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How staff dynamics can constrain instructional leadership

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership has been widely recognised as a central driver of teaching quality and student achievement. However, its enactment is often constrained by various factors, such as principals' knowledge, limited time, and external context. This qualitative study explores how interpersonal dynamics within the teaching staff may also inhibit principals' efforts to exercise instructional leadership. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 27 elementary school principals across Israel, the analysis identified three recurring patterns that hinder leadership practice. *Non-instructional collegiality* occurs when teachers prioritise personal relationships over professional collaboration, creating a culture in which social harmony displaces instructional dialogue. *Teacher-controlled boundaries* emerge when staff collectively restrict the principal's legitimacy to shape pedagogy, fostering conflict-avoidant norms that protect underperformance. *Coordinated non-cooperation* reflects instances where close teacher networks subtly or overtly resist leadership initiatives, offering surface-level compliance without meaningful engagement. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how school micropolitics complicate the enactment of instructional leadership.

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Introduction

Instructional leadership is an educational leadership approach in which principals are actively and continuously engaged in a wide range of activities aimed at improving teaching and learning for all students (Hallinger, Gümüş, and Bellibaş 2020). From this perspective, principals are expected to prioritise instruction and curriculum, viewing all other responsibilities as secondary (Walker and Qian 2022). Above all, they are required to promote high-quality teaching practices that support student academic success (Bellibaş, Kılınç, and Polatcan 2021).

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated a strong link between instructional leadership and improvements in instructional quality and student outcomes (Hou, Cui, and Zhang 2019; Özdemir et al. 2024), establishing it as a hallmark of effective school leadership (Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett 2018; Cox and Mullen 2023). Principals who exhibit strong instructional leadership have been repeatedly associated with a range of positive outcomes, including higher levels of student achievement, enhanced teacher motivation, and a more supportive school climate (Boyce and Bowers 2018; Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016).

However, the implementation of instructional leadership is not without challenges. The literature identifies a range of inhibitors to instructional leadership. Principals may lack the knowledge base needed to lead instruction effectively, such as understanding which teaching methods work best in specific contexts and how students learn particular subjects (Hallinger and Murphy 2013; Shaked 2023a). Time constraints also limit their engagement in instructional improvement, as their workdays are often fragmented and dominated by unplanned or crisis-oriented demands (Goldring et al. 2015, 2020; Murphy et al. 2016; Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten 2013). In addition, principals' perceptions of their role, priorities, and relationships with teachers can hinder instructional leadership (Shaked 2019). The national context also plays a role. For example, in Turkey, principals act mainly as implementers of centrally mandated goals rather than as facilitators of collaborative instructional improvement (Gümüş et al. 2021); in Israel, norms of equality and low power distance limit top-down leadership (Shaked, Benoliel, and Hallinger 2021); and in China, Confucian values and political expectations foster paternalistic leadership while constraining principals' autonomy (Walker and Qian 2022).

Building on this literature, the present study seeks to identify an additional set of inhibitors to instructional leadership: those arising from the dynamics within the teaching staff. This focus is warranted because principals influence student achievement primarily indirectly, through their impact on teachers' instructional practices, motivation, commitment, and self-efficacy (Bogler and Nir 2025; Ninković and Knežević Florić 2024), all of which may be influenced by the nature of staff relationships. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution by examining how staff dynamics can inhibit instructional leadership. The analysis extends existing research by demonstrating how everyday interactions among teachers may either enable or significantly constrain principals' efforts to improve teaching and learning.

The study was conducted in the Israeli education system, which serves approximately 1.8 million students across nearly 5,000 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education 2025), and is structured into three tiers: elementary school (grades 1–6, ages 6–12), middle school (grades 7–9, ages 12–15), and high school (grades 10–12, ages 14–19). Compulsory education spans from kindergarten to 12th grade (Halevy-Feldman and Setiawan 2020). In this context, principals are officially expected to act as instructional leaders, with a clear mandate to improve teaching and learning for all students (Capstones 2008; Shaked 2021). The Israeli Ministry of Education (2019, 5) highlighted that 'instructional leadership will be the main axis of learning' in principal preparation programmes, ensuring these programmes offer 'up-to-date and applied knowledge in this field, particularly on the connection between improving education, teaching, and learning, student achievements, and the role of the school principal.'

Moreover, the Israeli setting provides a particularly constructive context for examining how staff dynamics shape instructional leadership, as prior research has consistently shown that principal – teacher relationships play an especially influential role in shaping leadership practice. For example, studies describe Israeli schools as operating in environments that minimise hierarchical authority and emphasise collegiality and interpersonal harmony, creating conditions in which staff interactions carry substantial weight in enabling or constraining leadership (Litchka and Shapira-Lishchinsky 2016; Shaked 2023b; Shaked, Benoliel, and Hallinger 2021). These contextual features underscore the importance of understanding how staff dynamics may inhibit Israeli principals'

instructional influence. Drawing on interviews with Israeli principals, this study addresses the following research question: How can dynamics within the teaching staff hinder the implementation of instructional leadership?

Theoretical background

Conceptualisation of instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach in which the principal takes an active role in improving the quality of teaching and learning (Hallinger, Gümüş, and Belibaş 2020). Although principals are often consumed by administrative responsibilities that are not easily delegated, those who adopt an instructional leadership approach understand that their greatest influence stems from enhancing instructional quality and cultivating a school culture focused on learning (Neumerski et al. 2018; Ng 2019). Unlike other leadership frameworks, instructional leadership places a strong and explicit emphasis on the principal's responsibility to prioritise curriculum and instructional improvement as the primary means of enhancing student achievement (Goldring et al. 2015; Murphy et al. 2016).

Over time, scholars have developed several frameworks to conceptualise instructional leadership (DiPaola and Wagner 2018; Stronge and Xu 2021; Walker and Qian 2022), many of which share core elements (Shaked 2023a, 2023c). The most widely cited model, proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), outlines instructional leadership through three primary dimensions, each composed of specific functions: (1) Defining the school mission – establishing clear academic goals and communicating them effectively to the school community; (2) Managing the instructional programme – including curriculum coordination, supervision and evaluation of teaching, and monitoring student learning; (3) Developing a positive school learning climate – fostering a culture of continuous improvement and maintaining high expectations for both teachers and students.

The literature identifies a range of inhibitors to instructional leadership, including those related to the principal's knowledge (Hallinger and Murphy 2013; Shaked 2023a), time constraints (Goldring et al. 2015, 2020; Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten 2013), and perceptions (Shaked 2019), as well as those stemming from the national context (Gümüş et al. 2021; Walker and Qian 2022) or regional context (Shaked 2021). The present study focuses on a further source of inhibition: interpersonal and relational dynamics within the teaching staff.

These dynamics warrant close attention because principals influence student achievement primarily indirectly, through their impact on teachers' instructional practices, motivation, commitment, and self-efficacy (Bendikson, Robinson, and Hattie 2012; Bogler and Nir 2025; Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford 2010; Ninković and Knežević Florić 2024). By setting clear expectations, providing targeted professional development, monitoring instruction, and fostering a collaborative culture, principals shape the quality of teaching, which in turn enhances student learning (Hendriks and Scheerens 2013). Consequently, the nature of relationships among the teaching personnel is a pivotal factor in the effective application of instructional leadership. These relationships

influence how teachers interpret and respond to the principal's actions, ultimately determining whether leadership initiatives are embraced, adapted to local needs, or resisted.

Instructional leadership and staff dynamics

The body of research on staff dynamics and instructional leadership is limited and imbalanced. Most existing work examines the causal direction opposite to our research question, namely, it investigates how principals' instructional leadership shapes staff relations, typically by fostering cooperation among teachers to improve instruction. For example, studies associate instructional leadership with the development of professional learning communities (Liu et al. 2025), the cultivation of trust among staff (Şenol and Lesinger 2018), and increased teacher collaboration (Goddard et al. 2015). By contrast, far fewer studies investigate our focal direction, namely, how staff dynamics condition principals' ability to enact instructional leadership in practice.

Where the influence of staff dynamics on instructional leadership has been examined, the emphasis has been on facilitating conditions. Research indicates that teacher collegiality amplifies the effects of instructional leadership. Chen and Rong (2023) showed that collegiality moderates the relationship between principals' instructional leadership and teachers' self-efficacy, with benefits emerging primarily when collegiality is high. Similarly, Quines and Monteza (2023) reported a full mediation of the relationship between instructional leadership and teachers' professional development through collegiality. On the other hand, dynamics within teaching teams that constrain principals' instructional leadership, which can be described as manifestations of toxic culture (Mette 2020), have rarely been studied.

As can be seen, the existing literature does not comprehensively address how the dynamics within the instructional team influence instructional leadership. Outside the instructional leadership literature, several researchers have examined how micropolitics, defined as the internal perceptions and strategies individuals or groups use to gain or maintain advantage within school settings (Lindle 2020), influences the enactment of school leadership. Or and Berkovich (2023) demonstrated that micropolitics shapes the practice of distributed leadership. Walls (2023) explored how caring leadership gives rise to micropolitical contests in schools, which in turn hinder its enactment. Micropolitics can also obstruct social justice leadership by acting as a barrier to equity-oriented practices (Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb 2015). Collectively, these studies highlight that micropolitics can complicate school leadership as teachers engage in power negotiations, alliances, and resistance that frame leaders' capacity to implement change. Leadership is never enacted in isolation but is continually mediated by the informal politics of staff relationships, which can both enable and limit principals' influence. Yet, while these studies illuminate how micropolitical processes shape broader forms of school leadership, they rarely address instructional leadership specifically. As a result, the role of staff dynamics in conditioning principals' instructional work remains underexplored.

To narrow this gap in the available knowledge, the present study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how staff dynamics can inhibit the enactment of instructional leadership. To this end, this qualitative study examines principals' perceptions of specific patterns of interaction within a school's teaching team that may hinder its practical application.

Method

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method designed to identify ‘information-rich’ cases and considered particularly effective in qualitative research (van Rijnsoever 2017). To generate the sample, the researcher contacted nine superintendents from all six Israeli school districts, explained the concept of high visibility, and requested recommendations of principals recognised for excellence in this area. Each superintendent nominated one to four principals, producing 31 candidates. After four declined, the final sample comprised 27 principals.

To ensure ethical standards, all principals were informed that their decisions regarding participation would not be disclosed to the recommending superintendents and that pseudonyms would be employed in all reporting to ensure confidentiality. Each signed a written consent form after receiving an explanation of the study’s objectives and procedures.

The study focused exclusively on elementary schools, as combining elementary and secondary settings was deemed inappropriate given the substantial differences between them. These differences are well documented: elementary schools are smaller and typically staffed by generalist teachers, allowing principals to be more directly involved in classrooms and to influence instruction through schoolwide pedagogical practices. In contrast, secondary schools are larger and departmentalised, with subject-specialist teachers and stronger external accountability demands, which require principals to lead instruction more indirectly through middle leaders and to coordinate improvement across multiple subject areas (Zhong, Zheng, and Li 2024). While secondary schools were not included in the present research, their inclusion is planned for future studies.

The participating principals included 19 women and eight men, with an average age of 50 (range 37–59) and an average of six years of experience as principals (range 1–12 years). All participants, with the exception of one, possessed a master’s degree. [Table 1](#) below summarises participants’ demographics and school characteristics.

Data collection

The interviews explored principals’ perceptions of teaching staff dynamics that may hinder their efforts to exercise instructional leadership. A semi-structured format was used, allowing the researcher to adjust pre-prepared questions and pursue new lines of inquiry as they emerged during the conversations (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Data were collected through Zoom-based interviews. Although online interviews limit the ability to fully capture nonverbal cues such as body language, they offer important advantages, including greater flexibility in scheduling, accessibility across geographical locations, and the ability to create a comfortable environment for participants.

The interviews included guiding questions such as: How do teachers’ relationships with one another influence your capacity to lead instruction? Can you describe a situation in which staff dynamics affected your decision-making? What strategies do you use to manage situations in which staff collegiality or resistance constrains instructional change? Looking back, how has your approach to working with staff dynamics evolved over time? All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for analysis.

Table 1. Participants' demographics, school characteristics, and categories mentioned.

	Participants' Demographics				School Characteristics			Findings' Categories		
	Pseudonym	Sex	Age in years	Years of Experience	Education	District	No. of Students	Non-Instructional Collegiality	Teacher-Controlled Boundaries	Coordinated Non-Cooperation
1	Adam	Male	56	7	MA	Jerusalem	400	✓		
2	Adina	Female	52	3	MA	South	400		✓	
3	Alina	Female	39	6	MA	North	300		✓	
4	Benny	Male	49	11	MA	Jerusalem	400			✓
5	Clara	Female	56	9	BA	Tel Aviv	150			
6	Dalia	Female	56	5	MA	Jerusalem	450	✓		
7	Dana	Female	49	7	MA	South	350	✓		
8	Danny	Male	50	11	MA	Haifa	250			
9	Edith	Female	56	7	MA	Haifa	300			✓
10	Eli	Male	55	12	MA	Tel Aviv	250			✓
11	Ella	Female	37	6	MA	Jerusalem	200			✓
12	Elon	Male	56	8	MA	Haifa	250	✓		
13	Joel	Male	51	4	MA	Jerusalem	350		✓	
14	Judith	Female	44	8	MA	Centre	350			✓
15	Kareem	Female	44	6	MA	Jerusalem	150			
16	Leah	Female	46	5	MA	Haifa	500	✓		
17	Lia	Female	38	4	MA	Haifa	250			
18	Maya	Female	48	1	MA	Jerusalem	150		✓	
19	Naomi	Female	52	9	MA	North	300		✓	
20	Noa	Female	54	12	MA	North	250		✓	
21	Oren	Male	39	2	MA	Tel Aviv	350		✓	
22	Rachel	Female	48	3	MA	Haifa	450		✓	
23	Rebecca	Female	49	2	MA	Centre	300			
24	Rina	Female	55	4	MA	Centre	250	✓		
25	Roy	Male	59	8	MA	Tel Aviv	300			✓
26	Sarah	Female	49	3	MA	Jerusalem	450			✓
27	Talia	Female	51	8	MA	Tel Aviv	200	✓		
	Participants per category							7	8	6

Each session lasted approximately one hour. In two cases, participants were invited to brief follow-up conversations of about 15 min to clarify points that arose during transcript analysis.

Data analysis

The data analysis unfolded in three main stages: sorting, coding, and categorising. In the first stage, sorting, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts to identify statements relevant to principals' perceptions of the purposes of high visibility. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) note, this step is not purely mechanical but already involves analytic judgment, since the researcher's decisions about what to highlight and retain shape the trajectory of the analysis.

The second stage, coding, involved assigning 'essence-capturing' words or short phrases to the selected statements in order to encapsulate 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 potential themes to emerge directly from the material (Saldaña 2021). To ensure reliability, a master code list was gradually developed and then systematically applied throughout the dataset.

In the final stage, categorisation, the researcher clustered together statements that shared similar codes. This stage began with a comprehensive review of the codes to verify their accuracy, followed by grouping them into clusters that reflected recurring patterns, concepts, or ideas. These clusters were synthesised into broader thematic categories that conveyed the underlying meanings in the data. The process was iterative: categories were refined, reorganised, and re-examined several times, echoing Abbott's (2004, 215) metaphor of 'decorating a room,' arranging, stepping back, moving things again, and sometimes attempting a full reorganisation.

Through this iterative process, three categories of teaching staff dynamics were identified as barriers to principals' instructional leadership. These categories are presented in the findings chapter, with Table 1 displaying participant demographics, school information, and the categories each principal mentioned.

Findings

The present study examines how certain dynamics within the teaching staff can hinder instructional leadership. Analysis of interview data revealed three such dynamics: non-instructional collegiality, when personal relationships among teachers take precedence over instructional collaboration; teacher-controlled boundaries, when teachers collectively limit the principal's legitimacy to influence teaching and learning; and coordinated non-cooperation, when peer loyalty enables collective resistance to instructional improvement. These dynamics are discussed in the following sections, each supported by quotes from study participants.

Non-instructional collegiality

Interview responses indicated that one dynamic within the teaching staff that can impede instructional leadership arises when teachers view their connection primarily as personal

closeness rather than instructional collaboration. In such a dynamic, they see each other as good friends, showing mutual respect and willingness to help, but not as partners in improving instructional effectiveness.

Rebecca offered a cynical reflection on a school culture where teachers are more connected through personal enjoyment than through a shared commitment to student learning:

My teachers see the school as a great workplace. They have wonderful colleagues they enjoy talking to, celebrating with, and even going on vacations together. Their only problem here is that they have to teach the students.

Her observation suggests that while strong personal bonds can foster a pleasant work environment, they may also divert focus from the school's core mission, creating a culture in which social cohesion takes precedence over collective responsibility for student learning and instructional improvement.

Elon pointed out that routine practices within schools can embody a cultural preference for collegial harmony at the expense of instructional rigor. He explained:

In the school where I worked as a teacher, there was a wide range of instructional routines. Every week, you had to submit an instructional plan. Twice a semester, you had to submit an academic progress report, and so on. But in the school where I became a principal, the routines are mainly social. Every week there's a break where teachers eat together, every teacher's birthday is celebrated with cake in the staffroom, and so on. Now I'm trying to change that and build more routines that focus on teaching and learning.

For Elon, routines are not merely operational; they reflect and shape the school's priorities. His effort to '*build more routines that focus on teaching and learning*' underscores the challenge of shifting a school culture that values personal relationships over shared instructional accountability.

Leah explained that, at times, non-instructional collegiality leaves little room for instructional collegiality. She expressed concern that, in her school, teaching is largely absent from the informal professional dialogue among staff:

I know that teachers need their free time to breathe and rest, and I don't expect them to think about teaching all the time. However, I would like to occasionally see teachers using their free time to talk about how to improve their teaching. They could consult with each other on how to teach a new topic, how to handle a class misunderstanding, or how to support a struggling student. But I never see them talking about teaching during their breaks.

From Leah's perspective, the prominence of non-instructional collegiality does not allow space for teachers to seek instructional advice or exchange pedagogical ideas with one another. As a result, the staff misses valuable opportunities for informal collaboration and ongoing professional learning.

Teacher-controlled boundaries

Qualitative data revealed a further dynamic within the teaching staff that can constrain instructional leadership. This occurs when teachers draw boundaries around the principal's legitimacy to lead improvements in teaching and learning.

Naomi described a teaching staff that shared a collectively reinforced belief that teaching belongs to teachers alone. While they collaborated with one another, they viewed her involvement in pedagogy as unnecessary interference.

If I suggest a different method to the teachers, the answer is, ‘That’s how we do it,’ implicitly meaning, ‘We know what we’re doing, and we don’t need you to guide us.’ I feel that the close connections among them give them the confidence to take this stance.

The teachers’ shared perspective, which discouraged openness to new instructional approaches, made it challenging for Naomi to introduce changes aimed at improving teaching and learning.

In Joel’s school, teachers sent a subtle message that criticising their instructional work could lead to tension. As a result, middle leaders prioritised interpersonal harmony over pedagogical progress. In an effort to avoid conflict, they refrained from addressing instructional shortcomings or initiating changes, even when such actions could improve student learning:

There was a teacher on staff who wasn’t really pulling her weight instructionally. I spoke with the subject coordinator about how we might support her, but she seemed hesitant. I got the sense that maintaining a comfortable atmosphere was more important to them than addressing the issue directly.

In this case, the middle leader stalled efforts to improve instruction not out of a lack of awareness, but from a reluctance to disrupt the team’s social balance. The teachers had succeeded in creating a conflict-avoidant culture in which underperformance could persist unchallenged, thereby constraining instructional leadership.

Rachel recounted a similar experience with several members of her school’s management team when introducing a new instructional framework aimed at raising expectations across the school:

When I discussed the new instructional improvement plan with the management team, several team members expressed concern about how the staff would react. One of them said, ‘We don’t want to stir things up too much.’ It was clear they were more focused on keeping the staff comfortable than on moving the plan forward.

The management team’s response, as reported by Rachel, reflected a surrender to the teachers’ implicit threat that demanding instructional change could create an unpleasant atmosphere. The drive to implement the plan weakened not due to disagreement, but because of an unwillingness to ‘stir things up.’

Coordinated non-cooperation

Testimonies from principals pointed to yet another dynamic within the teaching staff that can inhibit instructional leadership. This pattern develops when teachers are closely aligned with one another but are not aligned with the principal. Under these circumstances, strong interpersonal bonds among staff may serve as a mechanism for collective self-protection and, at times, indirect or direct resistance to leadership direction.

Sarah described how several teachers cover for one another:

I carefully protect instructional time, so I take teacher tardiness seriously. But these three teachers work together at the same grade level and their classrooms are next to each other. When one of them is late, the others cover for them so it goes unnoticed. On the surface, it seems like they’re taking care to prevent disruption to the school routine, but I believe their main goal is to make sure the teacher doesn’t get caught.

Sarah's intention was not to catch or punish late teachers, but to ensure that instructional time was used as effectively as possible. While she did not expect teachers to report on one another, she also did not want them to conceal behaviours that could compromise the quality of teaching and learning.

Roy recounted how a group of teachers resisted a new instructional policy through quiet, coordinated avoidance:

I introduced a new system for lesson documentation that was meant to support reflective practice. I noticed that a small group of teachers, who are very close and often act as a bloc, didn't fully follow through. It wasn't confrontational; they did just enough to appear compliant, without really engaging. It was clear they had agreed among themselves not to fully commit to the change.

Roy's experience illustrates how strong interpersonal loyalty among staff can lead to passive forms of resistance. In such cases, teachers may maintain surface-level compliance while avoiding meaningful engagement, thereby weakening the principal's ability to implement instructional improvements.

Benny described a rebellion by the teaching staff that was strongly reinforced by the close-knit nature of the group. The teachers had worked together for many years and were accustomed to frequent principal turnover, which led them to feel empowered to evaluate and oppose new leadership. Benny recalled:

I wanted to implement an educational plan that offered students much broader choice in what to learn. Three teachers came to me and said that the staff believed I was not suitable to lead learning at the school and that they expected me to leave.

Benny's account reveals that strong peer bonds among teachers can block instructional improvement and serve to protect the status quo. Moreover, such dynamics can undermine leadership legitimacy, giving teachers a sense of collective power that enables them to challenge the principal's authority. The teachers' experience with repeated principal turnover likely contributed to their perception of the principal as temporary or interchangeable, further weakening his ability to lead meaningful instructional change.

Discussion

The present study explores how dynamics within teaching staff can hinder the exercise of instructional leadership. Analysis of interview data highlighted three main patterns that constrain principals' efforts: non-instructional collegiality, teacher-controlled boundaries, and coordinated non-cooperation. Non-instructional collegiality occurs when collegiality is defined primarily by personal closeness rather than professional collaboration, leading teachers to prioritise social harmony over instructional progress; while such bonds create a pleasant environment, they also displace professional dialogue about teaching and reduce opportunities for ongoing instructional learning. Teacher-controlled boundaries emerge when teachers collectively reinforce the idea that pedagogy is their exclusive domain, thereby discouraging receptiveness to new instructional approaches and fostering a conflict-avoidant culture in which leaders hesitate to challenge underperformance. Coordinated non-cooperation reflects the tendency of close teacher networks to act as blocs that subtly or openly resist principals' initiatives,

offering surface-level compliance without meaningful engagement, undermining leadership legitimacy, and ultimately blocking instructional improvement.

Previous research identifies several inhibitors of instructional leadership, including insufficient pedagogical knowledge (Hallinger and Murphy 2013), limited time (Goldring et al. 2015, 2020), principals' role perceptions (Shaked 2019a), and broader national and cultural contexts (Gümüş et al. 2021; Walker and Qian 2022). The findings of this study add a new dimension to this literature by pointing to inhibitors that stem not from principals themselves or external constraints, but from the dynamics within the teaching staff. Moreover, previous research has shown that principals' instructional leadership fosters cooperation among teachers, contributing to the development of professional learning communities (Liu et al. 2025), cultivating trust among staff (Şenol and Lesinger 2018), and directly promoting teacher collaboration (Goddard et al. 2015). By contrast, the present study highlights the ways in which collegial dynamics may act not as facilitators but as inhibitors of instructional leadership.

Importantly, previous research outside the instructional leadership literature shows that micropolitics complicates the enactment of school leadership, as principals' efforts are mediated by informal staff politics (Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb 2015; Or and Berkovich 2023; Walls 2023). Building on this knowledge, the present study extends the lens of micropolitics into the instructional leadership domain, illustrating how everyday staff dynamics can hinder principals' instructional influence. The analysis reveals micropolitical patterns that operate less through overt opposition and more through power negotiations, alliances, and subtle forms of resistance that constrain principals' capacity to foster instructional improvement. Accordingly, this study demonstrates that instructional leadership is mediated by the micropolitics of staff relationships, which can enable but also significantly limit principals' efforts to advance teaching and learning.

The three dynamics identified in this study – non-instructional collegiality, teacher-controlled boundaries, and coordinated non-cooperation – can be understood as micropolitical manifestations of informal teacher power that interact with, and at times counterbalance, the principal's formal authority. While principals possess structural authority to set instructional priorities, observe teaching, and guide professional learning, these powers are continually mediated by the micropolitics of collective norms and staff practices. *Non-instructional collegiality* represents a softer form of power, in which teachers prioritise social harmony over instructional dialogue, thereby diluting the principal's influence. *Teacher-controlled boundaries* reflect a more assertive stance, as staff collectively restrict the principal's legitimacy to shape pedagogy, effectively redefining the scope of authority in practice. *Coordinated non-cooperation* constitutes the most overt use of informal power, with teachers organising to resist or neutralise leadership initiatives, undermining the principal's capacity to drive instructional improvement.

Therefore, the three dynamics identified in this study can be seen as forming a micropolitical continuum of resistance to instructional leadership, ranging from the least to the most confrontational. At one end, non-instructional collegiality reflects a preference for social harmony over professional collaboration, resulting in passive neglect of instructional dialogue without directly challenging leadership. In the middle, teacher-controlled boundaries illustrate a stronger stance, as teachers collectively limit the principal's legitimacy to shape pedagogy, thereby constraining authority and reinforcing staff autonomy. At the other end, coordinated non-cooperation represents the most explicit form of

resistance, where close teacher networks organise to oppose leadership initiatives, ranging from surface-level compliance to active resistance. [Figure 1](#) illustrates this micropolitical continuum, showing how staff dynamics can escalate from marginalisation of instructional dialogue to overt opposition that undermines instructional leadership.

The findings of this study suggest important implications for leadership practice and policy. For principals, they highlight the need to navigate the micropolitics of staff relationships by intentionally shaping collegial cultures that balance social harmony with sustained professional dialogue, ensuring that collaboration supports, rather than substitutes for, instructional improvement. This requires principals to establish clear expectations for pedagogical conversations in grade-level and staff meetings, introduce routines that keep teaching and learning at the centre, and actively model inquiry-oriented professional discourse.

Principal preparation programmes should equip aspiring leaders with specific skills for identifying, interpreting, and redirecting micropolitical dynamics, including strategies for addressing resistance, managing conflict-avoidant cultures, and strengthening their instructional legitimacy. Mentoring programmes for novice principals can offer individualised guidance in addressing early challenges related to authority, collegiality, and informal teacher influence. For in-service principals, professional development should include training on facilitating difficult conversations, building teacher accountability through supportive structures, and mobilising staff toward shared instructional goals even when social cohesion exerts pressure to avoid discomfort.

At the policy level, leadership frameworks and evaluation standards should explicitly acknowledge that staff culture and micropolitical processes can either enable or constrain instructional leadership. Ministries and districts can support principals by providing tools for diagnosing staff dynamics, offering access to coaching in the social-political dimensions of leadership, and allocating time and resources for developing instructional leadership teams that help distribute influence and reduce relational bottlenecks. Such system-level supports can help principals address the micropolitical barriers identified in this study and strengthen the conditions required for sustained instructional improvement.

The scarce knowledge about teaching micropolitical dynamics within teaching staff that hinder instructional leadership underscores the need for this study, yet several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings rely on principals' accounts of staff dynamics without direct observation; incorporating observations in future research could provide a more accurate picture of leadership practices. Similarly, interviewing teachers themselves would enrich the analysis by adding their perspectives. Second, the study was conducted within the Israeli school system. This offers an opportunity to interpret the findings more deeply by considering how they may be shaped by the particular

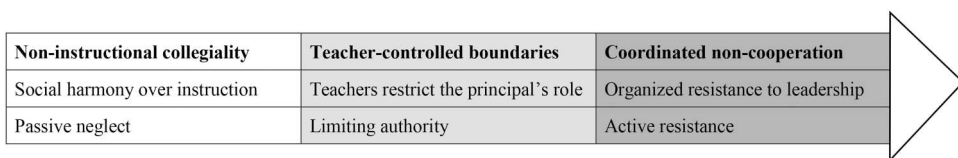


Figure 1. A micropolitical continuum of teaching staff dynamics that inhibit instructional leadership.

cultural, organisational, and relational features of the Israeli educational context. At the same time, comparative research across diverse socio-cultural settings could help determine the extent to which these dynamics are unique to Israel or reflect broader patterns, thereby supporting or refining the generalizability of the study's conclusions. Third, although the study identified three dynamics that act as inhibitors, the sample size was not sufficient to assess the frequency of each dynamic and the correlations between principals' characteristics, school characteristics, and staff dynamics. Future research with larger samples could examine the prevalence and relative weight of these dynamics more systematically.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on how everyday staff dynamics shape, and at times constrain, principals' efforts to enact instructional leadership. Through an analysis of Israeli elementary school principals' accounts, three recurrent patterns emerged: non-instructional collegiality, which elevates social harmony above pedagogical dialogue; teacher-controlled boundaries, which limit the principal's legitimacy to guide instructional practice; and coordinated non-cooperation, in which tightly connected teacher groups resist or neutralise leadership initiatives. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how informal teacher power and micropolitical processes form a continuum of resistance that can dilute, restrict, or directly challenge principals' instructional influence. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study extends existing scholarship on instructional leadership and micropolitics, demonstrating that leadership is not enacted solely through formal authority or technical expertise, but is continually negotiated through relational patterns within the staff. These insights highlight the need for leadership development and policy approaches that explicitly address the social-political conditions of schools alongside their instructional goals.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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