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Principals' and Teachers' Perceptions of Efforts by Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning in Turkish Middle Schools*

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Abstract

Contemporary research on instructional leadership has largely concerned itself with developing concrete instructional leadership models and investigating the association of such leadership practices with teaching and learning. Yet there is little research on how the internal school community reacts to the notion of principals influencing classroom instruction. The purpose of the current research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how instructional leadership is perceived in Turkish middle schools. The study draws upon data collected from a total of 36 personnel, including principals, assistant principals, teachers, and counselors in six middle schools in the province of Istanbul, Turkey. Interviews and documents were utilized to collect the data. The results show that participants' perception of instructional leadership is mostly influenced by the notion of leaders' indirect influence on teaching, and principals' direct involvement in instructional issues is constrained by problems associated with leadership content knowledge, coherence of leadership practices, and teachers' classroom privacy.

Keywords: Improving teaching and learning • Instructional leadership • Middle schools • School principals • Turkey

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Instructional leadership, which occupies the greatest proportion of all school leadership and management theories, possesses strong empirical roots (Hallinger, 2012). Research in the 1970's on successful schools constantly found that effective schools had principals who were particularly concerned with and spent time on improving the teaching and learning aspects of the school (Austin, 1979; Brieve, 1972; Bridges, 1967; Duke & Stiggins, 1985; Edmonds 1979; Eberts & Stone, 1988; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; McKenzie, 1988; Niedermeyer; 1977). In contrast to principals who spend most of their time dealing with managerial issues such as the budget, paper work, and the implementation of rules and regulations, principals in effective schools direct their attention more toward the academic aspects of their schools, such as setting academic goals, developing curriculum, assessing the effectiveness of teachers' instructional practices, and providing opportunities for instructional improvement. Such behaviors associated with the principals of effective schools are defined as "instructional leadership" (Blasé, 1987; Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982; Bridges, 1967; Hallinger, 2001, 2003, 2011, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1983, 1985, 1987; Hallinger, Murphy, Well, Mesa, & Mitman, 1983; Rosenholtz, 1985; Southworth, 2002).

Since the development of the theory in the 1980's, instructional leadership has been a substantial focus of educational research and was finally placed at the top of the list among all leadership theories (Hallinger, 2013). Early researchers mainly concerned themselves with the development of significant conceptual knowledge (how one might clarify and define instructional leadership) and theoretical understandings of the value and influences of instructional leadership (Bossert et al., 1982; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy 1990; Petterson, 1993; Weber, 1996). Later research investigated the contribution of instructional leadership on teacher and student learning (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Gerrell, 2005; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger et al., 1983; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 2011; Heck, 1992; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; May & Spovitz, 2011; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Ultimately, in a comprehensive study drawing on longitudinal data derived from hundreds of schools in Chicago, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) listed instructional leadership as an indispensable component of school principalship which was found to be a significant driving force for schools in achieving high quality instruction and thereby enhancing student achievement.

The significance of instructional leadership has been recognized by educational policy makers, practitioners, and international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Hallinger, 2012; OECD, 2009). Many countries have required principals to work with teachers towards the betterment of curriculum and instructional practices. In the USA, principalship standards, which are determined at the state level, overwhelmingly emphasize leadership involvement in the design and implementation of high quality instructional practices that better fit student needs. For instance, Colorado principal-quality standards require principals to establish high standards for curriculum and instruction, support teachers through continuous feedback and professional development, help teachers maximize effective use of instructional time, and work with teachers to determine the best instructional practices which are research-based and address student needs (Colorado Department of Education). Similarly, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) passed a law in 2010 that required school principals to exhibit multifaceted instructional leadership roles, such as developing their school's vision and mission, observing teaching and learning activities, and providing feedback to teachers regarding their performance, all in order to ensure high quality teaching and learning (MoNE, 2010).

Although instructional leadership as a requirement in schools is a relatively new phenomenon in the context of Turkish education, research into the instructional leadership of Turkish principals traces back to the 1990's. Most instructional leadership research in Turkey is based on survey data collected from elementary school teachers as well as principals, with the purpose of examining the extent to which Turkish school principals are involved in instructional leadership practices and what the variations are between the different regions in which they work across the country (Aksoy & Işık, 2008; Bayrak, 2001; Can, 2007; Dağlı, 2000; Gökyer, 2010; Gümüşeli, 1996; Gümüş & Akçaoğlu, 2013; İnandı & Özkan, 2006; Kaykanaci, 2003;Yavuz & Bas, 2010). Most such studies have concluded that Turkish principals are more likely to be concerned with managerial issues than with instructional matters. Other research that focused on principals' level of engagement in instructional leadership suggested the opposite results, however, that principals in Turkish schools were highly involved in instructional leadership behaviors

(Çelik, 2002; Ergen, 2013; Gümüşeli, 1996; Gürocak & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2012). In addition to research on principals' level of engagement in instructional leadership, the literature also focused on investigating the relationship of principals' instructional leadership to several other concepts such as organizational health (Recepoğlu & Özdemir, 2013), organizational dependence (Buluç, 2009) , teachers' job satisfaction, teachers' self-efficacy (Duyar, Gümüş, & Bellibaş, 2013), collective efficacy and collaboration (Gümüş, Bulut, & Bellibaş, 2013).

Particularly in Turkey, however, the field has only modest qualitative evidence concerning how instructional leadership is interpreted in schools and how principals and teachers react to these roles (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; May & Spovitz, 2011). There are theories of what instructional leadership is and how it is associated with student learning, yet there is not much knowledge as to how the school community interprets or reacts to principals' daily practices of instructional improvement. The primary purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate how instructional leadership is understood, conceptualized, and reacted to in middle schools in Turkey at a time when new leadership roles are being exposed to principals. It seeks to develop a more empirically grounded picture of instructional leadership through qualitative field data in a sample of six schools, drawing upon the perspective of principals, assistant principals, teachers, and counselors.

Literature Review

Despite the existence of specific models displaying certain behaviors defined as instructional leadership, many scholars have suggested a different and sometimes contradictory definition of the concept as a result of the empirical research they conducted on school leadership (Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Reitzug, 1997). This concurs with the argument that instructional leadership is considerably influenced by educational context and leaders' characteristics (Neumerski, 2012). The context is linked to how principals perceive and practice instructional leadership on a daily basis (Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Spillane, Diamond, & Jita, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond 2001). In this part of the review, the study provides an analysis of different perspectives on how instructional leadership is understood and analyzed in a variety of qualitative and quantitative empirical research.

A considerable body of studies in the 1980's was designed to provide an understanding of the link between principals and instructional improvement. The concept of instructional leadership in these studies did not always imply the direct influence of principals on classrooms and teaching. For instance, Gillat and Sulzer-Azaroff (1994) supported principals' direct involvement in instructional improvement and student learning. They argued that when the principal acts more like a teacher by observing classrooms, setting goals with students, and giving feedback and praise to students, student achievement is more likely to increase. From this perspective, the principal is a strong instructional leader who should directly and actively engage in classrooms and work not only with teachers but also with students.

On the other hand, an important number of scholars have actually contended that due to the nature of their job, direct influence is not as important as indirect influence. Hence, effective principals are more likely to affect teaching indirectly (Fireston & Wilson, 1985; Dwyer, 1985). From their perspective, instructional leadership might also involve what is traditionally considered to be managerial tasks, if such tasks provide an environment of support for instructional improvement and student progress (Kleine-Kracht, 1993; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Kleine-Kracht (1993) provided a different perspective on instructional leadership. She investigated how instructional leadership is carried out by conducting a qualitative case study on a high school that was recognized as a good school by the community as well as by the US Department of Education. The author drew upon various sources of qualitative data such as interviews, school visits, observations, and document analysis to see an overall picture of the enactment of instructional leadership tasks. In this study, it appeared that the principal's method of instructional leadership was through other people, such as chairs and administrators, by giving more authority to them so that they could exert more productive influence on teachers concerning instructional issues. The role of the principal as an instructional leader in this context was to select people who have more direct influence on teachers, to produce a work environment conducive to increased student success, and to encourage teachers toward change and innovation.

Blase and Blase (1999) also examined the everyday practices of principals' instructional leadership, drawing upon teachers' perspectives. Data for this study was gathered using an open-ended questionnaire that asked teachers to describe in detail the characteristics or actions of their principals that helped them improve their instructional practices.

The teachers' responses to the questionnaires indicated that they did not want their principals to directly give them instructional strategies; rather, they wanted to possess more autonomy in structuring instruction. Moreover, based on what teachers reported, the authors categorized principals' instructional leadership strategies into groups of activities: those which promoted reflection and those which provided teachers with professional growth. "Activities promoting reflection" included making suggestions, giving feedback and praise, using inquiry, and soliciting advice and opinions. Activities defined as providing professional growth included the study of teaching and learning, supporting collaboration among educators, and developing coaching relations among educators. In this context, the principals' instructional leadership role was more about creating opportunities and environments for teachers and teacher groups so that they could reflect on their colleagues' and their own instructional practices.

The idea of distributed leadership has considerable implications for shared instructional leadership as well. The literature suggests that improving teaching and learning is not a straightforward task (Hallinger, 2012). It instead requires substantial amounts of time and expertise to determine student needs based on data, to adjust the curriculum to student needs, to work with individual teachers to determine their instructional needs, and to provide the type of professional development that addresses the needs of teachers (Leithwood, 1994). In a school where instructional leadership is shared, each teacher who possesses more expertise in a particular subject matter takes formal and informal responsibility in contributing to each other's professional development. They collaboratively observe and reflect on the teaching practices of each other to solve problems related to classroom instruction. The formal leaders again play the role of leading leaders (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Spillane et al. (2001), for instance, develop a distributed perspective on the enactment of instructional leadership. In that study, they examined a number of schools to identify the type of leadership that emerged as a result of work regarding instructional improvement. In one of the schools, they observed that some important tasks of instructional leadership such as forging close and friendly relationships with teachers, observing classroom instruction, and engaging in post-observation conferences were enacted by the assistant principal. The principal, on the other hand, acted more as an authority figure whose connection with teachers was more formal and involved a formal assessment of classroom instruction.

Lee, Hallinger, and Walker (2012) conducted a qualitative study regarding the instructional leadership in international baccalaureate schools in East Asian countries including Vietnam, Thailand, Hong Kong, and China. While they interviewed principals, teachers, and students to understand the extent to which instructional leadership was distributed among different people, the study also involved important implications concerning the practices of instructional leadership in the East Asian context. As a result of the analysis of the interviews, they found that these schools had strong instructional leaders, yet their role was more as a facilitator who encourages the involvement of other staff in instructional leadership activities. However, a case study on a number of Australian principals indicated that the way instructional leadership was enacted varied, depending on the principal. While some principals linked themselves more directly to classroom instruction, by spending a significant amount of time in classrooms to enhance teaching and learning, other principals worked with staff to build capacity as a means of influencing instruction rather than engaging directly in the classroom (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2010).

Method

In this part, the design of the qualitative study, including selection of sites, schools, and participants, the sources of data, and the procedures to collect and analyze the data are articulated.

Sampling

The method used for selecting the qualitative sample was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling selects the participants most able to provide information for the study's key questions (Maxwell, 2005; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). In this way, a deeper understanding of the proposed questions was possible (Patton, 2002). Selection of schools and participants for the qualitative section of the study was based on findings from a preliminary quantitative analysis from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) data set. TALIS data was used to determine the most effective sample for collecting qualitative data. A brief explanation regarding TALIS and how the data was analyzed is provided below.

Analysis of the TALIS Data: TALIS is the first international survey that aimed to examine the

learning environment and working conditions of teachers and principals in both OECD and non-OECD countries. It includes rich information concerning the school and education systems of countries on various issues, including school climate and infrastructure; teachers' professional development; their instructional attitudes, beliefs, and practices; teacher appraisal and feedback; and principals' beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding school administration (OECD, 2009).

TALIS data includes substantial information concerning principals' participation in their own instructional leadership practices. Principals' responses to 14 questions represent the extent to which they are involved in various leadership practices aimed at improving teaching and learning. TALIS used 14 items to create an index of instructional leadership and sub-categories associated with instructional leadership. These categories are "management of school goals, instructional management, and direct supervision of instruction in the school."

The purpose for using TALIS was to find the context factors which determine Turkish principals' current level of instructional practices. The Turkish principal data set of TALIS, which included 191 middle school principals that were randomly selected across the country by the OECD, was employed to conduct multiple descriptive and inferential analyses. Factors included school type (public or private), school location (village, town or city), educational level of the surrounding community, as well as principals' gender, educational level, and experience (as a teacher and principal). Initially, various quantitative analysis methods, including t-test, ANOVA, and correlations were employed to determine the factors that are significantly associated with variations in a principal's capability of instructional leadership practice. Among all the variables available in the TALIS data set, gender, parental education, school type (public or private), and school size were found to be significantly related to instructional leadership. Finally, all these significant factors were included in a multiple regression model in order to identify the factors which significantly predict Turkish principals' instructional leadership practices (see Table 1).

The results from the analysis showed that of all the variables only school type (public or private) and principal gender (male or female) were significant predictors of principals' perceived instructional leadership. All of the model variables explain about 16% of the total variation in the instructional leadership index.

Qualitative Sample: Consistent with the results of quantitative analyses of the TALIS dataset, both public and private schools with a mix of male and female principals were determined to constitute the sample of the study. In total, six middle schools (two private and four public) and six participants in each school were chosen. Eventually, the qualitative sample involved 36 participants, composed of one principal, one vice principal, three teachers and one counselor in each of the six middle schools (4^{th} through 8^{th} grades). All sampled schools were located in the province of Istanbul, Turkey. Because Istanbul is the most populated and diverse province of Turkey, it provided the opportunity to select the most appropriate sample.

To identify schools, school principals were chosen. Initial contact was made with officers at the branch of Ministry of Education in Istanbul, along with several principals and teachers whom the researcher was acquainted with, to find principals who were considered to be effective instructional leaders. One challenge in this process was that few people were familiar with the formal concept of instructional leadership, requiring an explanation of what instructional leadership is, how it is defined, and what dimensions it involves. A pool of 30 schools based on their suggestions was created. Then, the list was narrowed down to ten schools after considering their comments and the mix of school types and leaders that were sought. Initial contact with the principals that work at those schools was made through school visits. After

Table 1
Regression Results for Variables Predicting Instructional Leadership

Dependent Variable: Instructional Leadership					
Variables	*B*	Std. Error	*B*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	.868	.631		1.375	.171
Gender	-.671	.248	-.204	-2.711	.007
Parents with Bachelor	-.039	.066	-.057	-.593	.554
Public or Private School	.595	.238	.278	2.501	.013
School Size	-7.386E-5	.000	-.063	-.740	.461

$R = .397$, $R^2 = .158$.
$F_{(4,172)} = 8.056$, $p < .05$.

visiting eight schools, six willing principals in the desired mix of schools were identified as the sample. The demographic information of the schools and principals is provided below (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2
Demographic Information for Schools in the Qualitative Sample

Schools	Type	Size (students)	Socio-Economic Status (SES)
1	Public	940	Medium
2	Public	2230	Low
3	Public	780	Medium
4	Public	350	High
5	Private	540	High
6	Private	470	High

In addition to principals, this study involved a total sample of six assistant principals, six counselors and 18 teachers from six schools. All assistant principals were male and had either two or three years of experience in their current schools. Two of the six counselors were female and the experience of the counselors in their current schools ranged from two to four. The teacher sample came from various subject areas including math, social studies, Turkish, English, and science. Nine out of 18 teachers were female. The experience of the teachers in their current schools ranged from two to ten years. The overall individual experience of any one participant ranged between 4 and 21 years.

Sources of Data and Procedures

Data for the qualitative study was gathered through interviews and documents. Interviewing is the most commonly used method in qualitative research (Rogers & Bouey, 1996). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, vice principals, and counselors. The face-to-face interview protocol consisted of two sets of open-ended questions with regard to principals' and teachers' beliefs, assumptions, and values on instructional leadership, and was created with the assistance of two professors at a university that is normally ranked at the top by *US News* in the field of Educational Administration and Supervision. Both sets of questions were prepared under the assumption that Turkish principals and teachers may not be familiar with the formalized concept of instructional leadership but would understand many of the behaviors associated with it. Therefore, a document was attached to the consent form which provided a short and general definition and purpose of instructional leadership. Specific behaviors or practices associated with the concept were not elaborated on in order to reduce bias due to definition. The problem was that they were not familiar with the terminology. However, they understood and knew various behaviors associated with instructional leadership as a matter of professional awareness and practice.

Each participant was provided with the consent form and interview questions a day or two before each interview, allowing them to read through and prepare answers. Most interviews took place in the teacher meeting rooms or offices in the schools. All semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face and type-recorded, ranging from 30 to 70 minutes. Apart from the interviews, other sources of data were documents. Principals were asked to share any documents that might reveal information concerning the instructional leadership activities of principals. Principals in each school shared various documents, including the strategic plan of the school, decisions of the grade-level teacher meetings, classroom observation materials, and the professional development provided to teachers.

Data Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed in their original Turkish. Data analysis was carried out right after the first interview and analysis continued as new participants were interviewed. Early data analysis was important since it enabled focusing and shaping of the study as it proceeded (Glesne, 2011). Memo writing was used to refresh the mind and open it to new ideas and perspectives (Glesne,

Table 3
Demographic Information for Principals

School	Code	Gender	Major	Teaching Experience	Experience in Current School	Total Experience
1	A1	Male	Elementary	3	4	4
2	K1	Male	Social Studies	4	4	4
3	E1	Male	Geography	5	3	10
4	M1	Female	Elementary	0	4	4
5	D1	Male	History Teacher	6	3	3
6	F1	Female	Elementary	6	4	4

2011), and rudimentary coding schemes were utilized to foresee where the study was going. In this way, it was possible to modify the interview questions for staying focused or for revealing additional information that seemed important (Glesne, 2011). The early data analysis also provided an opportunity to reflect on individual interviews and figure out whether there were points that needed to be clarified. The final interview data analysis was conducted right after all the interviews and transcriptions were completed. Final data analysis involved coding and displaying the data. The researcher reflected and worked on coding schemes that were developed during early data analysis by further classifying and categorizing. This was a cycle of defining and sorting the data, which helped to recognize the relationships of one code to the others. By combining codes or dividing them into different codes based on the relationships between them, these codes were organized into categories and sub-categories (Glesne, 2011).

Enhancing the reliability of the qualitative data, findings and interpretations are most commonly promoted through triangulation (Merriam, 2002) which can be carried out in multiple ways. In this research, two strategies of triangulation were used: multiple sources of data (such as documents, and interviews with teachers and principals) and multiple methods (by analyzing the TALIS data in order to determine a better qualitative sample). Another strategy to ensure validity is member checking. After the analysis of the interviews and documents was finished, eight participants were asked to comment on the findings, to make sure that the way their views were being categorized accurately represented their perceptions (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2002). In addition, other researchers were included in the process of qualitative data analysis by having two volunteer researchers reflect on the interpretations of the raw data. A third issue is external reliability, usually interpreted as generalizability. As qualitative research stands on its own, it is the reader who, based on the presented data and interpretations, decides whether the findings might apply beyond their immediate context (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, rich information from the context and empirical data (direct quotations and text) were provided to let the reader decide whether the findings might be transferable to other contexts.

Findings

Before presenting the main qualitative themes, it is worth noting that during the interviews considerable complaints were received, particularly from principals regarding schools being too large with limited financial recourses. Principals listed those two problems as significant challenges to their instructional leadership. They often acknowledged the importance of working on instructional improvement, yet they also stressed that it was impossible for them to devote time to the classrooms where teaching and learning take place due to the fact that efforts to find money and deal with a large number of students were more substantial and overwhelming, This consequently caused frustration and diminished motivation for dealing with the issues surrounding instruction and student learning.

Although some researchers acknowledge that a large school size and limited financial resources are important challenges to instructional leadership (Leithwood, 1994), it is also stressed that this should not be an excuse for principals to not invest time in working on instructional improvement (Brewer,1993; Grissolm & Loeb, 2011; Kleine-Kracht, 1993: Rosenblatt & Somech, 1998). School leaders can work on and create conditions in the school through which teachers can receive sufficient support for enhancing their knowledge and skills as well as improving the overall quality of instruction (Horng & Loeb, 2010).

With this in mind, an in-depth analysis of participants' perception of instructional leadership was carried out. Several themes emerged as a result of analyzing the responses of participants and documents.

Indirect Influence

The first theme that emerged from the data is the common perception of participants that principals can indirectly influence the quality of teaching and learning. Their direct involvement in instructional issues seemed to be unwelcome. Activities considered as a way of indirectly influencing include creating a disciplined school climate, dealing with teacher and student absenteeism as a way to buffer instructional time, and providing staff with fiscal and motivational support. Although such activities may not directly relate to instruction, most participants considered them to be substantial in creating a school and classroom climate within which teachers can be most effective.

Principals, particularly those in the more crowded schools, considered dealing with discipline to be an important aspect of instructional leadership. Although not directly related to classroom instruction, school-level discipline was thought to be a way of creating a

safe school environment where teachers and student can be engaged in teaching and learning activities without any fear or concern about security:

"To be honest, teachers do not like someone intervening in their classroom because they are the experts in what they teach. They do not talk directly to me about this, but I know they do not like it. But it makes sense. As a principal, I cannot know as much they know about what they teach…but this does not mean that I am not important for what is going on in the classroom. I do my best to reduce discipline problems. Whether it is about the school or the classroom, my assistant and I spend a lot of time dealing with discipline problems in order to make the school and classrooms safe places for teachers and students." (F1)

According to the interview data, principals can also influence classrooms by dealing with teacher and student absenteeism, hence protecting instructional time. The frequency of student and teacher absenteeism seemed to vary, depending on the SES of the school. There were more complaints about student and teacher absenteeism in low SES schools than in high SES schools, where school size was relatively smaller.

It was indicated by leader and teacher participants that school principals paid considerable attention to absenteeism and wanted to make sure that students were not left behind due to either the student or teacher being absent. However, they did not deal with absenteeism by themselves. The interview data suggested that the responsibility of principals for dealing with absenteeism was shared among assistant principals and teachers. The principal may get involved if there is a chronic issue. The responsibility was primarily given to assistant principals, who worked closely with teachers to diminish the impact of absenteeism on teaching and learning. For instance, if a teacher were absent, assistant principals first attempted to assign an available teacher. In case of a teacher shortage, assistant principals took the responsibility themselves of substituting for the absent teacher.

Several teachers pointed out that principals play a critical role in providing support to teachers. This type of support includes monetary and motivational factors. Teachers seemed to be satisfied if these types of support are provided:

"...you may know that in the last several years we have had a new type of curriculum that asks us to engage students in various projects, called project-based learning. The idea is to teach them while doing. I think the principal is important at this point. If they support what we are doing and encourage us teachers to do more projects with students then we have motivation for coming up with more projects." (M3)

Overall, the analysis revealed that even though principals may not directly influence teaching in the classroom, they can contribute to teaching and learning by creating a safe environment represented as one free from discipline issues by dealing with absenteeism, informing teachers about opportunities for professional development, and providing the necessary fiscal and motivational support to teachers.

Direct Involvement

A perception of principals' indirect influence on instruction is prevalent. Common sense says that teachers will be effective if principals create safe and disciplined schools, make sure to protect instructional time, and provide necessary support. To understand whether principals have a direct influence on teaching, participants were asked to share their ideas about communication and collaboration between staff and principals about issues related to classroom and instruction.

"So, if I am talking with my principals, it is probably because of a discipline issue or it could be an issue about official work that I have to deal with. Or maybe I need some materials for my classroom, I would go and talk to my principal…if I feel like I have an issue about my instructional techniques, I would not go to my principal. That does not make sense. I am a math teacher and his major is classroom teacher." (F5)

Teachers indicated that most of the classroom-level problems that they directed to the principal were related to either a discipline issue or the need for instructional materials. When they had an issue regarding instructional strategies or techniques, they chose to talk with a colleague who had the same area of expertise as themselves. Therefore, it is less likely that teachers and principals engage in the type of conversation that is intended to improve teaching in the classroom.

The way classroom problems were understood by teachers and principals in both public and private schools were similar. Their understanding of classroom problems was associated with discipline issues or lack of materials. None of the participants referred to any problem that was related to instructional practices or techniques.

The difference between public and private schools was in the frequency of principal involvement in discipline issues. Public school principals stated that they were regularly asked by teachers to engage with and resolve issues regarding student misbehavior. Private school principals indicated that they did not receive many complaints from teachers, and that their involvement in classroom discipline was rare since most issues were minor and teachers managed to resolve them without requiring additional assistance.

The issue of principals' direct influence was further investigated by inquiring about reasons why teachers would talk to or collaborate with their principals regarding an instructional problem they experience. Responses from both teachers and principals showed that leadership content knowledge, teacher classroom privacy, and coherence are issues related to principals' direct influence on instruction.

Leadership Subject Matter Knowledge: The issue of leadership subject-matter knowledge emerged when participants talked about principals' efforts to observe teaching and give teachers feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses. The common understanding among teachers and principals as well is that principals' involvement in the observation of teaching does not make sense due to their lack of knowledge in the subject matter they observe:

"I am a math teacher and therefore I teach math. But my principal is a former elementary school teacher. Yes, he comes and observes my classroom every year, but then after the class, he thanks me and goes. That's it. I do not expect him to give me feedback. I do not even think he knows what I teach and whether the way I teach is right or not right." (K3)

Principals made similar comments:

"Well, I am not an English teacher and I do not have any knowledge of English either. But I have to observe teaching because I am the principal in this school…I look at the lesson plan, I look at the classroom materials, how they are used, and also I look at how the teacher interacts with students and things like these…" (K1)

These comments from public and private school participants suggest low expectations for principals' capacity to help teachers improve teaching. The leading reason as expressed by teachers and principals is because of principals' limited knowledge of the subject matter taught by specialized teachers. The problem here is that teaching is understood in terms of delivering content knowledge to students. As a consequence, most teachers and principals indicated that principals do not possess the relevant knowledge or expertise to help them improve their instructional skills. This belief seems sufficient for teachers to argue that observations conducted by principals, for instance, are a waste of time. Principals also acknowledged the subject expertise of teachers and stressed that they paid more attention to lesson plans and teachers' skills in classroom management when observing. The general belief is that teachers would be more satisfied with instructional supervision carried out by members of a subject matter committee, just as is done in private schools.

Teachers' Classroom Privacy: Lack of support for principals' direct involvement in instructional improvement could not be explained solely through principals' lack of content knowledge. There was also evidence for the existence of strong teacher privacy. Although this does not preclude principals from entering classrooms and observing teachers in many cases since it is mandated by the Ministry, principals in some schools respect this private zone and do not observe teachers whom they believe to be "good teachers." According to teachers, a good teacher often refers to one with many years of experience. In such cases, the privacy of experienced teachers is well-respected and principals are more likely to observe novice teachers. The isolation in terms of classroom practice is not only between teacher and principal but also among teachers. The culture of classroom as a private zone is so powerful that teachers do not attempt to observe each other or learn from one another during the time of actual instructional practices.

There were a few exceptions, however. Two teachers who were close friends for a long time mentioned that they sometimes observed and learned from each other, despite the fact that they taught different subjects:

"…I have a friend here (in the school), he is a math teacher. We have been close friends for many years. It is very common for he and I to enter each other's classroom to learn something from each other… The last time I was in his class, an inspector from the Ministry came to observe his classroom. When he saw me, he was very confused. He then asked me who I was. I said I am the social studies teacher in the school but sometimes my friend and I observe each other and try to see if we can learn from each other. The inspector was very pleased, congratulated me and my friend, and said he would tell that story to the Ministry and teachers in other schools..." (A3)

Lack of Coherence: Another theme that emerged was a lack of coherence among instructional leadership activities. Data showed that principals had some involvement in developing goals, creating a safe school environment, informing teachers about possible opportunities for professional growth, and observing teaching. However, most of these practices were independent of each other in the sense that they did not inform one another. For instance, public school principals led strategic planning committees to specify goals to be accomplished within a period of four years, but the committees were not seen as very important or valued:

"Normally, in order to establish school goals we are supposed to gather together to discuss what we have, what we do not have, what our problems are, what needs to be improved, and so on. But to be honest with you, it never happens this way… A lot of people consider the goal-setting process as a mandate from the Ministry. So it is a kind of burden for principals. So usually what happens is that the responsibility (of determining or writing school goals) is given to one teacher or assistant principal. This person usually takes a look at what other schools have written and then they write a list of school goals." (K2)

This suggests that the process of goal setting was weakly aligned with identified instructional needs and/or student achievement problems. Principals observed instruction and provided opportunities for students to take several exams, but they did not appear to take into account the data from these processes when determining goals.

A similar pattern emerged in conversations about professional development:

"Professional development activities are basically seminars and they are very boring except for one that was given by Marmara University. I really enjoyed that one because it was about what I needed. Other than that, I do not remember… Most of them are theory based, they are not practical. They do not give me the practical knowledge I need. For instance, I would like them to show me how a good teacher teaches a class." (M2)

Most teachers expressed concern that the professional development activities they engaged in so far have not possessed the potential to provide them with the knowledge and skills that are relevant to what they need. The problem again is related to the way instructional leadership is performed. Principals enter classrooms and observe teaching, yet they do not, perhaps cannot, use the data they collected to make decisions regarding professional development opportunities for teachers. This reduces the potential for diagnosing instructional problems, developing a strategic plan, and replacing ineffective instructional techniques with effective ones.

This lack of coherence did not appear to be as major a problem in private schools. As indicated earlier, most instructional leadership responsibilities including observing teaching, giving feedback to teachers, and providing them with professional development were carried out by subject matter committees. Just as teachers in public schools, private school teachers indicated that they were more comfortable working with teachers who share the same area of expertise than working with the principal. Members of subject matter committees worked together with a head teacher to identify common instructional problems of teachers and student achievement problems by using data that came from classroom observations and student trial tests. Additionally, professional development was more decentralized in private schools with the content and type determined by the head teacher of the committee who seemed to draw more on data collected from students and teachers. Each of the committees organized professional development aligned with the needs perceived by the teachers' constituting the committee. In this way, instructional leadership activities in private schools were more coherent and more relevant to teachers compared to those in public schools.

Conclusion

Effective school studies indicate that schools should have principals who work closely with teachers for the purpose of improving classroom instruction (Brieve, 1972; Dimmock, 2011; Duke & Stiggins, 1985). As a result of the accountability policy, the rhetoric for instructional leadership is more prominent than it used to be (Hallinger, 2012). Acknowledging the importance of principals who assume the responsibility of increasing the quality of teaching, the Turkish Ministry of Education has now stated that school principals should become instructional leaders, and have mandated them to enter classrooms, observe teaching, and provide feedback to teachers (MoNE, 2010). However, little was known about how the school community has been responding to these new demands. This research investigated the perception of administrative and instructional staff regarding the current practices of instructional leadership as performed by school principals.

The findings suggest that the school community supports the idea that principals can and should be indirectly involved in teaching and learning by creating conditions for effective schools and classrooms. Such prevalent perceptions themselves concur with a piece of literature that recommends the indirect involvement of principals in the processes of enhancing the quality of teaching (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Fireston & Wilson, 1985; Dwyer, 1985; Kleine-Kracht, 1993). The idea is based on the premise that expecting secondary school principals to work directly on improving teachers' instructional capacity is not practically possible, given their limited expertise in specific subject matters and their numerous managerial responsibilities due to larger student populations in those schools (Lambert, 1998; Leithwood, 1994).

However, the participants' understanding of indirect involvement did not seem to show consistent patterns with what recent studies on indirect involvement have suggested. For instance, Horng and Loeb (2010) argued that leaders should recruit effective teachers and improve their capacity by creating environments in which teachers acquire the support they need instead of directly engaging in classroom instruction. The purpose here is to deliberately create and promote conditions that enhance professional collaboration among staff. The idea of indirect involvement in this study is not related to the conditions for a collegial network, rather it refers to principals' endeavors to create a safe and disciplined learning environment so that teachers can teach in their classrooms without any disruptions.

Principals' direct involvement in classrooms is not supported by either staff or principals on the grounds that school leaders do not acquire the necessary content knowledge regarding specific subject matters. This issue was also highlighted in the literature (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Hallinger, 2012; Stein & Neilson, 2003). The problem with this argument, however, is that not all components of teaching are directly related to the content of a given subject matter. Instead, many subject matters share similar characteristics of what is considered to be effective instruction (Morzano, 2007). For instance, using effective incentives and sanctions to motivate students, checking for student learning through regular assessments, linking the current material with previous ones, and helping students to transfer classroom learning into real life experiences are some common components of good teaching. Effective teachers are apt at putting these strategies into practice as they teach. A principal, presumably as an effective former teacher who possesses comprehensive knowledge of one subject matter, can further that expertise by observing teaching and determining the needs of teachers and students (Stein & Neilson, 2003).

The problem related to principals' direct involvement is not only about leadership content knowledge. There is also a sense of classroom privacy among teachers. All school personnel, including teachers, principals, and counselors, have a strong belief in teachers' expertise and therefore avoid intervening in their classrooms. Such a sense of teachers being experts in their fields has created an environment where classrooms are considered the private domain of teachers (Marshall, 2004). Hence, they mostly teach behind closed doors (Hallinger 2012; Morzano, 2007). The idea of teaching being a private issue for teachers was also justified and sustained by principals through the prevailing assumption that all teachers in their school were effective. Teachers seemed to have similar assumptions and tended not to intervene in other teachers' private domains, their classrooms. Such problems hinder not only a principal's individual effort but also the teachers' professional collaboration for working on instructional improvement.

Besides leadership content knowledge and teachers' classroom privacy, lack of coherence emerged as a factor that determined participants' perception of direct involvement. For instance, principals' involvement in classroom observations is not helpful to teachers when data collected through observations is not aligned with school goals or professional development is not provided to the staff (Elmore 2000, 2004). It is less likely for instructional improvement to occur if there is not coherence among instructional leadership because it "is the precondition for the exercise of any effective leadership around instructional improvement (Elmore, 2004 p.63)."

Private schools developed their own strategies for dealing with the discussion of direct versus indirect involvement. Private school participants seemed to have similar perceptions as those in public schools regarding principals' direct involvement in the classroom. The solution to the issue was to isolate principals from classrooms and give more authority to subject matter committees for changing and improving instruction. For instance, teachers are more welcoming when those who are experts in a particular subject matter carry out the classroom observation. This may help private schools convince teachers about the validity and usefulness of instruction-leadership activities (Bellibaş & Gedik, 2014).

Despite all of the issues found in the analysis of the perception of school personnel regarding instructional leadership in Turkish schools, it is widely accepted in the research that instructional leadership is one crucial component of effective leaders who successfully transform low-performing schools into high-achieving ones (Bryk et al., 2010). Research has not yet reached a consensus as to whether the direct or indirect practices of teachers should prevail (e.g. Horng & Loeb, 2010; Kleine-Kracht, 1993). Shifting the discussion away from whether they should directly or indirectly influence teaching and learning, current practices of principals in relation to instructional improvement should be revised in such a way as to satisfy the needs of teachers and students. Direct or indirect means of instructional leadership can be utilized strategically to address instructional problems.

Taking into account the findings in this study, there are implications for policy, practice, and research. First of all, principals' knowledge and skills in working with teachers on instructional improvement should be strengthened. In this regard, the need for leadership content knowledge seems substantial for principals in building a stronger sense of self-efficacy and for teachers to believe in principals' capability of engaging in activities to improve instructional practices. Universities could play a pivotal role in satisfying this need. However, current programs for principals lack training concerning instructional leadership (Ada & Gümüş, 2012). Therefore, it is important that principal development programs at universities include training programs for principals to develop leadership content knowledge. In addition to that, in-service training for principals provided at the Ministry level should integrate programs that enable principals to understand how teachers teach and how students learn a number of subject matters (Stein & Nelson, 2003). There is international evidence for Turkey regarding the validity of such a strategy. For example, a number of secondary school principals in Michigan (USA) were provided with algebra-intensive courses by university staff in order to develop the principals' leadership content knowledge in algebra. The purpose was to help principals gain the necessary knowledge to help them feel confident in working with algebra teachers toward improving their practice of teaching (Carver, 2010). Since the Ministry in Turkey has already had in-service training opportunities available to principals, it would be relatively easy to incorporate the teaching of leadership content knowledge into their trainings.

Learning various subjects has substantial implications for principals, but it may not be sufficient for them to become better instructional leaders. Principals lack not only knowledge but also professional experience for working with teachers on instructional improvement since they do not have the experience of working with an effective instructional leader. Principals need to have models or mentors at the school to teach and demonstrate to them how to act in ways that make teaching better able to satisfy students' academic needs.

This research indicates a lack of coherence among instructional leadership activities, which played a substantial role in devaluing principals' involvement in activities that are directly connected to teaching. An effectively implemented decision-making strategy based on data can be an important means in solving this problem. It is recommended that principals actively become involved in the analysis of data derived from the observation of instruction and students' test results in order to determine student and teacher needs. This would help them determine focused instructional goals and make meaningful decisions that address issues regarding teaching and learning (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006).

Such implications are derived from teachers' and principals' perceptions regarding the current practices of principals for improving teaching and learning. A better strategy for future research would be to unveil the nature of practices used by principals to influence classrooms either directly or indirectly. This would be possible only through systemic observations that focus on the daily instructional leadership practices of principals.

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