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Symbolic instructional leadership

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Abstract

Instructional leadership has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of concrete practices aimed at improving teaching and learning, such as supervising instruction, coordinating curricula, and supporting teacher development. This study extends that conceptualization by examining symbolic practices of instructional leadership, which focus on signaling the primacy of instruction rather than on technical interventions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 21 elementary school principals in Israel, the analysis identified three categories of symbolic practices: talking about teaching and learning, being present where teaching and learning happen, and making teaching and learning visible. By positioning symbolic practices alongside concrete practices, the study broadens the theoretical scope of instructional leadership.

Keywords

Instructional leadership, symbolic leadership, principals, Israel

Introduction

Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach grounded in the belief that improving teaching and learning is the most important factor in making schools effective (Hallinger et al., 2020). Although principals often face administrative responsibilities that are difficult to delegate, the instructional leadership approach emphasizes that their greatest influence lies in enhancing instructional quality and cultivating a school culture centered on learning (Neumerski et al., 2018; Ng, 2019). Unlike other leadership models, instructional leadership explicitly underscores the principal's responsibility to prioritize curriculum and instruction as the central pathway to raising student achievement (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016).

Instructional leadership has traditionally been understood in terms of concrete practices intended to improve teaching and learning. These practices, such as monitoring instruction, developing curricula, or supporting teacher learning, have been identified across numerous theoretical frameworks

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proposed over the years to define instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Stronge and Xu, 2021; Walker and Qian, 2022; Weber, 1989).

This article extends the focus beyond these concrete practices by examining symbolic practices, an additional and underexplored dimension of instructional leadership. Whereas concrete actions aim to shape and enhance instructional processes through specific interventions, symbolic practices focus on conveying the message that teaching and learning are the school's highest priorities. Such practices serve as signals that build a shared understanding across the school community, reinforcing that instruction lies at the heart of the institution's mission.

This study was conducted within the Israeli education system, which serves approximately two million students in nearly 6000 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2025). In this system, principals are formally expected to act as instructional leaders with a clear mandate to enhance teaching and learning for all students (Capstones, 2008; Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019; Shaked 2021). Based on interviews with Israeli principals, the study explores the following research question: What are the principals' symbolic practices of instructional leadership?

Theoretical background

Instructional leadership is an approach to educational leadership in which principals take an active and ongoing role in activities designed to enhance teaching and learning for all students (Hallinger et al., 2020). Within this perspective, principals are expected to place instruction and curriculum at the center of their work, treating other responsibilities as secondary (Walker and Qian, 2022). Central to this role is the expectation that they advance high-quality teaching practices that foster students' academic success (Bellibaş et al., 2021).

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated a strong association between instructional leadership and improvements in instructional quality and student outcomes (Hou et al., 2019; Özdemir et al., 2024), establishing it as a defining feature of effective school leadership (Cox and Mullen, 2023). Beyond its contribution to academic achievement, instructional leadership has also been linked to enhanced classroom practice and school learning effectiveness (Bellibaş et al., 2021), as well as to increased teacher motivation and organizational citizenship behavior toward both the school and students (Barth and Tsemach, 2023; Boyce and Bowers, 2018). Furthermore, research indicates that strong instructional leadership contributes to the development of a supportive and academically focused school climate (Day et al., 2016).

Scholars have suggested a range of frameworks for conceptualizing instructional leadership (e.g., Blase and Blase, 2000; Walker and Qian, 2022; Weber, 1996). The most widely cited and influential model (Hallinger and Wang, 2015), developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1986), conceptualizes instructional leadership across three interconnected domains, each comprising specific functions. The first is *defining the school's mission*, which involves framing and clearly communicating school goals. The second is *managing the instructional program*, which includes supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. The third is *promoting a positive school learning climate*, which encompasses protecting instructional time, supporting professional development, maintaining high visibility, and providing incentives for both teachers and students.

According to Stronge and Xu (2021), instructional leadership encompasses a set of five interrelated practices: (1) Building and sustaining a school vision, whereby principals articulate a clear direction for the school's future and secure staff commitment so that the vision becomes collectively owned. (2) Monitoring and supporting instruction, with principals observing classrooms, identifying strengths and needs, and assisting teachers in improving their practice. (3)

Coordinating and supervising the curriculum, ensuring that it is aligned with standards and goals and implemented effectively across the school. (4) Leading a learning community, which entails fostering professional growth, encouraging collaboration, and promoting continuous learning among teachers. (5) Using data to guide decisions, where principals collect and analyze information on student achievement and curricular implementation to inform instructional priorities.

In Shakeds (2023) analysis, four central elements define instructional leadership: (1) Instructional vision—building and mobilizing support for a school vision based on goals for student learning and results; (2) Instructional program—coordinating, supervising, guiding, and monitoring teaching and learning in the school; (3) Instructional climate—creating a positive, achievement-oriented academic environment; and (4) Developing teachers—ensuring that faculty members continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career.

These and other existing frameworks predominantly examine how principals employ concrete leadership and managerial actions designed to enhance the quality of instruction and curriculum. They emphasize what principals do in structured, procedural terms to improve teaching and learning. In contrast, much less attention has been given to the symbolic aspect of instructional leadership. Symbolic practices do not primarily serve to change instructional processes but rather to signal that teaching and learning are the school's foremost priorities. Through their everyday behaviors, interactions, and decision-making, principals enact symbolic instructional leadership practices to communicate that teaching and learning are valued above all else, thereby reinforcing and amplifying the impact of more concrete actions.

Although the literature distinguishes between direct and indirect instructional leadership (Gurr et al., 2010), symbolic instructional leadership should not be understood as a subset of indirect leadership but rather as a distinct form of instructional leadership. Bendikson et al. (2012, p. 4) explain that "direct instructional leadership is focused on the quality of teacher practice, including the quality of the curriculum, teaching and assessment, and the quality of teacher inquiry and teacher learning." In contrast, "indirect instructional leadership creates the conditions for good teaching and teacher learning by ensuring that school policies, routines, resourcing and other management decisions support and require high-quality learning, teaching and teacher learning."

Indirect instructional leadership is, therefore, the leadership work of establishing the foundation for effective instruction. Both direct and indirect instructional leadership are thus centered on actions designed to improve teaching and learning (Bendikson et al., 2012). Symbolic practices, however, represent actions whose primary purpose is not to alter instruction directly but to signal that teaching and learning are the foremost priorities of schooling. Symbolic instructional leadership can accordingly be understood as a third layer of instructional leadership, different from both direct and indirect forms, which emphasizes not the modification of teaching and learning themselves, but the communication of their central importance.

It should be noted that certain elements within existing instructional leadership frameworks can be reinterpreted as symbolic practices. For example, the very act of framing the school mission and continually emphasizing it (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Stronge and Xu, 2021; Walker and Qian, 2022; Weber, 1989) sends a signal about what is valued most. When principals define the mission around teaching and learning, it communicates symbolically that instruction is the school's highest priority. Nevertheless, defining the mission is originally presented not only as a way of signaling what is important in the school but also as a means of shaping teaching and learning in meaningful ways, since setting and communicating clear goals provides direction, aligns instruction, and guides curriculum and assessment. Similarly, the function of providing incentives for teachers and students (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986) also carries a symbolic dimension, as publicly recognizing teachers or students conveys what the school values most. Yet this, too, was originally conceived as a

functional practice, intended to motivate staff and students, reinforce desired behaviors, and improve instructional outcomes.

While symbolic dimensions can be discerned within existing instructional leadership frameworks, they have rarely been examined as a distinct analytic category. Instructional leadership has been extensively studied in terms of direct and indirect practices aimed at improving instruction, yet relatively little attention has been devoted to how principals symbolically construct instructional meaning and communicate instructional priorities through noninterventionist practices. Existing frameworks primarily analyze how leaders regulate, supervise, and support teaching and learning, but seldom explore how leaders shape instructional culture through value signaling and meaning making. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a symbolic leadership perspective to examine how principals communicate the primacy of teaching and learning through everyday practices. By situating symbolic practices alongside direct and indirect forms of instructional leadership, the study extends the conceptual boundaries of the field and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how instructional culture is constructed and sustained within schools.

Method

This study aims to generate conceptually grounded insights into how principals enact symbolic practices that communicate instructional priorities. A qualitative approach is therefore particularly well suited to capturing how these practices convey values and contribute to the construction of shared meanings within the school community.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants, as this approach is particularly suitable for locating "information-rich" cases in qualitative research (van Rijnsoever, 2017). To build the pool, the researcher approached seven superintendents representing all six Israeli school districts (North, Center, South, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa). After being introduced to the study's focus on instructional leadership, the superintendents were asked to recommend principals recognized for exemplary practice in this area. Importantly, the superintendents' role was limited to suggesting names; they were not involved in the recruitment process beyond this initial recommendation and were not informed about which nominees agreed to participate. Each nominated principal was contacted directly by the researcher and received an independent invitation explaining the voluntary nature of participation. Principals were explicitly informed that their decision to participate or decline would remain confidential, would not be communicated to the recommending superintendent, and would carry no professional consequences. Pseudonyms were used in all reports to protect participants' identities. In total, 25 principals were nominated, with each superintendent nominating between one and four candidates. Four nominees declined to participate, resulting in a final sample of 21 principals.

The study concentrated solely on elementary schools, as substantial differences between elementary and secondary contexts were considered to make combining the two levels inappropriate. Among the participating principals, 15 were women and six were men, with ages ranging from 36 to 60 (average age 48). Their tenure as principals ranged from two to 17 years, with an average of seven years. All participants held a master's degree. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of demographic characteristics and school profiles.

Although the study did not address sensitive personal information, potential professional risks were taken into account. Because participants were school principals reflecting on their leadership

Table 1. Participants' demographics and school profiles.

		Demographics			Schools	
	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Years as principal	District	Students
1	Abigail	F	42	5	TA	550
2	Alona	F	51	11	H	450
3	Benny	M	39	2	J	400
4	Danielle	F	55	13	TA	600
5	Debbie	F	53	9	N	350
6	Elana	F	42	2	S	250
7	Eden	F	46	7	S	700
8	Eli	M	43	2	H	350
9	Gabriel	M	59	14	C	400
10	Hagar	F	52	6	TA	300
11	Jonah	M	56	7	J	500
12	Karin	F	47	6	N	400
13	Leah	F	44	3	C	350
14	Moses	M	36	2	J	300
15	Naomi	F	41	2	N	450
16	Noa	F	39	2	C	550
17	Orly	F	60	17	TA	650
18	Rachel	F	49	9	J	400
19	Simon	M	46	7	S	200
20	Tammy	F	52	9	H	650
21	Yael	F	51	4	C	400

practices, there was a possibility that identifiable statements could affect their professional standing. To mitigate this risk, strict confidentiality procedures were implemented. Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details were generalized where necessary to prevent traceability. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. All interview data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

Data collection

This study drew on semi-structured interviews conducted to investigate principals' perspectives on their symbolic instructional leadership. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility: while guided by predetermined questions, the interviewer could pursue new topics that emerged organically during the conversations (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Although virtual interviews reduce access to nonverbal cues such as gestures or posture, they offer clear advantages, including easier scheduling, the ability to reach participants across districts, and the potential to create a relaxed atmosphere for respondents. At the beginning of each interview, the participating principal received an explanation of the study's objectives and procedures and subsequently provided informed consent.

The interview included questions such as: "In your view, what kinds of actions by principals communicate the importance of teaching and learning?"; "Can you share examples of actions you've taken to emphasize the centrality of teaching and learning?"; "How do you think your actions influence teachers' perceptions of their instructional work?"; "If you could advise a new

principal, what practices would you recommend they adopt to emphasize the importance of teaching and learning?". Each interview lasted approximately 45 min, was recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and then prepared for analysis. Two participants were later invited to short follow-up discussions (about 15 min) to clarify issues that arose during coding.

Data analysis

The data analysis proceeded through three main stages: sorting, coding, and categorizing. In the first stage, sorting, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts to identify statements related to symbolic practices of instructional leadership. As Miles et al. (2014) emphasize, this step is not a mechanical exercise but already involves analytic judgment, as decisions about what to highlight and retain shape the direction of the analysis.

The second stage, coding, involved assigning "essence-capturing" words or short phrases to the selected statements to distill their central ideas (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Rather than applying a predefined coding scheme, the process was inductive and data-driven, allowing codes, patterns, and themes to emerge organically from the data (Saldaña, 2021). To enhance reliability, a master code list was developed incrementally and systematically applied across the dataset.

In the final stage, categorizing, similar codes were clustered together. This stage began with a careful review of the codes to confirm their accuracy, followed by grouping them into clusters that reflected recurring patterns, concepts, or ideas. These clusters were then synthesized into broader thematic categories that conveyed the underlying meanings in the data. The process was iterative: categories were refined, reorganized, and repeatedly re-examined, echoing Abbott's (2004, p. 215) metaphor of "decorating a room": arranging, stepping back, moving things again, and, at times, attempting a complete reorganization. Through this iterative analysis, three categories of symbolic instructional leadership were identified. To enhance analytic transparency, Table 2 presents illustrative examples of how representative excerpts were coded and aggregated into thematic categories. These categories form the basis of the following chapter, which presents the study's findings.

Findings

The present study identified principals' symbolic practices of instructional leadership. These practices were conceptualized as symbolic because their primary purpose was not to directly improve instruction, but to affirm the centrality of teaching and learning. The following sections outline three main practices: (1) talking about teaching and learning, (2) being present where teaching and

Table 2. Illustrative analytic pathway from data to thematic categories.

Representative excerpt	Code	Thematic category
In Every Teachers' Meeting, I Begin With An Instructional Topic.	Prioritizing Instructional Discourse In Meetings	Talking About Teaching and Learning
If there's a science fair, a quiz, or even a small classroom exhibition, I make sure to show up.	Symbolic presence in learning events	Being Present Where Teaching and Learning Happen
When we invite parents, it is always about learning.	Framing parent events around instruction	Making Teaching and Learning Visible

learning happen, and (3) making teaching and learning visible. Each practice is illustrated with direct quotations from the study participants.

Talking about teaching and learning

Qualitative data analysis revealed that the first symbolic practice of instructional leadership was principals' deliberate use of every available opportunity to talk about teaching and learning. By making these topics a recurring theme across a wide range of interactions with various stakeholders, principals established pedagogical discourse as the common language of the school.

Gabriel, who deliberately embedded instructional themes into his routine communication with teachers, shared:

> When I write emails to teachers, I always try to put something about instruction right at the beginning. Sometimes it's a reminder about our literacy initiative, other times it's an update on how we're following student achievement across the grades, and sometimes it's just a quick nudge about an instructional strategy. No matter what the email is about, I want teaching and learning to stay in the picture.

By placing instructional content at the forefront of his messages, Gabriel used communication as a tool for reinforcing instructional priorities. Symbolically, this practice positioned instruction as the interpretive lens through which all other school matters should be understood, signaling that teaching and learning constitute the school's core identity.

Similarly, Hagar made a point of placing instructional issues at the forefront of her meetings with staff. She explained:

> In every teachers' meeting, I begin with an instructional topic. It might be sharing recent data from standardized tests, planning for our upcoming professional development day, or considering how to further integrate technology into lessons. By starting this way, I make it clear that teaching and learning are our first priority before we move on to anything else.

By consistently opening meetings with instructional matters, Hagar used the agenda as a means of emphasizing what was most important. In symbolic terms, this practice structured the meeting space around instruction, establishing a hierarchy of priorities in which teaching and learning functioned as the organizing principle of collective work rather than as one item among many.

Leah stressed the importance of casual, informal conversations in hallways and staffrooms. She used spontaneous interactions to normalize teaching and learning as the central thread in staff discourse:

> When I bump into teachers, I try to ask them about their lessons, what's going well, or what challenges they're facing. These small talks send the message that teaching is what matters most to me. I want our everyday chatter to circle back to learning.

Other principals implemented this practice not only with teachers but also with students and parents. Danielle emphasized the importance of opening assemblies or parent meetings with references to learning achievements or classroom practices, thereby positioning pedagogy as the shared focus of the entire school community. Eli noted that in student council meetings, he always asked students about their learning experiences before discussing events or logistics, reinforcing the message that learning takes precedence.

Being present where teaching and learning happen

Interviews with principals revealed that the second symbolic practice of instructional leadership is being present where learning happens. By positioning themselves in learning spaces, principals communicate the value they place on instruction and reinforce that teaching and learning are the school's foremost priorities.

Rachel described herself as entering classrooms frequently:

> I don't want people to think that being in the classroom is the unfortunate fate of those who have not advanced to leadership roles, while those who have advanced can spare themselves this burden. What happens in the classroom is the most important thing in the school, and that's why I make sure to be there often, to get this message across.

Rachel's frequent classroom visits were meant to challenge the notion that teaching is a lesser task compared to leadership roles. By being consistently present in classrooms, she sought to convey that instruction is the school's most vital work. Her presence did not primarily function as supervision or instructional oversight. Rather, it operated symbolically by disrupting the implicit hierarchy that privileges administrative work over classroom teaching, reaffirming instructional practice as the moral and professional center of the school.

Debbie, who also described her practice as regularly entering classrooms, explained that whenever she visited briefly, she made a point of initiating an interaction about learning:

> I relate to what I see on the board, ask about their progress, ask about learning outcomes in the classroom, or talk to them about a test that is coming up or has already happened. No matter how exactly, the main thing is to keep the conversation centered on their learning.

Debbie's practice illustrates how presence and communication can operate jointly as symbolic resources. By entering classrooms and initiating conversations about learning, she transformed routine visibility into a meaning-making act. These encounters did not function mainly as instructional oversight, but as public affirmations that teaching and learning define the moral and professional center of the school.

Simon emphasized presence in events related to learning, such as student presentations, academic competitions, and activities marking the completion of learning processes, even when his schedule was tight:

> If there's a science fair, a quiz, or even a small classroom exhibition, I make sure to show up. My presence says to both teachers and students that their learning is important enough for the principal to be there. It's a way of showing that instruction is not just the teachers' responsibility, but the whole school's focus.

Simon's approach illustrates how principals can mobilize presence as a symbolic resource, not only in classrooms but also in broader school events. His visible participation transformed these occasions into public affirmations of the school's instructional priorities, reinforcing the message that learning constitutes the institution's central value.

Making teaching and learning visible

Data gathered for this study suggested that principals demonstrated symbolic instructional leadership by foregrounding teaching and learning within the school's spaces and events. In doing so,

they positioned instruction at the forefront of school life, underscoring its central importance to the institution.

Orly emphasized the role of the school building itself in conveying instructional priorities:

> I want the public areas of the school, such as the entrance and the hallways, not only to be well-maintained and beautiful, but also to engage in learning. When students, teachers, and parents walk through the shared spaces, I want them to encounter reminders that teaching and learning are at the heart of our school.

Orly insisted that the very building of the school should "speak instruction," viewing the physical environment as a vehicle for highlighting the centrality of teaching and learning. By shaping the physical environment in this way, she transformed space into a symbolic medium. The school building thus functioned as a continuous cultural signal, embedding instructional meaning into the routines and experiences of everyday school life.

Abigail expressed a similar view regarding the classroom environment. She explained:

> I do not want teachers to decorate the classroom with nice pictures. I want the walls to be about learning and especially about student work. When students look around their classrooms, they should see evidence of their own efforts and achievements, not just decoration.

By encouraging teachers to use classroom walls as a platform for student work and instructional content, Abigail underscored that classrooms should not only be visually appealing but should also embody the school's instructional mission and showcase students' accomplishments as central to that mission.

Jonah directed his staff to design parent events around learning:

> When we invite parents, it is always about learning. We want to show them what their children are learning, to let them experience the learning process, and to celebrate the completion of that process.

By framing parent events in this way, Jonah used these occasions as symbolic platforms for communicating the school's instructional priorities. The events thus extended beyond information sharing, functioning instead as visible affirmations of the centrality of academic growth.

Similarly, Elana ensured that school assemblies highlighted learning and achievements. She remarked:

> I always open assemblies by recognizing academic achievements, showcasing student projects, or having students present what they have learned. It cannot be only about social matters or entertainment.

Through assemblies, Elana transformed routine school events into symbolic platforms for affirming the instructional mission. By foregrounding academic achievement, she communicated that academic growth was not peripheral, but rather the defining priority of the institution.

Discussion

The present study identifies three main symbolic practices of instructional leadership, whose central purpose is not to directly intervene in instructional processes, but to affirm that teaching and learning define the school's core values. What distinguishes these practices is their non interventionist nature. While they are oriented toward instruction, they do not involve oversight, evaluation, or formal pedagogical regulation. Instead, they operate through value signaling and meaning making, shaping how the school community understands what is most important.

The three practices identified in this study illustrate how symbolic instructional leadership is enacted in everyday school life. First, principals consistently talk about teaching and learning, ensuring that instructional issues are addressed in meetings, communications, and daily conversations. Second, they are present where teaching and learning occur, using their visibility in classrooms and learning spaces to signal commitment to the instructional core. Third, they make teaching and learning visible by shaping the school environment and events so that the community continually encounters reminders of the school's instructional mission.

These symbolic practices extend beyond the functions described in existing frameworks of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Shaked, 2023; Stronge and Xu, 2021; Walker and Qian, 2022), which primarily emphasize actions intended to explicitly improve teaching and learning. While most leadership actions aimed at improving instruction also carry the implicit message that teaching is the school's highest priority, the symbolic practices found in this study differ in that their central purpose is to convey this message. In this sense, the symbolic practices operate less as technical interventions in pedagogy and more as signals that shape meaning, reinforce priorities, and elevate the primacy of instruction within the school community. It is clear, of course, that actions designed to highlight the importance of teaching and learning are ultimately intended to contribute to their improvement. Yet the findings indicate that these are not immediate interventions in instruction itself, but rather practices whose primary purpose is to emphasize significance, which may, in the long run, foster better teaching and learning.

Highlighting the symbolic aspect of instructional leadership, as the findings of this study suggest, offers an alternative to conceiving instructional leadership narrowly as a set of practices concerned with monitoring and overseeing teachers. While supervision, evaluation, and curriculum oversight remain essential, the symbolic practices identified here emphasize that instructional leadership is equally about communicating priorities and signaling what the school values most. By foregrounding teaching and learning in everyday discourse, maintaining visible presence, and shaping the environment to showcase student achievement, principals convey that instruction lies at the heart of the school's mission. In this way, the study shifts the understanding of instructional leadership from a managerial focus on oversight to a richer conception that integrates symbolic signaling and symbolic meaning-making as essential dimensions of leadership influence.

Therefore, symbolic instructional leadership can be situated within broader symbolic leadership theory. Within this perspective, the significance of organizational life lies less in events themselves than in the meanings constructed around them and the interpretive frameworks through which they are understood (Fonsén and Lahtero, 2023; Lahtero and Risku, 2014). Extending this lens to the instructional domain, the findings of the present study demonstrate how principals shape instructional culture not primarily through direct intervention in pedagogical processes, but through non-interventionist practices that communicate the primacy of teaching and learning. In this sense, symbolic instructional leadership operates as a form of cultural influence, shaping collective understandings of what matters most in the school.

This argument resonates with the work of Sergiovanni (1984, p. 47), who decades ago observed that "The symbolic leader … signals to others what is of importance and value," further asserting that in schools, "The symbolic rather than the behavioral aspects of leadership are key factors" (Sergiovanni, 1981, p. 1). From this perspective, leadership is not defined solely by discrete actions but by the meanings attached to them and the values they communicate (Masiki, 2011). The essence of leadership, therefore, lies in the messages principals transmit through their words, decisions, and daily behaviors. Such messages shape the culture of the school, influencing how teachers, students, and parents understand what is valued and prioritized (Deal and Peterson, 2007).

Nevertheless, despite Sergiovanni's (1981, 1984) early emphasis on the symbolic role of school principals, this dimension has received relatively little attention in subsequent school leadership research (Fonsén and Lahtero, 2023). Instructional leadership in particular has largely been examined through managerial and technical lenses, emphasizing measurable functions such as curriculum coordination, monitoring outcomes, and developing teachers (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Shaked, 2023; Stronge and Xu, 2021; Weber, 1989). These approaches, while important, tend to overlook the symbolic power of leadership to signal priorities, reinforce values, and cultivate meaning across the school community. The present study revisits and extends Sergiovanni's insight by highlighting symbolic practices as a distinct and complementary strand of instructional leadership, thereby broadening the conceptualization of how principals influence teaching and learning.

Therefore, this study broadens the conceptualization of instructional leadership past its established managerial and technical functions. Prior models have largely emphasized actions intended to directly improve instruction (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Stronge and Xu, 2021; Weber, 1989), yet the findings presented here highlight symbolic practices as a distinct and complementary strand of instructional leadership. By integrating symbolic practices into the instructional leadership discourse, this study suggests that effective instructional leadership must be understood not only as the management of instruction but also as the cultivation of a culture that consistently affirms the centrality of teaching and learning, reinforces shared values, and sustains instructional priorities across the school community over time. This perspective underscores that culture is not peripheral to instructional leadership but a core medium through which principals shape meaning and influence learning.

Turning to practice, the findings suggest that principals can strengthen the culture of teaching and learning through everyday symbolic acts. Talking about instruction in all forms of communication, being visibly present in classrooms and learning spaces, and designing environments and events that make learning visible serve not only as cultural signals but also as tools for sustaining instructional priorities. These practices remind teachers, students, and parents alike that instruction is the school's foremost concern, thereby reinforcing the alignment of daily activity with the school's instructional mission. Beyond the work of individual principals, principal preparation programs should explicitly include the symbolic dimension of instructional leadership, encouraging aspiring leaders to recognize how everyday words, gestures, and routines convey values and shape culture. Mentoring of novice principals can integrate guidance on how to use symbolic acts strategically to build credibility and to communicate a focus on teaching and learning from the very start of their careers. For in-service principals, professional development meetings should create opportunities to reflect on and share symbolic practices, helping leaders to become more intentional in their use of language, presence, and recognition. At the policy level, frameworks that define the standards and expectations for school leadership should acknowledge symbolic practices as legitimate and necessary forms of instructional leadership. Recognizing the symbolic dimension in leadership standards and evaluation criteria would encourage principals to integrate meaning-making and cultural signaling alongside technical management and direct instructional oversight.

This study contributes to the conceptualization of instructional leadership by foregrounding its symbolic dimension. At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the data were collected within a specific national context, the Israeli education system, which operates within a relatively centralized governance structure and formally emphasizes the instructional role of principals. These contextual characteristics may shape how symbolic practices are enacted and interpreted. While the particular forms through which symbolic instructional leadership is expressed may vary across cultural and policy environments, the central mechanism identified in this study, namely the use of everyday practices to construct shared meaning around the

primacy of teaching and learning, is not inherently context specific. The transferability of the findings therefore lies less in the specific practices described and more in the underlying symbolic process through which leaders communicate institutional priorities. Future research should examine symbolic instructional leadership across diverse educational systems and conduct comparative studies to explore how governance structures and cultural traditions influence the enactment of symbolic practices.

Second, the interpretations presented here are based on principals' accounts, which may reflect self-perceptions as well as enacted practices. Although the study sought to capture how principals understand and articulate their symbolic work, future research could incorporate direct observations and perspectives from teachers, students, and parents in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how symbolic practices are experienced and interpreted within the school community.

Third, the study did not examine potential associations between symbolic practices and the characteristics of principals or their schools. Future research employing larger samples and mixed methods designs could investigate whether variations in symbolic instructional leadership relate to contextual variables such as school size, accountability pressures, or leadership experience. Such studies could also explore the extent to which symbolic practices are associated with outcomes such as teacher motivation, instructional quality, school climate, and student learning.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how principals enact symbolic instructional leadership. The findings identified three interrelated forms of symbolic practice: foregrounding instructional discourse, embodying instructional presence, and rendering teaching and learning publicly visible. Together, these practices extend prevailing understandings of instructional leadership by articulating its symbolic dimension as a distinct yet complementary layer alongside direct and indirect forms of leadership. By demonstrating how principals communicate instructional priorities through non-interventionist practices, the study reframes leadership not only as a mechanism of instructional regulation but also as a process of value signaling and cultural meaning making.

Conceptually, the study advances instructional leadership scholarship by demonstrating that influence over teaching and learning is exercised not only through supervision and pedagogical guidance, but also through the construction of shared understandings about what matters most in schools. In doing so, it reframes instructional leadership as both a managerial and a symbolic enterprise.

The findings have implications for theory, as they extend instructional leadership scholarship beyond managerial and supervisory functions toward a cultural understanding of leadership influence. For practice, the study suggests that principals can intentionally use language, presence, and symbolic acts to reinforce instructional priorities. For policy, leadership standards, and evaluation frameworks may benefit from recognizing symbolic practices as legitimate and consequential components of instructional leadership.

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