

Distribution of Instructional Leadership Roles Within a School Organization

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Zora Wolfe¹ , Kim-Kathie Knudsen¹ , and Abbie Mahaffey¹ 

Abstract

Educational leaders are tasked with many managerial responsibilities as well as instructional leadership roles. However, effective instructional leadership is a critical factor in improving student achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore how instructional leadership is distributed within a school organization, specifically examining the perceptions of district, building, and teacher leaders in relation to their roles in instructional leadership and the barriers to effective instructional leadership. Qualitative interviews were conducted with district office leaders, building leaders, and instructional coaches, and their responses to the questions were reviewed, categorized, and coded using Crewell's Data Analysis Spiral (2011). Data from this study showed: 1) the definition and expectations of instructional leadership vary across different roles, and 2) challenges in the fulfillment of instructional leadership roles indicate systematic issues that could be addressed through changes in resource (staff and time) allocation. These findings suggest practical recommendations for districts to more efficiently and effectively provide instructional leadership, beginning with explicit conversations to determine a common understanding of instructional leadership, and examining how to build capacity in all staff to fulfill the responsibilities within a school, so instructional leadership can be prioritized by building leaders.

Keywords

instructional leadership, school districts, principals, instructional coaches, district leadership

The role of the K-12 administrator has evolved in recent years, with many more added responsibilities (Ezzani, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has added responsibilities to administration, including

¹ Widener University

Corresponding Author:

Zora Wolfe, Widener University, 1 University Place, Chester, PA. 19013
Email: zmwolve@widener.edu



contact tracing and quarantining, determining coverage for classrooms without teachers, and navigating shifts to remote and hybrid learning; these added responsibilities have further highlighted the dual roles of a building administrator as an instructional leader and that of a building manager (Jenkins, 2009). As we prepare and support school leaders to facilitate teachers' work in remote teaching, online learning, and leading a building in a non-traditional format, we must have a sense of what is currently happening in schools, and specifically understand how the critical role of instructional leadership is distributed to determine the structures that need to be in place for strong instructional leadership within a school district.

The pressure on administrators has been heightened in recent years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the demand and scrutiny of high-stakes testing (Lewis, 2019). This has led to an intense focus on improving student achievement and the subsequent instructional climate. The intent to lead a school as an instructional leader is present, but time constraints devoted to managerial tasks and lack of knowledge in instructional leadership can prevent a principal from engaging in effective instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005). These stressors lead to the opportunity to examine instructional leadership as a role that can be integrated into a distributed leadership framework.

Distributed and Instructional Leadership

Providing strong instructional leadership is commonly understood to be a vital role for school leaders; however, what that looks like has evolved in recent years (Hornig & Loeb, 2010; Sharif, 2020). Hallinger and Murphy (2013) define instructional leadership as the ability of administrators to engage in three aspects of a school building: the school's mission, the instructional program, and a positive learning environment, all leading to increased academic achievement. The ability to be an instructional leader at the building level involves a fair amount of risk-taking and ultimately scrutiny by students, parents, teachers, colleagues, and district office leadership (Huggins et al., 2017). Huggins et al. (2017) found that principals inherently want to lead their buildings and take on the risk, but they are also tasked with an enormous amount of responsibility, which can often interfere with their desire and vision to carry out their role as an instructional leader. The recent change in schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the dual role of the building administrator as managerial and instructional (Lemoine et al., 2014). As such, K-12 principals are continually challenged with seeking a balance between those roles and leading instructionally (Jenkins, 2009).

Although the role of a building-level administrator is challenging, it is essential to identify the barriers to effective instructional leadership as well as the supports that can be put into place to assist the principal with instructional leadership. Specifically, rather than limiting the role of instructional leadership to the building principal, we suggest expanding the role to other leaders within a school system. Distributed leadership offers that "instead of a heroic leader who can perform all essential leadership functions, the functions are distributed among different members of the team or organization" (Yukl, 2002, p. 432).

The distributed leadership perspective examines the interactions of school leaders with others in their organization (Spillane et al., 2001). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the interactions of district, building, and teacher leaders, as they lead instruction within their schools. For example, teacher leaders in the form of master teachers or instructional coaches can assist principals with shared decision-making in a school, promote positive school culture, and have an instructional impact (Ezzani, 2020). Specifically, the role of instructional coaches can be explored to determine how these teacher leaders

can best help the principal in their role as instructional leaders. In addition, leadership extends upwards to the district level, whereby the district leadership leads and mediates the vision of how instructional leadership is enacted (Park & Datnow, 2009). These types of interactions should be more clearly examined within school organizations to determine specifically how instructional leadership is distributed.

As such, this study explores how instructional leadership is distributed within a school organization. The research questions guiding this study are:

- (a) How are instructional leadership roles and responsibilities distributed within a school organization based on the perceptions of district leaders, building leaders, and instructional coaches?
- (b) What challenges prevent the effective distribution of instructional leadership within a school organization?

Methodology

This study took place in a suburban district in central Pennsylvania. The school district has approximately 3,600 students served by four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and a district office. Three elementary schools have a head principal without an assistant principal and one elementary school, which also has the district kindergarten students, has a principal and an assistant principal due to a larger population of students and staff. The Director of Elementary Education serves a dual role as a building principal at one of the elementary schools and is also the supervisor to all elementary principals; in this study, this position was classified as a district office administrator due to her access to the district level perspective. The middle school is led by a head principal and an assistant principal, while the high school has two assistant principals and a head principal. Two STEM/Technology coaches work with all schools in the district, and each elementary school has two reading specialists/literacy coaches. Both the STEM/Technology coach and the reading specialist/literacy coach positions devote 50% of their time to coaching teachers and 50% of their time working directly with students.

The researchers sent a recruiting email to 25 district office administrators, principals and assistant principals, and instructional coaches. Fifteen participants responded to the email and indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview. Of the 15 participants, six worked in the district office, six were building-level administrators, and 3 were instructional coaches. District office level participants included were all responsible for instructional leadership directly or served in a role that provided direction to those responsible for instructional leadership; these positions included the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and four other cabinet-level directors.

Qualitative interviews were conducted to seek an in-depth understanding of how instructional leadership is distributed within a school organization to determine how the managerial job responsibilities of an administrator are balanced with instructional expectations and leadership. The interview followed a protocol designed by the researchers consisting of open-ended questions in reference to how instructional leadership is distributed within a school organization, how managerial responsibilities are balanced with instructional leadership roles and what barriers leaders face with instructional leadership. A researcher conducted the interviews remotely via Zoom, and all interviews were transcribed using the Zoom transcription tool. It is important to note this study was initiated prior to the COVID-19 school closures; however, data collection interviews began just as schools were

reopened in Fall 2020.

The responses to the questions were reviewed and categorized according to the research question and coded accordingly using the “Data Analysis Spiral” outlined by Creswell (2016) as a basis of data analysis procedures. Using the interview transcripts and notes, the researchers made notes of preliminary interpretations. The data was then coded into themes or categories and grouped together. The researchers analyzed the themes for patterns and cross-checked with each other until they achieved consensus. Using the themes and codes, the researchers interpreted the data and visualized the data in the form of charts and tables.

Findings

Data from this study showed two significant findings: 1) the definition and expectations of instructional leadership vary across the different roles, and 2) participants’ description of challenges in the fulfillment of instructional leadership roles indicate systemic issues that could be addressed through changes in resource (staff and time) allocation.

One significant finding from this study showed that the definition and expectations of instructional leadership vary across different roles. Instructional coaches, principals, and central office administrators possessed different views on what instructional leadership looks like and how it is enacted within the district. In this school district, job descriptions exist for all positions; however, due to changes in central office leadership, there have been varied expectations and subsequent fluidity for some positions. As the district evolves and grows, some positions have changed in scope and responsibility, such as a recent change of an instructional coach to include math as part of her responsibilities in response to the district’s goals and strategic plan. In this study, there was no significant difference between the groups of elementary and secondary principals, despite additional support at the secondary level in the forms of department chairs, which do not have supervisory responsibilities.

It is essential to note the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job responsibilities for school leaders and coaches, in the dual roles of instructional leadership and management of a school. Countless hours have been spent on managerial tasks such as contact tracing and social distancing groups of students. However, additional instructional hours have been allocated to the shift to teaching and learning in a digital environment. The March 2020 school closures necessitated intensive professional development in technology, pedagogy, and online learning, with school leaders and instructional coaches responsible for delivering this professional development while developing a vision of what teaching and learning could look like from home. While many of these tasks were in job descriptions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of time consumed by these tasks is critical to note in the light of balancing other existing work required of a leader.

Central office administrators primarily talked about instructional leadership as providing guidance around the curriculum. One administrator described instructional leadership as ensuring that “we understand content, pedagogy, and work with teachers to deliver the appropriate instruction to the students.” All central office administrators mentioned monitoring data and assessments as being an essential function of their roles to ensure that instruction was based on student data; one administrator described their role in the assessment process of instructional leadership as “testing not just to test...the need to have a process and what we are going to do with the data to change instruction.” Modeling best practices, supporting the mission and vision of the school district, working collaboratively with teachers, and working with curriculum were described as critical functions of instructional leadership by district

office administrators.

Principals defined instructional leadership very broadly, including managerial tasks and getting to know students. One principal described instructional leadership as “providing the most ideal circumstances to maximize student learning and the teaching and learning process.” This broad definition was echoed by other building-level administrators to include responsibilities such as creating action and data plans with teachers, visiting classrooms to build relationships with students and staff, and providing professional development on best practices in instruction. Another principal further clarified the goal of instructional leadership as a way to “change instruction and help teachers look at methods to meet all learners.”

Instructional coaches described the instructional leadership role they play as providing resources to teachers. The coaches mentioned providing resources and support directly to teachers and co-teaching and working with them on specific tasks. One coach described his role as “being an asset in aiding teachers to make their lives easier” and “empowering teachers to be the best they can be by efficiently enhancing their craft.” Their definition of instructional support encompassed working alongside teachers with technology and curriculum, providing group and individual professional development, and serving as a liaison between teachers and administration. The impact of the role of coaches to support teachers in their new role with online teaching and learning is significant; one coach, who is not a technology coach, stated, “I have also kind of taken on a tech coach role ... our teachers need a lot of support to pull that off.” The most common responses from all participants included supporting teachers (10), supporting the education and social-emotional growth of students (7), and helping to deliver appropriate curriculum materials and instruction (6).

A second significant finding from this study was that participants’ descriptions of their challenges to fulfill instructional leadership roles indicated systemic issues that could be addressed through changes in resource allocation, including staffing and time. When asked about what factors impact the ability to be an instructional leader, participants shared that other responsibilities often took priority and time away from instructional leadership. The additional responsibilities shared ranged from staffing issues, new programs to establish, communication with parents and teachers, addressing the social/emotional needs, managerial tasks, discipline, and various meetings, resulting in a lack of time for collaboration. One principal shared that you never get a chance to do what you “really want to do” as an instructional leader, while another principal felt like 90% of the day is “chaos central” with student and staff demands.

By far, the most common response to the challenge of providing effective instructional leadership was the lack of time. Reasons for the lack of time varied from increased behavior and discipline needs of students, to COVID-19 and the changes in the educational delivery model, including the time spent on contact tracing and arranging for class coverage, including, at times, personally covering classes for teachers amidst the substitute shortage. One participant said that putting out fires pulls administrators away from instructional leadership and that instructional leadership tasks are the easiest things to forgo in those situations. One administrator shared that leaders need to push themselves to be instructional leaders because the everyday tasks can get in the way, suggesting that time needs to be carved out in schedules to be instructional leaders. Another principal commented that better administrators are intentional, explicitly mentioning that

The more intentionally you schedule instructional leadership responsibilities into your days, weeks, months, the better it goes. It is important to force time in your schedule to have those moments or those growth opportunities with your teachers. If teachers don't see principals taking instructional leadership seriously or believing in the data that can really drive our teaching and our preparation, they aren't going to believe it either.

It was also shared that responsibilities continue to be added to administrators' list of duties without anything being taken away. Many of these other factors and responsibilities seemed to replace the priority of instructional leadership. While managing student behavior/discipline and managerial tasks were common responses to the added demands on administrators' time, participants also shared that various initiatives continually add more to administrators' plates. Title IX, health mandates, and COVID-19 protocols were shared as examples. Three participants specifically noted the challenge to balance managerial tasks with instructional leadership. Two participants commented on the need for the central office to set guidelines and expectations for building leaders regarding instructional leadership and to hold people accountable. Administrators acknowledged the difficulty of the dual role of manager and instructional leader; one principal suggested that one way central office could reinforce the need for principals as instructional leaders was to allocate staffing, such as additional psychologists and behavioral specialists, which would then provide more time for the building leader. The participants alluded that changes in resources related to time allocation could help minimize time spent in other areas and allow administrators to focus more on being instructional leaders.

Implications/Recommendations

Findings from this study suggest practical recommendations for districts to more efficiently and effectively provide distributed instructional leadership, beginning with explicit conversations to determine a common understanding of instructional leadership. In addition, districts should carefully examine how to build capacity in all of the building staff (including teachers, teaching aides, counselors, social workers, and others) to fulfill the multitude of responsibilities within a school, so instructional leadership can be prioritized by building leaders. The non-instructional duties described by Huggins et al. (2017) often interfere with the goal of instructional leadership by the building leader, thus necessitating the importance of distributed leadership to carry out the vision and mission of a school district. This aligns with other research that suggests instructional leadership should be a collaborative team function in schools (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Sharif, 2020).

Defining Instructional Leadership

Results of this study have significant implementations on K-12 school districts. Although participants at all levels acknowledged that instructional leadership is a priority, the definition of instructional leadership varied among study participants resulting in a disconnect from their perceived roles and the expectations of others in the district in leadership positions. Responses to the question asked about the definition of instructional leadership ranged from "supporting teachers" and "providing resources" to "maximize student learning and the teaching and learning process." The range of responses from being a support to teachers to actively working with teachers in the learning process indicates that a clearer and more consistent definition of instructional leadership may be valuable in a district to align with the district's mission and vision as well as expectations of all leaders. A common definition allows district leadership to collaboratively work with building-level administrators and coaches to define roles, allocate resources, plan for the professional development of both leaders and staff, and deliver consistent instruction to students.

Before any decisions about the role of instructional leaders in a district can be made, the mission and vision of a district, organizational structure, and decision-making processes need to be examined, so that

decisions can be consistently implemented across the district. For example, building administrators in this study talked about improving their instructional leadership through collaboration with other building administrators in their division, as well as collaborating with instructional coaches working in their building. However, the district-level decision-making process of how this could be done was perceived differently by district administrators, building administrators, and coaches. In this particular school district, the mission and vision of the district were interpreted similarly by all leaders; however, there was a disconnect in the process of decision-making to implementation from the district office to the student level. For example, decisions made at the district office level were interpreted differently by various administrators in elementary buildings. In turn, building-level leaders worked with instructional coaches on implementation, which looked differently at the student level. The effectiveness of implementation was varied based on perception and interpretation of the decision. This further highlights the need for clear communication between instructional leaders and teachers, especially when relying on an online network of communication (Brock et al., 2021).

In order to define instructional leadership and have it consistently carried out in a manner that impacts instruction and enables instructional leaders to carry out the vision, there needs to be a clear decision-making process originating from the district office to the building leaders and coaches, so that all can be participants in the process and implementation. In order for there to be system coherence, these collaborative decision-making processes cannot just be contained within a division without attention to a broader district plan. When communication and processes are unclear, implementation varies across schools and between leaders, thus affecting the effectiveness and adding to the confusion about roles and responsibilities.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

Instructional leadership in a school district should have a common definition, but districts should also interpret what instructional leadership looks like in their districts at each level, based on district needs, staffing, and current culture and climate. It should also be noted that this study was conducted during the 2020-2021 school year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The roles and responsibilities of all leadership changed significantly as leaders were tasked with performing non-instructional functions such as cleaning lunch tables, conducting contact tracing, and closing and opening buildings to meet guidelines. All survey participants recognized that these tasks disrupted their instructional leadership tasks this year; however, building-level principals were still frustrated with their inability to provide instructional leadership, even though they acknowledged that district office leaders did not expect them to provide the same level of instructional leadership as previous years due to the managerial demands of COVID-19 management. One recommendation is to take note of the non-instructional tasks that principals are performing and determine if there are others not in an instructional leadership position who can better perform these tasks, allowing leaders to have more time to devote to their instructional responsibilities. The 2020-2021 school year also generated a change in classroom instruction and learning, and all building leaders expressed that they wished they could have been supporting teachers more in their transition to hybrid or synchronous teaching.

The importance of analyzing the roles and responsibilities of instructional leadership within the district was a clear theme that is recommended for every district and should be revisited frequently as structure, staffing, and grant-funded positions change. Defining what instructional leadership looks like in a district, along with the roles and responsibilities of district office leaders, building-level

administrators, and coaches, are essential tasks. In addition, empowering informal teacher leaders can be critical in creating a school climate focused on instruction and student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2016); this additional group of staff is often underutilized to support instructional growth. Districts can also take a critical look at other positions in a school district who might be able to support students and staff, such as guidance counselors, social workers, dean of students, and paraeducators, to allow other leaders to focus on their roles and responsibilities while providing additional support and strengthening instruction. The allocation of time and resources, both human resources and financial, is a critical function of leadership that is critical to ensure that all resources provided by the district are maximized efficiently.

In addition, the challenges in the roles and responsibilities, specifically of instructional coaches, were a finding that is significant for school districts. Instructional coaches in this district take on a wide range of functions, such as providing teachers resources to support instruction, data analysis, co-teaching and co-planning, professional development, and student enrichment and remediation, but it was clear that for them to support instructional leadership well, their roles and responsibilities need to be more clearly defined in a manner that structures their work as a collaborative role with teaching staff so they can be an instructional support to administrators as well. For example, instructional coaches often have flexibility in their schedule to support different teachers, but as such, administrators need to be mindful of maximizing their instructional time with staff, as opposed to using them for non-instructional tasks, such as class coverage, supervision duties, and proctoring assessments.

Finally, results from this study indicate the need for professional development not only for teachers and staff in a K-12 district but also for continued learning for administrators on instructional leadership. Professional development is typically planned for teachers and other staff members, with the administrators and coaches often delivering the learning content, but districts should also plan for continued learning for administrators and coaches. Specifically, instructional leaders need to develop their own skills to better support their staff through developing strong understandings and applications of current best practices in teaching and learning, and supervision of teachers and staff.

Limitations

The results of this study are subject to limitations. This study was conducted in one suburban school district in central Pennsylvania during the 2020-2021 school year, and the school district needed to offer a variety of instructional models due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These models, including hybrid, asynchronous, synchronous, and in-person instruction, provided an additional strain on all staff, and the additional responsibilities related to the pandemic affected the ability of administrators to serve as instructional leaders. This district is also a smaller-sized district; therefore, the survey should be replicated in districts of different sizes where the structures and relationships among the district office, principals, and instructional coaches may be different.

Future Research

This study was completed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of a building administrator during that time included tasks such as contact tracing and quarantining students, working with students, parents, and teachers on the abrupt transition to emergency remote learning, and spending an inordinate amount of time working through the logistics of social distancing in the middle of

ever changing guidelines. This study should be replicated after the height of the pandemic so tasks specific COVID management are not at the forefront of administrators' minds.

Many of us thought that the COVID-19 pandemic would be a temporary situation impacting schools and there would be a return to normalcy after the height had dissipated. The 2021-2022 school year began with such optimism and a desire to return to normal. However, it became evident that COVID-19 has shifted the landscape of education; future research should focus on the impact of COVID-19 and the lessons learned from the pandemic that will permanently impact teaching and learning, particularly how the pandemic reshapes the definition of instructional leadership and the distribution of responsibilities for strong instructional leadership.

Administrators and coaches in this study did not mention the impact of teacher evaluations in their role as either an instructional leader or as part of their managerial tasks. Perhaps this was due to the COVID-19 pandemic where the requirements for teacher evaluations were mitigated and also as a high-performing district, teacher evaluations were not a source of stress that left an impact on administrators. As such, an additional future research topic should include the role and changing nature of the teacher evaluation system on administrators and instructional coaches, since the teacher evaluation system impacts the nature of relationships between the non-evaluative instructional coaches and teachers and administrators performing these evaluations.

Conclusion

In examining the question of how instructional leadership roles and responsibilities are distributed within a school organization, this study found that the answer varies based on the role of the participant (district leaders, building leaders, and instructional coaches). The findings highlighted the differences in how instructional leadership is defined across the different roles and also how challenges in the fulfillment of instructional leadership roles indicate systemic issues that could be addressed through changes in resource (staff and time) allocation. Topics for future study should include a more detailed analysis of how each group is prepared for and enacts their role of instructional leadership, as well as how the different roles can better work together across the district.

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ORCID iD

Zora Wolfe  [0000-0001-6161-9235](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6161-9235)

Kim-Kathie Knudsen  [0000-0002-3089-5859](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3089-5859)

Abbie Mahaffey  [0000-0001-9491-5145](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9491-5145)

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