

Enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators

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Abstract

Purpose – Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach that places great emphasis on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. This study explored the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators.

Design/methodology/approach – The participants in this qualitative study were 24 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 findings identified three significant enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators: pedagogical knowledge, relationship capability and support from the principal.

Originality/value – This study suggests that the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators differ from those of instructional leadership in principals because of their different places in the school structure and explains the enablers of instructional leadership in subject coordinators as middle leaders.

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

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Introduction

Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach in which the principal is actively engaged in activities aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). These activities include defining the school's academic mission, coordinating the curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, monitoring students' progress, facilitating professional development opportunities for teachers, and fostering relationships with external stakeholders (Walker and Qian, 2022). In contrast to other school leadership frameworks, instructional leadership places a strong emphasis on the principal's role in prioritizing curriculum and instructional improvements to drive student achievement (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2016).

However, the notion of the principal as the sole or primary instructional leader has been questioned in recent years (Bush, 2013). While the principal plays a vital role in instructional leadership, research has shown that effective schools require a distributed model of instructional leadership, in which instructional responsibilities are shared among multiple individuals (Hallinger, 2019; Halverson and Clifford, 2013). As Hallinger and Murphy (2013, pp. 9–10) argued, "Successful instructional supervision and curriculum leadership require skill sets that typically go beyond those possessed by any one individual in the school."

For this reason, school middle leaders, who hold leadership positions that are between the level of a classroom teacher and the principal and who are responsible for leading a specific area or department of the school (Grootenboer and Larkin, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023), play an essential role in the school's instructional leadership (Bush, 2023; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008). Principals and middle leaders must cooperate to jointly implement instructional leadership (Bush, 2015). They should work together to create and implement instructional strategies, monitor progress, and provide ongoing support to teachers. They should also engage in regular communication to ensure their efforts are aligned and complementary (Gurr, 2019; Tang *et al.*, 2022).



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The present study delved into instructional leadership within the group of middle leaders. Given that instructional leadership entails leadership activities aimed at enhancing teaching, learning, and outcomes (Murphy *et al.*, 2016; Hallinger *et al.*, 2020), this study broadly encompasses any action taken by middle leaders with the explicit goal of promoting instruction and advancing results as indicative of instructional leadership. Among middle leaders, subject coordinators represent a specific category with unique roles and responsibilities. They are primarily accountable for overseeing a particular academic subject or content area within the elementary school curriculum. In contrast, other middle leaders, such as grade-level team leaders or instructional coordinators, often have broader responsibilities that may encompass multiple subjects or involve a more general oversight role (Ghavifekr, 2021; Gurr, 2019). Subject coordinators should be seen as instructional leaders because they play a crucial role in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning in their subject area. As instructional leaders, they provide their colleagues with guidance, support, and resources to enhance their instructional practices and improve student learning outcomes (Bush and Glover, 2012; Somech and Naamneh, 2019).

The question that drove this study was what factors enable instructional leadership in subject coordinators. The research literature has discussed the enabling factors of the principal's instructional leadership (Robinson, 2010; Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2016). However, the enabling factors of subject coordinators' instructional leadership have been insufficiently explored thus far (Ghavifekr, 2021), hence the importance of this study.

Specifically, this study was conducted in Israel, whose school system serves almost two million students attending about 5,500 elementary, middle, and high schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2023). Instructional leadership is central to school leadership in Israel (Capstones, 2008; Moshel and Berkovich, 2023). The role of subject coordinators varies across different Israeli schools, but in general, subject coordinators primarily concentrate on curriculum development and offering support to teachers within their specific subject domains. They play a pivotal role in upholding the quality of subject-specific instruction. In contrast, school principals assume a broader leadership position, overseeing all aspects of school operations, including financial management, staff supervision, and the establishment of a secure learning environment. Assistant principals, meanwhile, contribute by providing essential administrative support to the principal, handling day-to-day responsibilities, managing student discipline, and overseeing specific programs. In this study, subject coordinators in elementary schools in Israel were interviewed about the factors enabling them to implement instructional leadership. To establish the platform for this investigation, the following theoretical background reviews the existing literature on instructional leadership and its enabling factors in both principals and subject coordinators.

Overview of the literature

Enabling factors of principals' instructional leadership

The principal's instructional leadership, which includes setting clear expectations for students' academic success, guiding and monitoring teachers to improve curriculum and instruction, and driving an impactful learning culture (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020; Shaked, 2023a), has been repeatedly associated with positive outcomes such as higher student achievement, increased teacher motivation, and a favorable school climate (Boyce and Bowers, 2018; Day *et al.*, 2016; Hou *et al.*, 2019). As an instructional leader, the principal is involved in activities such as working with teachers to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for delivering the curriculum and assessing student progress, conducting regular classroom observations and providing teachers with feedback and coaching, fostering professional development to enhance teacher skills, reviewing data on student performance, and ensuring that teachers and students make the most of their time in the classroom (Glickman *et al.*, 2017; Walker and Qian, 2022).

What are the enabling factors of principals' instructional leadership? The research literature discusses several prominent factors enabling instructional leadership in school principals. First, the principal's instructional leadership requires a broad pedagogical knowledge of the subjects taught at school and how students learn them (Robinson, 2010). This knowledge is vital because "without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well ... school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development" (Spillane and Louis, 2002, p. 97). Principals who possess this knowledge gain access to a more complete set of supervisory roles and, therefore, can better support teaching improvement (Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson, 2019, 2020). However, principals have been described as lacking the explicit knowledge base needed to function as instructional leaders. The image of a principal who possesses a comprehensive knowledge of content and pedagogy in all areas taught at the campus is unrealistic. Principals may not understand all the academic subjects deeply, limiting their ability to effectively lead and support teachers in their instructional practices (Bush, 2023).

Second, instructional leadership requires principals to have sufficient time to engage directly in activities that promote effective teaching and learning (Goldring *et al.*, 2015). In most cases, instructional leadership involves tasks that demand blocks of uninterrupted time to achieve meaningful results, such as planning and organizing professional development programs, analyzing student performance data, observing classroom teaching, and providing teacher feedback (Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Unfortunately, principals often lack the time for instructional leadership, largely because of ongoing structural limits on their time that pressure them to attend to other issues. Unfortunately, much of their time is spent on unplanned and crisis-oriented issues. Principals' average workday is characterized by a fragmentation of activities and a brevity of attention to issues, which limits their ability to focus on instructional matters (Prytula *et al.*, 2013).

Third, a principal's instructional leadership requires systems thinking and the ability to solve complex problems (Robinson, 2010). To effectively practice instructional leadership, it is essential to consider not only individual circumstances or specific areas within the school but also to view the wider picture, which encompasses the interrelated and interdependent domains that make up the entire school (Shaked, 2023a). This holistic approach, known as systems thinking, can be helpful in enabling instructional leadership (Shaked and Schechter, 2016). Systems thinking involves viewing issues as interconnected wholes rather than as isolated components and emphasizes the relationships between these components (Shaked and Schechter, 2017). As instructional leadership requires understanding the interconnections between the different aspects of the school, incorporating systems thinking can be beneficial in enhancing instructional leadership (Shaked *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, instructional leadership requires the principal to be able to establish and maintain positive relationships with the teachers. Robinson (2010, p. 16) explained that the importance of this capability for instructional leadership "is evident from the fact that leadership is, by definition, a social process." It should be noted that instructional leadership is an authoritative approach emphasizing control, evaluation, and monitoring. In other words, instructional leadership is "a directive and top-down approach to school leadership" (Hallinger, 2003, p. 337). However, the ability to cultivate healthy relationships is significant for instructional leadership because it helps foster a supportive school culture, enhance student learning and achievement, and build strong partnerships with families and other stakeholders (Shaked, 2021).

The principal is the primary leader responsible for instructional leadership in a school (Hallinger *et al.*, 2020). However, there is increasing recognition that instructional leadership is a shared responsibility that involves the cooperation and participation of

other parties in the school as well, mainly because of the two reasons mentioned above: the lack of the explicit knowledge base and skill set needed to function as instructional leaders; and time constraints related to the conflicts between instructional leadership and other management issues and the hectic task environment in which principals work. Therefore, viewing subject coordinators as instructional leaders is necessary for school improvement (Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023).

Subject coordinators' instructional leadership

Middle leadership differs from principalship in that, although school middle leaders have management and pedagogical responsibilities, they do not have the ultimate organizational responsibility that lies solely with the principal. The principal is responsible for all aspects of school functioning, while middle leaders manage specific areas of the school, such as a subject department or grade-level team (Bassett, 2016; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). School middle leaders do not shape the school's policies and establish guidelines but rather mainly work to make them a reality (Edwards-Groves *et al.*, 2019; Harris *et al.*, 2019).

De Nobile's (2018) model for middle leadership in schools presents a set of roles for school middle leaders, ranging from management to leadership: student-focused role, administrative role, organizational role, supervisory role, staff development role, and strategic role. While this model does not explicitly state the instructional role of middle leaders, the literature views instructional leadership as one of the primary responsibilities of middle leaders (Gurr, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023): "The literature has tended to identify and describe patterns of practice demonstrated by middle leaders to enact their instructional leadership roles and to offer empirically based accounts of the influence of middle leaders in schools" (Tang *et al.*, 2022, p. 521). Middle leaders have the opportunity to influence and support teachers in their teaching practice and play a crucial role in creating a culture of continuous instructional improvement (Bassett, 2016; Hefnawi, 2021). By working with teachers to apply direct instructional leadership (Cardno *et al.*, 2018), middle leaders generate improvements in student achievement and support the development of a strong teaching and learning culture in the school (Bryant and Rao, 2019).

Subject coordinators are middle leaders responsible for overseeing a specific subject area. They are appointed by the principal and may be given additional pay or released from teaching duties to fulfill their role (Gurr, 2019). Their primary responsibility is coordinating and leading the curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation for the subject they oversee (Bush and Glover, 2012). This involves working closely with other teachers who teach the subject, providing support and guidance in planning and delivering lessons, ensuring that resources and materials are available, and monitoring student progress (Ghavifekr, 2021). Although they may have administrative duties, such as maintaining records, producing reports, and communicating with parents or guardians, their prominent role is to improve teaching and learning in their subject (Somech and Naamneh, 2019). Therefore, they should be seen as instructional leaders.

In general, there is a dearth of research on subject coordinators, and specifically, their role as instructional leaders is rarely discussed in academic literature (Ghavifekr, 2021). The current study sought to explore the perceptions of subject coordinators regarding the enabling factors of their instructional leadership. As mentioned above, the existing literature identified the enabling factors of instructional leadership in school principals (Robinson, 2010; Shaked, 2023a). However, the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators have not undergone adequate examination (Gurr, 2019). In light of the significant impact of subject coordinators on school effectiveness, this issue deserves research attention. Therefore, the current study explored the factors enabling instructional leadership in Israeli subject coordinators, utilizing qualitative methods.

Method

When the available knowledge about the topic under investigation is limited, qualitative research methods are the most appropriate as they gather and interpret non-numerical data to understand the experiences and behaviors of the study participants (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The participants' selection process, the interview techniques employed, and the analysis of the collected data are detailed below.

Study participants

To avoid addressing differences in instructional leadership between elementary and secondary (middle and high) schools (Gedik and Bellibas, 2015; Hallinger, 2012), only subject coordinators from elementary schools, which were more accessible to the author, were included as participants in this study. In addition, this study made the assumption that middle leaders differ from one another. Consequently, it did not investigate instructional leadership across all middle leadership roles (such as curriculum coordinator, year coordinator, and pedagogical coach. Gurr, 2019; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023) but rather concentrated specifically on subject coordinators.

The schools were chosen using convenience sampling (Etikan *et al.*, 2016), which relied on their accessibility or availability to the researcher. However, an effort was made to create a sample of elementary schools that resembled the larger Israeli school system regarding districts, school size, and socio-economic level. The researcher then requested principals to recommend one subject coordinator who demonstrated instructional leadership. For ethical considerations, the researcher did not disclose whether the subject coordinator had agreed to participate in the study. To obtain sufficient data, "as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113) were included, resulting in a sample of 24 subject coordinators from 24 schools, three males and 21 females, with an average age of 42 and average of 17 years of educational experience. Regarding education, 11 had a bachelor's degree, and 13 had a master's degree. Table 1 provides additional information about the participants, including their pseudonyms and the enabling factors they brought up (see below). To ensure privacy, pseudonyms were used for the participants.

Data collection

Qualitative researchers frequently use interviews to obtain detailed information and perspectives from participants. In this particular study, face-to-face interviews were utilized to investigate the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators. To ensure ethical standards, all participants provided written consent after being informed of the study's purpose and voluntary nature; no participants withdrew. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with a general plan and designated topics, but the interviewer was open to flexibility and divergence from the script to accommodate participant responses and feedback. Follow-up questions were asked, and additional topics were added when necessary (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

The interviewer intentionally avoided using the term "instructional leadership" during the interviews to prevent the interviewees from shaping their responses in a particular direction. Instead, open-ended questions were posed, such as: "What supports do you need to improve teaching and learning and ensure quality instruction in your department?", "Can you describe a time when you positively impacted teaching and learning in your subject area? What made this possible?", and "What advice would you give to someone considering taking on the subject coordinator role regarding the resources they need for success?".

The interviews took place from January to March 2023. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with an average duration of one hour. Additional follow-up

Table 1.
Study participants' information

	Pseudonym	Sex (Female/ Male)	Age	Years of experience	Education (BA/MA)	Subject area	School size (No. of students)	School district (Center/Hatifa/ Jerusalem/North/ South/Tel Aviv)	Pedagogical knowledge	Relationship capability	Support from the principal
1	Abigail	F	56	33	MA	Math	200	H		✓	
2	Benjamin	M	41	16	MA	Language	150	S			✓
3	Charlotte	F	52	29	MA	Science	400	H			
4	Denise	F	35	7	BA	Physical ed	450	J			
5	Ella	F	54	30	MA	Math	250	TA	✓	✓	
6	Emma	F	48	22	BA	English	250	N	✓		
7	Emily	F	47	15	MA	Judaism	500	N	✓	✓	
8	Grace	F	44	19	MA	English	250	S			✓
9	Harper	F	37	8	BA	Language	300	J			
10	Heather	F	30	6	BA	Special ed	200	TA			
11	Isabella	F	51	27	MA	Science	450	C	✓		
12	Jack	M	40	14	BA	Judaism	350	H		✓	
13	Jane	F	28	6	BA	Language	400	H			✓
14	Janet	F	42	17	MA	Math	250	S			
15	Julie	F	55	32	MA	English	450	J			
16	Maria	F	49	24	MA	Math	550	S		✓	
17	Mia	F	32	7	BA	Language	250	TA	✓		✓
18	Nicole	F	43	18	BA	Science	300	N			
19	Olivia	F	45	20	MA	Art	350	C			
20	Rebecca	F	39	11	MA	Special ed	300	N			✓
21	Ruth	F	34	10	MA	Math	300	J			
22	Sophia	F	27	4	BA	English	650	TA	✓		
23	Victoria	F	53	28	BA	English	150	C			✓
24	William	M	31	7	BA	Language	250	C		✓	

Source(s): Created by the author

interviews, averaging 15 min, were conducted as necessary to clarify any questions that arose during the review of the transcripts to guarantee the data's completeness and accuracy.

Data analysis

The researcher employed a three-stage process to analyze the data: sorting, coding, and categorizing. Sorting and coding were the initial stages, enabling the researcher to systematize and identify pertinent information, while categorizing was used to detect patterns and trends in the data. Sorting, the first stage, involved the researcher's initial reading of the transcripts to identify statements related in some way to the research question and analytic choices about which data chunks to code and which to omit. In the coding stage, the researcher read through the sorted data and assigned codes to data segments reflecting specific concepts or ideas. Open coding was used, which involved giving essence-capturing codes to the data without any preconceived categories. The researcher used a constant comparison approach to compare the coded segments with others and to refine the codes' definitions. The third stage, categorizing, involved grouping the coded data segments into categories based on shared characteristics. This stage was iterative and required multiple rounds of categorization, refinement, and regrouping until the categories accurately represented the key themes. The categories established in this stage formed the foundation for the study's findings.

Findings

The current study explored the enabling factors of subject coordinators' instructional leadership. The qualitative data analysis identified three significant enabling factors of instructional leadership noted by the subject coordinators: pedagogical knowledge, relationship capability, and support from the principal. [Table 1](#) lists the enabling factors brought up by each participant. It should be noted that almost all interviewees briefly mentioned all three enabling factors. However, [Table 1](#) highlights participants who emphasized and provided more extensive insights into specific factors. The enabling factors are presented below, accompanied by participants' comments.

Pedagogical knowledge

The interviews conducted for the current study suggested that the first enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators was in-depth pedagogical knowledge (see [Table 1](#)). They perceived their comprehensive understanding of their area as significant capital and leveraged it to foster improvement and push forward innovation.

The subject coordinators who participated in this study said their pedagogical knowledge came from a variety of sources. For instance, Sophia attributed her extensive knowledge to her prior experience in teaching the subject for which she was responsible. This experience granted her a profound understanding of the subject matter, encompassing the content being studied, as well as the most effective learning materials and teaching methods. In addition to her teaching experience, Sophia also pointed to her educational background and training, which included degrees, training programs, and professional development activities closely related to the subject area. She articulated her approach, stating, "Over the years, and thanks to the many training courses I have attended, I learned many teaching methods. I offer my team all kinds of ideas for interesting and creative ways of teaching that advance the students." Emma highlighted her interactions with superintendents and pedagogical counselors, who provided her with up-to-date insights into the curriculum, available resources, and innovative approaches. Additionally, Emma stressed the significance of collaboration with colleagues who shared valuable ideas and strategies pertaining to

teaching the subject. She explained, “I participate in conferences related to the profession, where I hear the latest information and receive ideas from colleagues from other schools. When I return to school, I share everything new with my team.”

The study participants indicated a range of pedagogical knowledge they required to effectively manage and improve the teaching and learning of their subject. Isabella said: “I know how to guide teachers regarding learning objectives, teaching methods, exams, and other instructional issues.” Likewise, Ella said: “I require heterogeneous teaching from my team, but I also know how to explain to them exactly how to do it and give them many ideas and tools.” The pedagogical knowledge of study participants included mastery of the subject they taught; understanding how to teach their particular subject in ways that are effective for students; close familiarity with the curriculum; ability to design and implement assessments that accurately measure student learning; expertise in how to modify instruction and assessment to meet the needs of students with different learning styles, abilities, and interests; and skills in how to effectively integrate technology into their teaching.

Their wide knowledge enabled the study participants to guide their teachers and make informed decisions about questions such as what topics will be taught, which textbooks align with the school’s instructional goals, and how to select technology tools. In addition, they believed their knowledge established their status, not only among their team members but also increased their esteem among the school’s senior management and parents. As Mia explained: “The principal knows that when I say that something is necessary for our subject, it is really necessary, and the teachers also know that the way I say to teach is the most professional way.”

Relationship capability

The second enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators, which emerged from the data collected in this study, was the ability to establish and maintain productive relationships with the team (see [Table 1](#)). For the study participants, this ability included a wide range of skills.

First, the ability to build positive relationships with teachers included good communication skills. Ella claimed that communication skills are critical for establishing and maintaining positive relationships between subject coordinators and teachers: “By actively listening to teachers and asking questions, I demonstrate that I value their opinions and am invested in their success.” Emily said that although communication should be clear and concise, with no room for misinterpretation, respect for teachers is significant: “Healthy communication is respectful and non-judgment. I recognize the value of the teachers’ contributions and ideas, even if I don’t always agree with them.” Abigail asserted that solid communication skills included balancing clear expectations and flexibility: “I provide clear instructions to ensure everyone is ‘on the same page.’ However, I know that teachers may have different styles, requiring flexibility. I’m open to change because expectations and teaching methods may need to be adjusted based on changing circumstances.”

Second, the ability to build robust relationships with teachers included empathy skills, which involved subject coordinators putting themselves in the teachers’ shoes and understanding their feelings. William said that subject coordinators should be able to understand teachers’ situations and challenges: “We should recognize that teachers have personal and professional lives outside of school and that they may be dealing with various stressors.” For him, subject coordinators should show compassion by being kind and patient. They could offer encouragement, provide a safe space for teachers to vent their frustrations, and express empathy toward their struggles.

Third, the ability to build close relationships with teachers included a positive attitude, which created a friendly and welcoming environment that fostered supportive relationships.

Maria explained: “Subject coordinators who can approach teachers with kindness, optimism, and a willingness to collaborate are more likely to build amicable relationships.” Fourth, the ability to build stable relationships with teachers included conflict resolution skills. Jack asserted: “Conflict is a normal part of any relationship, but subject coordinators who can constructively manage disagreements listen to all sides, find common ground, and work together to find a solution that benefits everyone involved.”

It should be noted that building beneficial relationships with teachers was viewed by the study participants as both a capability, as well as a responsibility, of subject coordinators. Cultivating constructive relationships with teachers requires specific skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. Subject coordinators who possess these skills are more likely to successfully build healthy relationships with teachers. However, cultivating constructive relationships is not only a question of capability but also a task of, and an expectation from, subject coordinators, who must invest efforts to do so in the best possible way.

Support from the principal

Qualitative analysis of interview data pointed to support from the principal (and the senior management) as the third enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators (see [Table 1](#)). The study participants believed they needed help, resources, encouragement, and backing to effectively carry out their responsibilities.

The subject coordinators expected their principals to give them time to engage in various activities that support the development and implementation of the curriculum and instruction within their subject area, such as classroom observations and feedback or assessment and data analysis. Victoria asserted: “By providing me with sufficient time, the principal ensures that I can perform my duties effectively and positively impact student learning.” They also needed time to collaborate with other teachers within their subject area. Mia argued: “Meetings between the subject coordinator and the teachers are essential for ensuring that the curriculum and instruction are effective and aligned with the school’s goals and objectives. If the principal doesn’t allocate time for these meetings, our area won’t progress.”

In addition, the subject coordinators expected their principals to provide them with access to resources such as textbooks, technology, teaching materials, and professional development opportunities. Rebecca described her principal as “allocating a budget for each subject area to support purchasing resources such as software and equipment.” Benjamin’s principal “provides subject coordinators with access to technology, such as computers and projectors, and access to research databases, such as academic journals and online libraries.”

The subject coordinators expected principals to listen to their feedback and involve them in decision-making processes that affect their subject area. They also expected that their hard work would be appreciated. Grace said her principal provided her with positive feedback on her work, highlighting her strengths and success. She explained: “This recognition is a source of pride for me and makes me feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in my work.” She added: “It helps me feel that my efforts have been seen and serves as a motivator for me to continue to make positive contributions to the school community.”

The subject coordinators needed the support of the principal when conflicts arose between them and other middle leaders at school. Middle leaders may compete for limited resources such as funding, staff, or time. They may have different ideas about teaching and learning approaches or priorities. The study participants expected the principal to be involved and resolve conflicts. Jane said: “My principal usually mediates the discussion between the parties involved, encouraging them to find a solution acceptable to everyone, but she also knows how to take a side and make clear decisions.”

Discussion

The current study sought to answer the question of what the enabling factors of instructional leadership are for subject coordinators. A qualitative analysis of the interview data suggested three primary enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators: pedagogical knowledge, relationship capability, and support from the principal. As mentioned above, researchers noted four enabling factors of instructional leadership in principals: pedagogical knowledge, available time, systems thinking, and relationship capability (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Robinson, 2010; Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson, 2019, 2020; Shaked and Schechter, 2016). A comparison between the findings of the current study, which dealt with subject coordinators, and the existing literature, which deals with principals, explains the characteristics of instructional leadership in subject coordinators as school middle leaders.

The first enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators, which emerged from the data collected for the present study, is pedagogical knowledge, referring to their understanding of the principles and practices of teaching and learning within their subject area. This includes, for example, knowledge of instructional strategies, assessment practices, and student learning styles and needs. According to the literature, pedagogical knowledge is also an enabling factor of principals' instructional leadership (Robinson, 2010; Spillane and Louis, 2002). Numerous tasks undertaken by educational leaders to enhance teaching methods and boost student performance are exceptionally challenging to accomplish without a solid understanding of how to establish and foster effective educational settings that cater to all students. Therefore, principals familiar with the subjects taught at school and how students learn them are more likely to be able to support teaching improvement and gain access to a broader range of supervisory roles (Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson, 2019, 2020). However, while the literature often notes that principals lack the required pedagogical knowledge (Bush, 2023; Murphy *et al.*, 2016), the findings of this study suggest that pedagogical knowledge is a distinct strength of subject coordinators. Subject coordinators were found to possess solid pedagogical knowledge that allows them to support and guide teachers in their subject area, ultimately contributing to improved teaching and learning outcomes. The principal, as the head of the entire system, cannot specialize in all the fields of study in the school. In contrast, subject coordinators as school middle leaders have a specific area of expertise and therefore excel in their pedagogical knowledge. Moreover, this study found that pedagogical knowledge not only empowers subject coordinators to provide guidance to their teachers and make informed decisions but also establishes their professional standing.

The second enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators, found in this study, was the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with the teachers. This included various skills, such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. The literature also mentioned relationship capability as an enabling factor of instructional leadership in principals (Robinson, 2010). Compared to other school leadership approaches, relationship capabilities are particularly crucial within the context of instructional leadership. Collaborating closely with teachers, instructional leaders identify strengths and weaknesses, share best practices, and collectively develop strategies to enhance teaching. However, principals' instructional leadership was portrayed in the literature as more authoritative, in which the principal plays a more directive or top-down role in setting clear expectations for instructional practices and student learning outcomes, monitoring and evaluating instruction to ensure they align with educational standards and best practices, and providing guidance and direction on teaching, assessment, and curriculum development (Hallinger, 2003; Shaked, 2021). In contrast, instructional leadership in subject coordinators as school middle leaders is based on participative leadership (Shaked, 2023b), in which close relationships play a more dominant role, as found in the current study.

The third enabling factor of instructional leadership in subject coordinators is support from the principal (and the senior management), including elements such as resources, encouragement, and backing. A principal who is willing to step back and give others a chance to step forward not only promotes a more collaborative and inclusive school culture but also harnesses the collective strengths of the entire staff. This approach can lead to improved student outcomes, enhanced professional development opportunities, and a more resilient school community (Fullan, 2023). More than other school leadership approaches, principal support is particularly integral to instructional leadership. Principal support for monitoring and feedback processes reinforces their significance and contributes to their consistent and effective implementation. Additionally, principal support underscores the emphasis on enhancing teaching and learning by allocating resources, establishing clear expectations, and cultivating a culture that places a premium on teaching and learning excellence. This enabling factor was not mentioned in the literature dealing with instructional leadership in principals because the principal has overall responsibility for all aspects of the school's functioning, whereas subject coordinators as middle leaders manage particular areas (Bassett, 2016; Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023). Subject coordinators do not formulate the institution's policies and set guidelines but instead focus on and bringing them to fruition (Edwards-Groves *et al.*, 2019; Harris *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, subject coordinators, as school middle leaders, cannot perform their instructional leadership without support from the principal.

The existing literature suggested two additional enabling factors of instructional leadership in principals, which were not found in the current study dealing with subject coordinators: available time (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Prytula *et al.*, 2013) and systems thinking (Shaked and Schechter, 2016). Available time was mentioned by the participants of this study as enabling instructional leadership. However, it was mentioned mainly in the context of the principal's support because the study participants expected their principals to make sure they had enough available time. Regarding systems thinking, it can be speculated that systems thinking as an enabling factor of instructional leadership did not feature prominently in the interviews with subject coordinators because although systems thinking is also necessary for middle leaders, it is a particularly central element in a principal's work, who is required to see the school in its entirety (Shaked and Schechter, 2017).

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the distinctive nature of instructional leadership in subject coordinators, suggesting that the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators differ from those found in principals because subject coordinators are positioned as middle leaders in schools. Subject coordinators manage specific areas of the school, are not placed at the top of the school hierarchy, and work to implement the school policy rather than to shape it. Therefore, they rely on subject-specific pedagogical knowledge, focus on building close relationships with teachers, and need support from the principal to carry out their instructional leadership duties effectively.

Moreover, the research literature underscores the substantial instructional leadership role played by middle leaders. Middle leaders play a pivotal role in influencing and supporting teachers in their instructional practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Bassett, 2016; Hefnawi, 2021). Through their engagement in direct instructional leadership with teachers (Cardno *et al.*, 2018), middle leaders contribute to enhanced student achievement and the cultivation of a robust teaching and learning environment within the school (Bryant and Rao, 2019; Tang *et al.*, 2022). According to the current study's findings, the instructional leadership role of middle leaders is made possible by specific enabling factors. A deep understanding of teaching methods, curriculum, and educational research allows middle leaders to effectively coach and mentor teachers, helping them improve their instructional strategies that directly affect student academic results; relationship-building skills allow middle leaders to create a supportive, collegial atmosphere conducive to teacher

growth and development; and the necessary resources, autonomy, and encouragement provided by the principal allow middle leaders to work with teachers effectively.

It should be noted that school culture plays a vital role in facilitating the three primary enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators. A positive school culture that values continuous learning and professional development significantly enhances the pedagogical knowledge of subject coordinators. In such environments, there is often a strong emphasis on sharing best practices, engaging in professional learning communities, and providing opportunities for ongoing training and education. This supportive atmosphere encourages subject coordinators to deepen their understanding of effective teaching strategies and curriculum development, which are essential for instructional leadership. Moreover, a healthy school culture, characterized by trust, collaboration, and open communication, is crucial for building strong relationships between subject coordinators and other stakeholders. In a culture that promotes mutual respect and teamwork, subject coordinators are more likely to collaborate effectively with and influence their peers, leading to improved instructional practices and student outcomes. In addition, the effectiveness of subject coordinators in their instructional leadership roles is significantly enhanced in a school culture that supports and empowers them. This includes the principal's support being evident not only verbally but also through actions such as providing resources, time for collaboration, and autonomy for subject coordinators to lead and innovate.

The findings of this study have important implications for developing effective instructional leadership practices in schools. First, inasmuch as the study highlights the critical role of subject coordinators as middle leaders in promoting instructional leadership within their subject area, schools should recognize the value of their contribution to improving teaching and learning outcomes. Second, the study underscores the importance of pedagogical knowledge in instructional leadership. Thus, schools should ensure that subject coordinators have the necessary pedagogical knowledge related to their field to support teachers and students effectively. Third, the study emphasizes the need for healthy relationships between subject coordinators and teachers. Subject coordinators should be provided with training and guidance to enhance their relationship skills and foster a culture of collaboration and teamwork among teachers. Fourth, the study highlights the importance of the principal's support for subject coordinators' instructional leadership. Principals should provide them with the necessary resources, encouragement, and backing to carry out their instructional leadership duties.

Compared to previous research, this study presented novel insights into the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators. However, several limitations should be considered. First, the scope of this study was confined to Israel. Since contextual factors exert a significant influence on school leadership, future research could undertake a comparative study to explore the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators across different countries. Such cross-country comparisons would offer a more comprehensive perspective on practices that are effective in diverse contexts and what may require adaptation to align with each country's specific needs, simultaneously providing insights into international best practices. In addition, the findings of this study were based on self-reported measures, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias. To overcome this limitation, future research could interview subject coordinators' superiors and subordinates to obtain more objective data. Furthermore, this study did not take into account the impact of the nature of the subject matter, specifically whether it was mandatory or optional. This factor was not considered in the study's analysis or findings, and its omission poses a limitation in understanding the potential variations in subject coordinators' work. Finally, no meaningful links were found in this study between the enabling factors of instructional leadership in subject coordinators and their demographic characteristics, such as gender, experience, and education or school size. However, future research with larger samples may identify differences associated with these characteristics.

Conclusion

Instructional leadership is a crucial approach in school management, emphasizing the improvement of teaching and learning quality. This study delved into the factors that enable instructional leadership among subject coordinators, shedding light on their unique role within the school structure. The research uncovered three pivotal enabling factors for instructional leadership in subject coordinators: pedagogical knowledge, relationship-building skills, and support from the principal. What makes these findings particularly intriguing is the contrast between instructional leadership in subject coordinators and principals. Subject coordinators, as middle leaders, operate in a unique position within the school hierarchy. Their enabling factors differ from those of principals due to their distinct roles and responsibilities. This study suggests a shift in our understanding of instructional leadership, urging us to acknowledge the vital role that middle leaders play in driving improvements in teaching and learning within schools. This new perspective invites further exploration into the dynamic and collaborative nature of instructional leadership across various levels of school leadership.

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