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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP'S LOST HOURS: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF ROLE DISTORTION AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINT

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Abstract

Research consistently shows that effective instructional leadership drives student success. This multi-case study investigates a critical, yet often overlooked, disconnect in school administration: the structural fragility of the preparation-to-practice pipeline. The study posits a substantial misalignment between the demanding expectations established by research, policy, and professional standards, and the actual systemic capacity principals possess to enact instructional leadership practices daily. Using Interpretive Description, the study examines how this efficacy gap contributes to the persistent disparity between the time principals are expected to devote to instructional tasks and the time they actually spend on them. Findings reveal that the absence of a coherent, standardized, and comprehensive system for developing and supporting principals' instructional expertise, combined with limited professional autonomy, has an unintended consequence: school leaders lack both the time and specialized skill set required to develop teachers effectively. Consequently, their focus on the core work of teaching and learning is constrained, ultimately hindering student achievement.

Keywords

Instructional Leadership, Principal Development, Leadership Practices, School Administration, Principal Preparation

Introduction

The principal's role has transformed significantly under 21st-century accountability mandates, moving the primary focus from managerial tasks to instructional leadership and the core business of teaching and learning (Wallace Foundation, 2012). However, this theoretical expectation is often unmet in practice. Field observations show that principals consistently allocate minimal time to instructional duties, with new administrators modeling this managerial focus. This theoretical priority is undermined by the compounding weight of non-negotiable operational and administrative demands (e.g., facility oversight, complex budgeting, scheduling, and crisis management) and extensive state and federal compliance mandates. In addition, managing staff relationships, evaluations, and professional development, alongside addressing student discipline and behavioral issues, often takes precedence, particularly in schools with high staff turnover or complex student populations. Building and maintaining relationships with diverse parents, community members, and district officials is essential but time-consuming, pulling the principal out of classrooms and curriculum discussions.

Despite high expectations, a critical unanswered question remains: How does the systemic preparation-to-practice pipeline fail to equip principals with the sustained time commitment and requisite high-leverage practical competencies (such as expert instructional coaching skills or comprehensive data analysis knowledge) required for effective instructional leadership? This systemic failure (not simply a matter of time management) undermines principals' ability to prioritize instructional leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is both pragmatic and theoretical. The findings will inform practitioners about the adequacy of school leaders' instructional leadership preparation, understanding, and current practices. The

findings will also contribute to a growing body of research literature that examines how principal development related to improving instructional leadership needs to be a systematic, intentional effort supported by top district officials.

More specifically, this study investigates: principals' understanding and enactment of their role; the factors constraining their instructional focus; the adequacy of existing preparation and support systems; and the disconnect between professional expectations and actual daily practices.

This study suggests that the absence of a **coherent, comprehensive, and intentional framework** for developing and supporting principals' instructional capacity ultimately yields adverse downstream effects for teaching quality and student academic outcomes. We contend that despite the dedication and passion of most leaders, principals rarely engage systematically in core instructional leadership behaviors because the preparation-to-practice pipeline – including university coursework, district training, support, and mentoring programs – fails to provide a holistic and purposeful approach to developing and enacting the necessary expertise.

The following questions guided this study:

RQ 1: How do principals understand and implement their role as instructional leaders, and what factors significantly limit their instructional focus?
RQ 2: How do principals perceive the adequacy of their professional preparation and support in developing and sustaining instructional leadership knowledge and skills?

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

While the existing literature establishes a strong consensus on instructional leadership's critical importance, core functions, and indirect link to student achievement, and while it documents the widely-recognized gap between theoretical expectation and managerial reality, it fails to adequately investigate the systemic and intentional development and support structures required to equip principals with the necessary competencies to consistently execute instructional leadership, which is the central focus of the current study.

Evolution of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership (IL) has emerged as a prominent and enduring paradigm in educational administration beginning with the groundbreaking work of Edmonds (1979) and expanding during the effective schools movement in the 1980s, persisting as a relevant model in contemporary, accountability-focused educational environments (Hallinger, 2009; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990). However, the term "instructional leadership" has been defined in various ways (both broadly and more precisely), without consensus on what, exactly, it should translate into in the day-to-day practices of school leaders, and how to measure it. There is general agreement on the importance and core focus of instructional leadership, but less consensus on a single, precise definition among researchers (Horng & Loeb, 2010; The Education Hub, 2021). The term "instructional leadership" is often used as an umbrella that includes related concepts such as "pedagogical leadership" and "learning-centered leadership" (The Education Hub, 2021).

The body of scholarly work establishes a strong consensus regarding the nature and key responsibilities of instructional leadership. Fundamentally, instructional leadership is defined as the leadership function directly tied to the improvement of student learning (Hallinger, 2005). It specifically encompasses the leader's actions and responsibilities aimed at directly influencing instructional and student learning outcomes within the school (Terosky, 2016). Effective instructional leaders, Terosky argues, prioritize strategies that enhance teaching and learning. Their critical responsibilities include setting a clear vision for academic success, establishing clear goals, providing operational support for teachers, and promoting collaborative practices that ultimately lead to improved student outcomes (Terosky, 2016). Furthermore, scholarly consensus outlines a consistent set of functions essential to IL, including developing specific teaching and learning objectives, holding high expectations for students, monitoring learner progress, coordinating the curriculum, protecting essential instructional time, and supporting continuous professional learning for teachers.

Researchers agree that the central goal of instructional leadership is the improvement of curriculum, instruction, and student achievement (EBSCO, 2025; The Education Hub, 2021). This thinking represents a strategic shift for principals' roles from handling purely managerial tasks to concentrating on the core business of teaching and learning (EBSCO, 2025; NAESP, 2009).

The conceptual foundation for IL, and the basis for subsequent measurement tools, is rooted in the seminal framework developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985, 1986). Their model defines the instructional leadership construct through a detailed framework of three core dimensions that remain widely cited: defining the school's mission and goals; managing the instructional program (e.g., monitoring instruction, coordinating curriculum, approving assessments, and providing feedback); and fostering a positive school learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990).

Furthermore, research widely accepts that a leader's influence on student achievement is mostly indirect, operating primarily through factors like influencing teachers' motivation, knowledge, skills, and working conditions, rather than direct instruction to students (Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Nettles & Herrington, 2007).

Despite these areas of commonality, there are also areas of variation and evolving views on what instructional leadership really means. The lack of a singular definition stems from variations in the scope of practice and the distribution of the role.

Historically, some literature emphasizes a traditional, "hands-on" view where the principal is an expert directly involved in classroom supervision and coaching (Horng & Loeb, 2010; NAESP, 2009). However, a more expanded view now encompasses broader organizational management for instructional improvement (Horng & Loeb, 2010). This includes strategic practices such as effective staffing, resource allocation, and creating structures for collaborative professional learning (HMH, 2023; Horng & Loeb, 2010).

While the Hallinger and Murphy framework provided the theoretical groundwork, contemporary models have refined and operationalized IL to address modern systemic challenges, particularly concerning resource management and talent development. According to a study conducted by Dewi (2021), for instance, the UWCEL 4D Instructional Leadership Framework organizes IL around four integrated dimensions: Vision, Mission, and Learning-Focused Culture; Shared Vision of Effective Instruction (Marshaling Resources); Improvement of Instructional Practice (Observation, Analysis, Support for Teacher Growth); and Management of Systems and Processes (Talent Management, Equitable Resource Allocation). The core of IL remains the active engagement in pedagogical improvement, but a significant expansion in contemporary IL models is the integration of organizational management with instructional goals. This dimension covers the strategic and operational systems necessary for effective schooling (Southworth, 2002; Dewi, 2021). The argument made is that instructional leaders must identify and innovatively leverage resources (including time, money, technology, expertise, and space) equitably for the maximum benefit of all students.

This strategic linkage to resource allocation ensures that instructional initiatives are properly funded and supported. In addition, according to Dewi (2021), the talent management function involves using data to establish priorities for recruiting, selecting, inducting, supporting, evaluating, and developing staff. It also includes engaging in ongoing succession planning and creating supportive working environments that provide the necessary time and space for collaboration (Dewi, 2021).

The explicit connection between IL and human resource management (Talent Management) and financial fairness (Equitable Resource Allocation) demonstrates that contemporary IL is not a purely educational concept, but an integrated organizational strategy. This linking of resource fairness and strategic staffing to high-quality instruction ensures that academic success is accessible to all students, irrespective of demographic variables.

The Role of the Principal

The role of the school principal has also fundamentally and continuously changed over time, evolving from a primarily managerial position to a complex, multi-faceted leadership role with an intense focus on instructional quality (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Historically, particularly up until the mid-20th century, the principal was often seen as the "middle manager", primarily responsible for organizational tasks such as overseeing facilities, managing budgets, enforcing compliance with district rules, and maintaining discipline (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Wallace Foundation, 2012). This traditional role was focused on the administrative operation of the school building.

The most significant shift began with the school effectiveness movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, which led to the modern emphasis on the principal as the instructional leader (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Driven by standards-based reform and accountability measures since the early 2000s, this evolution mandates that principals focus their efforts on curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher development to improve student academic achievement (Chairez, 2022; Wallace Foundation, 2012). The modern principal is expected to be a visionary leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of change, constantly monitoring instructional quality, providing targeted feedback, and leading professional learning communities (NAESP, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Research confirms this focus is critical, as a principal's instructional leadership is consistently linked to positive outcomes for both teacher performance and student achievement (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1999).

The central challenge for today's principal is that managerial responsibilities have not diminished; rather, they have been compounded by new instructional expectations and increasing societal pressures (McPeake, 2017; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Contemporary principals must now balance managerial tasks with the expansive new expectations of instructional leadership, operational oversight (especially concerning safety and technology), and responding to social/emotional needs exacerbated by recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chairez, 2022; NAESP, 2021). This role expansion has led to principals reporting a significant increase in total weekly work hours and higher levels of stress, making strategic support and the delegation of administrative tasks crucial for the sustainability of the position (Chairez, 2022; NAESP, 2021; Wallace Foundation, 2012).

The concept of "school leadership" has also evolved, from focusing on the principal as the sole "heroic" instructional leader to recognizing the necessity of distributed leadership, where the responsibility for instructional

improvement is shared among the principal, lead teachers, instructional coaches, and other staff (EBSCO, 2025; Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Leadership is viewed not as a fixed role belonging to one individual, but as a set of emergent practices resulting from the interactions among leaders, followers, and their specific school context (Spillane, 2006). The distributed leadership theory moves beyond the classical idea of delegation and introduces the concept of an organizational culture where people are empowered to take leadership roles when they are well-equipped to do so and feel it would be beneficial for the organization (Leemans, 2020). A distributed perspective encourages researchers to ask not just *who* takes on a leadership role, but *how* leadership is distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation (Spillane, 2006). This requires moving the unit of analysis from the individual leader to the daily enactment of leadership routines and functions (Spillane, 2005).

Principals' Preparation, Development, and Support Programs

Principal preparation programs consistently shift their focus from analyzing research-based, theoretical approaches and concepts to practices that support the improvement of teaching and learning. Gurley et al. (2016), Aas and Paulsen (2019), Hallinger (2005), and Brazer and Bauer (2013) describe programs that emphasize instructional leadership through distributed practices and strategic alignment with school missions. Several studies, including Almager et al. (2021), Aas and Paulsen (2019), and Lashway (2002), report that ongoing, individualized coaching and mentoring – as well as immersive, job-embedded experiences – enhance participants' practical skills and leadership confidence. Fink and Resnick (2001) and Hayes and Irby (2020) note that aligning program content with real-world accountability pressures is vital, even as Backor and Gordon (2015) and Lashway (2002) highlight variability in the quality and depth of field experiences and induction support.

Differences in program implementation become apparent across contexts. For example, European initiatives (Aas & Paulsen, 2019) stress digital competence and collaborative learning, while U.S. programs (Murphy, 1988; Backor & Gordon, 2015) tend to rely on internships, cohort models, and structured induction.

Notable key takeaways include a central emphasis on shifting toward instructional leadership and distributed leadership practices and the value of coherent coaching, mentoring, and experiential learning in building leadership capacity. At the same time, variations in program effectiveness do exist, and they are tied to the quality of field experiences, faculty expertise, and alignment with school contexts.

The thematic analysis across tens of peer-reviewed research articles confirmed that instructional leadership has been the central focus of contemporary preparation models, moving away from traditional analysis of theoretical models. The studies converged on several common threads representing practices perceived as most effective. Studies frequently emphasized the value of job-embedded experiences, internships, and problem-based learning (Almager et al., 2021; Brazer & Bauer, 2013). This component was reported to enhance practical skills and readiness for leadership roles. Ongoing, individualized, and context-specific coaching was consistently identified as a critical component, with some of the studies reviewed detailing its implementation (Almager et al., 2021; Aas & Paulsen, 2019). This practice is viewed as essential for skill development and improving principal confidence. Recent studies included distributed or shared leadership as a program component, highlighting a consensus that instructional improvement is a collective responsibility (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; DeMarco & Gutmore, 2021; Colquitt, 2024; Green, 2024; Raymond, 2024). Program evaluation and professional development were also deemed critical in principal development. Assessment and evaluation of the preparation program itself were documented in multiple studies (e.g., Barnet, 2004), demonstrating an emphasis on continuous quality improvement and curriculum alignment.

Despite the consensus on *what* effective preparation should include, the review of literature also illuminated significant gaps and implementation challenges that hinder program effectiveness. Access and resource constraints were a major hurdle; the issue of limited time for internships, competing demands on aspiring or new principals, and general resource constraints limit the ability to deliver high-quality, sustained experiential learning and induction support (Lashway, 2002; Backor & Gordon, 2015; Hayes & Irby, 2020; Almager et al., 2021). The quality of preparation and consistency are also highly variable. Studies reported challenges with the inconsistent quality of field experiences and limited access to effective coaching or mentoring, with some principals reporting feeling inadequately prepared for their instructional roles (Lashway, 2002; Barnet, 2004; Backor & Gordon, 2015; Hayes & Irby, 2020; Almager et al., 2021). Lastly, there are reported issues with the misalignment between program curricula and the practical realities of school leadership, including the lack of faculty expertise in current IL practice and a failure to rigorously evaluate whether program outputs translate into effective instructional actions once principals are on the job (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Barnet, 2004; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Backor & Gordon, 2015; Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Hayes & Irby, 2020).

In addition, research acknowledges that leadership practices are not universal; they are shaped by the context in which they occur (Hallinger, 2018; Hirsh et al., 2023; Noman et al., 2024). Key contextual factors include school demographics (student population – e.g., socioeconomic status, English Language Learners, special education – and staff demographics); organizational structure and the role of the central office (e.g., bureaucratic vs. supportive); level of principal autonomy and availability of resources; and community relations (the relationship between the school and its surrounding community).

In essence, while the theoretical models for principal preparation, development, and support are mature and strategically focused on instructional leadership (drawing heavily on models like Hallinger's), the research suggests a profound, systemic gap exists in the consistent, high-quality delivery of experiential learning, ongoing coaching, and structured induction and support necessary to turn knowledge into practical, time-prioritized instructional leadership. In addition, while the research consistently identifies preparation gaps, most studies remain conceptual, suggesting a need for more empirical validation of program effectiveness.

Methodology

Research Design and Methodological Framework

This qualitative, multi-case study is guided by the methodological framework of **interpretive description** (ID) (Thorne, 2016). ID was developed within applied disciplines to generate knowledge that is both theoretically sound and practically useful (Thorne et al., 1997). Its core aim is to produce insights that can inform and improve professional practice, making it particularly well-suited for studying instructional leadership among school principals.

The primary advantage of ID lies in its pragmatic, practice-oriented focus. Rather than simply describing experiences, it seeks to construct a coherent interpretive account that bridges the subjective experiences of participants with the objective realities of their professional contexts (Thorne, 2008, 2016). In this study, ID provides the analytical lens for exploring how principals understand, experience, and negotiate the constraints on their instructional leadership time – the central problem underlying the study.

The framework also supports the integration of multiple qualitative data sources – focus groups, individual interviews, and documentary evidence (artifacts and professional standards) – allowing researchers to move beyond thematic categorization toward conceptual explanation. ID accommodates this complexity by enabling the development of typologies or models that illustrate relationships among key variables such as preparation, efficacy, time-on-instructional task, and professional expectations.

Finally, ID ensures that findings maintain contextual richness, acknowledging that the meaning and efficacy of instructional leadership are constructed by principals within their specific school environments and preparation experiences. As such, ID aligns seamlessly with the multi-case study design, offering a structured yet flexible methodological foundation for producing actionable, practice-informed insights into leadership preparation and enactment (Thorne et al., 1997).

Participants

Purposeful sampling identified principals with demonstrated engagement in instructional leadership practices. The participants include five building principals from Metro Detroit and Western Michigan, representing diverse demographics, professional backgrounds, and work contexts (traditional and charter public schools). Principals were also selected based on their established relationships of trust with the investigators through prior professional engagement.

Data Collection Procedures

Focus Group

Following the expression of interest, participants were provided with comprehensive information detailing the virtual discussion session, which was conducted via Zoom. This focus group lasted approximately two hours and served a dual purpose: to collect essential demographic data and to facilitate a collaborative dialogue. The core of the session centered on principals' subjective understanding of instructional leadership and their perceived enactment of practices that embody it. This format created an environment for shared reflection and collective meaning-making regarding the role. To provide a space for follow-up and ethical closure, an optional debrief session was offered to interested participants within one month of the initial focus group interview.

Individual Interviews

Following the focus group, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the same principals to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their preparation, training, experiences, level of support received, leadership approaches, and time-on-task. Interviews were conducted virtually (with participants given multiple options), audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Combining focus group and individual interview data enhanced the depth and breadth of understanding across both collective and individual levels.

Artifacts and Document Review

Artifacts (such as calendar entries, personal notes, journal entries, etc.) were examined when available. These documents illuminated how principals interpret and enact instructional leadership principles in authentic school contexts. Available artifacts were coded and analyzed to identify patterns and trends in leadership development.

Document analyses have the potential to contextualize and extend empirical findings. As Saldaña (2016) notes, documents can reveal "the expectations, values, interests, beliefs, and ideologies of people" and thus "should be examined critically to establish the meaning of such social products" (p. 162). Reviewed materials included research literature on instructional leadership, the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). These documents were descriptively coded for key constructs and grouped into conceptual families, which were then compared with qualitative data to triangulate and refine interpretations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a multi-method, multi-level process grounded in interpretive description (ID) (Thorne, 2016) to ensure the findings applied to professional practice. The overall analysis strategy utilized four main techniques: coding, pattern matching, time series analysis (TSA), and word analysis.

The core qualitative analysis followed a multi-level coding process consistent with Saldaña's (2016) strategies. The process began with structural coding, which assigned content-based phrases aligned with the study's research questions and conceptual categories, including two predetermined areas (*Challenges* and *Roles of a Principal)*, with the provision for a third category (*Mindset*) to emerge inductively from the data. Subsequent stages involved descriptive coding to summarize primary topics and pattern coding to identify broader cross-case themes and interpretive linkages.

Word Analysis, embedded within this thematic approach, was specifically applied to the transcripts from the focus group discussions and individual interviews. This systematic technique identified key words, concepts, and semantic patterns to determine the principals' subjective understanding of instructional leadership and the commonalities in their described practices, thereby facilitating the construction of the interpretive account central to the ID framework.

Time Series Analysis (TSA) was applied to the available principals' work-time artifacts. By tracking longitudinal temporal data (e.g., time-on-task, minutes per day or week) dedicated to instructional tasks versus operational and managerial duties, TSA was employed to detect behavioral trends and cyclical allocation patterns (e.g., identifying seasonal dips in instructional focus). Crucially, TSA provided quantitative corroboration to test the relationship between a principal's perceived efficacy, derived from the qualitative findings, and their sustained temporal commitment to instructional tasks, thereby rigorously addressing the core *time-allocation gap*.

Through this iterative process, data from all sources – focus groups, interviews, artifacts, and documents – were triangulated to develop a cohesive, practice-informed understanding of the phenomenon. This aligns with ID's emphasis on applied insight, ensuring that findings contribute both to theoretical understanding and professional practice in educational leadership.

Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed multiple validation strategies. Triangulation across data sources ensured convergence of findings and strengthened internal validity (Patton, 1990). Peer debriefing sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted during data analysis to test interpretive accuracy and guard against researcher bias. Finally, a rich description provided a strong contextual account to support transferability to similar educational settings.

Findings

Our summary of findings is organized around the three main areas of the study: instructional leadership, role of the principal, and preparation and support systems. The findings address the stated research questions:

RQ 1: How do principals understand and implement their role as instructional leaders, and what factors significantly limit their instructional focus?
RQ 2: How do principals perceive the adequacy of their professional preparation and support in developing and sustaining instructional leadership knowledge and skills?

The Instructional Leadership Gap

The analysis of qualitative data, derived from multi-level coding (Saldaña, 2016) and Word Analysis on principal interviews and focus groups, resulted in a relevant interpretive account (Thorne, 2016) of the systemic barriers constraining instructional leadership (IL) practice. The core finding is that the instructional leadership gap is a problem of systemic implementation fidelity, rooted in misaligned support structures rather than a lack of principal knowledge or dedication.

Principals' Understanding of Instructional Leadership (IL)

Participants demonstrated a strong conceptual alignment with research-based models of instructional leadership, defining it primarily as a systematic process to improve teaching and learning. However, this knowledge consistently clashed with the practical reality of their daily roles, resulting in a pervasive thematic pattern termed the "Aspiration-Constraint Dichotomy," which participants frequently expressed through the "But" Statement (e.g., "I know I should be... *but* the reality is a fire drill...").

Conceptual Alignment (What Principals Say):

Principals articulated that instructional leadership is their most critical role, requiring a systemic approach centered on the school's vision and structures (CM, MB, MK, JR). Core components consistently mentioned include: teacher development – coaching, modeling best practices, and delivering professional development that is responsive to teacher needs; data-driven approaches – establishing a coherent process for monitoring instruction, including looking at interim assessments and identifying why students are or are not learning (CM); and curriculum viability – ensuring the school uses a rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum that acts as a comprehensive roadmap, rather than just a textbook (MK).

> To me, instructional leadership is all in the structure. […] How do you structure your building and prepare your building for instruction? What instructional leadership team are you building? How are you looking at the data? What type of data points are you looking at? How are you planning to develop your teachers professionally?
> What are you doing in your PLC (Professional Learning Community), on a weekly basis? What are you doing on a day-to-day basis? Like, say for example, 60 to 80 percent of your time should be spent doing that. How are you driving instruction? How do you know that the kids are learning? (MB, Focus Group)

The Mindset Gap and Practical Reality (What Principals Do)

The *Word Analysis* revealed that every principal's aspiration was immediately qualified by external constraint, signaling a profound deficit in the professional agency needed to enact IL consistently. "I know I should be spending two hours a day in classrooms, coaching teachers, and debriefing. I know that's the research. But the day-to-day reality is a fire drill, literally and figuratively. I'm lucky if I get 45 minutes." (KB, Focus Group)

Instructional leadership was described as the most important function of a principal; however, an analysis of principals' calendars and their descriptions of "a day on the job" shows that less time is allocated to this function compared to other areas of school leadership.

This struggle reflects a fundamental Mindset Gap: compliance vs. competence. Principals are functionally required to prioritize compliance and administrative tasks, even when they know instruction is the key lever for student success. "The research says I should be a master coach; my district says I'm the chief compliance officer. I spend 80% of my time trying to avoid a lawsuit or filling out a report. That takes precedence over a curriculum discussion every single time." (CM, Focus Group)

One principal states:

> I think that I was able to understand what good instruction was supposed to look like because I taught for 12 years. I became a national board-certified teacher. That was a grueling process where I discovered so much about what I didn't know about good teaching, so I brought that into the principalship, and I think an instructional leader is able to model best practices, support teachers, and hold them accountable. Especially having a framework like Danielson from which to operate, using the data, like M. said, to drive what we do, but I just want to say that as a principal, I know what it's supposed to look like, but there are so many competing factors that don't allow me to do the kind of instructional leadership work I wanted to do. Operations is huge; who's going to clean the bathrooms? (MK, Focus Group)

The qualitative analysis revealed an unexpected issue: the Mindset Gap is a systemic challenge extending far beyond the principals' time management struggles, encompassing the deeply held low expectations of various educational stakeholders – including teachers, parents, and students – regarding students' capacity for high academic achievement. Educational achievement is significantly influenced by psychological factors, including beliefs about intelligence and belonging (Rattan et al., 2015). All participating principals reported a core, constant, demanding conflict in attempting to shift these restrictive belief systems within the school and community. The challenge was frequently distilled into the single, urgent phrase, "They need to buy in!" – a reference to overcoming teacher resistance to implementing new instructional methods or inspiring students and parents to adopt a college-ready mindset. Such resistance ultimately affects educational outcomes and students' potential for high academic achievement.

One principal elaborated:

> It is very challenging to work with the teachers because many hold fixed beliefs about whether students can or cannot achieve, and many of them believe that they cannot. The students' mindsets [show] limited confidence in their ability to achieve, and this often mirrors their parents' beliefs. Parents don't believe that the kids can achieve. *(KB, Individual Interview)*

The Principal's Role and Constraining Factors **(RQ 1)**

The constant tension between the ideal IL role and daily functions led to the emergence of the central theme: Role Distortion and Managerial Triage.

Principals overwhelmingly described their actual day-to-day existence as one of Reactive Management. Their function is to triage immediate crises, managing down chaotic situations to maintain a sufficient level of order, allowing classrooms to merely operate, rather than flourish.

(MB) described deliberately "blocking out" times for classroom walkthroughs, acknowledging that outside of that chunk, they are "shutting everything off" to handle unpredictability and constant interruptions. Similarly, (CM) detailed a planned, instructionally focused day that is derailed by "behavioral issues", "teachers crying", and demands from central management or facilities that consume 30-minute meeting slots when an email would suffice.

All participants in the study talked about building relationships. One of the principals placed a high focus on building relationships with their students and peer principals in the district (CM). Another principal talked extensively about developing relationships with teachers and the greater community (MK).

Constraining Factors

The primary factors limiting the instructional focus are external, systemic, and deeply rooted in the organizational structure of the district:

Non-Negotiable Demands (Time Constraint) included student discipline, family concerns – "They want to talk to the principal, and right then" (KB), and unexpected meetings from HR, facilities, or central management. These constantly consume the time that principals attempt to block out for instruction.

Compliance Over Instruction: Extensive state and federal compliance mandates (e.g., special education protocols, detailed reporting) were universally cited as priority-consuming tasks that force principals into a "chief compliance officer" role rather than a "master instructional coach" role.

Lack of Autonomy and Resources: The most vocal principal criticized the "big bureaucracy" that provided minimal autonomy over budgets and staffing (MK). This lack of control forced them to seek outside support (e.g., finding furniture, seeking community partners) and left them under-resourced, unable to hire the administrative support needed to delegate operational tasks.

Inability or Unwillingness to Distribute Leadership: Principals in the study frequently found it difficult to enact distributed leadership. Data analyzed showed that this difficulty stemmed from three main categories of obstacles: structural or organizational limitations, staff readiness and engagement issues, and personal or cultural resistance within the school environment.

One principal reflected on their growth as a leader, admitting, "The delegation piece has been a difficult thing for me because I just like to do things, and I just go. And sometimes that becomes difficult. But in developing and managing my time and efforts over the last few years, I am learning to delegate more" (JR).

Another principal shared four main reasons for their struggle to delegate more: ultimate accountability, the desire for personal connection, specific organizational constraints on delegation, and a personal tendency toward hands-on work.

> I also feel similarly, delegation is one of the things that is the hardest thing to do for me, and to what M. [another participating principal] was saying, there's definitely a lot of shared responsibility in each [leadership] area, but ultimately, at the end of the day, I can't delegate away the fact that it stops with me and it starts with me, both. I can't delegate that away, but I would say the area that I delegate the most is operations. […] It's also easy for me to delegate a lot of our culture initiatives to my Dean, but then again, at the end of the day, I have to know every kid, and I have to know every family, because when it really comes down to it, they all want to hear from me on some level, right? Then, teaching and learning, I don't get to delegate that one as much as I would like. I am the only person on the leadership team who is able to evaluate and coach teachers. At our high schools in our network, we do have Assistant School Directors who can evaluate and coach, and I fulfilled that role, but our middle schools don't have that role, and I do find that a little difficult at times because I would like to share the responsibility of evaluating and coaching the 25 teachers I have […], but I can't (CM).

The comparison with research reveals a stark contrast: research advocates that the majority of time should be spent on IL (MB mentioned 60% to 80%). In reality, principals estimate their direct IL time is often dramatically less, sometimes confessing to 5% to 10% for instructional planning and observing instruction (MK, CM, KB).

Principals engage in managerial triage because it is perceived as survival-critical (MB), whereas IL tasks are perceived as optional or deferrable within the immediate political climate.

***Preparation, Development, and Support* (RQ 2)**

The constraints on enactment are reinforced by weaknesses in the professional support pipeline, which suffers from systemic incoherence.

Misalignment in Preparation

While principals generally affirmed that preparatory programs provided necessary "fundamental knowledge" (theory, frameworks such as Danielson or Marzano), they lacked the experiential depth needed to build practical efficacy, specifically instructional expertise.

> The coursework was strong on theory... But I was trained to handle a bus issue and a budget line. I was not trained on how to conduct a high-stakes, differentiated teacher evaluation or lead a complex curriculum mapping session. That skill was just assumed. (CM, Individual Interview)

This finding directly links the preparation model (focusing on administrative certification, theoretical concepts, and organization management) to the Role Distortion observed in practice.

Socio-Cultural Context

All participants agreed that principals should be trained to be instructional leaders by their school district primarily, because these entities have a particular vision of instruction, teacher development and evaluation, and curriculum. The socio-cultural context serves as a critical framework layer, acknowledging that leadership practices are not universal, but are shaped by the context in which they occur.

Data sets from the interviews and focus groups were coded to identify how these contextual factors influence the principals' leadership. Findings included principals describing having a vision for a strong instructional culture, but being unable to implement it due to a lack of resources, a highly bureaucratic central office, school demographics (socioeconomic status, large number of English Language Learners and Special Education students), and the level of principal autonomy.

Inconsistent Support Reinforces Managerialism

Participants unanimously identified mentorship, coaching, and peer collaboration as the most beneficial and desired forms of development, but noted their inconsistent quality and availability. In terms of coaching, the most effective support cited was consistent, real-time, one-on-one coaching from a principal manager or external consultant (CM, MB, JR). One principal found their central management coach to be highly effective, pushing them to focus 80% of their one-on-one time on teaching and learning. However, they noted this coaching support was taken away in their second year due to financial and logistical reasons, highlighting the structural fragility of beneficial support (CM).

Principals stressed the immense value of peer-to-peer learning and collegiality, but lamented the difficulty of being "vulnerable" or transparent about struggles with colleagues within their district's central management structure. They wished for mandated, dedicated time with other principals outside of the compliance-driven district meetings (CM, MK, MB).

Systemic failure also emerged as a variable influencing principal support and development. The systems meant to support growth (induction programs and field experiences) often skew toward "managerial survival tactics" (MK, MB, KB), effectively training new leaders to cope with running from one emergency to another, rather than lead instruction. This perpetuates the cycle of Role Distortion observed in the time-use data.

Conclusion of Qualitative Analysis

The similarity between principals and research is the intellectual recognition that instructional leadership (IL) is the job's core. The critical difference is the translation of this knowledge into sustained commitment. The data suggest that principals are structurally prevented from prioritizing IL by a system that demands immediate managerial compliance, fails to provide adequate delegation capacity, and offers an education pipeline that primarily teaches *theory* but neglects the *experiential competencies* required for systemic instructional leadership.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The use of interpretive description (ID) provided rich, contextualized data essential for creating a relevant interpretive account of the instructional leadership (IL) gap. However, this qualitative approach carries inherent limitations that inform crucial directions for future research.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is related to its qualitative scope and generalizability. As an ID multi-case study, the findings focus on developing context-specific insights (Thorne, 2016) and are not intended for statistical generalization. The results reveal how the IL gap is experienced by this cohort of principals, but cannot definitively claim how often or to what extent the problem exists across the larger population (i.e., it lacks statistical generalizability).

A second limitation of the study is due to factors of reliance on self-reported data. The primary evidence base relies on participant interviews and focus groups, introducing the possibility of social desirability bias. However, the recurring "Aspiration-Constraint Dichotomy" theme, marked by the frequent "But" Statement in interviews, served as an internal data check, suggesting participants were forthcoming about the discrepancy between their aspirational commitment to IL and their constrained practice. In addition, there was no data available to evaluate the participants' readiness levels and expertise to engage in one of the most significant components of instructional leadership – coaching and developing teachers.

The issue of variable quantitative data also represents a limitation. Reliance on available work-time artifacts for the Time Series Analysis (TSA) resulted in inconsistent data quality and duration across cases, which reduced the robustness of the quantitative findings and positioned the TSA as a corroborative rather than an independent analytical tool.

Implications for Future Research

The identified theme of Systemic Implementation Fidelity and the three core constraints (Non-Negotiable Demands, Compliance Over Instruction, and Lack of Autonomy) open pathways for rigorous follow-up studies:

Future research should conduct mandatory, high-fidelity quantitative time-use studies (e.g., standardized daily activity logs) over a full academic year. This data should be rigorously correlated with principals' perceived self-efficacy and student achievement data to statistically test the causal link inferred by the TSA: Does increased sustained temporal commitment to IL lead to higher efficacy and improved student achievement, independent of school context?

Future research could employ quasi-experimental designs to compare outcomes between principals who follow the ideal pathway (teacher→ instructional coach→ principal) versus those who follow the administrative/managerial pathway. The objective is to quantify the difference in preparedness for high-leverage IL tasks (e.g., instructional coaching, providing high-quality feedback to teaching, and data analysis) that is currently only qualitatively inferred by the misalignment in the Preparation finding.

Another opportunity would be evaluating district support models, large-scale, comparative studies to assess the impact of different Central Office structures. Specifically, comparing districts that operate under a perceived "bureaucratic, compliance-driven" model (as described by MK and KB) versus those with a perceived "service delivery, coaching-centric" model (as described by CM and JR). This research could focus on measuring the subsequent principal autonomy and the structural fragility of beneficial support (e.g., how often coaching is reduced or removed due to financial or logistical reasons).

Lastly, given the desire for non-judgmental collegiality, intervention studies could be designed to test the impact of mandated, structured, and externally facilitated Principal Professional Learning Communities (P-PLCs) that focus explicitly on sharing struggles and instructional practice outside of the district's direct accountability hierarchy.

Conclusion

While the principal is now expected to be the chief instructional officer, the relentless tide of organizational management and compliance, paired with a lack of autonomy and comprehensive preparation, development, and support, often leaves school leaders with insufficient capacity to meaningfully impact teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

The ultimate implication is that closing the instructional leadership gap requires systemic reform focused on ensuring Systemic Implementation Fidelity. This necessitates creating structures that protect time, provide high-fidelity instructional development and support, grant discretionary autonomy over resources, and fundamentally shift the administrative identity from one of managerial triage to instructional master coach.

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