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Instructional leadership in a 21st century global context: a conceptual review

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual review examines the evolution of instructional leadership by tracing its historical development, analyzing recent conceptual advancements, and outlining future directions for theory and research. Drawing on 69 conceptual publications, the paper identifies three major themes shaping the contemporary landscape: conceptual integration, contextual responsiveness, and technological adaptation. These themes reflect how instructional leadership is being redefined to meet the demands of increasingly complex and dynamic educational environments. The review concludes by proposing future trajectories that emphasize equity, localized leadership models, digital transformation, and system-level coherence, positioning instructional leadership as a vital and evolving force in educational improvement.

Introduction

This paper explores recent conceptual developments in instructional leadership, an approach to school leadership that positions the improvement of teaching and learning as a key responsibility of principals (Boyce & Bowers, 2018b; Hallinger et al., 2020; Neumerski et al., 2025; Ng, D. F. S. 2019). Instructional leadership calls for principals to engage in purposeful actions to enhance teaching and learning (Bossert et al., 1982; Bridges, 1967; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). These include refining the curriculum, monitoring classroom instruction, and promoting effective teaching practices.

Although principals are frequently occupied with administrative responsibilities that are difficult to delegate, those who embrace instructional leadership recognize that their most significant impact lies in advancing instructional quality and fostering a school culture centered on learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Neumerski et al., 2018; Ng, D. F. S. 2019). Principals can create a coherent and supportive environment that promotes academic success by building a team of instructional leaders who work closely with teachers to align classroom practices with student learning goals (Cardno et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2016). Extensive research has consistently linked instructional leadership to improved instructional quality and student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hou et al., 2019; Özdemir et al., 2024), solidifying its status as a defining feature of

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effective school leadership (Billingsley et al., 2018; Cox & Mullen, 2023; Robinson et al., 2008).

Given its policy prominence, multiple research reviews have focused on instructional leadership. These reviews have synthesized empirical findings (Boyce & Bowers, 2018b; Gümüş et al., 2018; Hallinger et al., *in press*; Pietsch et al., 2025), identified key research topics and themes (Hallinger, 2011), and mapped the field (Hallinger et al., 2020). Nevertheless, no researcher has explicitly focused on tracking the ‘conceptual evolution’ of instructional leadership research and practice over the past few decades.

Several influential reviews have examined instructional leadership from empirical or bibliometric perspectives. Meta-analytic and systematic reviews have synthesized evidence on its effects on teaching and student outcomes (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Robinson et al., 2008), while science-mapping studies have traced publication trends and research clusters (Hallinger et al., 2020), and thematic reviews have identified dominant research patterns (Gümüş et al., 2018). Although these contributions have significantly advanced the field, they have primarily focused on effects, themes, or publication trajectories rather than on how the underlying conceptual assumptions and theoretical boundaries of instructional leadership have evolved over time. The present review addresses this gap by foregrounding conceptual evolution as its central analytic lens.

This ‘conceptual evolution’ is the systematic examination of how its meaning, scope, and theoretical underpinnings have shifted over time in response to changes in policy, research paradigms, and educational practice. This perspective is distinct from prior reviews that primarily describe what has been studied or which themes have emerged. Instead, it interrogates the changing assumptions, frameworks, and boundaries of the construct itself. Such an approach reveals not only continuity in scholarly understanding but also the ruptures, expansions, and integrations that have shaped its trajectory.

We assert that this is a significant oversight. The policy context of education has undergone significant changes since scholars began to focus on the role of the principal during the 20th century. More specifically, policy trends such as accountability, teacher empowerment, and technological change have reshaped the expectations of school principals (Bush, 2013; Gümüş et al., 2021). Moreover, in recent decades, educational leadership and management (EDLM) has transformed into a global enterprise (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019). Thus, scholars have increasingly highlighted the relationship between instructional leadership and the context in which it is enacted (Brauckmann et al., 2016; Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018). This rapidly changing context underscores the need to examine how conceptualizations of instructional leadership have evolved in response to these contextual developments.

Recognition of this research gap framed the guiding questions of the present study.

- (1) Historical evolution – What have been the key milestones in conceptualizing instructional leadership over time?
- (2) Contemporary reconceptualizations – What recent conceptual themes are transforming the conceptualization of 21st-century instructional leadership?
- (3) Evidence-informed future directions – Based on the synthesis of historical developments and current research trends, what evidence-supported trajectories and priorities are likely to shape future directions in conceptualizing and studying instructional leadership?

This review employed the conceptual review method (Hulland, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Conceptual reviews are ‘appropriate when considerable time has passed since an earlier critical assessment, particularly when the field is very active’ (Hulland, 2020, p. 29). As suggested above, this describes the domain of instructional leadership theory. In this article, the authors applied conceptual review synthesis methods to 68 conceptual documents on instructional leadership from multiple online databases. The synthesis aimed to identify emerging conceptualizations of instructional leadership and future directions for theory development, empirical research, and practice.

Method

The review employed a conceptual review method (Hulland, 2020; Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Over the past 25 years, quantitatively oriented research reviews (e.g. meta-analyses, content analysis, bibliometric) have garnered an increasing proportion of the space devoted to journal research reviews. Nonetheless, research reviews that critique and synthesize key conceptual constructs remain critical to advancing knowledge (Boyan, 1981; Heck & Hallinger, 1999). This is the domain of conceptual reviews, which aim to ‘reconcile and then extend’ key concepts in a field of study (Hulland, 2020, p. 28). Additionally, a recent trend in conceptual reviews has been to emulate selected features of ‘systematic reviews’ such as reproducibility, transparency, and thoroughness (Hulland, 2020).

Document identification

Hulland (2020) emphasized the critical importance of clearly delineating the scope of a conceptual review. The conceptual boundary established for the review encompassed academic documents on the topic of *instructional leadership* enacted within K-12 school settings. Given the review’s emphasis on conceptual development, priority was given to conceptual publications; reviews and empirical studies were included only if they offered a substantive conceptual contribution, such as the development or empirical testing of theoretical models. A conceptual contribution was defined as an explicit effort to: (a) interpret or reinterpret the concept of instructional leadership; (b) propose integrative models that incorporate instructional leadership alongside other frameworks; (c) develop novel typologies or theoretical perspectives; or (d) adapt the concept of instructional leadership to emerging or underexplored contexts.

This review applied the PRISMA guidelines for conducting systematic reviews to the search and exclusion process (see Figure 1). Document searches were conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This ensured that the documents would be pre-screened for academic rigor (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). The search term [‘instructional leader*’ OR ‘instructional manage*’] was entered into the ‘Keyword’ and ‘Article Title’ fields of each database without restriction of time or document type. The ‘Abstract’ field was not employed in this search for two reasons. The authors surmised that the most relevant articles on ‘instructional leadership’ would feature the search term in the Keyword and Article Title fields. Second, a search that included the Abstract field would surface too many articles in

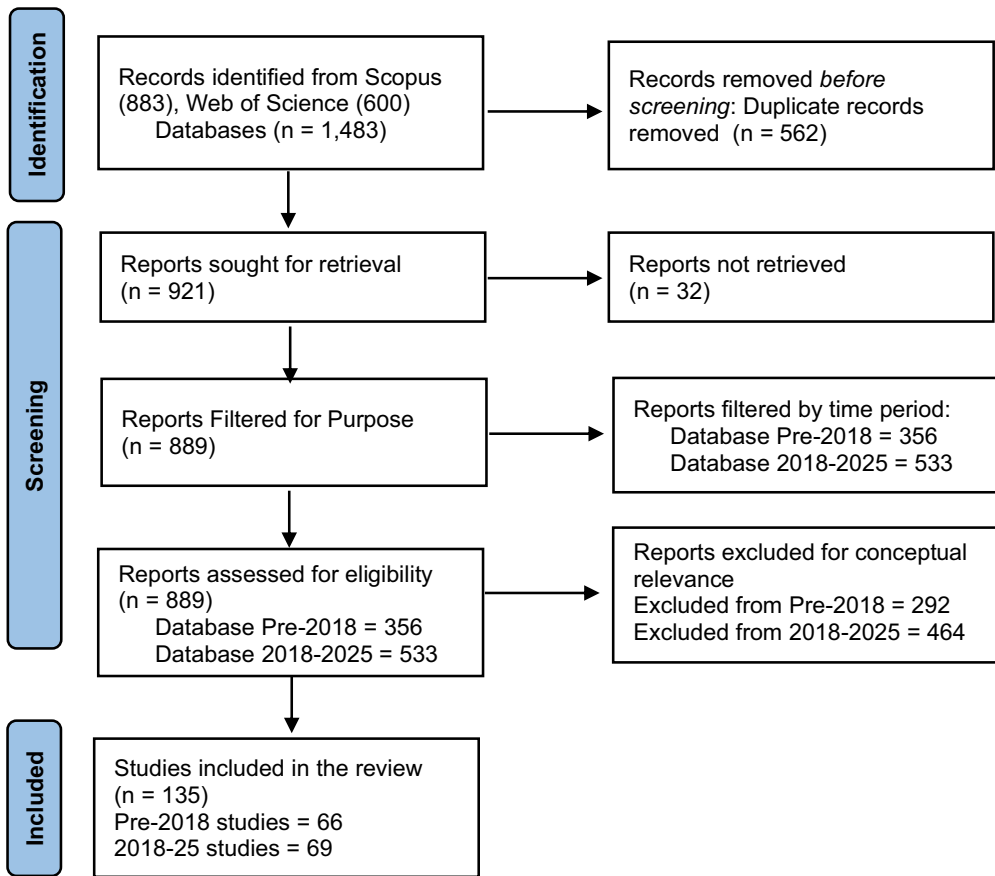


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of the search and exclusion process (from Page et al., 2021).

which this term was mentioned, even if the article was not explicitly on the topic. This was particularly the case since the authors were explicitly interested in conceptual papers.

The initial searches, conducted on 18 June 2025, yielded 883 documents in Scopus and 600 in the Web of Science (see Figure 1). The document lists were exported to MS Excel, where the conditional formatting function was used to identify duplicate documents, resulting in the exclusion of 562 records. An additional 32 documents were excluded after the authors were unable to retrieve full-text documents.

The remaining 889 documents were then filtered to identify those published before and after 2018. The authors selected 2018 as the year demarking the start of the ‘emerging literature,’ which was the focus of the second research question. 2018 was selected as the starting point for Q2 to keep the scope manageable and allow for a focused synthesis of the most recent conceptual developments. This left 356 and 533 documents for the pre-2018 and 2018–25 periods, respectively. These documents were then individually screened by the authors and discrepancies resolved through discussion. Following this step, 65 documents remained for the pre-2018 literature and 69 for the 2018–2025 literature.

Conceptual synthesis method

MacInnis (2011) proposed that conceptual reviews rely on inductive rather than deductive synthesis. Conceptual reviews should start ‘with individual observations and then collate them into a higher-order set of conclusions’ (MacInnis, 2011, p. 147). A critical reading of individual documents should aim to identify, integrate, and synthesize key ideas within the selected knowledge domain, resolve inconsistencies, highlight gaps in the existing literature, and establish an agenda for future research (Hulland, 2020, p. 28). In the current review, the authors applied these principles to the critical analysis and synthesis of emerging conceptualizations of instructional leadership.

Research question 1, which inquired into the historical evolution of instructional leadership, drew upon the full database of 135 documents. The analysis of emerging conceptualizations was limited to the 69 documents from 2018–25. Each of the 69 publications was examined for key features, including its stated aim, theoretical framing, critiques of current conceptualizations and practices, and conceptual contributions (e.g. refinements, frameworks). Initial codes were generated inductively from the content rather than using a pre-established coding scheme. Consistent with the conceptual review method, this allowed themes to emerge organically from the data.

These codes were clustered into broader categories through a process of constant comparison across texts, forming the basis for thematic synthesis. The synthesis process involved interpreting and refining these categories into higher-order themes that reflected distinct conceptual directions in the literature. This process ultimately yielded three overarching conceptual developments in instructional leadership.

Findings of the conceptual synthesis

This section presents the findings of the conceptual synthesis. Rather than functioning as a traditional literature review, the historical analysis reconstructs the conceptual trajectory of instructional leadership as it emerged from the inductive synthesis of the selected documents.

The first section addresses the historical evolution of instructional leadership, tracing its conceptual development over time. The second section focuses on the contemporary landscape, examining recent advancements and emerging themes in the conceptualization of instructional leadership. The third section identifies future conceptual directions in research on instructional leadership.

Milestones in instructional leadership

In 1934, William S. Gray wrote, ‘The evidence upon which the conclusions and the recommendations [concerning instructional leadership] presented in this article are based was secured in a supervisory experiment which began in 1926 . . . and continued for five years’ (Gray, 1934, p. 418). This reference shows that inquiry into instructional leadership began one hundred years ago.

In mid-20th-century U.S. schools, instructional leadership was a practice-based ideal driven by the perception that successful schools were led by effective principals. This widely accepted belief was reflected in publications authored by Grobman and Hynes

(1956), Gross and Herriot (1965), and Lipham (1964). Nonetheless, Bridges (1967) critiqued the lack of precision in the language used to describe instructional leadership. He highlighted the need for a coherent conceptual framework to guide research and practice. Bridges (1967) also identified a recurring tension between the aspirational demands placed on principals and their practical challenges in fulfilling the instructional leadership role, a dilemma that continues to the present (Cuban, 1988; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Murphy et al., 2016; Shaked, 2023b).

The effective schools movement of the 1980s significantly advanced the development of instructional leadership. Research by Brookover and Lezotte (1977), Edmonds (1979), and others identified how certain schools, despite challenging socioeconomic contexts, consistently produced strong student outcomes. A key differentiating factor in these schools was the presence of assertive principals who were deeply engaged in instructional improvement. Building on these insights, Bossert et al. (1982) proposed one of the earliest conceptual frameworks to explain how principals influence student learning (see Figure 2).

However, despite this seminal contribution, Bossert et al. (1982) still did not conceptualize the practices that comprised instructional leadership. This gap was filled by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), who introduced the first comprehensive conceptual definition of instructional leadership (Figure 3), one that has retained its relevance over the succeeding decades (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Hallinger et al., 2020). Nonetheless, scholars and practitioners continued to reprise the historical tension between aspirations for principals to embrace the instructional leadership role and workplace realities (Barth, 1986; Cuban, 1988).

In the 1990s, transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990) emerged as a competing school leadership framework (Leithwood, 1994). Adapted from the business sector, transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's role in building organizational capacity for learning and change (Leithwood et al., 1996). While transformational leadership shares some conceptual elements with instructional leadership (e.g. vision, rewards), it emphasizes staff capacity-building for change over direct instructional engagement by the principal (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 1996). This period was

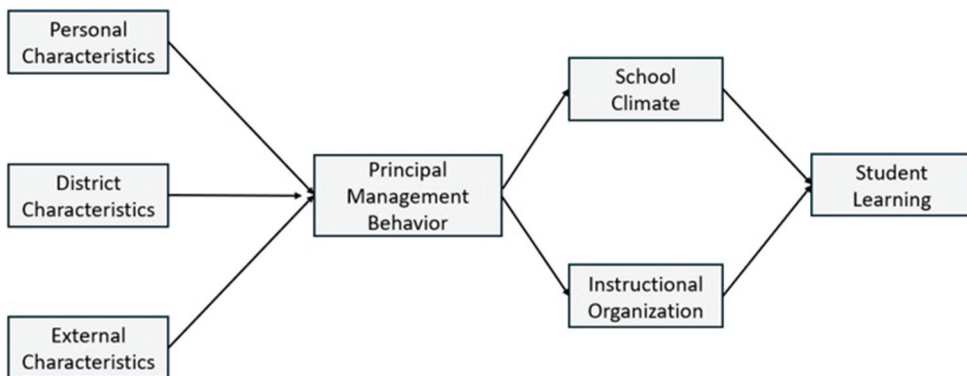


Figure 2. Conceptual framework instructional management role of the principal (Bossert et al., 1982, p. 40).

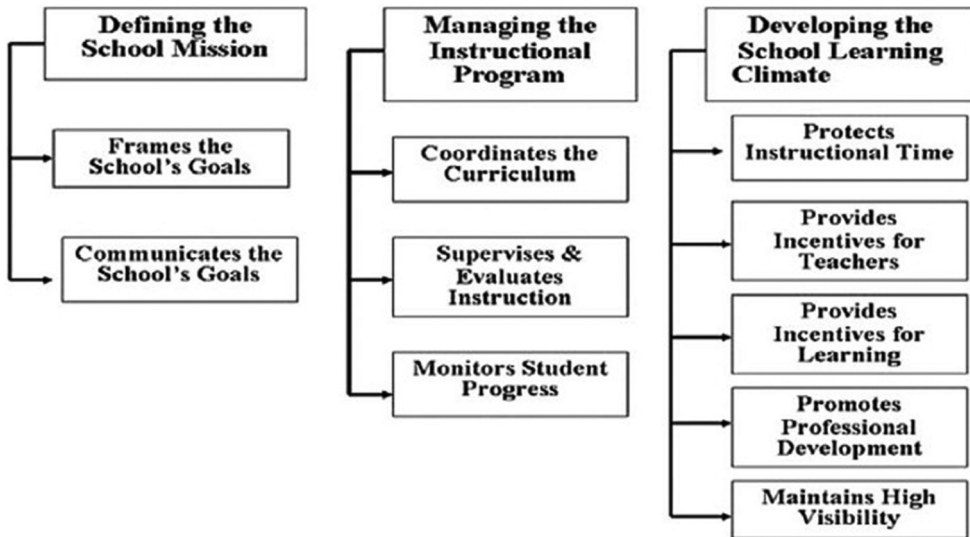


Figure 3. Principal instructional management framework (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 28).

later referred to as the era of paradigm wars between the competing models of principal leadership (Hallinger, 2003).

In the 2000s, several emerging trends shaped the further evolution of instructional leadership. First, as government-initiated education reform accelerated worldwide, instructional leadership gained increasing international acceptance as an administrative priority (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019). This global trend emerged in the 2000s (e.g. Gurr et al., 2007; Kruger, 2003; Law et al., 2007), and gathered momentum in the subsequent decades (Bush, 2013; Kaparou & Bush, 2015; Kasprzhak et al., 2022; Ng, D. F. S. 2019; Sepúlveda, 2015; Walker & Hallinger, 2015).

A second trend, arising from newly published research findings, has accelerated the global acceptance of instructional leadership among policymakers, scholars, and practitioners. More specifically, a series of empirical studies (e.g. Hallinger et al., 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003) and research reviews (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2008) supported the efficacy of instructional leadership. Indeed, in their meta-analytic review, Robinson et al. (2008) concluded that 'the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was three to four times that of transformational leadership' (p. 635). This finding effectively ended the 'paradigm wars' and further supported the ascent of instructional leadership among policymakers.

A critical conceptual shift also occurred in how scholars understood the mechanisms through which instructional leadership influences teaching and learning. Early models often implied a relatively direct relationship between principal supervision and classroom instruction. However, subsequent empirical research increasingly demonstrated that the effects of instructional leadership are predominantly indirect. Rather than directly altering instructional practice, principals shape organizational conditions such as professional collaboration, teacher efficacy, academic press, school climate, and instructional

coherence, which in turn influence teaching quality and student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2008). This shift reframed instructional leadership from a supervisory model focused on direct control toward a systemic model emphasizing mediated influence through organizational and professional processes.

A third evolutionary trend in conceptualizations of instructional leadership concerned how principals enacted instructional leadership. Before 2000, instructional leadership was often interpreted as a directive, top-down approach to supporting instructional change in schools. However, this initially hierarchical orientation gradually gave way to a more nuanced, relational understanding emphasizing collaboration, mutual trust, and sustained dialogue among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2013; Rigby, 2014). Indeed, findings from the most recent generation of instructional leadership studies emphasize the relational axiom. While previous reviews have focused on synthesizing empirical findings or mapping research trends, this conceptual review highlights how instructional leadership is being redefined to meet evolving educational demands the evolving demands of education. The findings offer timely insights into how instructional leadership is being reshaped to remain relevant in a rapidly changing educational landscape. Implications are offered for research and practice that leaders get results through people (Al-Mahdy et al., 2024; Shaked, 2024).

The last pre-2018 trend had its roots in Bridges (1967) observation of the gap between aspirations for principals to embrace the instructional leadership role and the normative pressures that constrained even well-intentioned principals (Goldring et al., 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Horng et al., 2010; Marshall, K. 2003). Paradoxically, as instructional leadership gained traction as a contributor to school effectiveness and improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), it was increasingly acknowledged that the scope of this role exceeds the capacity of any one person (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). The resolution of this tension emerged in theoretical treatises that explored how the mind-set and tasks encompassing instructional leadership could be 'shared' or 'distributed' among a broader array of school that included but was not limited to leaders the principal (Barth, 2001; Lambert, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy et al., 2009; Spillane, J. P., et al., 2003). Consequently, over time, instructional leadership has increasingly been viewed as a shared form of leadership practice encompassing the principal, middle-level, and teacher leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Neumerski, 2013; Spillane, J. 2017).

More recent frameworks have also sought to refine rather than replace the foundational models. For example, Stronge and Xu (2021) conceptualize instructional leadership as five interrelated practices, including vision-building, monitoring instruction, curriculum coordination, professional learning leadership, and data-informed decision-making. Similarly, Shaked (2023b) synthesizes four central elements, namely instructional vision, instructional program, instructional climate, and developing teachers, thereby organizing instructional leadership into an integrated architecture. These contemporary models converge in preserving a core focus on teaching and learning while offering greater conceptual clarity regarding the internal structure of the construct. Rather than representing a paradigmatic break, they reflect a process of theoretical refinement and structural consolidation of the instructional leadership domain.

Emerging conceptual developments in instructional leadership: 2018–2025

The analysis revealed three recurring and interrelated themes that characterize recent developments in the field: conceptual integration, contextual responsiveness, and technological adaptation. Each theme reflects a distinct yet overlapping trajectory in the evolving conceptualization of instructional leadership. These themes were identified through a review of 69 documents (see above), each examined for its central aim, theoretical orientation, critiques of prevailing ideas and practices, and conceptual contributions. Initial codes were generated inductively from the content rather than derived from a predefined coding scheme, allowing patterns to emerge organically. Through constant comparison across texts, these codes were grouped into broader categories, forming the basis for a thematic synthesis. This synthesis process involved interpreting and refining the categories into higher-order themes that reflect key conceptual directions in the instructional leadership literature. The following sections present and elaborate on these three developments.

Conceptual integration

One recent conceptual development in instructional leadership is its integration with other school leadership frameworks to form a more comprehensive approach to educational leadership. Rather than viewing instructional leadership as a standalone model, scholars increasingly position it alongside complementary frameworks such as transformational leadership (Leithwood et al., 1996), learning-centered leadership (Murphy et al., 2006), distributed leadership (Spillane, J. P., et al., 2003), leadership for learning (MacBeath, 2019), teacher leadership (Neumerski, 2013), and successful school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2023). This integrative perspective acknowledges the complexity of school leadership and seeks to align instructional improvement with broader organizational goals, relational dynamics, changes in environmental values and norms (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood, 2023; Rigby, 2014).

Over the past few decades, scholars have argued that instructional leadership, while essential, must be complemented by additional leadership frameworks and practices. For example, researchers have found that schools exhibiting strong instructional leadership also tend to demonstrate high levels of transformational leadership, suggesting that the enactment of these complementary frameworks can produce added value (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2024; Kwan, 2020; Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy et al., 2009; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

Scholars have also described how efficient organizational management of school operations is a necessary condition that supports efforts to lead improvements in teaching and learning (Dwyer, 1985; Shaked, 2023a). This supports Hallinger and Murphy's (2013) assertions that principals who embrace the instructional leadership role cannot ignore tasks associated with their managerial, administrative, and political roles. This admonition is supported by abundant research evidence (Goldring et al., 2015; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Sebastian et al., 2019).

Earlier, we noted that instructional leadership was rooted in the research on instructionally effective schools serving the urban poor (Edmonds, 1979). During the ensuing decades, concerns for 'social justice leadership' morphed into a related but distinct line of inquiry (Leithwood, 2023; Rigby, 2014; Theoharis, 2024).

Shaked (2025) demonstrated how principals embed a social justice lens into the core dimensions of instructional leadership (Shaked, 2025). In a similar vein, Howley et al. (2019) proposed the concept of inclusive instructional leadership, and Mugisha (2013) introduced the notion of culturally responsive instructional leadership (Lambrecht et al., 2022; Marshall, S. L., & Khalifa, 2018). Additional integrations of instructional leadership with complementary frameworks have also been proposed (e.g. Katewa & Heystek, 2019; Leithwood, 2023; Shaked & Benoliel, 2020).

The integration of instructional leadership with other leadership frameworks has led to the development of new, hybrid models. For instance, its integration with distributed leadership, which conceptualizes leadership as a collective process involving both formal and informal actors (Soncin et al., 2024), has given rise to models such as distributed instructional leadership (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Noman, 2023; Zuckerman et al., 2018) and shared instructional leadership (Bellibaş et al., 2022; Cardno et al., 2018; Zhan & Cao, 2023; Zhan et al., 2023). These approaches reposition instructional leadership as a collaborative responsibility rather than the sole domain of the principal (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Marks & Printy, 2003; Torres et al., 2020).

Neumerski et al. (2025) argue that, from the perspective of central office leaders, instructional leadership alone is no longer adequate for addressing the complex demands of today's schools. Instead, principals are expected to combine instructional leadership with five additional orientations: resilience, problem-solving, equity, well-being, and political savvy. They introduced the term 'instructional leadership plus' to capture this expanded vision of the instructional leadership role.

Drawing on a meta-narrative review of 109 quantitative studies, Boyce and Bowers (2018b) identified substantial conceptual overlap between instructional leadership and leadership for learning (MacBeath, 2019). The overlap was particularly evident in the domains of vision-setting, instructional management, and curriculum coordination. However, they argued that leadership for learning encompasses broader responsibilities, including staff recruitment, satisfaction, commitment, and retention. Thus, Boyce and Bowers concluded that 'leadership for learning is the conceptual evolution of 25 years of diverse instructional leadership research' (Boyce & Bowers, 2018b, p. 61; see also Boyce & Bowers, 2018a; Moral, 2018; Tulowitzki & Pietsch, 2020).

While conceptual integration has enriched the field, it also raises questions regarding conceptual boundaries. As instructional leadership is increasingly combined with transformational, distributed, equity-oriented, and digital leadership frameworks, there is a risk that it may become an umbrella construct encompassing multiple leadership orientations. To retain conceptual distinctiveness, instructional leadership must preserve its defining core: a sustained and explicit focus on improving teaching and learning processes. Unlike broader leadership-for-learning paradigms, which may include organizational culture, staff wellbeing, or strategic management as primary domains, instructional leadership remains anchored in the supervision, coordination, support, and development of instructional practice. The challenge for future theory is therefore not merely to expand instructional leadership, but to clarify its conceptual center while articulating its relationships with adjacent frameworks.

Contextual responsiveness

Another conceptual development that has emerged from research on instructional leadership is the need for context-sensitive models tailored to the different school environments (Bajunid, 1996; Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996). Successful school leadership must adapt broad frameworks to the local cultural and institutional context (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2018). Nonetheless, school leadership discourse frequently underestimates the influence of a school's context on leadership enactment, focusing on 'what works' rather than 'what works in a particular context.'

Growing evidence suggests that a universal framework for instructional leadership may not be applicable across varied national settings (Pietsch et al., 2025; Shaked et al., 2021). For example, Aas and Brandmo (2016) were unable to replicate the instructional leadership factor structure commonly found in American studies when analyzing data from Norwegian principals. They argued that leadership practices in Nordic countries differ considerably from those in the United States, a view supported by Bowers (2020).

In Malaysia, national policies have prioritized instructional leadership in the role of school principals (Bush et al., 2018). While the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model has been widely disseminated, there has also been evidence of adaptation to meet local values and goals. For example, principals are expected to incorporate national values of racial harmony and inclusiveness into their educational programs (Harris et al., 2019; Samichan et al., 2021; Thien et al., 2023).

Recent studies illustrate how this conceptual diversification is taking shape in practice. In the Chinese context, instructional leadership is characterized by six core practices that reflect both deeply embedded cultural values and educational priorities. These practices include: (1) Defining purpose and direction; (2) Evaluating and monitoring instruction; (3) Nurturing positive and collaborative relationships with and between teachers; (4) Aligning the curriculum; (5) Fostering professional development to enhance teacher capacity; and (6) Promoting external communication to support learning.

While this model shares many similarities with common frameworks, it also reflects the national institutional, cultural, and political contexts. A highly centralized education system and uniform organizational routines, such as peer-supported teacher development and regular classroom observations, define the roles and interactions of principals with teachers. Additionally, Confucian cultural values, including hierarchy, harmony, and collectivism, foster a paternalistic leadership style where principals act as caring authority figures. However, political expectations demand that principals implement top-down reforms and maintain high exam performance, often resulting in tensions and constrained autonomy (Walker & Qian, 2022. See also; Liu & Liao, 2025).

In Turkey, instructional leadership is shaped by highly centralized education system and a culture of high power distance, resulting in a model built around four key dimensions: (1) Emphasis on national goals and competition; (2) Maintaining the learning environment; (3) Motivating and enabling teachers; and (4) Monitoring program alignment and test results. Instructional leadership in Turkey tends to position principals as implementers of centrally mandated goals, primarily focused on student performance in national examinations, rather than as facilitators of collaborative goal-setting, instructional supervision, or professional learning. Therefore, principals often adopt a managerial stance, prioritizing the provision of physical resources and offering

emotional support to teachers, while playing a limited role in leading job-embedded professional development or driving instructional improvement. highly centralized education system and a culture of high power distance (Gümüş et al., 2021; see also Cansoy et al., 2024).

A parallel emphasis on centralized directives can be found in Iran, where instructional leadership is defined by strict adherence to national goals, though adapted through context-sensitive practices at the school level. A unique feature of the model is the added dimension of ‘knowledge and involvement,’ highlighting the importance of principals’ relationships with teachers, students, and parents. While the curriculum and school vision are top-down mandates from the Ministry of Education, effective principals reinterpret and enact these visions in a contextual manner, often transforming formal slogans into meaningful school practices. The Iranian centralized system shapes but does not entirely constrain instructional leadership, with Iranian principals playing an active role in adapting national directives to the specific needs and conditions of their local school communities, thereby fostering supportive learning climates and promoting professional growth (Zeinabadi et al., 2023).

Similarly, Singapore principals’ instructional leadership is guided by the centralized nature of Singapore’s education system, where Ministry of Education policies and initiatives have a significant influence on school practices. Within this system, principals exercise instructional leadership by aligning their school’s vision with national directives, while still adapting it to their unique school contexts through collaboration with stakeholders. Their leadership is especially evident in articulating school goals within ministry-imposed frameworks and fostering alignment between curriculum implementation and the broader desired outcomes of education (Ng, F. S. D., et al., 2015).

Across these cases, a common pattern emerges: tensions between centralized control and school-level autonomy shape the practice of instructional leadership. Principals in China, Turkey, Iran, and Singapore all operate within highly centralized education systems that prescribe national goals, curricula, and accountability measures. Nevertheless, within these constraints, they seek to adapt and respond to the unique needs of their school communities. While the tension between policy compliance and local responsiveness is shared, each country has developed its own context-specific instructional leadership model, reflecting distinct institutional structures, cultural norms, and political expectations.

In light of these developments, it becomes clear that one more recent conceptual shift in the field of instructional leadership is the move toward context-responsive models. This shift can be understood as a response to the challenges associated with policy borrowing, defined as the practice of adopting educational policies from one national system to improve another (Nir et al., 2018). While policy borrowing offers certain advantages, such as reducing uncertainty, avoiding redundant efforts, and providing a rationale for change, it also carries risks. In particular, borrowed models may clash with local values, institutional structures, and educational traditions, leading to implementation challenges (Ng, F. S. D., et al., 2015; Qian et al., 2017; Samichan et al., 2021).

Technological adaptation

Another recent conceptual development in instructional leadership is the emergence of digital instructional leadership (Berkovich & Hassan, 2024). Also referred to as virtual

instructional leadership (Awang et al., 2022), this concept highlights the intersection between the principal's instructional responsibilities and the increasingly digital environment in which school leadership is enacted (Hassan & Berkovich, 2023; Moulin & Soncin, 2024). It reflects a growing recognition that instructional leadership must adapt to technological shifts that shape teaching, learning, and organizational communication in contemporary schools.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, digital instructional leadership was a relatively underexplored domain, primarily interpreted as 'technological leadership' (McLeod, 2015). Technological leadership encompassed two domains. The first was using technology to enhance principals' efficiency in managing administrative tasks (Sorenson et al., 2016). The second was supporting teachers' use of technologies in their classrooms for teaching management tasks. Shepherd and Taylor (2019, p. 52), who were the first to introduce the term *digital instructional leadership*. They proposed that 'school leaders are to be instructional leaders within a digital environment, just as they are expected to do in the non-digital environment.' Despite these insights,

COVID-19 fundamentally redefined the scope and urgency of digital instructional leadership. The widespread closure of schools and the abrupt shift to remote instruction expanded the principal's role to include active support for teachers, students, and parents in navigating online teaching and learning (Berkovich, 2023; Pollock, 2020). Principals were required to lead virtual schools, ensure instructional continuity, and address emerging pedagogical challenges, while also confronting persistent and newly visible inequities in students' access to quality learning opportunities (Moulin & Soncin, 2024; Nurabadi et al., 2022).

COVID-19 marked a significant turning point in the prominence of digital instructional leadership. Yet two critical questions remain. First, will this change endure? Harris and Jones (2021, pp. 243–245) argued that the pandemic shook 'the very fabric of education' and that 'school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely to return to "normal" anytime soon, if ever at all.' However, in many respects, education systems have reverted to pre-pandemic norms, raising questions about the depth and permanence of this transformation (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Second, does this shift reflect merely an instrumental change, altering the tools and platforms through which instructional leadership is enacted, or does it signal a more fundamental reconceptualization of the instructional leadership paradigm? The key challenge is to determine whether the pandemic has transformed the substance of instructional leadership or simply modified its delivery mechanisms.

More recently, a new chapter is being written about digital instructional leadership in the age of artificial intelligence. As AI opens new avenues for innovation in teaching and learning (Celik et al., 2022), instructional leaders are called upon to guide and shape this transformation. They are uniquely positioned to lead the integration of AI into pedagogical practices in ways that align with the school's instructional vision and goals. At the same time, effective instructional leadership is crucial for mitigating the potential risks associated with AI use in classrooms. This includes ensuring proper supervision, ethical implementation, data privacy protections, and alignment with sound pedagogical principles (Ayyildiz & Yilmaz, 2023).

For principals themselves, AI offers significant support by automating routine, repetitive, and time-consuming tasks, such as scheduling, reporting, and data entry. This

automation allows school leaders to reclaim valuable time and mental energy for more strategic and creative responsibilities (Fullan et al., 2024). These responsibilities include core instructional leadership functions that demand uninterrupted focus, such as curriculum analysis, lesson planning, conferencing with teachers, classroom observation, and designing professional development opportunities (Murphy et al., 2016).

Beyond enhancing administrative efficiency, artificial intelligence (AI) holds significant potential as a strategic enabler of instructional leadership. Principals can leverage AI tools to assist in monitoring student performance, analyzing data, supporting self-directed professional learning among teachers, anticipating instructional outcomes, and developing data-informed leadership plans tailored to the specific needs of their school communities (Bixler & Ceballos, 2025). However, AI remains in its early stages of adoption, and its full impact on instructional leadership is still unfolding.

The rapid pace of AI innovation suggests that it could fundamentally reshape how principals make decisions, support teaching and learning, personalize instruction, and drive continuous school improvement. Yet the same question raised earlier persists: does this shift represent merely a change in the tools of instructional leadership, or does it signal a deeper transformation in the very nature of the practice itself?

Future directions for instructional leadership theory and research

The conceptual shifts identified in recent scholarship – conceptual integration, contextual responsiveness, and technological adaptation – offer a rich foundation for projecting future directions in the field of instructional leadership. These developments signal a broader, more dynamic understanding of how instructional leadership can and must evolve to meet the demands of increasingly complex, diverse, and digitally mediated educational environments. Building on these insights, this chapter outlines several trajectories for advancing both theory and practice in instructional leadership.

The integration of instructional leadership with complementary leadership models has already generated hybrid approaches such as shared instructional leadership (Torres et al., 2020), distributed instructional leadership (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Noman, 2023), and inclusive instructional leadership (Howley et al., 2019; see also Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Looking ahead, one key direction is the continued refinement and empirical validation of these hybrid models. The field must move beyond conceptual alignment toward operational frameworks that offer clear guidance for practice, supported by robust measurement tools and outcome-based research (Boyce & Bowers, 2018b; Zhan et al., 2023).

Further, the concept of ‘instructional leadership plus’ (Neumerski et al., 2025) opens the door to broader reconceptualizations that integrate domains such as wellbeing, resilience, and political acuity into instructional leadership. Future research should explore how these dimensions interact with core instructional functions and how they can be incorporated into leadership preparation, accountability systems, and school improvement frameworks. These integrative efforts can support a shift from narrow task-based understandings to more holistic models that reflect the realities of contemporary school leadership.

One significant implication of conceptual integration is the potential to position equity not as a complementary concern but as a central organizing principle of

instructional leadership. Scholars have called for the infusion of social justice into all leadership functions, including curriculum oversight, instructional supervision, and teacher evaluation (Mugisha, 2013; Shaked, 2025; Theoharis, 2024).

Moving forward, future models should conceptualize instructional leadership as inherently equity-oriented, one that not only improves instruction but also disrupts practices that perpetuate inequality. This entails developing frameworks that guide principals in critically examining how instructional decisions reproduce or mitigate inequities across race, gender, language, and ability. It also requires empirical studies that document how equity-focused instructional leadership is enacted in practice, and under what conditions it leads to transformational outcomes. Ultimately, this direction calls for a normative shift: instructional leadership should not only be about advancing learning but about advancing just learning.

The growing recognition that instructional leadership is context-bound rather than universally applicable (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2018) necessitates a sustained research agenda focused on contextualization. Future work should continue to interrogate how leadership practices are shaped by cultural, policy, and structural variables across different education systems (Pietsch et al., 2025; Walker & Qian, 2022). Comparative and cross-cultural studies can deepen our understanding of how instructional leadership is adapted – or resisted – in diverse national and regional settings.

This also calls for the development of locally grounded frameworks that are co-constructed with practitioners and responsive to community needs (Gümüş et al., 2021; Zeinabadi et al., 2023). By centering context as a design element rather than a backdrop, these models can enhance both the conceptual relevance and practical utility of instructional leadership frameworks.

The digital transformation of education is unlikely to recede, even as the COVID-19 pandemic fades into history. The rise of virtual learning environments, learning analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) presents both opportunities and challenges for instructional leadership. Future directions must include robust frameworks for digital instructional leadership that extend beyond the logistical coordination of online platforms to encompass digital pedagogy, data ethics, and digital equity (Berkovich & Hassan, 2024; Moulin & Soncin, 2024).

With the growing adoption of AI, instructional leaders must also engage with questions of technological governance and instructional integrity. As Fullan et al. (2024) suggest, the automation of administrative tasks through AI can free up time for leaders to engage more deeply in instructional matters. Yet, this efficiency must be matched by ethical and pedagogically sound leadership practices that ensure technology enhances, rather than undermines, teaching and learning. Future research should explore how principals can lead responsible, inclusive, and visionary digital transformation efforts within schools.

As instructional leadership becomes increasingly complex, so too must the systems that prepare and support school leaders. Traditional preparation programs often separate instructional supervision from broader leadership functions, yet future directions demand more integrated approaches. Programs must embed leadership for equity, contextual responsiveness, and digital innovation into their curricula. These areas should not be treated as electives or peripheral content but as core components of effective leadership.

Professional learning should also move beyond episodic workshops toward ongoing, embedded, and adaptive learning models. Leadership development must account for local needs, foster critical reflection, and promote collaborative inquiry among peers. Coaching, peer observation, and data-informed reflection can help leaders translate conceptual frameworks into actionable strategies that are relevant to their specific contexts.

Moreover, future directions for instructional leadership must be supported by coherent policy environments. Policymakers have a critical role to play in legitimizing new models of instructional leadership through standards, accountability structures, and resourcing. Supportive policies can enable principals to exercise professional judgment, engage in continuous learning, and develop distributed leadership structures that are essential for instructional capacity-building.

Policy alignment should also extend to leadership evaluation frameworks, which often emphasize compliance and test-based outcomes. Future frameworks should adopt a more holistic view of instructional leadership, including its relational, contextual, and equity-oriented dimensions. This shift would help ensure that instructional leadership is not only performative but transformative.

Conclusion

Overall, the future of instructional leadership lies in its ability to adapt to changing educational landscapes while remaining anchored in its foundational commitment to improving teaching and learning. By embracing conceptual integration, attending to context, harnessing digital innovation, and embedding equity at its core, instructional leadership can remain a vital and evolving force in the pursuit of educational excellence and social justice. To realize this vision, continued theoretical refinement and systemic alignment are essential. In doing so, scholars and practitioners alike can co-construct a future in which instructional leadership is not only more relevant, but more powerful, than ever before.

Disclosure statement

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