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How school principals manage teaching to support equity in learning: re-thinking instructional leadership with a social justice lens

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ABSTRACT

Principals are increasingly expected to serve not only as instructional leaders but also as social justice leaders. This study examines the intersection of these two critical leadership roles by investigating how principals promote equity in student learning through the management of teaching practices within their schools. The participants in this qualitative study were 21 elementary school principals in Israel. Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and analysed using a structured three-stage process: sorting, coding and categorising. The analysis revealed that principals promoted equity in learning opportunities by managing teaching across four key domains: classroom practices; curriculum content; teaching resources; and instructional structures. Taken together, the findings suggest a conceptual model that illustrates how principals advance equity by strategically managing teaching practices within their schools.

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Introduction

Principals worldwide are increasingly expected to serve as instructional leaders, a role focused on shaping teaching and learning practices at both the classroom and school levels to raise student achievement (Hallinger et al., 2020). Instructional leadership requires principals to engage actively in a range of carefully planned activities aimed at refining the curriculum, monitoring classroom activities and promoting effective teaching practices (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2005). Although principals are often occupied with a multitude of administrative duties, those who embrace an instructional leadership approach recognise that their most influential role lies in prioritising teaching and learning (Neumerski et al., 2018; Ng Foo Seong, 2019). Accordingly, they commit themselves to enhancing teaching quality and cultivating a learning-oriented school culture that supports student academic performance (Walker & Qian, 2022).

Concurrently, today's principals are increasingly viewed as social justice leaders, responsible for fostering equity and inclusivity within their schools through

purposeful leadership practices (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gümüş et al., 2021). Persistent achievement gaps – disproportionately affecting minoritised students – remain a pressing challenge across many education systems (Chmielewski, 2019; Hutchings, 2021). Moreover, theory, research and practice ‘make a strong case for why culture and diversity should be central conceptual and methodological themes in educating students’ (Gay, 2018, p. xxix). In response, principals are expected to critically examine and address the ways in which factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status and ability shape the learning environment and influence student outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2024; Wang, 2018).

Given the detrimental effects of fragmented school leadership, marked by a lack of cohesion and coordination (Reid, 2021), it is essential to explore the intersection of the aforementioned critical leadership roles: instructional leadership and social justice leadership. Building on previous studies that have begun to explore this intersection (Gümüş et al., 2022; McKenzie et al., 2006; Rigby, 2014; Shaked, 2023a, 2024, 2025), this study focuses more specifically on school leaders’ practices regarding the management of teaching, an essential aspect of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), and their relation to promoting equitable learning experiences. In particular, the study seeks an answer to the following research question: How do school principals promote equity in student learning through the management of teaching practices in their schools?

The rationale for this study lies in the need to understand how principals integrate equity concerns into their instructional leadership, particularly regarding their practices of managing teaching. Many educational inequities stem from how teaching and learning are structured and resourced, making the management of teaching a critical site for advancing social justice. While research has established the importance of both instructional leadership and social justice leadership, little is known about how these roles converge in principals’ day-to-day practices. Addressing this gap, the study conceptualises instructional leadership as both a technical practice and an equity-driven endeavour, and identifies strategies that can simultaneously enhance teaching quality and ensure fairness in learning opportunities.

Theoretical background

Empowering instructional leadership with a social justice perspective

Instructional leadership is commonly defined as an approach in which principals take an active and sustained role in activities aimed at improving teaching and learning for all students (Hallinger et al., 2020). Within this approach, principals are expected to place instruction and curriculum at the core of their work, treating other responsibilities as secondary (Walker & Qian, 2022). The most influential framework, developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), conceptualises instructional leadership across three interrelated domains: (1) defining the school mission by establishing clear academic goals and communicating them to the school community; (2) managing the instructional programme through curriculum coordination, supervision and evaluation of teaching, as well as monitoring

student learning; and (3) cultivating a positive learning climate by promoting continuous improvement and maintaining high expectations for both teachers and students.

Throughout its decades of development, the concept of instructional leadership has steadily gained prominence as a focus of educational research (Hallinger et al., 2020; Shaked, 2023b). Given its documented influence on student outcomes, principals around the world are now expected to exhibit strong instructional leadership as a central aspect of their role, shaping teaching and learning to enhance academic achievement (Bellibaş et al., 2021, Boyce & Bowers, 2018, Özdemir et al., 2024, 2024; Tan et al., 2024). However, despite the extensive literature on instructional leadership, relatively limited attention has been devoted to its equity dimension.

Over the past decade, some strands of the literature have begun to bridge instructional leadership with equity-focused frameworks. Rigby (2014) proposed social justice as a distinct logic of instructional leadership, which centres on addressing the experiences and outcomes of marginalised students and challenging the structural inequities embedded in ostensibly neutral systems. Principals operating within this logic are expected to establish inclusive structures, support teachers' development of equity-oriented practices, and hold staff accountable for promoting fairness through instruction. This approach seeks to raise achievement for all students, cultivate critical citizenship and foster inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms.

Other scholars, although not always explicitly using the term 'social justice', similarly emphasise equity and inclusion as core elements of effective instructional leadership. For example, Howley et al. (2019) relied on the approach of inclusive education, which seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, languages or other characteristics, learn together in the same schools and classrooms, to advance the idea of inclusive instructional leadership. Other researchers have drawn on the concept of culturally responsive leadership, an approach in which principals actively recognise, value, and integrate the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences and identities of students, families and staff, to develop the framework of culturally responsive instructional leadership (Hartung & Reimer, 2019; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Webb-Johnson, 2006). This social justice oriented instructional leadership can be understood as a set of intentional, collaborative and creative leadership actions designed to improve the academic engagement and success of students from minoritised communities, including encouraging teachers to build on students' cultural strengths, integrating cultural perspectives into pedagogy, providing targeted professional development, and involving the broader community in students' education (Mugisha, 2013).

More recently, scholarship on instructional leadership has more directly focused on its integration with social justice leadership, emphasising that such integration is both possible and necessary (Shaked, 2023a, 2024, 2025). Building on these initial explorations, the present study focuses specifically on one of the core elements of instructional leadership – the principal's responsibility for managing teaching within the school – to examine how this dimension can be leveraged to promote equity. To set the stage for this exploration, the next section discusses the equity dimension of teaching.

Instilling equity through teaching

A well-established argument in the literature is that instructional leadership primarily influences student learning and results through its impact on teaching and teachers (Goddard et al., 2019; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2020). Research consistently demonstrates that the effectiveness of instruction is the most influential school-related factor affecting student outcomes, surpassing other elements such as curriculum design or student grouping (Burroughs et al., 2019; Gershenson, 2016). Such an effect is not limited to the overall achievement level of the school but also holds true for closing the achievement gaps among different student groups through equitable teaching practices (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Wah & Nasri, 2019).

Equitable teaching practices begin with teachers' awareness of how their expectations, interactions and instructional choices impact students. It is grounded in the belief that all students are capable of academic excellence. To consistently convey this message, teachers must maintain high expectations for every student while offering differentiated support to help each one reach those expectations (Sarra et al., 2020). Ensuring equitable participation is another essential component. In many classrooms, a small number of students dominate discussions while others, often those from marginalised backgrounds, remain silent or overlooked (Mack, 2012). To address this imbalance, teachers can employ intentional strategies such as random calling, small group discussions and structured turn-taking to ensure that all voices are heard. These practices empower students who might otherwise be excluded and contribute to a more inclusive and participatory classroom environment (Aguillon et al., 2020; Dallimore et al., 2004).

One of the most foundational strategies for instilling equity in teaching is differentiated instruction (Pham, 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Rather than teaching all students the same way at the same pace, differentiated instruction involves modifying what is taught (content), how it is taught (process) and how students demonstrate what they have learned (product), based on students' varying readiness levels, interests and learning profiles (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). The goal is to help every student access meaningful learning and achieve academic growth by providing different paths to understanding and success (Goddard et al., 2019).

Another foundational strategy for instilling equity in instruction is culturally responsive teaching, which involves using pedagogy that 'resonates with students' lived experiences, values, and cultural knowledge, practices, and identities' (Jensen, 2021, p. 145). This approach emphasises the importance of affirming students' cultural backgrounds as a means to enhance engagement, relevance and academic success (Gay, 2018; Wah & Nasri, 2019). Teachers can create a more equitable classroom by integrating students' cultural backgrounds, languages and experiences into the curriculum and daily interactions (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). Using diverse instructional materials, such as literature, historical examples and scientific contributions from a wide range of cultures, ensures that students see themselves reflected in what they learn (Tanase, 2022). It also broadens all students' perspectives, challenging dominant narratives and fostering a richer understanding of the world (Ebersole et al., 2016).

Instilling equity through the management of teaching

The preceding discussion on how teaching can promote equity highlights key strategies that teachers can use to implement equitable instruction, such as maintaining high expectations, ensuring inclusive participation, practising culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiating instruction (Sarra et al., 2020; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). However, considerably less attention has been given to the role of the principal in promoting equity through the management of teaching. Nevertheless, the literature does offer insights into how certain aspects of a principal's instructional leadership can contribute to advancing equity in teaching.

For example, principals are expected to limit ability grouping, which is the practice of organising students into instructional groups based on perceived skill levels or academic performance (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). While often intended to tailor instruction to student needs, research has shown that ability grouping can reinforce social inequalities by disproportionately placing marginalised students in lower groups, thereby restricting their access to rigorous content and high expectations. Instead, principals should promote heterogeneous grouping and cultivate a school culture that prioritises equity, inclusion and the belief in all students' potential over systems of academic sorting (Blanco-Varela et al., 2024).

In addition, principals can advance equity by ensuring that the curriculum reflects diverse cultures, perspectives and histories (Gümüş et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2025; Wolf, 2018). Through the careful review and selection of instructional materials that represent all student groups, they contribute to a more inclusive and affirming learning environment (Miller et al., 2022). In doing so, school leaders not only enhance student engagement and a sense of belonging but also challenge dominant narratives and cultivate critical thinking across the student body (Garrett, 2021).

Principals also have a responsibility to promote social justice through equitable allocation of resources within their schools (Gümüş et al., 2026; Wolf, 2018). This includes distributing teaching staff, instructional time and learning materials in ways that address student needs rather than reinforce existing disparities. By intentionally directing greater support to students and classrooms facing the greatest challenges, principals can help ensure that every learner has a fair opportunity to succeed (Rigby & Tredway, 2015).

While the literature sheds light on specific ways principals can help advance equity in teaching, it does not offer a comprehensive understanding of how they lead for equity through the management of teaching. This gap highlights the need to explore how principals, in their role as instructional leaders, ground the management of teaching in equity-oriented values. This study seeks to address this need by examining how principals integrate social justice principles into their instructional leadership, thereby implementing equitable, inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to managing teaching that support the academic success of all learners.

Method

Research context

This study was conducted within the Israeli school system, which serves approximately two million students across 5500 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2025). Compulsory education in Israel spans from kindergarten through grade 12 (Halevy-Feldman & Setiawan, 2020).

Israeli educational policy places a strong emphasis on instructional leadership, identifying it as the central focus of principal preparation programmes (Capstones - The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2008; Shaked, H., 2023a, 2023b). According to the Israeli Ministry of Education (2019, p. 5), these programmes are designed to equip principals with ‘up-to-date and applied knowledge’, particularly regarding the links among leadership, teaching, learning and student achievement. Research from Israel indicates that principals largely adopt an instructional leadership perspective (Author1, 2023b). However, as in other countries, they face challenges that mirror those associated with instructional leadership worldwide (Shaked, 2019). In addition, local studies have identified specific inhibitors that constrain principals’ ability to fully enact instructional leadership in the Israeli context (Shaked et al., 2021, 202).

At the same time, the need for socially just leadership in Israel’s education system is underscored by its structural division into separate Jewish and Arab sectors. Despite geographic proximity, the population remains socially and educationally segregated (Feniger et al., 2021). These two systems operate largely independently, with each serving a mostly homogenous student body, and school leaders typically sharing the same ethnic and linguistic background as their students (Berkovich et al., 2025; Resh & Blass, 2019). This separation reinforces systemic inequalities, contributing to Israel’s high level of educational disparity, particularly between Jewish and Arab students, as reflected in PISA 2018 results (OECD, 2019). Although this bifurcated structure has drawn growing concern (Berkovich, 2021; Frei-Landau & Avidov-Ungar, 2022), it remains distant from the everyday work of principals, who usually lead within relatively homogenous communities.

Educational inequalities in Israel also stem from significant socioeconomic disparities, which are often visible within schools themselves (Dadon-Golan et al., 2019). These internal divides – both regional and within individual schools – pose daily challenges for principals, even in schools that appear demographically uniform (Shaked, 2021). Addressing such inequalities offers an important opportunity for enacting social justice leadership at the school level. Thus, the present study focused on social justice leadership within schools, rather than between sectors. Given the significant differences between the Jewish and Arab sectors that comprise the Israeli education system (Arar, 2019), this study focused exclusively on Jewish schools, with the Arab sector reserved for future research.

While the importance of equity in education is increasingly acknowledged (Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Feniger et al., 2021), equity remains a secondary concern within leadership training compared to instructional leadership. As a result, principals often develop their approach to social justice based on their own beliefs, experiences and values, which shape their educational vision and leadership practices (Arar, 2015; Oplatka, 2013; Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). Due to the limited empirical research on how instructional

leadership intersects with social justice leadership in the Israeli context, qualitative methods were chosen to explore principals' perspectives and lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants

This study did not combine elementary and secondary schools due to significant differences between these educational levels. For practical reasons, the research focused on elementary schools, with plans to address secondary schools in future studies. The study participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method specifically aimed at identifying 'information-rich' cases, which is generally more effective than random sampling in qualitative research (van Rijnsoever, 2017). To identify suitable participants, the researcher contacted nine superintendents from Israel's six school districts, seeking their recommendations for principals demonstrating instructional and social justice leadership. Each superintendent suggested between one and four principals, resulting in a pool of 25 candidates. Following the withdrawal of four principals, the final sample consisted of 21 participants. Their demographic composition is 16 women and five men, with their ages averaging 49 years (ranging from 39 to 58 years). These principals had an average school leadership experience of seven years, with individual experiences ranging from two to 13 years. Regarding educational background, all but one participant possessed a master's degree.

The participants' schools were located across all six districts of the Israeli school system and varied in size, with student populations ranging from 150 to 550. Of the participating schools, six were public-religious institutions. The sample also reflected diversity in terms of student composition (including linguistic, cultural and special education populations) and socioeconomic context, ranging from schools in high-resource communities to those serving disadvantaged populations.

Data collection

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews, which included questions such as: 'In what ways do you see your role as a principal contributing to social justice through the management of teaching?'; 'What are the main social justice challenges you encounter in managing teaching at your school?'; and 'Looking ahead, what additional steps do you think are necessary to further integrate a social justice perspective into teaching and learning at your school?'

As highlighted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the flexible design of these semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to adjust to unique situations and emerging insights. Although the key questions were predetermined, the discussions remained dynamic, resembling natural conversations rather than rigid question-and-answer sessions. The study utilised Zoom interviews, each session typically lasting about one hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To address uncertainties during transcript reviews, three follow-up interviews, each lasting approximately 15 minutes, were conducted for clarification.

To uphold ethical standards, participants were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without

consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Hemdat College of Education.

Data analysis

In this research, data analysis was executed through a structured three-stage process comprising sorting, coding and categorising. The sorting phase involved a preliminary examination of the interview transcripts, focusing on identifying statements related to advancing social justice through the management of teaching. The main goal was to thoroughly review all the data to determine which segments to code. Open coding was then applied, in which the data were labelled with essence-capturing codes, independent of pre-existing categories (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). During the coding phase, the researcher meticulously analysed the identified data, assigning distinct codes to segments that encapsulated specific concepts or ideas. This phase employed a constant comparison method, allowing for the refinement of codes through cross-segment comparisons.

During the categorisation stage, the researcher grouped similarly coded statements into clusters to uncover overarching themes. This process began with a meticulous review of all assigned codes to ensure their accuracy and consistency. Recurring patterns, themes and concepts were identified within the codes, allowing for their synthesis into broader thematic categories that captured significant or recurring ideas in the data. These themes were refined into clear, descriptive concepts that encapsulated the essence of the participants' insights. The themes were then analysed within the context of the study, highlighting their relevance to addressing the research question. The categorisation process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of clustering and reorganising, much like Abbott's (2004, p. 215) metaphor of 'decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on.' Using this iterative approach, meaningful connections and overarching themes emerged, offering a more profound comprehension of how social justice is promoted through the management of teaching. The findings chapter highlights four key areas by which principals advance social justice through managing teaching.

During data analysis, the researchers remained mindful of their positionality. On the one hand, both share a strong belief in the importance of instructional leadership and the critical need for social justice leadership, and they have recently engaged in exploring the intersection between these two frameworks. On the other, their perspectives differ: Shaked is based in Israel, previously served as a school principal there, and is deeply familiar with the local educational context, whereas Gümüş has never visited Israel and brings an external perspective. These shared commitments, alongside their differing vantage points, contributed to a richer and more nuanced analysis of the data.

Findings

Data analysis revealed that participating principals advanced equity in learning opportunities by managing teaching through four key areas: classroom practices; curriculum content; teaching resources; and instructional structures. The following sections elaborate on these areas, supported by quotes from the study's interviews.

Classroom practices

The study participants reported that they urged teachers to integrate social justice principles into their classroom practices. They also emphasised incorporating these principles into performance expectations.

The study participants encouraged teachers to adopt inclusive pedagogies. Daphne, with 10 years of principalship experience, advocated for differentiated instruction, which entails tailoring lessons to students' diverse needs, abilities, interests and learning styles: 'We implement differentiated instruction to ensure that every student, regardless of background or skill level, has the opportunity to succeed.' Raya, with six years of principalship experience, advocated for cooperative learning, which centres on student collaboration in small groups under the teacher's guidance: 'Cooperative learning not only enhances engagement but also ensures that every student progresses, not just the high achievers.' While there are various reasons to adopt these teaching methods, these participants specifically highlighted social justice as their primary justification.

In addition, the study participants called on teachers to set high expectations for all students, without exception. Naomi, with eight years of experience, believed that high expectations challenge systemic biases that often result in lower expectations for marginalised students: 'High expectations aren't just about setting the bar high; they're about sending a message to students that we see their abilities, we believe in them, and we won't let them settle for less than their best.' Emily, with three years of experience as a principal, noted that such biases can subtly shape classroom interactions and instructional decisions: 'Some teachers might assume that a physically disabled student also has cognitive difficulties.'

More broadly, principals expected teachers to take responsibility for the academic success of all students, without exception. Liam, with five years of experience, reinforced this expectation: 'One of the teachers told me that the reading acquisition process was very successful – only three students still couldn't read, but since they have learning disabilities, it's clear they won't succeed.' He rejected this mindset: 'I told her that we cannot absolve ourselves of responsibility for any student in the classroom, even those who face challenges.'

Curriculum content

Qualitative data indicated that the study participants adapted teaching to promote social justice through expanded curriculum inclusivity. They accomplished this by ensuring broader representation and relevance for all students. Lily, a principal with two years of experience, emphasised this approach: 'I want every child to see themselves and their families reflected in the texts studied in the classroom. At the same time, I want them to read about families and cultures different from their own.' To further this goal, they incorporated diverse perspectives in learning materials. Lidia, with seven years of experience as a principal, reinforced this idea, stating: 'I want children to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the world.'

The study participants encouraged teachers to engage students in discussions on inequality, discrimination and privilege as they arise in the curriculum, fostering critical thinking and deeper engagement. Noah, a principal with five years of school leadership

experience, emphasised the importance of addressing, rather than avoiding, complex issues: 'The texts we teach don't always align with our current understanding of social justice. For me, that's not a reason to replace them – it's an opportunity to discuss them with students.'

In addition, the study participants selected learning materials that represented diverse gender perspectives, highlighted contributions from all genders, and avoided reinforcing traditional gender roles. With 13 years of experience as a principal, Tamar remarked: 'I do not permit the use of teaching materials that convey gender stereotypes.' Re-evaluating gender roles for both male and female students, Iris, a principal with five years of experience, challenged traditional assumptions about what boys and girls should be interested in or capable of achieving: 'I don't allow the craft teacher to automatically suggest sewing for girls and woodworking for boys. She should present all options to every student and remain non-judgmental about their choices.' Similarly, Jonathan, a principal with nine years of experience, opposed the idea of the physical education teacher designing lesson activities based on gender stereotypes. He stated: 'It's essential to provide all students with equal opportunities to participate and enjoy a wide range of physical activities, free from preconceived notions about what boys or girls might find interesting or suitable.'

Teaching resources

Interviews with the study participants suggested they redistributed resources to ensure greater access and support for all students, particularly those from historically excluded groups.

The study participants emphasised the importance of providing learning support to students from underserved societal backgrounds. With 13 years of experience as a principal, David asserted: 'We recognize that students from low socioeconomic communities start far behind their peers. Closing these achievement gaps isn't just important – it's essential. That's why we take proactive measures to create an environment where every student can succeed.' The participants also particularly mentioned that providing support to special education students promotes social justice by ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities and limitations, have equitable opportunities to succeed.

The support involves allocating teaching resources disproportionately by prioritising additional investments for underserved students. These investments include initiatives such as tutoring, remedial programmes and extended learning opportunities, notably after-school and summer school programmes. Ruth, with 11 years of experience, remarked: 'When we provide extra support to specific students, it often comes at the expense of others. Even so, it is entirely justified because this is precisely what social justice entails – ensuring the best possible opportunities for everyone to succeed.'

Sarah, with eight years of experience as a principal, observed: 'I'm relatively new to this school, but I've noticed that students from higher-income families consistently have access to the most effective teachers, mainly because their parents expect the best for their children. It's my responsibility to address this imbalance.' Her statement highlights that resource redistribution extends beyond financial budgets to encompass other factors, such as access to high-quality teaching. In this case, the objective is not to provide

underserved students with more than their peers, but to ensure they receive equal opportunities and do not fall behind.

Instructional structures

Interviews conducted for this study demonstrated that the study participants adjusted teaching structures to promote equity in learning. To this end, they intentionally modified instructional frameworks to create a more equitable learning environment, ensuring that all students had access to meaningful learning opportunities.

For example, the study exercised caution with ability grouping, which sorts students based on perceived abilities or academic performance. While it could benefit high-achieving students, they recognised its potential drawbacks. Rachel, with nine years of experience as a principal, emphasised the one-way nature of ability grouping: 'Once a student is placed in a lower group, moving up to a higher level becomes nearly impossible. Instead of bridging gaps, this system tends to solidify them, raising serious concerns about the opportunities it denies students.' Dina, a principal with four years of experience, stressed the vital role of self-confidence in learning: 'Ability grouping can negatively impact the self-perception and confidence of students placed in lower groups, causing them to question their abilities compared to their peers. It can have long-term consequences on a student's academic growth and motivation.'

In addition, the study participants fostered social justice through decisions about which subjects are taught in school. For example, Jacob, with 11 years of experience as a principal of a religious school, advocated for ensuring that female students also have access to religious studies: 'I make it a point to offer girls the opportunity to study religious subjects that have traditionally been reserved for boys. I believe that no significant area of knowledge should be off-limits to them.' He acknowledged that, despite the lack of parental support for her approach, he remains committed to ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students.

Furthermore, the study participants implemented classroom integration, ensuring that students with diverse abilities learn together rather than being separated. Miriam, with six years of experience, emphasised the importance of this practice: 'Segregating students based on ability sends the wrong message about their potential. In an integrated classroom, students learn not only from their teachers but also from each other, fostering mutual understanding and respect.'

Discussion

This study explores how principals promote equity by managing teaching practices within their schools. The findings indicate that principals foster equitable learning opportunities through strategic leadership in four key areas. First, instructional structures: principals adapt instructional frameworks to create more equitable learning environments, ensuring that all students have access to meaningful educational experiences. Second, teaching resources: principals strategically allocate resources to improve access and support, particularly for students from historically marginalised groups. Third, curriculum content: principals work to make the curriculum more inclusive by broadening representation and enhancing its relevance to diverse student populations. Finally, classroom practices: principals encourage

teachers to embed social justice principles into their instructional approaches to promote equity within the classroom.

To see the big picture of how the principals' management of teaching promotes equity, the four areas identified in the current study can be grouped into two levels of influence. The first two areas, classroom practices and curriculum content, are implemented at the teacher level, with principals playing a supportive role by guiding, mentoring and encouraging teachers to adopt inclusive and justice-oriented pedagogical practices (Bogotch & Reyes-Guerra, 2014). In contrast, the latter two, teaching resources and instructional structures, involve leadership actions primarily at the principal level. These require school-wide decisions and structural changes that shape the learning environment and ensure equitable access to quality education (Shaked, 2020).

In terms of impact, the first two areas have a direct impact on students: inclusive curriculum content engages learners with diverse and culturally relevant materials, and social justice-oriented instruction promotes critical thinking, empathy, and awareness of equity-related issues in daily classroom learning. The latter two areas, however, tend to have an indirect effect on students: adapting instructional frameworks influences how learning is structured, which shapes students' overall educational experience, while equitable resource allocation affects the quality of student support, facilities and access to effective teaching.

The four areas can also be viewed through a pedagogical-organisational lens. The first two are pedagogical in nature: inclusive curriculum design ensures that learning materials reflect diverse backgrounds, and embedding social justice into teaching helps foster equity and belonging within the classroom. In contrast, the latter two represent organisational or systemic changes: adapting instructional frameworks modifies how teaching is designed and delivered across the school, while redistributing resources addresses systemic inequities by ensuring fair allocation of materials, time and personnel (Ainscow, 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020).

Additionally, the four areas reflect a distinction between supportive action and proactive design. The first area, classroom practices, and the third area, teaching resources, represent supportive actions that aim to remove barriers and facilitate equity in existing practices. Conversely, the second area, curriculum content, and the fourth area, instructional structures, represent proactive efforts to design foundational systems that anticipate and address student needs.

Taken together, the findings point to a conceptual model comprising four key areas through which principals promote equity in learning opportunities by managing teaching, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#). These areas are organised along two intersecting dimensions: pedagogical versus organisational focus; and supportive action versus proactive design. This framework yields the four distinct yet interconnected areas: classroom practices (pedagogical, supportive); curriculum content (pedagogical, proactive); teaching resources (organisational, supportive); and instructional structures (organisational, proactive).

While existing literature identifies key strategies for equitable teaching, such as maintaining high expectations for all students (Sarra et al., 2020), ensuring inclusive classroom participation (Mack, 2012), implementing culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and using differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning needs (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2014), it offers only a partial view

| | | | |
|------------|---|--------------------------|-----------|
| | The teacher level; Direct impact on students; Pedagogical | | |
| Supportive | Classroom Practices | Curriculum Content | Proactive |
| | Teaching Resources | Instructional Structures | |
| | The principal level; Inirect impact on students; Organizational | | |

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for promoting equity through the management of teaching.

of how principals promote these practices through their leadership. Equitable teaching is often conceptualised as the responsibility of individual teachers within their classrooms, with relatively little attention given to the organisational and leadership structures that enable such practices to flourish at the school level. Some studies have begun to explore the role of principals, for example, by limiting ability grouping (Alam & Mohanty, 2023), by ensuring that the curriculum is inclusive of diverse cultures, perspectives and historical narratives (Miller et al., 2022), or by allocating resources equitably within their schools (Wolf, 2018). However, these studies tend to focus on isolated behaviours rather than offering a systematic account of how principals lead the core instructional work of the school in ways that promote equity.

The findings of this study suggest that principals influence equitable teaching not only by supporting teacher practices but also by shaping broader instructional structures and school-wide decisions, mainly aligning with existing broader literature on the principal's influence (Grissom et al., 2021; Printy, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). From the perspective of instructional leadership, the relationship between teaching and equity extends beyond classroom-level guidance to include strategic decisions about what subjects are prioritised, how instructional time is allocated, and how teaching expertise is distributed across classrooms. These managerial choices – often overlooked in discussions of equity – play a critical role in determining students' access to rigorous, inclusive and high-quality learning opportunities.

Despite emerging interest in this area, the field still lacks a comprehensive understanding of how equity-oriented values are operationalised through principals' day-to-day management of teaching. This study addresses that gap by offering an empirically grounded, school-level perspective on how principals advance equity through their instructional leadership and the organisational decisions that shape teaching and learning.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the findings are closely tied to the Israeli national and cultural context. The country's education system is divided into Jewish and Arab sectors, and principals typically lead relatively homogenous schools. This structural separation, combined with pronounced socioeconomic disparities, shaped principals' equity work to focus less on bridging intercultural divides and more on addressing inequalities within their own schools through instructional structures, resource allocation, curriculum and classroom practices. Moreover, the strong policy emphasis on instructional leadership, coupled with the lack of formal training in social justice leadership for principals (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019), encouraged principals to frame equity largely in terms of teaching and learning. In addition, the cultural and political sensitivities of a diverse society made it more feasible to pursue social justice through everyday instructional practices rather than overt activism. While investigating such practices, mostly within schools, adds significantly to the current knowledge base of socially just instructional leadership, it is worth adding that those practices may not bring any positive influence on closing the pronounced inequalities at the societal level. This calls for more studies focusing on the practices of higher-level educational authorities and policy-level analysis regarding the educational inequalities in the Israeli national context. In addition, comparative studies are needed to further clarify how different national and cultural contexts shape the ways principals integrate equity into instructional leadership.

Second, leadership preparation and professional development programmes should embed equity-driven instructional decision-making into all areas of training (Mckenzie et al., 2006). This introduces potential limitations such as bias, incomplete reporting, selective memory and social desirability effects, especially given the normative appeal of social justice. Future studies should incorporate direct observations and include perspectives from additional stakeholders, such as teachers, students and middle leaders, to triangulate the data and construct a more comprehensive account of equity-focused leadership. Additionally, participants may have held varied conceptualisations of social justice, shaped by their personal and professional experiences, which may have influenced both their actions and the way they articulated them. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limits insight into the evolution or sustainability of equity-oriented leadership over time. Longitudinal research could provide a deeper understanding of the development and long-term impact of such practices.

Third, while the study identified four key areas through which principals advance equity in learning opportunities (classroom practices, curriculum content, teaching resources and instructional structures), it did not assess the frequency or depth with which each area was addressed. Future research using larger and more diverse samples could quantify these patterns and offer a more nuanced understanding of how equity-oriented instructional leadership is enacted across schools.

Practical implications

The findings of this study carry important practical implications for enhancing equity in schools through instructional leadership. First, the framework developed in this study can serve as a diagnostic tool for principals to reflect on and refine their own leadership practices. By examining the four dimensions – classroom practices, curriculum content, teaching resources and instructional structures – principals can evaluate the extent to which equity is embedded across the teaching and learning environment within their schools. Beyond individual reflection, this framework can be used to facilitate shared professional dialogue during staff development sessions, guide data-informed decision-making, and structure instructional rounds with a deliberate equity focus.

Second, leadership preparation and professional development programmes should embed equity-driven instructional decision-making into all areas of training. Rather than treating equity as a stand-alone course or ethical add-on, programmes must integrate it into practical learning about curriculum, assessment, supervision and resource management. Aspiring principals should be equipped to critically assess how resources are distributed, examine curriculum content for inclusivity, and design instructional frameworks that are responsive to the needs of linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse students. For under-resourced schools in particular, training should highlight creative strategies for leveraging limited resources, forming partnerships with community organisations and advocating for systemic support to meet student needs.

Third, the findings underscore the importance of system-level policies that empower principals to lead for equity. To translate equity goals into practice, principals need both autonomy and targeted support. Structural changes that promote equity – such as assigning teachers strategically, designing inclusive schedules or adapting curricula to reflect student diversity – require flexibility at the school level. Policymakers and district leaders should therefore ensure that principals have access to disaggregated student data, sustained mentoring and professional networks that allow them to share strategies across diverse contexts. In under-resourced settings, equity-focused policies should prioritise additional staffing, funding for remedial and enrichment programmes, and professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Finally, accountability frameworks must evolve to reflect the broader aims of equity-focused instructional leadership. Evaluation systems should include indicators such as the inclusivity of instructional practices, equitable distribution of resources and the degree to which marginalised student groups are supported and represented in school decision-making. By aligning accountability structures with equity-oriented goals, education systems can create the conditions for principals not only to improve academic performance but also to expand fair, inclusive and high-quality learning opportunities for all students.

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Author contributions

Shaked and Gümüş jointly contributed to the development of the study's concept. Shaked was responsible for data collection, analysis, and manuscript drafting. Gümüş provided critical revisions for intellectual content. Following several rounds of revision, both authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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