabled middle leaders to provide guidance to their teams. They used their specific subject-matter understanding to direct teachers regarding various topics, such as learning objectives, teaching methods and exams. Miriam utilized her experience to guide her staff on teaching strategies: “My experience provided me with valuable insights into effective teaching methods, and I share this knowledge with my team to develop their instructional capabilities.” She believed that her experience allowed her to reflect on what has worked well in the past and make adjustments to improve future outcomes.

The instructional expertise enabled middle leaders to make informed decisions about questions such as what subjects will be taught, which textbooks align with the school’s instructional goals and how to select technological tools that meet the needs of the team and students. Amelia used her professional knowledge to define curriculum and assessment: “Thanks to my deep familiarity with the topics being studied, I could define the specific knowledge that students should acquire and how this knowledge can be assessed.”

The middle leaders in this study believed their status was primarily based on their knowledge and skills in their particular subject area. Esther explained: “Our team members expect us to possess a deep understanding of best practices, curriculum development, assessment and other relevant areas. A high degree of specialized knowledge is the basis for our professional credit.” Esther went on to claim that her instructional expertise not only strengthened her status among her team members but also increased her esteem in the eyes of the school’s senior management and deepened the trust entrusted in her by the parents because “Expertise inspires confidence.”

The study participants perceived their knowledge and skills related to instruction as their chief capital. From their perspective, their instructional expertise facilitated the improvement of teaching, learning and student outcomes. They felt respected for their expertise and relied on it to achieve their goals.

Leading by collaboration

Analysis of the interviews conducted for the current study suggested that the second characteristic of instructional leadership in middle leaders was participative leadership (see [Table 1](#)). The middle leaders in this study employed decentralized instructional leadership. The focus was on collaboration and empowering teachers to take ownership of and responsibility for their instructional work.

Hannah involved teachers in making instructional decisions that impact their own teaching practice and their students’ learning: “I believe in empowering teachers to make decisions about their instructional approach, materials and assessment methods, so I allow them to experiment and try new approaches.” She aspired to build a culture of shared decision-making because she believed it had various benefits, such as increased job satisfaction and motivation, enhanced instructional effectiveness and improved student outcomes.

Bella emphasized collaborative efforts made by teachers to improve their instruction quality and support student learning. She encouraged teachers to develop and refine teaching strategies and materials: “Although I’m the subject coordinator, we work together cooperatively and support each other in achieving the best outcomes for students.” She

claimed that teachers are more effective when they collaborate and can benefit from their colleagues' knowledge, skills and experiences. Thus, she encouraged working together to design and implement effective instructional strategies, sharing resources and materials and providing feedback and support to each other.

Rebecca invited teacher input: "I solicit feedback and suggestions from teachers regularly and actively listen to and consider their ideas." She argued that teachers could provide valuable insights into how instructional strategies will be most effective. Moreover, by inviting teacher input, the instructional methods and materials can be tailored to meet the specific needs of the teacher's classroom and students, increasing the relevance and practicality of the instructional materials and helping to ensure that they will be effectively implemented.

From the study participants' perspective, when teachers are involved in the instructional design process, they are more likely to be invested in the program's success and feel a sense of ownership for the content, which can lead to increased motivation and engagement among teachers. Therefore, they enacted their instructional leadership in a decentralized, democratic way, creating a supportive and inclusive work environment and building trust.

Leading by example

In the interviews conducted with a diverse sample of middle leaders, it was found that the third characteristic of instructional leadership in middle leaders was doing what they advised teachers to do (see [Table 1](#)). The middle leaders who participated in the current study fulfilled exactly the same requirements as they set for their teachers and "practiced what they preached." By doing so, they set the standard for the expected work level.

Denise said that the fact that she first demanded from herself the quality teaching that she demanded from other teachers gave her the moral authority to set instructional requirements for teachers. "I expect myself to adhere to the same instructional norm I expect from other teachers." She held herself to a high level of accountability and strived to practice what she preached. By giving a personal example, she developed a standard for others to follow and demonstrated that she takes her own teaching philosophy and expectations seriously.

Lily emphasized the importance of the credibility of the middle leaders and the level of confidence and trust teachers have in them. She claimed that middle leaders who consistently act in line with and live up to their words and actions have greater credibility with teachers. "When subject coordinators show that they are committed to their instructional values, which in my eyes reflects integrity, they are more likely to build the trust of their followers in them."

Leah claimed that by demonstrating through their own behavior what is possible, she could set a positive example and encourage others to strive for excellence. For her, the personal example was a source of teacher inspiration and motivation. "When subject coordinators themselves do what they expect others to do, they create a sense of belonging and commitment among teachers, which is essential for effective leadership."

The study participants described themselves as not only talking about their instructional beliefs but also actually working according to them, modeling the behavior they wanted to see in their team members and meeting the same demands as those they placed on their staff. They did not only push teachers toward instructional excellence. Instead, they demonstrated that excellence.

Discussion

The research literature portrays school middle leaders as instructional leaders ([Gurr, 2019](#); [Lipscombe et al., 2023](#); [Tang et al., 2022](#)). However, the question of *how* they exercise their instructional leadership responsibility has not yet received sufficient research attention. For

this reason, the current study explored how subject coordinators in elementary schools in Israel carry out instructional leadership functions. Qualitative analysis of the interview data pointed to three main characteristics of instructional leadership in school middle leaders. Importantly, these characteristics distinguish how middle leaders enact instructional leadership compared to school principals.

First, as instructional leaders, middle leaders rely on their proficiency in their specific fields of knowledge. Many activities required for instructional leadership, such as setting instructional goals, monitoring what is being taught and having a dialogue with teachers about teaching methods, are virtually impossible without solid instructional knowledge (Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson, 2020). When it comes to the principal as an instructional leader, the image of a principal who has an in-depth understanding of content and pedagogy in all areas taught at the school may be considered unrealistic (Lochmiller and Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Steele *et al.*, 2015). However, the findings of this study suggest that middle leaders base their instructional leadership on a broad knowledge of the subject being studied. While the principal leads teachers when they know more than the principal does, middle leaders' instructional leadership includes responsibility for areas within their specialty. Thus, unlike principals, who use their general pedagogical knowledge, relating mainly to classroom management and student characteristics, as a starting point from which their instructional leadership can develop (Shaked, 2023b), middle leaders emphasize the content knowledge of a particular subject, the pedagogical knowledge for teaching that particular subject and curriculum knowledge.

Second, the instructional leadership of middle leaders is characterized by participative leadership, in which teachers are encouraged to provide input and are involved in the decision-making process. This may be due to the small distance between middle leaders and teachers in the school hierarchy. The middle leaders are not at the top of the school hierarchy, and in many cases, they are themselves a part of the team they lead. Perhaps that is why they thought it was more appropriate to use a collaborative leadership style, with an emphasis on interactions and communication between the middle leaders and teachers. Moreover, the middle leaders may have thought that this is the only way they would be able to mobilize the teachers to improve teaching and learning because their organizational power and authority are limited. Here too, middle leaders may differ from principals. Principals' instructional leadership focuses on setting clear expectations and expecting teachers to meet them (Shaked, 2023a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, as this study shows, middle leaders mainly use the power of influence rather than positional authority to engage teachers in improving teaching and learning. However, the principal plays a vital role in establishing and shaping the school culture, setting the tone and pace for the entire institution. Therefore, when we observe a high level of cooperation among middle leaders, it is reasonable to infer that this positive culture stems from the leadership of the school principal.

Third, middle leaders as instructional leaders do not only "talk the talk" but also they "walk the walk." They act in a way that agrees with what they say, supporting what they themselves suggest, not only just with words but also through their behavior. According to this study, middle leaders believe that when they set a positive example, they not only demonstrate their commitment to the instructional goals but also they can inspire teachers to follow a suit and establish a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. While principals are not always able to model the behavior they expect from their teachers, middle leaders who hold themselves to high standards encourage others to do the same and help to create a learning environment that supports growth and development.

The above three characteristics of instructional leadership in middle leaders are summarized in Table 2. The present study suggests that principals and middle leaders who are jointly involved in the instructional leadership of their schools do so in quite different ways. As teachers who take on extra responsibilities in specific areas of school life, middle leaders hold leadership

positions in their schools. However, they are not at the very top of the school structure, their status is influenced by their knowledge and skills related to their subject matter, and they spend significant time teaching in the classrooms (Edwards-Groves *et al.*, 2019; Harris *et al.*, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). Due to the differences between the status, responsibilities and roles of the principal and middle leaders, their instructional leadership is also different. As leaders of an organization, principals have official authority that comes with their position. This official authority includes the power to make decisions, enforce policies, allocate resources and manage staff. In this sense, principals can rely on their official authority to improve teaching and learning. The middle leaders, on the other hand, do not hold the highest position in the school hierarchy. They are situated between the senior leadership team and the front-line staff. They, therefore, base their instructional leadership less on their formal authority and more on their expertise, relationships and positive example.

As mentioned above, the model of middle leadership in schools, presented by De Nobile (2018), identified both the roles that middle leaders play and how they do so but did not mention instructional leadership as a part of the roles of middle leaders. On the other hand, the model of Tang *et al.* (2022) identified the dimensions and functions of middle leaders' instructional leadership but did not explain the ways in which they carry them out. The present study reduces this gap by identifying how middle leaders apply instructional leadership. The characteristics of instructional leadership in middle leaders found in this study – leading by expertise, leading by collaboration and leading by example – may be used in future research regarding middle leaders' roles, influence and effectiveness. Moreover, it seems advisable to train school middle leaders in their instructional leadership roles, especially regarding *how* to exercise instructional leadership. This training can occur before entering the position or in professional development sessions of active middle leaders.

Since school leadership is influenced by the specific context in which it takes place (Hallinger, 2018), the findings of this study should be examined in the context of the Israeli school system. The Israeli social culture can be characterized as having a low power distance. Power distance refers to the degree to which a society acknowledges and embraces unequal distribution of power among individuals. In societies with a low power distance, there is a prevailing belief in equality among people. Conversely, high power distance societies rely on status differentials and hierarchies to define social and professional relationships (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, the education system in Israel operates based on a clan culture (Cameron and Quinn, 2011), characterized by loyalty, commitment and strong interpersonal relationships (Shaked *et al.*, 2021; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009). A clan culture resembles an extended family, where leaders are seen as mentors or even parental figures. In such cultures, all employees are considered equal and success is measured by the internal climate and concern for people. Collaboration takes precedence over competition, with shared goals, values, teamwork and consensus being highly valued (Brewer and Venaik, 2010; Heritage *et al.*, 2014). These contextual factors may explain why instructional leadership in the Israeli school middle leaders is based on leading by expertise, leading by collaboration and leading by example rather than on power distance and hierarchical culture. To gain further insights

Characteristic	Description
Leading by expertise	Middle leaders leverage their deep understanding of the specific subject matter to drive progress
Leading by collaboration	Middle leaders engage teachers in discussions, gather their input and feedback, and involve them in decision-making
Leading by example	Middle leaders meet the expectations they set for teachers and model best teaching practices that teachers can emulate

Table 2.
The characteristics that distinguish instructional leadership in school middle leaders

into this topic, future research could conduct a comparative study examining how middle leaders enact instructional leadership within various cultural contexts and educational systems across different countries.

Compared to the existing research, the current study provides new data on how middle leaders fulfill their instructional leadership roles. However, it has several limitations. First, the data collected for this study is self-reported data, which can be subjective and influenced by personal biases, beliefs or emotions. Specifically, the current study lacks interviews with principals, which prevents us from fully understanding the link between principals' and middle leaders' instructional leadership. To address this gap, it is crucial for future research to conduct interviews with both principals and middle leaders, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their relationship and its impact on the overall dynamics within the school setting. By including insights from both perspectives, a more nuanced understanding can be achieved. In addition, this study did not find how middle leaders' characteristics, such as gender, experience and education, are related to their ways of instructional leadership. This may be found in future research with a larger sample.

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