Instructional Leadership: A Lutheran School Principals' Perspective

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Background and Significance

Lutheran schools transform students, families, congregations, and communities (LuthEd, 2021). In order to do this, Lutheran schools need effective leaders. Demonstrating effective school leadership is difficult and becoming increasingly so (Fuller et al., 2018), and leaders of Christian schools face challenges unique to the parochial context (Fraser & Brock, 2006; Kerins & Spalling, 2022). Even so, leadership impacts student learning, directly and indirectly (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2015), and school leadership is contextual (Hallinger, 2010). Currently, there is no evidence that connects effective instructional leadership practices and Lutheran school contexts.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how leaders of Lutheran schools understand and practice instructional leadership.

Participants and Procedures

Participants

Six PreK-8 LCMS school principals who were exemplars of strong instructional leadership served as the cases. Each of the six principals completed at least two years in his or her current school and at least three years as a principal. They were selected through a stratified purposeful sampling approach, combined with network and criterion sampling. The strata included the following:

Female principal & male principal	Small school: 50-150 students (4K-8)
Female principal & male principal	Medium school: 151-250 students (4K-8)
Female principal & male principal	Large school: 251+ students (4K-8)

Procedures

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The interview protocol (see below) was developed in alignment with Robinson et al.'s (2008) five dimensions of instructional leadership. To balance that structure, several questions invited the participant to speak more broadly about his or her experience and perspective. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using a clean verbatim transcription.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol – Based on Robinson et al. (2008)

*Icebreaker Question: You're currently a principal, but could you tell me briefly about your **professional journey** up to this point? (follow up with a description of their current position)*

*1. To you, what does it mean to be an **instructional leader** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to ask for specific dimensions or facets if not offered in their explanation.)*
   <Briefly define instructional leadership prior to asking question 2: Instructional leadership has evolved from a narrow definition of the principal conducting formal classroom observations to a broader understanding of who and what is involved with instructional leadership. The questions I am going to ask you unpack that broader understanding of instructional leadership with topics like goal-setting, curriculum, professional development, the learning environment, and more.>

*2. In the past year, how have you **established goals** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed.)*

*3. In the past year, how have you **acquired resources strategically** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed.)*

*4. In the past year, how have you been **involved with the teaching** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed. Possible probes - planning, coordinating, evaluating)*

*5. In the past year, how have you been **involved with the curriculum** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed. Possible probes - planning, coordinating, evaluating)*

*6. In the past year, how have you been **involved with teacher development** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed. Possible probes - promoting, participating)*

*7. In the past year, how have you ensured an **orderly and supportive environment** at [this specific school]? (Follow up to identify specific practices and/or to evaluate key practices as needed.)*

*8. In the past year, has **anyone else** at [this specific school] helped you with instructional leadership? What roles do they play? (Possible probes - teacher leaders, mentor teachers, department heads, instructional coaches, assistant principals)*

*9. Are there any **additional aspects** to your approach as an instructional leader that you would like to share?*

Analysis

Coding and Analysis

The researcher began with a brief list of provisional codes drafted before the first interview was conducted. This list was revised and expanded as within-case data analysis continued. Three elemental methods–descriptive, in vivo, and process–and three affective methods–emotion, values, and evaluation–of coding were used in first cycle coding.

During cross-case analysis, emergent pattern codes were mapped and written as analytic memos. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal for self-awareness during data collection and analysis. The researcher has filled various instructional leadership roles for over a decade. The researcher's empathetic connection with the participants also prepared her to probe meaningfully, enhancing the semi-structured interview protocol.

Findings

Themes of Practicing Instructional Leadership

Through iterative coding of the principals' interview responses, four themes emerged to characterize their practice of instructional leadership:

- **high visibility**
- **emotional intelligence**
- **strategic alignment**
- **a conversational posture (toward teachers)**
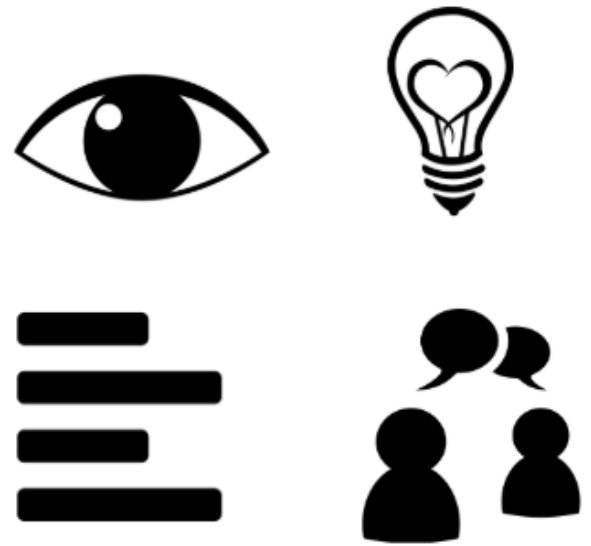
These four themes transcend the five components of Robinson et al.'s (2008) framework of instructional leadership:
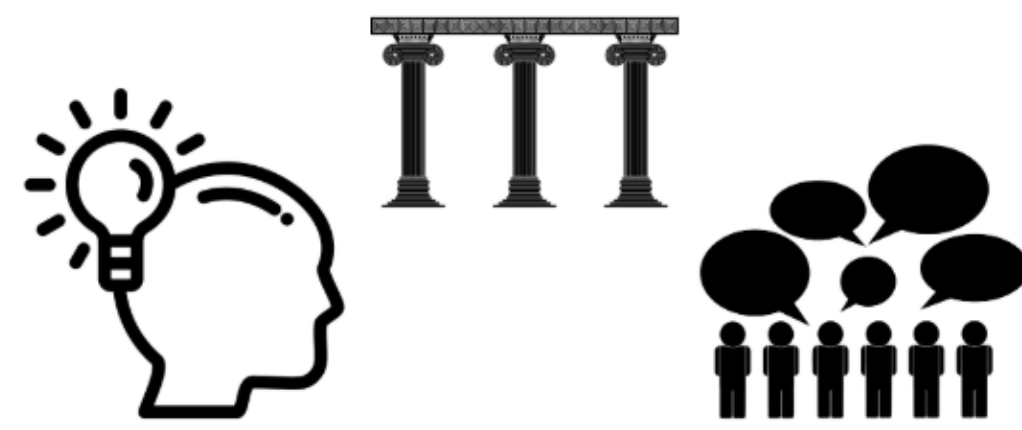
- goal setting
- resourcing strategically
- curriculum and teaching
- professional development
- orderly and supportive environment

Whether the principals were coaching teachers, acquiring new resources, or planning teacher development activities, they did so *with* high visibility, emotional intelligence, strategic alignment, and a conversational posture toward faculty.

Codes by Case for the Four Themes of Practicing Instructional Leadership

Case	High Visibility	Emotional Intelligence	Strategic Alignment	Conversational Posture
Mrs. W *Small school category*	classroom observations, more time spent with new teachers, church attendance	openness to personal goals, strong relationships lead to conversations about teaching*, take on something to give teachers a break, preventing teacher burnout, authenticity, not terrified of offending people	accreditation as group goal	conversations about teaching, strong relationships lead to conversations about teaching*, ask directly about teaching, seeks teacher feedback
Mr. D *Small school category*	classroom observations, walkthroughs, visibility, frequent observations for poor teachers	open door for teachers*, principal has teachers' backs	accreditation as group goal, intentionally connecting school families to church, catechesis overlap	evaluations as two way conversations, conversations about teaching, conversations about teaching, open door for teachers*
Mrs. P *Medium school category*	classroom observations, coaching, visibility, walkthroughs, nothing as coaching strategy*	collaboration increases buy-in and productivity, authenticity, open door for teachers*, humility, know your staff, empathy for teachers, encouraging teachers, emotional intelligence, love my job	accreditation as group goal, backwards planning (high school), nothing as coaching strategy*	seeks teacher feedback, evaluations as two way conversations, conversations about teaching, open door for teachers*
Mr. B *Medium school category*	coaching, more time spent with new teachers	encouraging teachers, know your staff, principal has teachers' backs, emotional intelligence, strengths finders, empathy for teachers, match teachers with strengths, SEL recently added, trauma informed practices, fellowship as a team, removing roadblocks for teachers, holistic support for teachers, love for teammates, preventing teacher burnout, love any job	coaching as professional development, instructional leadership in new teacher onboarding	coaching as conversation about teaching, seeks teacher feedback, ask directly about teaching
Mrs. J *Large school category*	classroom observations, more time spent with new teachers, walkthroughs, observe what they are proud of	holistic support for teachers, openness to personal goals, take on something to give teachers a break, emotional intelligence, open door for teachers*, know your staff, access to pastor, fellowship as a team, prayer for each other as support, love my job, individualized recognition strategies for good teaching, SEL recently added	accreditation as group goal, observations as curriculum review strategy, align professional development and group goals, coaching as professional development, coaching for individual goals, coaching to handle student challenges	conversations about teaching, open door for teachers*, prefers informal evaluations
Mr. M *Large school category*	visibility, classroom observations, walkthroughs, more time spent with new teachers, documenting time in classrooms	holistic support for teachers, openness to personal goals, accountability for teachers, principal's goals, empathy for teachers, lean on others, humility, surround yourself with honest teammates, know your staff	coaching to handle student challenges, align professional development, align curriculum with group goals, development and new curriculum implementation	seeks teacher feedback, prefers informal evaluations, conversations about teaching

*Note: *Denotes codes that are listed under multiple themes*

Themes of Understanding Instructional Leadership

A simple framework emerged to portray how these Lutheran school leaders understood instructional leadership:

- **Know**
- **Support**
- **Engage**

Each verb in this framework was further developed into subcategories. While the number and specific nature of **knowledge components** varied between cases, all responses fit within three sub-categories: knowledge of education, knowledge of faculty, and knowledge of school data. Participants in this study understood themselves to be primarily in a **supporting role** for teachers. This support was for the teacher in action in the classroom but also for the teacher as an individual outside of the classroom. In practice, this supportive role also extended to students and families, especially those who were facing challenges with academics and with life in general. Participants considered **engaging their faculty** in continuous improvement to be their responsibility as leaders, and their instructional leadership practices across the five dimensions of Robinson et al. (2008) reflected this commitment to engagement. Furthermore, engaging followers by nurturing teacher agency was described by one participant in the context of his view of instructional leadership. A commitment to nurturing teacher agency was prevalent in the answers other participants gave for how they practiced instructional leadership.

Codes by Case for the Themes of Understanding Instructional Leadership

Case	Know	Support	Engage
Mrs. W *Small school category*	knowledge of new trends, knowledge of education lingo	ensuring professional development occurs	
Mr. D *Small school category*	awareness of school data	supporting teachers	ability to deal with the politics of the congregation, fidelity to mission statement, continuous improvement
Mrs. P *Medium school category*	knowledge of content, knowledge of best practices, awareness of school data, knowledge of how curriculum is used, knowledge of new trends	coaching, conversations (with faculty) about teaching, outsourced IL for weak areas, model excellent teaching	initiates projects with release of responsibility
Mr. B *Medium school category*	knowledge of best practices, knowledge of new trends, awareness of school data, problems identified through data	walkthroughs, classroom observations	problems identified through data*, holding teachers accountable
Mrs. J *Large school category*	knowledge of best practices, knowledge of new trends	coaching, classroom observations, conversations (with faculty) about teaching, coaching to handle student challenges	
Mr. M *Large school category*	match teachers with strengths, rely on teacher expertise	support teachers	teacher agency

*Note: *Denotes codes that are listed under multiple themes*

Conclusions

This study examined Robinson et al.'s (2008) five domains of instructional leadership in specific contexts–small, medium, and large LCMS PreK-8 schools. Principals demonstrated instructional leadership in all five domains. They understood instructional leadership to be what they know, how they support, and how they engage.

No single leadership style characterized their instructional leadership.

No universal best practice for how to accomplish goal setting, curriculum review, or coaching cycles in these schools. This was uniquely situational.

The commonality was that, however they chose to approach goal setting in their specific school context, they did so with high visibility, emotional intelligence, strategic alignment, and a conversational posture.

Implications for the future of LCMS schools
1. Creative solutions needed for the challenge of high visibility for instructional leaders
2. Look for these habits in the hiring or calling process for school leaders
3. Look for these emerging habits to identify future leaders
4. Target growth in these particular areas (current and future leaders)