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When Improving Teaching Fulfills Teachers' Higher-Order Needs: A Maslowian View of Instructional Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how school principals, in their role as instructional leaders, describe their efforts to motivate teachers to commit to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning. Drawing on interviews with 19 Israeli elementary school principals, the study adopts Maslow's theory of human needs as an analytic lens for interpreting principals' constructions of motivational processes in instructional leadership. The findings suggest that principals describe creating motivational environments in which instructional improvement may address teachers' higher-order needs for belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. The study extends instructional leadership literature and highlights the motivational significance of collaborative, empowering, and relational leadership practices.

Introduction

Instructional leadership is commonly understood as a form of school leadership in which principals assume an active and sustained role in advancing high-quality instruction and curriculum, thereby positioning teaching and learning as the central focus of their professional work (Bellibaş et al., 2025; Hallinger et al., 2025). Extensive empirical research has demonstrated that instructional leadership is strongly associated with improvements in instructional quality and student learning outcomes across diverse educational systems and contexts (Özdemir et al., 2024; Pietsch et al., 2025). These findings have reinforced the view that leadership matters most when it directly engages with the core instructional work of schools, highlighting instructional leadership as a powerful lever for enhancing both classroom practice and student achievement (Gümüş et al., 2022; Shaked, 2023a).

Anchored in this perspective, instructional leadership assigns principals a central responsibility for motivating teachers to continuously enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Hallinger et al., 2025; Stronge & Xu, 2021). As instructional leaders, principals are expected not only to articulate instructional goals and monitor classroom practice, but also are perceived as fostering teachers' engagement, commitment, and willingness to invest sustained effort in instructional improvement (Bellibaş et al., 2025; Gümüş et al., 2022). A key question, therefore, concerns the mechanisms through which principals seek to motivate teachers to improve their instructional practice.

Despite the intuitive relevance of this perspective, the motivational processes underlying instructional leadership remain insufficiently theorized and empirically examined. Addressing this gap is important both theoretically and practically. This study advances instructional leadership theory by conceptualizing how principals understand and construct teacher motivation as a mechanism through which instructional leadership may translate into sustained instructional improvement.

The study was situated within the Israeli education system, which serves approximately two million students across nearly 6,000 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2026). Within this system, school principals are formally charged with serving as instructional leaders and are explicitly mandated to promote high-quality teaching and learning for all students (Capstones - The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2008; Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019; Shaked, 2025). Drawing on interviews with Israeli principals, this

study addresses the following research question: How do school principals, acting as instructional leaders, describe their efforts to motivate teachers to improve teaching and learning?

The analysis proceeded inductively, allowing patterns related to teacher motivation to emerge from principals' accounts. These emerging patterns were then considered in relation to several motivational frameworks. Through this comparative process, Maslow's theory of human needs was identified as offering a useful interpretive perspective for understanding the motivational dynamics reflected in the data. Therefore, the following chapter reviews the relevant literature in two stages. It first examines scholarship on instructional leadership and then turns to Maslow's theory of human needs as a framework for understanding motivation. Together, these bodies of literature provide the conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows.

Theoretical Background

Conceptualization of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership foregrounds the principal's influence on the instructional core of schooling by emphasizing purposeful engagement with teaching practices, curricular coherence, and the professional conditions that support effective instruction (Gümüş et al., 2022; Özdemir et al., 2024). Within this perspective, teaching and learning are positioned as the primary arena through which leadership exerts its influence (Hallinger et al., 2025). From a conceptual standpoint, instructional leadership is understood as a central mechanism for linking leadership practice to the improvement of teaching and learning, reinforcing its role as a defining framework for understanding how principals shape the educational work of schools (Bellibaş et al., 2025; Shaked, 2023a).

A variety of conceptual frameworks have been proposed to capture the nature and scope of instructional leadership (e.g., Blase & Blase, 2000; Stronge & Xu, 2021; Walker & Qian, 2022; Weber, 1989). Among these, the model formulated by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) has emerged as the most widely cited and enduring framework in the field. This model portrays instructional leadership as a multidimensional construct organized around three mutually reinforcing domains, each encompassing a distinct set of leadership functions. The first domain, defining the school's mission, centers on articulating and communicating clear academic goals that provide direction and coherence for the school's instructional efforts. The second domain, managing the instructional program, focuses on the core technical aspects of schooling, including the supervision and evaluation of teaching, curriculum coordination, and the systematic monitoring of student learning outcomes. The third domain, promoting a positive learning climate, addresses the conditions that support high-quality instruction, such as safeguarding instructional time, investing in professional development, maintaining a visible leadership presence, and incentivizing effective teaching and learning for both staff and students.

Early conceptualizations of instructional leadership positioned the school principal as the primary and, in many cases, the sole actor responsible for guiding teaching and learning within the school. As Hallinger (2005, p. 223) noted in his historical overview, "instructional leadership was conceived as a role carried out by the school principal." This principal-centered understanding reflected a view of leadership as directive and hierarchical, consistent with later historical accounts describing instructional leadership as "initially flourishing as a top-down, directive model of principal leadership emerging from the effective schools movement, first in North America and then across the world" (Gurr et al., 2025, p. 25). This rendered the position of a single "heroic leader . . . virtually untenable" (Townsend et al., 2013, p. 68). However, this narrow conceptualization soon attracted criticism for its limited scope and explanatory power. Subsequent scholarship highlighted that instructional leadership extends beyond the capacity of any single individual. In this regard, Hallinger and Murphy (2013, pp. 9–10) argued that "Successful instructional supervision and curriculum leadership require skill sets that typically go beyond those possessed by any one individual in the school," underscoring the need to expand the analytic focus beyond the principal alone.

As the conceptual frame widened, scholars increasingly acknowledged that instructional leadership is enacted by multiple actors across the school. Marks and Printy (2003, p. 371) asserted that "the principal is not the sole instructional leader but the leader of instructional leaders," emphasizing that "instructional leadership involves the active collaboration of principal and teachers on curriculum, instruction, and

assessment.” This shift brought middle leaders, such as department heads and coordinators, into the sphere of instructional leadership, alongside informal teacher leaders who exert influence through expertise, initiative, and peer collaboration. More broadly, it signaled a growing recognition that all teachers bear responsibility for improving teaching and learning, not merely as implementers of policy but as active contributors to instructional development (Gurr, 2024; Gurr et al., 2025; Shaked, 2023b, 2025; Tang et al., 2022).

This expansion helps explain the growing emphasis on professional learning communities, which frame instructional improvement as a collective endeavor grounded in shared inquiry, mutual accountability, and collaborative learning (Hassan et al., 2019; Pashmforoosh et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2019). Within this perspective, empowerment emerges as a core dimension of instructional leadership (Barth & Tsemach, 2023), as empowering teachers strengthens their capacity to influence instructional practice and enhances overall school effectiveness (Dahiru & Gbolahan, 2022; Yalçın et al., 2025).

At the same time, this line of work highlights the centrality of relationships. When principals cultivate positive and trusting relationships with teachers, they are better positioned to enact instructional leadership that supports listening, empathy, and constructive dialogue about teaching and learning (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Shaked, 2024). Reflecting this relational turn, Hendawy Al-Mahdy et al. (2024) concluded that “instructional leadership is a relational process rather than a bureaucratic or hierarchical form of leadership.”

Despite the extensive literature on instructional leadership, relatively little attention has been paid to how principals seek to motivate teachers to engage in and sustain instructional improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020). Research on teacher motivation further suggests that teachers’ engagement in instructional improvement is closely related to their sense of professional efficacy, recognition, and collaborative support within the school environment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017), all of which have been shown to shape teachers’ instructional practices. In analyzing the interview data, themes related to teacher motivation were first allowed to emerge inductively from principals’ accounts. As these themes developed, they were examined alongside several motivational frameworks in order to identify a theoretical perspective that could help interpret the observed patterns. In this process, Maslow’s theory of human needs provided a coherent framework for understanding how principals described their efforts to motivate teachers to engage in instructional improvement. Consequently, Maslow’s theory is used in this study as a motivational lens for examining instructional leadership.

Maslow’s Needs Theory

Maslow’s (1943) needs theory posits that human behavior is motivated by the drive to satisfy a set of core human needs that differ in their nature and function. Maslow conceptualized these needs as organized within a hierarchical framework comprising five broad domains, beginning with needs essential for survival and extending toward more growth-oriented aspirations. At the base of the framework are physiological needs, such as food, water, rest, and shelter, which are necessary for basic functioning. When these needs are sufficiently met, individuals become increasingly concerned with safety and security, which include both physical protection and psychological stability, such as predictability, freedom from fear, and a sense of continuity in one’s environment (Maslow, 1943; Taormina & Gao, 2013). Beyond safety, Maslow identified social needs, commonly referred to as belongingness, reflecting the human desire for meaningful relationships, social connection, and inclusion within groups and communities (Tay & Diener, 2011). Higher in the hierarchy are esteem needs, encompassing both internal evaluations of competence and self-worth and external recognition, respect, and appreciation from others (Taormina & Gao, 2013). At the highest level is self-actualization, defined as the realization of one’s potential and the pursuit of personal growth and fulfillment (Maslow, 1943; Tay & Diener, 2011).

Central to Maslow’s theory is the claim that motivation emerges primarily from unmet needs (Maslow, 1943). From this perspective, individuals are energized to act when they perceive a discrepancy between their current condition and a desired state of need fulfillment. Unmet needs generate psychological tension that directs attention and effort toward behaviors aimed at reducing that tension. For example, a lack of security may motivate individuals to seek stability and predictability, whereas unmet needs for belonging or esteem may prompt efforts to build relationships, gain recognition, or demonstrate competence.

Motivation, therefore, is not arbitrary but is meaningfully shaped by what individuals experience as lacking or insufficient in their lives (Maslow, 1943; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). This emphasis on unmet needs provides a useful framework for interpreting how specific organizational conditions and leadership practices can stimulate engagement, persistence, and goal-directed action.

Despite its enduring influence, Maslow's theory has been subject to critique, particularly for its hierarchical assumptions. A substantial body of research has questioned the claim that human needs are organized in a fixed, sequential order or that they are fulfilled in the same hierarchical pattern across contexts. For example, Wahba and Bridwell (1976) found little empirical support for the assumption that lower-level needs must be satisfied before higher-level needs become salient. Similarly, Tay and Diener (2011) demonstrated that the fulfillment of different needs contributes independently to well-being rather than following a strict progression. More recently, Rojas et al. (2023) reported that empirical evidence does not support a universal pyramid-like structure of needs. Importantly, these critiques do not challenge the relevance or validity of the needs themselves, but rather the assumption that they are hierarchically ordered in a uniform manner. Because the present study does not rely on the hierarchical ordering of needs, but instead uses Maslow's needs framework as a conceptual lens for interpreting motivational meaning, critiques of the hierarchical structure are not directly applicable to the analysis.

Although no theoretical or empirical studies have directly examined the relationship between instructional leadership and Maslow's theory of needs, the literature offers indirect evidence of meaningful connections between the two frameworks (Berkovich et al., 2025). For example, Cansoy and Parlar (2018) identified positive, significant relationships among school leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and collective teacher efficacy. Given the close association between self-efficacy and self-esteem (Pajares, 1996), these findings suggest that principals' instructional leadership may influence teachers' motivation by addressing esteem-related needs, such as competence, recognition, and professional worth. However, the ways in which instructional leaders address teachers' unmet needs to motivate instructional improvement remain largely unexplored. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how principals, as instructional leaders, motivate teachers through practices aligned with Maslow's theory of human needs.

Importantly, the purpose of drawing on Maslow's framework in the present study is not to re-label existing leadership practices, but to illuminate their motivational significance for teachers. Many instructional leadership practices identified in prior research, such as collaboration, recognition, and professional autonomy, have primarily been discussed in structural or organizational terms. Interpreting these practices through Maslow's needs framework makes it possible to understand how they may function as motivational experiences for teachers by addressing needs for belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. In this sense, Maslow's theory offers an interpretive perspective that helps explain why certain leadership practices may motivate teachers to engage in sustained instructional improvement.

Method

This study adopts a positivist qualitative orientation (Berkovich, 2018). From this standpoint, social life is understood as complex, situated, and shaped by context, yet still amenable to careful and systematic inquiry. The approach assumes that rigorous qualitative procedures can generate interpretations that extend beyond a single case, contributing to cumulative knowledge while preserving sensitivity to setting and meaning. Framing the study in this way supports an analytic stance that values depth and nuance, alongside explicit attention to methodological trustworthiness and transparent knowledge building across contexts.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a strategy well-suited to identifying information-rich cases in qualitative research (van Rijnsoever, 2017). To construct the sampling pool, the researcher contacted 12 superintendents, with two representing each of the six Israeli school districts (North, Center, South, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa). After receiving an explanation of the study's focus on instructional leadership, superintendents were asked to nominate principals known for strong practice in this area. This reputational purposive sampling strategy was used to identify information-rich cases of principals widely recognized for their engagement in instructional leadership practices. Overall, 24 principals were

nominated, with each superintendent recommending two candidates. Five nominees declined participation, yielding a final sample of 19 principals. To reduce any perceived pressure to participate, principals were informed that their decision would not be disclosed to the recommending superintendent. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting to protect participants' identities. Focusing on principals made it possible to explore how instructional leaders themselves conceptualize and describe motivational processes within their leadership practice.

The study focused exclusively on elementary schools, given the substantial structural and cultural differences between elementary and secondary settings, which were judged to make a combined sample analytically inappropriate. The sample included 13 women and six men, aged 35 to 59 ($M = 48$). Participants' experience as principals ranged from two to 14 years ($M = 6$). All held a master's degree.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews designed to explore how principals, as instructional leaders, motivate teachers to improve teaching and learning through practices that align with Maslow's theory of human needs. The semi-structured format balanced consistency across interviews with the flexibility to pursue unanticipated but relevant issues raised by participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design enabled the researcher to follow a guiding protocol while also inviting elaboration, examples, and clarification as the conversation unfolded.

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Although virtual interviewing can limit access to nonverbal cues, it also offers practical and methodological advantages, including increased scheduling flexibility, access to participants across geographically dispersed districts, and conditions that may support conversational ease. Each interview began with a clear explanation of the study's aims and procedures. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew and later translated into English for analysis and reporting. Care was taken to preserve the meaning of participants' statements during translation, and translated excerpts were reviewed to ensure that they accurately reflected the original Hebrew responses.

The interview protocol was developed based on the study's research question and informed by the literature on instructional leadership and teacher motivation. The questions were designed to encourage principals to reflect on how their leadership practices relate to teachers' motivation to engage in instructional improvement. Interview prompts included questions such as: "How do you, as a principal, try to motivate teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning in your school?"; "When you think about instructional improvement, what do you see as your role in shaping teachers' motivation to invest in their instructional work?"; "Looking across your leadership practices, what do you think most strongly motivates teachers to continue improving their teaching?"; and "If you were advising a new principal, what would you suggest they do to motivate teachers through their instructional leadership?" Interviews lasted about 50 minutes, were audio recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for analysis. Two participants later took part in brief follow-up conversations (approximately 15 minutes) to clarify issues that emerged during coding.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by an institutional ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that their decision to participate or decline would not be disclosed to the superintendents who nominated them.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted in three broad phases: sorting, coding, and categorizing. During the sorting phase, the researcher read the interview transcripts closely to identify segments that spoke directly to how principals, as instructional leaders, described their efforts to motivate teachers to improve teaching and learning through their leadership practices. Consistent with Miles et al. (2014), this stage was treated as interpretive rather than purely procedural: decisions about what to extract were guided by analytic judgment and helped shape subsequent meaning making.

In the coding phase, selected segments were labeled with short, meaning-focused descriptors that captured their central idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding proceeded inductively, without imposing

a predetermined scheme, allowing recurring patterns and themes to surface from the data itself (Saldaña, 2021). To support consistency across transcripts, the researcher developed a master code list iteratively and applied it systematically throughout the dataset. Illustrative codes identified in the analysis included instructional improvement as collective ownership, professional community through shared instructional routines, being seen for instructional effort, authentic recognition of teaching quality, discovering professional potential through teaching, and instructional growth as intrinsic fulfillment.

In the categorizing phase, codes were examined for conceptual similarity and clustered into higher-order groupings. As part of this phase, the emerging themes related to teacher motivation were examined in relation to several motivational frameworks. This comparative analytic process suggested that Maslow's theory of human needs provided a coherent interpretive perspective for understanding the patterns identified in the data. The present study, therefore, adopts Maslow's theory not as a rigid hierarchical model, but as a conceptual framework for interpreting motivational meaning in principals' accounts. In this sense, the analysis can be understood as abductive, combining inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. While additional motivational aspects also surfaced and warrant further examination, they fall beyond the scope of the present article and will be addressed in future publications. Accordingly, this study focuses on Maslow's theory, and the findings chapter is organized around its key constructs. In this way, Maslow's framework serves as an interpretive lens for organizing and understanding the motivational meanings reflected in principals' accounts, rather than as a predetermined coding structure guiding the analysis.

Findings

This study examines how principals, acting as instructional leaders, describe their efforts to motivate teachers to invest in the improvement of teaching and learning. The findings suggest that principals describe creating organizational, professional, and cultural conditions that may enable instructional improvement to be interpreted as addressing teachers' professional needs and thereby function as a source of motivation for sustained instructional improvement. The analysis further shows that principals describe establishing conditions through which improvements in teaching and learning may be seen as relating to all five needs described in Maslow's theory.

However, important distinctions emerged between lower and higher-order needs. With regard to basic physiological needs, improving teaching and learning does not address these needs in their direct or literal sense. Engaging in instructional improvement does not directly provide physical sustenance or shelter. Similarly, improving teaching and learning may address teachers' safety needs insofar as it contributes to stability, predictability, or occupational security, which Maslow identified as central components of safety. At the same time, instructional improvement does not encompass the full scope of safety needs as originally conceptualized by Maslow, particularly those related to comprehensive protection from threat, danger, or uncertainty.

In contrast, the findings indicate that principals created conditions in which improving teaching and learning was described as fulfilling the three higher-order needs in their direct and substantive meanings. Through instructional improvement, principals described how teachers experienced belonging through shared professional work, esteem through recognition and appreciation of instructional effort, and self-actualization through growth, creativity, and the realization of professional potential. For this reason, this chapter focuses exclusively on these three needs: belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.

Belongingness

Qualitative data analysis revealed that principals described creating conditions in which improving teaching quality may fulfill teachers' need for belongingness by organizing instructional improvement as a collective process. When teaching improvement is embedded in shared practices, a common professional identity, and collective recognition, teachers experience a sense of professional belonging through participation in instructional work itself.

Adina viewed teaching quality as a collective outcome rather than an individual attribute:

I avoid framing high-quality teaching as an individual achievement. In my view, pedagogical improvement does not belong to single teachers but to teams. When teaching improves, it is usually because teachers are learning, planning, and reflecting together, and that collective work is what I want to recognize and strengthen.

Through this stance, Adina transformed instructional improvement from an individual performance task into a shared professional endeavor, allowing teaching quality itself to function as a source of belonging.

David deliberately used structured routines to embed collaboration into everyday instructional work:

I build regular routines for planning lessons together and looking at student work as a team, not just to improve teaching, but to help teachers feel part of a professional community where learning and responsibility are shared.

By emphasizing team-based planning and collective analysis of student work, David framed instructional improvement as a shared professional activity rather than an individual endeavor, reinforcing teachers' sense of membership in a professional community.

Yael promoted pedagogical dialogue in informal settings:

I encourage pedagogical talk not only in formal meetings but also in everyday, informal moments. I try to model this myself by talking about teaching in everyday conversations, not only in meetings. I make sure to be present in informal spaces like the teachers' lounge and during breaks, so pedagogical talk can happen naturally. When teaching becomes part of our daily language, it brings people together and turns improvement into something we share.

By modeling pedagogical curiosity, Yael enabled teaching to become a shared professional language. In this way, instructional improvement extended beyond formal structures and became a practice through which teachers experienced connection and belonging.

Esteem

The interviews conducted for this study suggest that principals described creating conditions in which improving teaching quality may fulfill teachers' need for esteem by ensuring that instructional improvement becomes a visible, valued, and professionally meaningful accomplishment. In this way, instructional improvement functions as a source of professional esteem, motivating teachers to invest further in refining their instructional practice.

By emphasizing regular classroom presence, Rachel framed her instructional leadership as attentive witnessing of quality practice:

One of my main roles is to walk into classrooms and, time and again, find myself stopping for a moment in genuine admiration of the quality of teaching I see. When teachers sense that their investment in high-quality instruction is truly noticed and appreciated, it becomes a powerful engine for further improvement.

Rachel explicitly positioned recognition as a "powerful engine" for continued instructional improvement, especially when they are not predictable, standardized, or formally scripted, but rather experienced as authentic, situational responses to what the principal genuinely observes in practice.

Similarly, Leah described her deliberate habit of attending to recognition on a daily basis:

I believe one of the most important things a principal can give a teacher is the feeling that their good work is truly seen and that the effort behind it is recognized. I make a point of asking myself every day, and every week, who has done meaningful work and hasn't yet been told that I noticed it and appreciate it.

Like Rachel, Leah conceptualized esteem as emerging from ongoing, informal acts of recognition rather than from formalized evaluation mechanisms. In her view, appreciation functions as a sustained motivational mechanism that both supports instructional improvement and encourages continued professional investment.

Jacob, in turn, transformed academic success into an explicit moment of appreciation:

After we saw the improvement in our national test results, I felt it was important to stop and acknowledge the whole staff. I organized a well-planned, respectful, and celebratory dinner to genuinely honor the work and effort that went into this progress. I wanted teachers to clearly feel that their investment in high-quality instruction was seen, valued, and taken seriously.

By organizing a collective appreciation event, Jacob emphasized shared responsibility for the achievement while simultaneously conveying professional esteem. In doing so, he reinforced the understanding that instructional improvement is both a collective accomplishment, as outlined in the previous section, and a form of professional work that merits recognition and respect.

Self-Actualization

Data gathered for this study further indicate that principals described creating conditions in which improving teaching quality may fulfill teachers' need for self-actualization by enabling instructional improvement to become a site of professional growth, creativity, and meaningful engagement. When teachers are encouraged to exercise professional judgment, pursue instructional innovation, and align their pedagogical work with personal values and aspirations, high-quality teaching becomes an expression of who they are and who they seek to become as professionals.

Bela viewed the realization of professional potential as the most meaningful form of reward:

The best reward I can offer my teachers for excellent work is the feeling that they surprise themselves with what they are capable of. When they realize they've taught at a level they didn't know they could reach, that sense of discovery becomes more meaningful than any external reward.

By highlighting teachers' ability to "surprise themselves," Bela presented high-quality teaching as a process of discovering one's own professional potential. For her, motivation for instructional excellence is sustained not by external incentives or material rewards, but by internally experienced achievement and growth.

Dana emphasized autonomy as a central pathway to professional fulfillment:

I try to create space for teachers to develop and lead pedagogical initiatives that matter to them. When a teacher designs a new instructional approach and sees it take shape in the classroom, it gives them a sense that they are shaping their instruction, not just implementing decisions made by others.

By allowing teachers to lead pedagogical projects, Dana framed instructional improvement as a process through which teachers translate personal educational beliefs into practice, which in turn fosters a sense of ownership.

Oren focused on leadership opportunities as a source of self-directed growth:

I encourage teachers to take on instructional leadership roles in areas where they feel strong, such as curriculum development, mentoring new teachers, or leading learning communities. When teachers see themselves influencing others and shaping directions, they realize they have grown into professionals they didn't initially imagine becoming.

Through the delegation of pedagogical leadership, Oren positioned instructional improvement as a context for expanding teachers' sense of professional capability, responsibility, and influence within the school.

Discussion

This study explores how principals, in their role as instructional leaders, describe their efforts to motivate teachers to commit to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning. Analysis of the data revealed that Maslow's needs framework offers a suitable theoretical lens for interpreting the patterns that emerged. The findings suggest that principals cultivate conditions that shape teachers' professional experiences in ways that may enable instructional improvement to be experienced as addressing teachers' motivational needs and sustain engagement in improving teaching and learning. These conditions function as motivational environments that give instructional work meaning for teachers.

Building on this insight, the study deepens the understanding of instructional leadership by demonstrating that guiding teachers toward higher-quality instruction involves more than the managerial and organizational mechanisms that have been widely acknowledged in the literature (Gümüş et al., 2022; Hallinger et al., 2025). While such mechanisms are essential, the current study's findings indicate they are not sufficient on their own. Instead, instructional leadership may benefit from explicitly attending to teachers' motivation. By foregrounding motivation as an analytic lens, this study reframes instructional leadership as a practice concerned not only with directing instructional processes or creating supportive

conditions but also with actively engaging the motivational forces that sustain teachers' long-term commitment to instructional improvement. In doing so, it advances instructional leadership theory by positioning motivation as a core explanatory mechanism linking leadership practice to enduring instructional change.

More specifically, this study illustrates how principals describe shaping the conditions under which instructional improvement primarily may fulfill teachers' higher-order needs for belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. These findings can be situated coherently within the existing instructional leadership literature, which emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and relational processes. At the same time, the present study extends this body of literature by interpreting these well-established leadership dimensions through an explicitly motivational lens, highlighting how they operate as mechanisms that make instructional improvement meaningful and motivating for teachers.

Teachers' need for belongingness aligns with conceptualizations of instructional leadership as a shared and collective endeavor distributed across the school. As instructional leadership moved beyond a principal-centered model to encompass middle leaders, informal teacher leaders, and teachers more broadly, instructional improvement came to be understood as a joint responsibility rather than an individual task (Hammad et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2019; Holzberger & Schiepe-Tiska, 2021; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pashmforoosh et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2019). Within this framework, participation in shared instructional work and professional learning communities enables teachers to experience instructional improvement as a collective professional enterprise, thereby fostering a sense of belonging grounded in collaboration and shared purpose.

Teachers' need for esteem corresponds with scholarship that foregrounds empowerment as a central dimension of instructional leadership. When instructional leadership is distributed and teachers are granted space for initiative, influence, and leadership, they are positioned not merely as implementers of decisions but as valued contributors to instructional development (Barth & Tsemach, 2023; Dahiru & Gbolahan, 2022; Yalçın et al., 2025). The findings suggest that instructional improvement may fulfill teachers' esteem needs when it allows them to gain recognition for their professional judgment, instructional expertise, and leadership contributions within the school.

Finally, teachers' need for self-actualization resonates with relational and distributed conceptualizations of instructional leadership that emphasize leadership as enacted through interaction rather than hierarchical control (Hendawy Al-Mahdy et al., 2024; Marks & Printy, 2003). By involving teachers as active partners in instructional leadership and creating opportunities for initiative and leadership, principals transform teaching into a space for professional growth, agency, and the realization of pedagogical potential. In this sense, instructional leadership functions not only as a mechanism for improving teaching and learning but also as a context in which teachers can fully develop and actualize their instructional capacities.

Considered together, these findings not only align with the trajectory of instructional leadership's evolution (Gurr et al., 2025) but also offer a possible explanation for it. As instructional leadership has moved away from a predominantly top-down, principal-centered model toward more collaborative and distributed forms (Shaked, 2023b, 2025; Tang et al., 2022), it may have done so not only for organizational or normative reasons, but also because such configurations are more effective in motivating teachers to engage in instructional improvement. From this perspective, the shift toward shared, relational, and distributed instructional leadership can be understood as a response to teachers' motivational needs, as these forms of leadership create conditions that enhance teachers' sense of belonging, recognition, and professional growth. In this way, the development of instructional leadership toward more collaborative and less hierarchical models may reflect its capacity to mobilize teachers' motivation and sustain their commitment to improving teaching and learning.

Seen in this light, this study contributes to the instructional leadership literature by foregrounding teacher motivation as a central explanatory mechanism linking leadership practice to sustained instructional improvement. By showing how principals described instructional leadership practices as creating motivational contexts that may address teachers' higher-order needs, the study offers a theoretically grounded account of why contemporary instructional leadership has evolved toward more collaborative, relational, and distributed forms. Rather than viewing this evolution solely as a structural or normative shift, the findings suggest that it reflects instructional leadership's growing capacity to engage teachers' motivation and secure their long-term commitment to improving

teaching and learning. In doing so, the study invites future research to further examine motivation as a foundational dimension of instructional leadership and as a key lever for enduring instructional change.

Conclusion

This study examined how principals, acting as instructional leaders, describe their efforts to motivate teachers to engage in sustained instructional improvement. Drawing on interviews with Israeli elementary school principals, the findings suggest that principals described creating organizational, professional, and relational conditions that may enable instructional improvement to address what principals interpret as teachers' higher-order motivational needs and support teachers' ongoing commitment to improving teaching and learning.

The findings of this study offer practical insights for school principals seeking to secure teachers' sustained engagement in pedagogical improvement. Specifically, the study suggests that effective instructional leadership requires principals to attend deliberately to teachers' motivation, not only by organizing instructional processes and fostering collaborative structures, but also by creating conditions in which instructional work is experienced as meaningful, valued, and professionally significant. These insights have important implications for principal preparation programs, which should explicitly address motivational leadership as a core component of instructional leadership and equip aspiring principals with tools to recognize and respond to teachers' motivational needs. Similarly, induction and mentoring programs for novice principals should emphasize how to build instructional improvement processes that engage teachers as active partners and support their sense of belonging, esteem, and professional growth. For in-service professional development, the findings underscore the value of helping practicing principals reflect on how their daily leadership practices shape teachers' motivation to improve instruction. At the policy level, the study points to the need to conceptualize enhancing teachers' motivation as an integral part of the instructional leader's role, and to embed this expectation within leadership standards, evaluation frameworks, and professional development policies aimed at improving teaching and learning.

While this study advances the conceptual understanding of how principals, in their role as instructional leaders, motivate teachers to commit to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the analysis focuses on principals' efforts to engage teachers at a motivational level, the empirical data are based exclusively on principals' accounts. Consequently, the findings reflect principals' interpretations of teachers' motivational responses and engagement with instructional improvement, rather than teachers' own perceptions of what motivates them or how they experience principals' leadership practices. As with all self-reported accounts of leadership practice, principals' descriptions may also reflect elements of social desirability or halo effects. This constitutes an important limitation, as teachers may attribute their motivation to different factors or interpret the same leadership practices in ways not fully captured by principals' perspectives. Future research should therefore incorporate teachers' voices directly to examine how teachers themselves understand motivational processes within instructional leadership. Second, the data were collected within a specific national context, Israel. While the motivational dynamics identified may be relevant to broader discussions of instructional leadership, caution is warranted when transferring these findings to other cultural, organizational, and policy environments. Comparative and cross-national studies could help illuminate how contextual factors shape the ways in which principals mobilize teacher motivation and sustain instructional improvement across different educational systems. Finally, the study did not examine potential relationships between motivational processes and characteristics of principals, schools, or organizational contexts. Future research using larger samples or mixed-method designs could investigate how variations in leadership experience, school composition, or institutional conditions relate to teachers' motivation and to sustained engagement in improving teaching and learning. In addition, most participants in the sample were female, reflecting the gender composition typical of elementary school leadership in Israel. Although gender was not a focus of the present study, future research could examine whether and how principals' gender may shape motivational aspects of instructional leadership and teachers' engagement in instructional improvement.

Disclosure Statement

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

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