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Instructional leadership clarity: how principals make instructional leadership intelligible and predictable for teachers

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Abstract
Instructional leadership is widely regarded as a key lever for improving teaching and learning. This qualitative study investigates how principals cultivate clarity in their instructional leadership and identifies the specific practices that make their work more coherent and predictable for teachers. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 elementary school principals in Israel, the analysis revealed three central aspects through which leaders enhance clarity. Transparency involves openly sharing information, explaining the reasoning behind instructional decisions, and reducing ambiguity in day-to-day interactions. Consistency is reflected in maintaining stable expectations, aligning actions with stated priorities, and avoiding rapid shifts that can confuse staff. Focus refers to concentrating on a limited number of core instructional goals and filtering out competing demands that dilute teachers' attention. These aspects demonstrate that clarity operates as a fundamental mechanism through which instructional leadership is enacted.

Keywords Instructional leadership · Principals · Clarity · Transparency · Israel

Introduction

Instructional leadership, defined as a school leadership approach in which principals take an active and ongoing role in supporting high-quality teaching and learning (Bellibaş et al., 2025; Hallinger et al., 2025), urges principals to view the improvement of instruction and curriculum as their highest responsibility while treating other administrative and managerial tasks as secondary (Pietsch et al., 2025). A wide range of studies demonstrates that instructional leadership has a powerful and consistent

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impact on teaching quality, teacher commitment, and student learning (Hou et al., 2019; Özdemir et al., 2024). Consequently, it has become a defining expectation of contemporary school principals, grounded in the argument that nothing is more central to the principal's role than exercising robust instructional leadership (Gümüş et al., 2022; Huong et al., 2025).

Although instructional leadership practices are well documented, and some studies have examined principals' time use and daily activities (Goldring et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2013), how leaders enact these practices in ways that are intelligible and meaningful in their daily work remains underexplored, highlighting a critical area for further scholarly inquiry (Shaked, 2023; Hallinger et al., 2020, 2025). This study examines how principals enhance clarity within instructional leadership, making expectations and decisions more understandable and predictable. Clarity, defined as "being coherent and intelligible" (Sharratt, 2019, p. 1), is a critical capacity in effective school leadership, particularly in complex and rapidly changing educational environments. It enables leaders to translate broad goals and intricate policies into simple, comprehensible, and actionable expectations that guide teachers' daily work. When leaders articulate priorities clearly and consistently, they reduce uncertainty, help staff concentrate on what matters most, and prevent the fragmentation that can result from multiple competing initiatives. Most importantly, clarity offers teachers a strong sense of direction and purpose, strengthening their confidence, engagement, and ability to align their efforts with the school's core instructional goals (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). Given its centrality to effective leadership, it is essential to explore how principals actively cultivate clarity in their instructional leadership practice.

The study was conducted within the Israeli education system, which serves approximately 1.8 million students across nearly 5,000 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2025). In Israel, principals are formally expected to function as instructional leaders and are charged with the responsibility of improving teaching and learning for all students (Shaked, 2025; Capstones, 2008). This expectation is embedded in national policy for principal preparation, which positions instructional leadership as a central element of the role (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019). Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: How do Israeli principals promote the clarity of their instructional leadership?

Theoretical background: clarity of instructional leadership

To provide a conceptual foundation for this study, this section first examines the notion of clarity in school leadership more broadly and then focuses on its role in instructional leadership.

Fullan and Kirtman (2019) highlight clarity as a cornerstone of effective school leadership, especially in times of complexity and rapid change. They suggest that clear leadership helps transform broad aspirations and detailed policies into practical guidance that teachers can easily understand and apply in their daily practice. When leaders communicate priorities in a consistent and focused way, they minimize confusion, direct teachers' attention to what truly matters, and avoid the diffusion of effort that occurs when too many initiatives compete for attention.

Clarity can be interpreted through the lens of framing theory, which suggests that leaders shape how individuals understand and interpret their work by emphasizing certain priorities and meanings (Benford & Snow, 2000). When principals articulate priorities in a coherent and consistent manner, they contribute to shaping the interpretive frameworks through which teachers understand professional expectations.

In the context of instructional leadership, Sharratt (2019) emphasizes that clarity in school leadership means building shared beliefs and understandings about what matters most in learning, teaching, and leading. She explains that when leaders create a common language and a clear line of sight to students' learning, the work across the school becomes more aligned and purposeful. Clarity, in her view, is not about adding new initiatives but about concentrating on the essential questions of what students should know, how progress will be measured, and how the school will respond when learning gaps appear. With this kind of focus, leadership shifts from reacting to complexity to guiding coherent, intentional improvement.

Clarity is discussed in the literature on instructional leadership primarily in relation to specific domains. For example, research on framing school goals, one of the core components of instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 2020), emphasizes that goals are effective only when they offer clear guidance for teachers and staff. As Bendikson et al. (2020, p. 714) explain, "Goals are effective when they provide direction by being clear and specific, as opposed to vague… because there is less chance of ambiguity about the expectations." Clarity also appears in studies of role clarity among instructional leaders, which is essential for leaders' ability to act with confidence, form accurate judgments, and navigate their responsibilities effectively (Brandmo et al., 2021).

The importance of clarity becomes particularly evident when considering the evolution of instructional leadership over recent decades. Early conceptualizations portrayed instructional leadership as a relatively focused set of functions centered on setting school goals, supervising instruction, monitoring student progress, and maintaining an effective learning environment (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Weber, 1989). However, subsequent scholarship has significantly broadened the scope of instructional leadership. Principals are now expected not only to supervise teaching and learning but also to promote teacher professional learning, foster collaborative cultures, engage in data-informed decision-making, distribute leadership responsibilities, strategically allocate resources, support equity and social justice goals, and respond to increasingly complex organizational and accountability demands (Hallinger et al., 2020, 2025; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Robinson, 2007; Stronge et al., 2008).

This evolution has transformed instructional leadership from a relatively bounded leadership approach into a multifaceted and highly demanding endeavor. Hallinger et al.'s (2020) science mapping review demonstrated that the knowledge base on instructional leadership has expanded substantially over time, incorporating an increasingly diverse set of themes, perspectives, and leadership functions beyond its original focus on supervision and goal setting. More recent research similarly portrays instructional leadership as encompassing a broad range of interconnected responsibilities, including teacher evaluation, professional development, instructional improvement, organizational learning, distributed leadership, and accountabil-

ity processes (Hallinger et al., 2025; Neumerski et al., 2018; Özdemir et al., 2024). As instructional leadership has expanded across these multiple domains, principals face growing risks of fragmentation, initiative overload, and competing priorities that may undermine coherence in teachers' daily work (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Pietsch et al., 2025).

Under these conditions, clarity becomes increasingly critical. The effectiveness of instructional leadership depends not only on what principals do but also on whether teachers understand instructional priorities, recognize how different initiatives connect to broader goals, and can translate leadership expectations into everyday practice. Clarity may therefore serve as a crucial integrative mechanism that enables principals to manage the growing complexity of contemporary instructional leadership by providing coherence, direction, and predictability for teachers.

Clarity may be relevant across multiple dimensions of instructional leadership. For example, in defining school goals, it helps teachers understand instructional priorities and expectations (Bendikson et al., 2020). Similarly, it may support other core instructional leadership functions, including supervising instruction, professional development, resource allocation, and school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson, 2007; Stronge et al., 2008). Across these dimensions, clarity may be enacted through leadership practices that make instructional priorities visible, stable, and manageable for teachers. Thus, it may function as a cross-cutting leadership capacity that supports the effective enactment of multiple instructional leadership practices.

Yet despite the growing complexity and expanding scope of instructional leadership, surprisingly little research has examined how principals actively cultivate clarity in their instructional leadership practice. Existing studies tend to address clarity in relation to specific domains of instructional leadership, such as goal setting or role expectations, rather than conceptualizing it as a broader and integrative characteristic that cuts across multiple leadership functions. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how principals create and sustain clarity across the diverse responsibilities that characterize contemporary instructional leadership.

This conceptual gap positions the present qualitative study to examine clarity not merely as a feature of a particular instructional leadership practice, but as a broader and integrative characteristic of instructional leadership. Specifically, the study explores how principals construct and sustain clarity in ways that make instructional priorities understandable, coherent, and actionable for teachers.

Method

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024) was used to identify principals able to provide rich and relevant insights. The study focused exclusively on elementary schools, as combining elementary and secondary settings was considered inappropriate due to substantial organizational and pedagogical differences. Five superintendents from different districts, representing five of the six districts in

Israel, were contacted and asked to nominate principals recognized for high visibility, resulting in 21 candidates. One principal declined to participate, yielding a final sample of 20 principals. The sample included 15 women and five men, with an average age of 51 years and an average of eight years of experience as principals. All participants held a master's degree. Confidentiality was assured, pseudonyms were used, and written informed consent was obtained after explaining the study's purpose and procedures. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews designed to elicit principals' perceptions of how they create and sustain clarity in their instructional leadership practice. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, was recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for analysis. The interview protocol included questions such as: "What steps do you take to ensure that teachers fully understand your instructional expectations?"; "How do you make the reasoning behind your instructional decisions visible to teachers?"; "What challenges make it difficult to maintain coherence in your instructional leadership?"; and "What does 'clarity' mean to you when working with teachers on teaching and learning?" These questions served as guiding prompts within a semi-structured interview design, allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and to introduce issues that were not anticipated by the researcher. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to reflect on specific situations and to clarify their responses.

Table 1 Study participants' information

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Years of experience as a principal	District (North, Center, South, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv)
1	Addie	F	59	13	*N*
2	Amit	M	51	4	J
3	Ariela	F	54	13	N
4	Ayla	F	49	9	J
5	Daniel	M	57	11	J
6	Dina	F	49	3	J
7	Eden	F	48	3	C
8	Ethan	M	49	12	N
9	Esther	F	46	12	N
10	Hannah	F	48	11	S
11	Jeremiah	M	55	14	C
12	Judith	F	57	12	TA
13	Leah	F	45	8	S
14	Lily	F	44	5	C
15	Linda	F	52	4	J
16	Lisa	F	48	7	N
17	Maya	F	51	8	TA
18	Oren	M	56	14	TA
19	Ruth	F	56	3	S
20	Yasmin	F	48	2	J

Table 2 Example of coding process

Interview excerpt	Initial code	Theme
How can a teacher meaningfully prepare over the summer if they only find out what they're teaching the day before school starts?	Early communication of decisions	Transparency
If something is important, it has to stay on the table… Otherwise, teachers assume it was just another passing remark.	Sustained reinforcement of expectations	Consistency
I chose one focus… and concentrated only on that.	Narrowing priorities	Focus

To enhance the credibility of the data, interview transcripts were shared with participants for review (member checking). Participants were invited to comment on the accuracy of the transcripts and to provide clarifications if needed. While no substantial feedback was received, this step was included to ensure transparency and allow participants the opportunity to verify their accounts.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a five phase process (Bingham, 2023). Although the interview questions were conceptually informed, the coding process remained inductive, with themes emerging through iterative engagement with the data rather than being predetermined by the interview protocol. This approach allowed for the identification of patterns that extended beyond the structure of the interview questions.

First, transcripts were reviewed, cleaned, and memoed to identify early indications of how principals created instructional clarity. Second, open inductive coding was applied to segments addressing communication, decision making, expectations, and efforts to reduce ambiguity. In the third phase, related codes were clustered into three overarching themes transparency, consistency, and focus reflecting recurring patterns in principals' clarity building practices. The fourth phase involved refining these themes through iterative review of the transcripts to ensure conceptual coherence and distinctiveness. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framing of clarity as an instructional leadership capacity. An audit trail of memos, code lists, and analytic decisions was maintained throughout to enhance trustworthiness. An illustrative example of the coding process is presented in Table 2.

Findings

This study examines how principals create and sustain clarity in their instructional leadership. Analysis of the interview data revealed three core aspects through which principals establish clarity and make their instructional leadership understandable and predictable for teachers: transparency, consistency, and focus. The following sections present these three aspects, each illustrated with participants' quotations that demonstrate how these practices are enacted in principals' daily leadership work.

Transparency

One way the participating principals enhanced the clarity of their instructional leadership was by practicing sustained transparency, a theme mentioned by eight participants. Rather than working behind closed doors, these principals sought to make instructional decisions and considerations visible to teachers. Their accounts suggested that transparency was enacted through both the proactive communication of instructional decisions and the disclosure of the reasoning underlying those decisions.

Jeremiah communicated his instructional plans for the following year early in the process. He asserted:

> *Some principals wait until the last minute to tell teachers what they'll be teaching next year. They keep everything to themselves because plans might change, but to me, that feels disrespectful to teachers and to their professionalism. How can a teacher meaningfully prepare over the summer if they only find out what they're teaching the day before school starts?*

Jeremiah believed that teachers cannot plan effectively or improve their practice if they receive their assignments only shortly before the school year begins. His early communication, even with the risk of later changes, respected teacher professionalism, supported pedagogical readiness, and fostered a more stable working environment. By communicating teaching assignments and instructional expectations early, Jeremiah enabled teachers to prepare more effectively for their instructional responsibilities.

Addie also kept her teachers informed about her instructional plans, even when she knew they might not welcome the news. She noted:

> *When I make decisions about teaching that personally affect a teacher negatively, like moving her from one class to another, I try to hide it as little as possible. Even though it may mean she'll have more time to walk around school feeling upset or resentful, I still choose to be transparent. For me, keeping someone quiet is far less important than being open and honest with them.*

For Addie, openness outweighed the temptation to avoid conflict or protect feelings. Although transparency might initially lead to frustration or resentment, she believed that not hiding information ultimately fosters long-term trust between principals and teachers.

Together, the accounts of Jeremiah and Addie illustrate how transparency was enacted through the proactive communication of instructional decisions. For these principals, clarity was enhanced when teachers were informed early about decisions affecting curriculum implementation, teaching assignments, and instructional expectations. Early communication reduced uncertainty and enabled teachers to align their instructional practice with school priorities.

Maya similarly revealed to teachers the considerations underlying her instructional decisions. She stated:

I share the reasoning behind my instructional decisions openly with the teachers, even when it involves pressures, sensitivities, or competing demands. I believe they deserve to know what shapes my choices. Being transparent about the factors I am considering, including the difficult ones, helps create honesty, reduces misunderstandings, and strengthens our professional relationships.

Maya built trust by sharing, rather than concealing, difficult information. Even when decisions were complex, sensitive, or shaped by external pressures, she explained the factors she was weighing, believing that teachers deserved to understand the rationale behind choices that affected their work.

Unlike the previous examples, which focused primarily on communicating decisions themselves, Maya emphasized transparency regarding the reasoning behind those decisions. Her account suggests that clarity involves not only informing teachers about what was decided but also helping them understand why particular decisions were made. This was particularly important when instructional decisions involved competing pedagogical priorities, resource constraints, or changes in teaching and learning practices.

While most principals emphasized transparency, Ethan believed that full openness may not be effective in managing change:

I believe a principal sometimes needs to be strategic. If you reveal everything too early, you may create unnecessary resistance. I prefer to introduce changes gradually and share information at the right moment, once I feel the staff is ready to hear it."

Ethan's account introduces an important qualification to the transparency theme. Whereas most participants viewed transparency as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty and strengthening trust, he suggested that openness must sometimes be balanced against strategic considerations regarding timing and staff readiness. This perspective highlights a tension inherent in transparency: while openness can enhance clarity, revealing information too early may also generate resistance and complicate change efforts. Transparency therefore emerged not as a simple practice of disclosure, but as a leadership practice requiring careful judgment regarding when and how information should be shared.

Consistency

Another way principals promoted the clarity of their instructional leadership was by demonstrating consistency, a theme mentioned by ten participants. These principals emphasized the importance of maintaining stable instructional priorities over time and ensuring that their actions remained aligned with their stated values, goals, and expectations. Their accounts suggested that consistency was enacted through two related practices: the sustained reinforcement of instructional priorities over time and the alignment between declared priorities and practical decisions.

Ariela said she was careful not to change instructional plans and practices too frequently. She stated:

The principal before me was very creative and constantly innovating, and every now and then she would introduce a new pedagogical initiative. This not only exhausted the staff but also made them feel as though they couldn't understand the instructional direction of the school. When I assumed the position, I quickly realized that I needed to act differently.

Ariela understood that teachers need continuity and stability in instructional plans to feel confident and to invest meaningfully in their work. Rapid shifts make it difficult for them to fully master any single instructional change, ultimately weakening overall teaching quality. Frequent changes may also undermine teachers' ability to sustain improvement in classroom instruction because attention becomes dispersed across multiple competing initiatives.

Similarly, Amit said that if he set an instructional expectation or defined a goal, it must not be forgotten or fade away:

If I say that every lesson must include clear learning goals, then I follow through. Expectations cannot disappear after a week. If something is important, it has to stay on the table, be revisited, and be reinforced in our conversations and observations. Otherwise, teachers assume it was just another passing remark.

Amit asserted that once an instructional expectation was set, it should not disappear or lose its importance after a short period. Important goals must stay "on the table," actively discussed and observed, not fade away in the day-to-day busyness of school life.

The accounts of Ariela and Amit illustrate how consistency was enacted through the sustained reinforcement of instructional priorities. Rather than introducing frequent changes, these principals emphasized continuity and repeated reinforcement as mechanisms for maintaining instructional clarity. For these principals, clarity depended not only on defining goals and expectations but also on maintaining them over time. Stable priorities enabled teachers to understand the school's instructional direction and maintain sustained attention to instructional goals, teaching practices, and professional learning expectations.

Eden aligned her practical decisions with her declared instructional goals. She said:

The budget must reflect our priorities; otherwise, they remain just words. So when I decide how to allocate resources, I always begin with our instructional priorities. If a request doesn't advance teaching and learning, it simply doesn't get funded.

By directing resources toward what supports teaching and learning, Eden ensured that her actions were consistent with her stated instructional priorities. This congruence between what she said and what she did signaled to teachers that her goals were not symbolic but operational. The alignment made her leadership more credible and enabled teachers to understand that her expressed priorities would be reflected in the decisions she implemented. By aligning resource allocation with instructional priori-

ties, Eden reinforced the credibility of her instructional leadership and clarified which teaching and learning goals deserved the greatest attention.

Unlike the previous examples, which focused on maintaining instructional priorities over time, Eden emphasized consistency between declared priorities and concrete actions. Her account suggests that clarity is strengthened when principals' decisions reinforce, rather than contradict, their stated instructional goals. In this sense, consistency involved not only maintaining stable expectations over time but also ensuring that instructional priorities were reinforced through concrete decisions and actions.

Focus

Another way principals supported the clarity of their instructional leadership was by maintaining a well-defined focus, a theme mentioned by twelve participants. These principals emphasized the importance of concentrating attention on a limited number of instructional priorities and protecting those priorities from competing demands. Their accounts suggested that focus was enacted through two related practices: narrowing instructional priorities and filtering out competing initiatives that might dilute teachers' attention and effort.

Ayla narrowed the objectives of her school to ensure a distinct sense of direction about what truly matters. She emphasized:

> *I don't believe in having too many school priorities and activities at once. You can't push interpersonal connection, instilling values, encouraging reading, connecting with the community, and so on, all at the same time. I chose one focus, heterogeneous teaching, and concentrated only on that. All our meetings revolve around it, all the programs revolve around it, everything under one heading.*

Ayla did not want her teachers to feel flooded or confused, so she deliberately focused on only one instructional goal. By distilling the school's goals, she created a strong sense of direction that helped teachers align their efforts and work more confidently toward shared priorities. This concentration enabled teachers to direct their instructional efforts toward a shared pedagogical objective rather than dividing their attention among multiple competing initiatives.

In a similar way, Yasmin focused her feedback to teachers on her central goals:

> *There are many things I could point out to teachers: why the classroom isn't decorated enough, why there aren't enough letters to parents, why there aren't more social activities, etc. But I set aside many issues and focus on the teaching quality, so they can clearly see what sits at the top of my priorities.*

Yasmin acknowledged that there are countless areas where teachers could be critiqued. However, she understood that giving feedback on many minor or peripheral issues can dilute her message and cause confusion. By narrowing her input to her essential goal, she helped teachers concentrate their efforts productively. In doing so,

she clarified which aspects of teaching quality were most important for instructional improvement.

The accounts of Ayla and Yasmin illustrate how focus was enacted through the deliberate narrowing of instructional priorities. Rather than attempting to address multiple goals simultaneously, these principals concentrated attention on a limited set of priorities. For them, clarity was enhanced when teachers could easily identify the instructional priorities that should guide their teaching, professional learning, and classroom decision-making.

Oren declined collaborations with external programs, even those that offered funding and resources, in order to concentrate fully on his instructional goal. He explained:

> *I have countless opportunities to bring external programs into the school with full funding. It is always tempting because each program comes with valuable resources. But every program also demands the teachers' time, attention, and energy, and I do not want to overload them or scatter our focus. This year I decided to commit to one thing only: the thoughtful integration of blended digital instruction. Everything has to serve that goal, so I am turning down even excellent offers.*

Oren is not guided by the availability of external resources or appealing offers. He rejects even worthwhile opportunities when they do not support his core instructional goal. Through this disciplined approach, he creates a predictable environment in which teachers can easily understand what matters and where to direct their efforts. This allowed teachers to concentrate their efforts on a clearly defined instructional improvement agenda rather than responding to multiple external initiatives.

Unlike the previous examples, which focused on narrowing priorities, Oren emphasized the importance of protecting those priorities from competing initiatives. His account suggests that clarity depends not only on identifying a small number of instructional goals but also on filtering out opportunities and demands that may distract teachers from those goals. In this sense, focus involved both selecting priorities and safeguarding them from fragmentation. In instructional leadership terms, focus involved protecting the school's instructional agenda from competing demands that could dilute improvement efforts.

Although most principals highlighted the importance of maintaining a clear focus, Linda suggested that such focus is not feasible in practice:

> *I have many stakeholders I am accountable to, and each of them has priorities they expect me to address. I also have my own priorities that I consider important. So in reality, I find myself constantly moving between different ideas.*

Linda's account introduces an important qualification to the focus theme. Whereas most participants viewed focus as essential for maintaining clarity, she emphasized the practical difficulty of sustaining a limited set of priorities in the face of competing stakeholder demands. Her perspective highlights the constraints that may limit principals' ability to maintain a narrow instructional focus and suggests that focus is

not simply a matter of leadership choice but is also shaped by contextual pressures that can fragment attention and make coherence difficult to maintain.

Discussion

The current study aimed to understand how principals create and sustain clarity in their instructional leadership. Analysis of the interviews revealed three key aspects through which principals establish such clarity: transparency, consistency, and focus. Transparency was evident when principals communicated early, openly shared the reasoning behind decisions, and made instructional considerations visible. Consistency emerged when principals maintained stable expectations, aligned their actions with declared priorities, and avoided rapid shifts that could confuse teachers. Focus was reflected in their ability to concentrate on a small set of core instructional goals and filter out competing demands, enabling teachers to direct their efforts with confidence and purpose.

These findings invite a more critical consideration of how instructional leadership becomes understandable and actionable for teachers. Existing instructional leadership models have focused primarily on identifying the practices through which principals influence teaching and learning, including goal setting, curriculum coordination, instructional supervision, and professional development (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger et al., 2025). The current findings suggest that the effectiveness of these practices depends not only on whether principals perform them, but also on whether teachers understand the instructional priorities underlying them. Transparency emerged as a mechanism through which principals make instructional leadership visible by communicating instructional expectations, explaining instructional decisions, and revealing the considerations that shape those decisions. In this sense, transparency extends existing understandings of instructional leadership by highlighting the importance of making instructional priorities intelligible rather than merely communicating them. This finding complements qualitative studies showing that instructional leadership is enacted through ongoing communication and interaction rather than through formal structures alone (Goldring et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2013). While previous studies documented how principals engage with instructional issues in their daily work, the present findings suggest that the influence of those activities may depend substantially on teachers' understanding of the rationale underlying them. At the same time, Ethan's account suggests that transparency is not an unqualified good. While openness can reduce uncertainty and strengthen trust, revealing information too early may also generate resistance and complicate change efforts. This finding extends existing discussions of transparency by suggesting that openness may sometimes conflict with the strategic demands of instructional change and improvement. Transparency therefore appears to require balancing openness with strategic judgment.

The findings also highlight the importance of consistency in sustaining instructional direction over time. Although instructional leadership research has long emphasized the importance of establishing goals and expectations, the present findings suggest that clarity depends equally on maintaining those priorities over time

and reinforcing them through repeated actions. Ariela and Amit demonstrated how consistency helps prevent the fragmentation that can result from frequent changes in instructional initiatives, while Eden illustrated the importance of aligning resource allocation and organizational decisions with stated instructional goals. These findings resonate with literature on coherence and school improvement, which emphasizes the importance of sustained attention to instructional priorities (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). They also extend qualitative accounts of instructional improvement by suggesting that teachers require not only clearly articulated goals but also stable and sustained attention to those goals over time. In this sense, consistency appears to function as a mechanism through which instructional priorities remain visible, credible, and actionable in everyday school practice. At the same time, consistency may also involve tensions. Although such concerns did not emerge strongly in the present data, excessive consistency could potentially reduce adaptability and responsiveness to emerging challenges. The findings therefore suggest that effective instructional leadership requires balancing coherence with flexibility.

Focus emerged as a third mechanism through which principals create clarity in instructional leadership. Contemporary schools operate in environments characterized by competing initiatives, multiple stakeholders, and increasing accountability pressures (Hallinger et al., 2025; Pietsch et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, the participating principals described focus as both the deliberate narrowing of instructional priorities and the protection of those priorities from competing demands. Ayla and Yasmin demonstrated how limiting the number of priorities helped teachers identify what mattered most, while Oren illustrated how protecting instructional goals from external initiatives helped preserve a coherent instructional agenda. These findings suggest that focus functions as a filtering mechanism that protects instructional improvement efforts from fragmentation. In contrast to perspectives that emphasize the accumulation of instructional leadership responsibilities, the present findings suggest that effective instructional leadership may also require principals to selectively filter competing initiatives in order to preserve coherence around teaching and learning. However, Linda's account highlights an important limitation. Her experience suggests that maintaining a narrow instructional focus is not simply a matter of leadership choice but is constrained by competing stakeholder expectations and contextual demands. Focus therefore appears to be both a leadership practice and a contextual challenge.

Taken together, transparency, consistency, and focus can be understood as complementary mechanisms through which principals manage the growing complexity of contemporary instructional leadership. Transparency makes instructional priorities visible, consistency keeps those priorities stable over time, and focus protects them from fragmentation. Rather than representing isolated leadership behaviors, these three mechanisms appear to provide the conditions under which instructional leadership becomes understandable, coherent, and actionable for teachers. Existing instructional leadership models have primarily focused on identifying what principals do. The present study extends this literature by illuminating how principals make instructional priorities visible, stable, and manageable for teachers. The findings therefore suggest that clarity operates as a meta-capacity of instructional leadership, enabling principals to translate instructional goals into coherent guidance for teachers. From

this perspective, clarity is not an auxiliary feature of instructional leadership but a central condition that enables instructional leadership practices to influence teaching and learning.

This study has clear practical implications. Principals should intentionally apply clarity-building strategies by embedding transparency, consistency, and focus into their instructional leadership, thereby creating the coherence teachers need for effective instruction. Beyond individual practice, the findings have implications for leadership preparation, induction, professional development, evaluation, and policy. Preparation and induction programs should explicitly develop principals' capacity to create clarity through communicative and relational competencies, while ongoing professional learning should support principals in aligning instructional priorities with organizational structures. Leadership evaluation frameworks should recognize clarity as a core dimension of instructional leadership, and education policies should avoid overloading principals with competing demands that undermine coherent leadership.

Although this study provides new insights into how principals cultivate clarity in instructional leadership, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies solely on principals' self-reports and does not include direct observations or teacher perspectives. While this focus allows for an in-depth understanding of how principals construct and make sense of clarity in their instructional leadership, it does not capture how these practices are enacted in specific situations or how they are perceived by teachers. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating teachers' perspectives and observational data to examine how instructional leadership clarity is enacted and experienced in everyday practice.

In addition, the thematic analysis necessarily involves a level of abstraction, focusing on recurring patterns across participants rather than on detailed accounts of specific interactions. While this approach enables the identification of cross-cutting features of instructional leadership clarity, it does not capture the situational dynamics of communication in practice. Future studies could complement this approach by employing qualitative designs that focus on concrete episodes of interaction, such as observations or interaction-based analyses.

The study is also situated within the Israeli education system, and its findings may be shaped by this specific policy and cultural context. Future research could extend this work by conducting comparative studies across different national or socio-cultural settings to assess the broader applicability of the findings. Finally, the sample size did not allow for examining the prevalence or variability of the identified clarity-building practices across principals and school contexts. Future research could build on these findings by using larger samples or mixed-methods designs to explore patterns of variation and the distribution of these practices across different contexts. Despite these limitations, the study offers a unique contribution by illuminating the coherence-building and meaning-making processes through which principals enact instructional leadership.

Author contributions H.S. is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for all aspects of the study and the writing of the manuscript.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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