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Principals' Perspectives on the Role of Instructional Leadership in Their Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how principals perceive the role of instructional leadership in their well-being using Seligman's PERMA model. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 Israeli elementary school principals. Participants associated instructional leadership with Positive Emotion, Meaning, and Accomplishment, but not Engagement. They also described relational tensions, although these did not necessarily indicate deterioration in the Relationships dimension of well-being. The findings suggest that principals may experience instructional leadership as professional work through which they enact their expertise, professional identity, and educational purpose. Thus, instructional leadership may represent a source of well-being while also involving relational challenges in professional practice.

Introduction

Instructional leadership is a school leadership approach that emphasizes the principal's central role in improving teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2026b; Shaked, 2023). Although principals are often occupied with numerous administrative responsibilities, effective leaders recognize that their greatest influence lies in the quality of instruction and student learning. Consequently, they prioritize instructional leadership and engage actively in strategically planned activities aimed at strengthening the curriculum, supporting effective instructional practices, and fostering a school culture centered on learning (DeWitt, 2020). Through these efforts, principals create the organizational conditions that enable effective teaching, promote continuous improvement in classroom practice, and ultimately improve academic outcomes (Hallinger et al., 2020).

A substantial body of research links principals' instructional leadership to improved school performance, including higher teaching quality and greater student academic success (Dutta & Sahney, 2022; Gümüş et al., 2022). These positive outcomes are evident across diverse contexts, encompassing elementary and secondary schools, public and private institutions, and varied geographic and socioeconomic settings (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Pietsch et al., 2025). Thus, exhibiting effective instructional leadership has become a fundamental expectation for contemporary school principals (Hallinger, 2026b).

While this line of research has primarily focused on the organizational benefits of instructional leadership, the present study shifts attention to its implications for principals themselves. Specifically, it explores how the enactment of instructional leadership relates to principals' well-being. This question is particularly timely, as principals' well-being has emerged as a growing concern in educational research (Beausaert et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Jardine et al., 2025). As Wang (2024) argued, healthy schools require healthy principals, and sustaining an effective principal workforce depends on creating conditions that enable principals to experience positive well-being at work. Moreover, examining instructional leadership from a well-being perspective broadens our understanding of its consequences. Whereas research has largely examined instructional leadership in terms of its implications for schools, teachers, and students (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Dutta & Sahney, 2022; Pietsch et al., 2025), a well-being perspective extends this line of inquiry to the principals who enact it. In doing so, it provides a more comprehensive account of instructional leadership by considering not only what it may produce for the organization and its members, but

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also how engaging in instructional leadership is experienced by principals themselves. Against this backdrop, understanding the implications of instructional leadership for principals' well-being represents an important yet underexplored area of inquiry.

This study was conducted in the Israeli school system, which serves about two million students in approximately 5,500 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2026). In this system, principals are explicitly expected to enact instructional leadership (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2019; Shaked, 2023). This organizational context provides an important backdrop for understanding how principals experience instructional leadership. Against this background, the present study addressed the following research question: How do principals perceive the role of instructional leadership in their well-being?

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership refers to principals' efforts to improve teaching and learning by promoting high-quality instruction, supporting teachers' professional growth, and creating organizational conditions that enhance student learning (Hallinger, 2026b; Shaked, 2023). A more nuanced understanding of instructional leadership emphasizes that it is not the principal's only responsibility. Rather, successful principals are expected to balance instructional leadership with multiple managerial, organizational, and relational responsibilities and, whenever possible, integrate these responsibilities in ways that support teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2026a; Shaked, 2024). It also rejects the traditional view of instructional leadership as a top-down exercise of formal authority, instead portraying it as a collaborative process that depends on positive relationships, mutual trust, and teacher agency (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020). Over the past four decades, scholars have proposed several frameworks to conceptualize instructional leadership. Although these frameworks differ in their structure and terminology, they share a common emphasis on the principal's role in improving teaching and learning.

The framework of instructional leadership developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) has become the most widely used in the field (Hallinger et al., 2025). It is structured around three key dimensions, each encompassing specific functions. The initial dimension focuses on establishing the school's mission, comprising the tasks of setting instructional goals and ensuring their communication to relevant stakeholders. The second dimension revolves around instructional program management, entailing the coordination of curriculum, oversight and assessment of teaching, and the monitoring of student progress. The final dimension emphasizes fostering a conducive learning environment within the school, which is achieved through safeguarding instructional time, offering motivational incentives for teachers, encouraging student learning, supporting ongoing staff professional growth, and ensuring high levels of engagement and visibility from school leaders.

More recently, Stronge and Xu (2021) proposed a broader conceptualization consisting of five interconnected practices. First, principals establish and sustain a shared school vision by defining a clear direction for the school's future and fostering staff commitment so that the vision is embraced collectively. Second, they monitor and support instruction by observing classroom practice, identifying teachers' strengths and areas for improvement, and providing guidance to enhance instructional quality. Third, they coordinate and supervise curriculum implementation, ensuring that it is aligned with educational standards and school goals and enacted consistently across classrooms. Fourth, they cultivate a professional learning community by promoting collaboration, encouraging ongoing professional learning, and supporting teachers' professional growth. Finally, they use data to inform instructional decisions by collecting and analyzing evidence on student achievement and curriculum implementation to determine instructional priorities.

Building on these and other instructional leadership frameworks (Blase & Blase, 2000; Stronge et al., 2008; Weber, 1989), Shaked (2023) synthesized the literature and conceptualized instructional leadership as comprising four core elements. The first, instructional vision, involves developing a shared vision focused on student learning and achievement while building commitment to its implementation. The second, instructional program, refers to coordinating, supervising, guiding, and monitoring teaching and learning throughout the school. The third, instructional climate, emphasizes creating a positive

academic environment that encourages high expectations and supports effective teaching and learning. The fourth, developing teachers, highlights the principal's responsibility for promoting teachers' continuous professional growth and ensuring that they strengthen their instructional practice throughout their careers.

Conceptualizing Well-Being

Well-being is a multifaceted construct for which no single, universally accepted definition exists (Bautista et al., 2023). Among the various conceptualizations of well-being, this study draws on Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, a foundational and widely applied framework in the well-being research. The model conceptualizes well-being as comprising five measurable dimensions: Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A).

Positive Emotion (P) refers to the experience of pleasant emotions such as happiness, joy, optimism, and hope. Positive emotions contribute to psychological and physical well-being by enhancing motivation, improving work performance, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and fostering a positive outlook on the future. Engagement (E) reflects the extent to which individuals become deeply involved and absorbed in activities they find meaningful and enjoyable. It is characterized by concentration, commitment, and active participation, often culminating in a state of *flow*, in which individuals become fully immersed in the task at hand, lose awareness of time, and experience complete focus on the present moment. Relationships (R) emphasize the importance of developing and maintaining positive interpersonal connections. Supportive relationships with other significant individuals foster a sense of belonging, provide emotional and social support, and constitute a central source of well-being. Meaning (M) refers to the perception that one's life and activities serve a purpose beyond personal interests. Individuals experience greater well-being when they apply their strengths in pursuit of valued goals, contribute to their communities, or engage in activities that they perceive as significant and worthwhile. Such experiences provide a sense of purpose and direction in life. Accomplishment (A) represents the pursuit and attainment of personally meaningful goals. It reflects individuals' desire to achieve, master challenges, and develop competence, ultimately leading to a sense of achievement, fulfillment, and pride in one's accomplishments, even when these are not accompanied by immediate pleasure or external rewards (Goh et al., 2022; Kun et al., 2017).

These five dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and assessing individual well-being. A growing body of empirical research supports the validity of this framework. Studies have shown that both the overall model and each of its five dimensions positively predict subjective well-being while being negatively associated with adverse well-being outcomes (Jimenez et al., 2024; M. Seligman, 2018). Furthermore, higher PERMA scores have been linked to a range of desirable personal and professional outcomes, suggesting that enhanced well-being contributes to more effective functioning across multiple domains of life and work (Cabrera & Donaldson, 2024). Intervention studies have likewise demonstrated the effectiveness of PERMA-based interventions, reporting outcomes such as enhanced solution-focused thinking among students (Grant & Atad, 2022) and increased post-traumatic growth and hope (Shoshani, 2021). Given its strong theoretical foundation and extensive empirical support, the PERMA model provides an appropriate framework for examining how instructional leadership contributes to principals' well-being.

Bringing together the literatures on instructional leadership and principal well-being highlights the potential significance of instructional leadership for principals themselves, as it constitutes a central form of professional work through which they pursue the educational purposes of their role. Instructional leadership involves activities such as shaping an instructional vision, guiding teaching and learning, supporting teachers' professional growth, and monitoring educational progress (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Stronge & Xu, 2021). Such activities may provide principals with opportunities to use their professional capabilities, engage in work they value, pursue meaningful educational goals, experience progress and achievement, and interact closely with teachers. At the same time, instructional leadership is demanding work that may involve difficult conversations, accountability, competing responsibilities, and interpersonal tensions (Hallinger, 2026a; Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). Thus, there is theoretical reason to expect instructional leadership to intersect with multiple dimensions of principal well-being, but not necessarily

in uniformly positive ways. Particularly, the PERMA framework provides a multidimensional lens for examining how principals experience the relationship between instructional leadership and their well-being.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to identify principals with substantial experience in enacting instructional leadership who could provide information-rich accounts of how this work related to their well-being. The purpose of this sampling strategy was not to obtain a representative sample of principals or to estimate the prevalence of particular well-being experiences, but to examine in depth how principals who actively engaged in instructional leadership experienced its implications for their well-being. The study focused exclusively on elementary school principals, as elementary and secondary schools operate within substantially different organizational and instructional contexts.

To recruit participants, six district superintendents from Israel's educational districts were asked to recommend principals recognized for their instructional leadership. Recognition was based on the superintendents' professional judgment and familiarity with the principals' work rather than on a standardized measure or predetermined operational criterion of instructional leadership. The nominations were therefore intended to identify information-rich participants with substantial experience in instructional leadership, rather than to establish objectively that they represented particularly high levels of instructional leadership. The final sample included 15 female and seven male principals, with a mean age of 49 years and an average of seven years of experience in the principalship. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic and professional characteristics.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews designed to explore principals' perceptions and experiences of the role of instructional leadership in their well-being. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured that their responses would remain confidential, and provided informed consent. The interview protocol consisted of broad, open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on how instructional leadership related to their well-being and to describe relevant experiences from their professional practice. These questions served as flexible prompts

Table 1. Study participants' information.

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Years of experience as a principal	District (North, Haifa, Center, Tel Aviv, South, Jerusalem)
1	Adi	F	57	12	TA
2	Alice	F	56	3	S
3	Annette	M	51	4	J
4	Ariela	F	54	6	N
5	Ayla	F	49	9	J
6	Dana	F	49	3	J
7	David	M	54	9	N
8	Debra	F	44	3	C
9	Elon	M	53	11	H
10	Esther	F	46	5	N
11	Hila	F	55	14	C
12	Gabriel	M	49	12	H
13	Jacob	M	42	2	TA
14	Judith	F	44	6	H
15	Leah	F	45	8	S
16	Lily	F	44	5	C
17	Miriam	F	51	8	N
18	Nathan	M	45	6	J
19	Rebecca	F	48	11	S
20	Sarah	F	42	4	TA
21	Yael	F	39	2	H
22	Zachary	M	56	14	TA

within a semi-structured format, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and raise issues they considered relevant. Follow-up questions were used to explore participants' responses in greater depth, clarify meanings, and encourage further reflection.

The interview protocol deliberately began with broad, open-ended questions that did not reference the PERMA dimensions, allowing participants to describe in their own terms how instructional leadership related to their well-being. Only subsequently were more focused questions used to explore experiences potentially related to the five PERMA dimensions. This sequencing was intended to reduce the extent to which the theoretical framework predetermined participants' accounts and to allow experiences outside the framework to emerge.

General questions explored participants' overall perceptions of instructional leadership and its role in their well-being. Sample questions included: *What does instructional leadership mean to you in your role as a principal? Can you describe situations in which instructional leadership has influenced how you feel about your work?* and *How, if at all, does instructional leadership affect your personal well-being?* Additional questions were designed to explore specific dimensions of well-being reflected in the PERMA framework. For example, participants were asked: *Which aspects of instructional leadership do you enjoy the most? Why?* and *Does instructional leadership give your work a particular sense of purpose? Why?*

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted after the interviews had been transcribed. Participants were provided with copies of their transcripts and invited to review them for accuracy, as well as to suggest any corrections or clarifications they considered necessary. No substantive revisions were requested. This process was used to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts and participants' recorded accounts; it did not serve to validate the researcher's subsequent coding or interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Analysis unfolded in three stages: sorting, coding, and interpretation. During the sorting stage, the researcher read the interview transcripts repeatedly and identified segments that addressed principals' perceptions and experiences of how instructional leadership related to their well-being. As Miles et al. (2019) note, sorting is already an interpretive act rather than a purely technical procedure, because decisions about what to extract and foreground shape the subsequent analysis.

In the coding stage, the selected segments were coded using the PERMA framework (M. E. P. Seligman, 2011) as a deductive analytic framework. Specifically, each segment was examined to determine whether it reflected one of the five dimensions of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, or Accomplishment. Although the coding process was guided by this predefined framework, the researcher remained attentive to participants' own language and experiences throughout the analysis.

Importantly, the analysis did not assume that all participants' accounts would fit within the PERMA framework. Throughout the coding process, the researcher remained attentive to experiences and meanings that did not correspond to any of the five dimensions and considered whether these represented additional aspects of well-being or professional experience not captured by PERMA. No recurring pattern of this kind was identified in the researcher's analysis. Given the deductive nature of the analysis and the absence of independent coding, however, this finding should be interpreted cautiously rather than as evidence that the PERMA framework exhaustively captured all aspects of participants' well-being experiences.

The analysis was conducted by a single researcher, enabling sustained engagement with the full dataset and consistency across the analytic process, while also meaning that interpretations were not independently verified through inter-coder comparison. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to both convergent and divergent accounts within each PERMA dimension. Reflexivity was particularly important because the use of PERMA as a deductive framework could predispose the analysis toward interpreting participants' accounts through its five dimensions. The researcher therefore remained attentive to this possibility throughout the analysis, repeatedly returning to participants' own language, examining divergent accounts, and attending to experiences that did not fit readily within the predefined framework. These practices did not eliminate the researcher's interpretive influence or provide independent validation of the analysis, but were intended to make the role of the theoretical framework explicit rather than treating the resulting

categories as emerging independently from the data. Accordingly, the findings reflect the researcher's interpretive role in the analytic process.

The final stage involved interpreting the coded data within each PERMA dimension. In this interpretive stage, a distinction was maintained between the well-being experiences represented by the PERMA dimensions and the instructional leadership experiences or professional outcomes through which participants explained those experiences. Thus, professional expertise, professional identity, teacher development, and student achievement were not treated as well-being experiences in themselves, but as features or outcomes of instructional leadership that participants associated with particular well-being experiences. The researcher compared participants' accounts, identified recurring patterns, and examined the different ways in which participants perceived instructional leadership as relating to each dimension of well-being. This process was iterative, requiring repeated movement between the interview data and the PERMA framework to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts while accurately reflecting the theoretical constructs.

To illustrate this analytic process, within the Positive Emotion dimension, codes focused on participants' reported experiences of enjoyment, confidence, and enthusiasm, while professional expertise and connection to their professional identity as educators were interpreted as features of instructional leadership through which participants explained these positive emotional experiences. Within Meaning, codes focused on participants' sense of purpose and perceptions of their work as worthwhile, which they associated with contributing to students' long-term success and fulfilling the educational mission of the principalship. Within Accomplishment, codes focused on participants' reported sense of achievement and pride, while successful instructional initiatives and improved student achievement were treated as professional outcomes that participants interpreted as evidence of successful leadership. Within Relationships, codes focused on participants' experiences of interpersonal tension and relational strain, which they associated with dealing with ineffective teachers and enforcing high professional expectations. The Engagement dimension did not emerge in the data. These findings formed the basis for the thematic organization of the findings chapter.

Findings

This study examined how principals perceived the relationship between instructional leadership and their well-being, conceptualized through the PERMA model: Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A). Participants described instructional leadership as positively associated with Positive Emotion, Meaning, and Accomplishment. In contrast, its perceived implications for Relationships were more complex, as participants described tensions between improving instruction and maintaining harmonious relationships with teachers. Engagement did not emerge in participants' accounts. The following sections elaborate on each dimension, drawing on illustrative excerpts from participants' narratives.

Positive Emotion

Analysis of participants' accounts indicated that Positive Emotion was reflected in feelings of enjoyment, confidence, and enthusiasm associated with instructional leadership. Participants explained these positive emotional experiences in relation to several features of instructional leadership, particularly the opportunity to draw on their professional expertise, maintain continuity with their identity as educators, and engage in instructional activities they inherently enjoyed.

Debra suggested that she enjoyed instructional leadership because it was the aspect of the principalship that most closely aligned with her professional background:

> I often have to navigate areas where I have little experience, such as managing budgets or working with the school parent committee, and therefore I feel less confident. When it comes to promoting best practices in teaching, this is an area where I know exactly what to do, and therefore enjoy it much more.

Debra explained that she derives enjoyment from instructional leadership because it draws on her professional expertise. Unlike responsibilities such as financial management or working with the parent committee, which fall outside her prior experience and leave her feeling less confident, instructional leadership builds on the knowledge and skills she developed as a teacher. Rather than confronting unfamiliar managerial tasks, instructional leadership allows principals to rely on capabilities they have developed throughout their careers. This sense of competence appears to make instructional leadership a particularly rewarding aspect of the principalship.

For Rebecca, instructional leadership reconnected her with her professional identity as a teacher:

> It's all about getting back to what I love most: teaching. When I'm leading instruction, this is my way of keeping that thrill of teaching alive. I honestly love it much more than other parts of being a principal.

Leading instructional improvement enables Rebecca, despite now serving as a principal, to remain connected to her professional identity as a teacher. Her account suggests that instructional leadership allows principals to maintain continuity between their former identity as teachers and their current leadership role. Rather than feeling that becoming a principal distances them from teaching, instructional leadership enables them to remain connected to the educational work that originally motivated them to enter the profession. This continuity appears to strengthen the positive emotions associated with the role.

Dana's account highlights a third explanation for the relationship between instructional leadership and positive emotion:

> I have responsibilities that I do because I have to, and some that I would gladly do without. But guiding teachers and thinking together about instruction are a part of the job that I genuinely enjoy.

Dana distinguishes between responsibilities that are performed out of obligation and those that are inherently enjoyable. Her account suggests that principals derive enjoyment from the day-to-day activities through which instructional leadership is enacted, such as working with teachers and discussing pedagogy. Dana's account suggests that she associated these day-to-day instructional leadership activities, such as working with teachers and discussing pedagogy, with experiences of enjoyment and positive emotion.

Meaning

Participants' accounts reflected Meaning primarily through a sense of educational purpose and the perception that their work was worthwhile. They associated these experiences with remaining connected to the educational mission of the principalship, perceiving the broader impact of their work, and viewing the demands of instructional improvement as worthwhile.

Leah explained that her decision to become a principal was driven by a desire to improve teaching and learning:

> Instructional leadership reminds me why I decided to become a principal in the first place. It's not about managing a school; it's about creating better opportunities for children to learn and succeed. That sense of purpose keeps me going, even during the most difficult times.

For Leah, the essence of the principalship lies in creating better learning opportunities for students rather than managing the school's administrative responsibilities. Her account suggests that instructional leadership strengthens principals' sense of purpose by directing their attention to the educational mission that originally motivated them to assume the role. Rather than becoming absorbed in administrative demands, instructional leadership keeps them connected to the core mission of school leadership.

Annette emphasized the opportunity to influence large numbers of students:

> Every time I help a teacher grow, I know that it ultimately affects hundreds of students. That gives my work a real sense of purpose. It reminds me that what I do every day truly matters.

Annette perceives instructional leadership as a meaningful form of educational influence, highlighting the multiplier effect of developing teachers and believing that improvements in teachers' practice ultimately

benefit hundreds of students. Her account suggests that she associated the perceived broader impact of her instructional leadership with a sense of meaning and purpose. By supporting teachers' professional growth, she believed that her influence extended to the learning and lives of many students, which made her own work feel significant and worthwhile.

David reflected on the long-term impact of instructional leadership on students' lives:

> I sometimes wonder whether all the meetings and paperwork are worth it. However, at the end of the day, instructional leadership isn't about lesson plans or observations. It's about giving children a better chance to succeed in life. When I keep that in mind, all the efforts become worthwhile.

David views instructional leadership as meaningful because he associates it with students' long-term success. Although he acknowledges the sustained effort that instructional leadership requires, he believes that its ultimate purpose is to create better opportunities for children to succeed in life. His account suggests that instructional leadership helps principals perceive the often demanding and time-consuming work involved in improving teaching as worthwhile because it ultimately contributes to students' lives.

Accomplishment

Analysis of participants' accounts suggested that their sense of Accomplishment was associated with seeing the results of their instructional leadership efforts. Four types of professional outcomes served as evidence of accomplishment for participants: successful instructional innovations, improvements in the school's instructional culture, teachers' professional growth, and valued educational outcomes. These outcomes were not themselves experiences of well-being; rather, participants interpreted them as evidence that their leadership efforts had made a meaningful difference, generating feelings of achievement, fulfillment, and pride.

Esther reported a strong sense of accomplishment from successfully leading instructional innovation:

> You know, seeing those changes take root, watching our classrooms light up with innovation, it's what I'm proud of. We've been trailblazers, shaking things up for the better. There's this sense of pride that comes with being the spark for change, paving the way for an education that's cutting-edge.

Esther's account illustrates how successfully leading instructional innovation generated a sense of accomplishment. It suggests that principals experience accomplishment when instructional innovations become embedded in classroom practice, providing visible evidence that their leadership has made a meaningful difference.

Sarah described a sense of accomplishment in cultivating a school culture characterized by strong academic engagement:

> We created an environment where teaching time is protected, students are engaged inside the classroom, and teachers prepare their lessons well to teach effectively. Nowadays, you hardly ever catch students hanging out outside when they should be in class. Being at the helm of that change? It's something I take real pride in.

Sarah's reflections suggest that her sense of accomplishment arose from successfully transforming the school's instructional culture. Her account indicates that accomplishment stems from sustaining change over time until it becomes part of the school's everyday practices. The ability to shape a lasting instructional culture therefore provides principals with a strong sense of achievement.

Jacob experienced accomplishment through the professional growth of an individual teacher:

> There was one teacher who really struggled with classroom instruction. We worked together for months, observing lessons, reflecting, and trying different approaches. Then one day I walked into her classroom and saw a completely different teacher. Watching that transformation made me feel that all the effort had been worthwhile.

For Jacob, successfully supporting a teacher's professional growth demonstrated that his instructional leadership had achieved its intended purpose. His account suggests that principals experience accomplishment when they witness the visible growth of the teachers they support. The teacher's transformation provides concrete evidence that their sustained efforts have made a meaningful difference, reinforcing both their sense of accomplishment and their confidence in their leadership.

Miriam reflected on her school's performance in the national examinations:

> Seeing those scores, that's the real deal. It's not just numbers; it's a reflection of the hard work I invested together with all the teachers.

For Miriam, students' academic achievement represented the successful attainment of valued educational goals. Her account suggests that she interpreted these educational outcomes as evidence of successful instructional leadership, which she associated with a sense of accomplishment. Although she emphasized the collective efforts of the teaching staff, these results also served as visible evidence that the instructional leadership she had provided had contributed to meaningful educational success.

Relationships

Unlike the patterns that emerged for Positive Emotion, Meaning, and Accomplishment, the pattern for Relationships was more complex. Analysis of participants' accounts suggested that instructional leadership could generate interpersonal tensions by holding teachers accountable for instructional quality, making difficult instructional decisions that affect teachers, and consistently enforcing professional expectations. Participants nevertheless viewed these tensions as inherent and, at times, unavoidable consequences of effective instructional leadership, because improving instruction often required prioritizing professional expectations over immediate interpersonal comfort. Importantly, participants' accounts did not indicate that these tensions necessarily diminished the quality or value of their professional relationships. Rather, the findings point to relational tensions associated with instructional leadership without establishing a negative effect on the Relationships dimension of well-being.

Elon reflected on these tensions:

> Being everyone's friend is much easier than improving teaching. When I insist that curriculum maps are submitted on time and that teachers develop work plans based on them, some teachers become less satisfied with me.

Elon explained that pursuing instructional improvement may come at an interpersonal cost. His account suggests that accountability is one of the primary mechanisms through which instructional leadership challenges relationships with teachers. Holding teachers responsible for instructional quality may create discomfort and resistance because it requires principals to confront performance rather than simply maintain harmonious relationships. At the same time, his account did not suggest that such tension necessarily represented deterioration in the relationship itself. Indeed, he described his own perception that teachers' initial dissatisfaction could coexist with subsequent appreciation: "They are angry with me at first, but in the end they appreciate me more."

Alice described relational tension arising from dismissing an ineffective teacher harmed her relationships with other teachers:

> All the teachers knew I was right. They knew his teaching was unacceptable and that he was unlikely to improve. Still, they identified with him, became angry with me, and that created distance between us.

Alice believed that dismissing this persistently ineffective teacher was the right instructional decision. Her account suggests that instructional leadership may generate relational tension when principals make difficult decisions that prioritize instructional quality over collegial solidarity. Even when teachers recognize that such decisions are educationally justified, they may nevertheless empathize with their colleague, creating tension between professional judgment and interpersonal loyalty.

Zachary maintained strict expectations regarding teachers' timely arrival, despite knowing that doing so could make his relationships with them more difficult:

> I know teachers like me less because of this, but I show no leniency when teachers are late for school or arrive late to class after the break.

Although Zachary recognized that enforcing punctuality was not always well received by teachers, he viewed protecting instructional time as a non-negotiable responsibility. His account suggests that instructional leadership may require principals to accept reduced interpersonal popularity in order to maintain consistent

professional expectations. Rather than prioritizing immediate interpersonal harmony, principals sometimes choose to preserve instructional standards, even when doing so creates relational strain.

Discussion

This study examined how principals perceive the relationship between instructional leadership and their well-being. Participants associated instructional leadership with Positive Emotion, Meaning, and Accomplishment in several distinct ways. They described Positive Emotion in relation to opportunities to draw on their professional expertise, maintain continuity with their identity as educators, and engage in the everyday practices of teaching and learning that they found inherently enjoyable. They associated Meaning with remaining connected to the educational mission that motivated them to become school leaders, perceiving the broader influence of their work through teachers' effects on students, and viewing the sustained effort required to improve teaching as worthwhile. Finally, they described Accomplishment in relation to seeing instructional innovations become embedded in practice, observing improvements in the school's instructional culture, witnessing teachers' professional growth, and attaining valued educational outcomes. Relationships differed from these dimensions: participants described relational tensions associated with the enactment of instructional leadership, but their accounts did not establish that these tensions represented diminished relational well-being.

The findings broaden our understanding of instructional leadership by extending attention from its widely studied implications for schools, teachers, and students to the experiences of the principals who enact it. In doing so, they illuminate instructional leadership not only as a set of leadership practices directed toward improving teaching and learning, but also as a form of professional work with implications for the principals who enact it. Participants described instructional leadership as work that drew on their professional expertise, reflected their identity as educators, and advanced educational goals they deeply valued. These findings suggest that what distinguishes instructional leadership is not simply the instructional practices it encompasses, but also the ways in which principals may experience this work as congruent with their professional identity, expertise, and educational purpose. Participants associated opportunities to apply their expertise, pursue worthwhile educational goals, and witness the impact of their efforts on teaching and learning with experiences of competence, purpose, and accomplishment. Participants' accounts suggest that, among principals recognized for their instructional leadership, the demanding nature of instructional leadership did not preclude experiences of well-being; rather, demanding instructional leadership work could be experienced as a source of well-being when its core practices were closely aligned with principals' professional identity and with the educational purposes they sought to advance. This interpretation should be considered in light of the study's purposive sampling strategy. Because participants were specifically nominated as principals recognized for their instructional leadership, the positive experiences identified here may be particularly characteristic of principals who are already strongly engaged in and positively oriented toward this form of leadership. While these findings resonate with broader research on meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018), the present findings identify instructional leadership as a specific form of professional work through which principals enact their expertise, professional identity, and educational purpose.

However, the findings suggest that the Relationships dimension requires a different interpretation. Participants described instructional leadership as involving relational tensions, particularly when holding teachers accountable, making difficult instructional decisions, and enforcing professional expectations. These accounts should not be interpreted as evidence that instructional leadership negatively affected the Relationships dimension of principals' well-being. Rather, they suggest that instructional leadership may involve relational challenges as principals navigate instructional demands while seeking to maintain harmonious professional relationships. Such tensions may coexist with principals' continued valuing of their professional relationships and should not necessarily be understood as evidence of relational deterioration. The findings therefore highlight a potential tension within principals' professional experience rather than a straightforward negative association between instructional leadership and relational well-being.

Hallinger (2026a) recently argued that the widespread belief that instructional leadership is enacted through the top-down exercise of formal authority represents one of the enduring myths surrounding the

construct. Although instructional leadership requires direction, direction should not be confused with command. Rather, successful instructional leadership relies primarily on influence, the development of a shared vision of learning, professional credibility, trust, teacher agency, and the construction of shared norms (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the findings of the present study indicate that even when principals enact instructional leadership through influence rather than command, their relationships with teachers often become more complex. The participants described how holding teachers accountable, take unpopular instructional decisions and maintaining high instructional expectations generated interpersonal tensions despite avoiding authoritarian leadership practices. These findings complement Hallinger's argument by suggesting that replacing authority with influence does not necessarily eliminate the relational costs of instructional leadership. Instead, the very practices through which instructional leadership is enacted may be sufficient to create relational tension.

The dimension of Engagement did not emerge in the interviews. While principals clearly described instructional leadership as enjoyable, meaningful, and professionally rewarding, they did not portray it as an activity that generated the type of intense immersion or flow typically associated with the Engagement dimension of PERMA. The present data do not establish why Engagement did not emerge. One possible interpretation is that instructional leadership, as experienced by the participants, was characterized less by moments of complete absorption than by a sustained commitment to educational improvement. This interpretation is consistent with the view that successful instructional leadership requires principals to balance instructional leadership with multiple managerial and organizational responsibilities (Hallinger, 2026a). At the same time, principals' work is characterized by frequent interruptions and continual switching between tasks (Oplatka & Horwitz Prawer, 2026). These demands may leave relatively few opportunities for the sustained concentration typically associated with experiences of flow. This explanation remains speculative, however, and future research could examine whether the fragmented nature of principals' work helps explain the absence of Engagement in participants' accounts.

The findings have several practical implications, which should be interpreted in light of the study's design and sampling strategy. First, participants' accounts suggest that instructional leadership may be experienced by some principals not only as a means of improving teaching and learning but also as professionally rewarding work associated with aspects of well-being. In particular, participants described opportunities to apply their professional expertise, enact their identity as educators, pursue educational purposes they valued, and witness the impact of their efforts on teaching and learning. These findings may encourage leadership preparation and professional development programs to attend to how principals experience the instructional dimensions of their work, while recognizing that the present study does not establish that greater engagement in instructional leadership improves principal well-being.

Second, the findings suggest that the interpersonal tensions associated with instructional leadership should not necessarily be interpreted as signs of ineffective leadership or deteriorating relationships. Holding teachers accountable, making difficult instructional decisions, and maintaining high instructional expectations may create short-term interpersonal tensions, even when principals lead through influence rather than authority. Such tensions may coexist with, and over time potentially contribute to, professional respect for the principal's judgment and leadership. Leadership preparation, mentoring, and professional development programs should therefore help principals distinguish between immediate relational comfort and professionally grounded relationships, and develop strategies for communicating instructional expectations clearly, conducting difficult professional conversations, and maintaining respect while addressing weaknesses in instructional practice.

Finally, the findings may have implications for how policymakers think about the conditions under which principals engage in instructional leadership. Participants perceived opportunities to engage in instructional leadership as professionally rewarding and associated them with important aspects of their well-being. The present study does not establish that increasing instructional leadership will improve principals' well-being. Rather, it suggests that future research should examine whether organizational conditions that enable principals to remain engaged with the instructional core of their work are also related to how they experience their professional roles.

This study contributes to the instructional leadership literature by broadening understanding of its consequences beyond schools, teachers, and students to include the principals who enact it. By examining instructional leadership through a multidimensional well-being lens, the findings further suggest that

participants perceived its relationship with their well-being differently across PERMA dimensions, highlighting both opportunities for well-being and more complex relational dynamics. At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study was conducted with elementary school principals within the specific context of the Israeli education system, which is characterized by distinctive policy and organizational features (Shaked et al., 2021). Both the national context and the organizational characteristics of elementary schools may have shaped participants' experiences, particularly the relational dynamics associated with instructional leadership. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually situated rather than assumed to characterize principals' experiences across school levels or educational systems. Future research should examine whether similar patterns emerge among secondary school principals and in educational systems characterized by different policy contexts and organizational cultures.

Second, the sampling strategy introduces an important source of potential positive selection bias. Because participants were nominated by district superintendents as principals recognized for their instructional leadership, they may have been more committed to, confident in, or positively oriented toward instructional leadership than principals more generally. Moreover, nominations reflected superintendents' professional judgments rather than a standardized measure or predetermined operational criterion of instructional leadership. Their accounts may therefore foreground the well-being resources associated with instructional leadership and underrepresent more negative, ambivalent, or disengaged experiences. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted primarily as illuminating how principals already recognized for instructional leadership experience its relationship with their well-being, rather than as representing principals' experiences more generally. Future research should include principals with varying levels of engagement in and orientation toward instructional leadership to examine whether the patterns identified here extend beyond principals recognized as strong instructional leaders.

Third, the findings are based on principals' self-reported perceptions and experiences. Although this approach was appropriate for understanding how principals make sense of the contribution of instructional leadership to their well-being, future studies could incorporate the perspectives of teachers, supervisors, or other stakeholders to examine how principals' instructional leadership practices are experienced by others and how these relate to principals' well-being.

Fourth, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher and did not include independent coding or researcher triangulation. Although repeated engagement with the transcripts supported consistency in interpretation, the analysis inevitably reflects the researcher's interpretive perspective. This limitation is particularly relevant given the deductive use of the PERMA framework, which may have sensitized the researcher to experiences represented by its dimensions while making alternative conceptualizations less salient. Consequently, the absence of recurring patterns outside the PERMA framework should also be interpreted cautiously. Future studies could incorporate multiple researchers or other forms of analytic triangulation to examine the robustness of the patterns identified here.

Fifth, the study adopted a qualitative design with a purposive sample, enabling an in-depth exploration of principals' experiences but not statistical generalization. Future research could build on these findings by using quantitative or mixed-methods designs to examine the relationships between instructional leadership and the different dimensions of well-being across larger and more diverse samples of principals. Such studies could explore whether these relationships vary according to principals' characteristics and school contexts, including gender, leadership experience, school level, school size, accountability pressures, and organizational culture. Finally, future research could examine whether principals' well-being mediates the relationship between instructional leadership and important educational outcomes, such as teacher commitment, instructional quality, school climate, principal retention, and student learning.

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