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Examining Primary School Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices: A Case Study on Curriculum Reform and Implementation

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Abstract: This study examines how primary school principals navigate and influence curriculum reform through instructional leadership. Using a qualitative approach, data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and structured observations with three purposefully selected principals, guided by the Principal Instructional Management model. Interview questions focused on three core areas—developing the school mission, managing the instructional program, and fostering a positive school climate—allowing principals to share insights on their leadership strategies, challenges, and engagement in curriculum reform. Observations captured real-time practices, such as classroom visits, teacher interactions, and feedback sessions, to provide a comprehensive view of their instructional leadership roles. Thematic analysis revealed that principals actively shape school missions by integrating personal beliefs, educational agendas, and curriculum policy knowledge. They engage in reflective practices such as meetings and retreats to reinforce the school's vision among teachers, manage instructional programs through routine and random checks, motivate teachers with positive feedback, and promote a positive climate by supporting social cohesion and addressing teachers' personal needs. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of instructional leadership, where principals balance personal convictions with policy-driven mandates. Recommendations include targeted professional development and formal policy recognition of instructional leadership to empower principals in leading reform efforts.

Keywords: curriculum reform; educational policy implementation; instructional leadership; PIMRS; principals' practices



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1. Introduction

The implementation of curriculum reforms requires robust instructional leadership, a vital element that can significantly influence the effectiveness of educational outcomes (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Gawlik, 2018). Principals play a critical role as instructional leaders by fostering environments that support effective teaching and learning, aligning instructional practices with curriculum goals, and navigating challenges associated with policy changes (Acton, 2021; Shava et al., 2021). However, in various global contexts, including in developing nations, the concept and enactment of instructional leadership face significant obstacles due to systemic and structural challenges (Hallinger, 2018; Bros

& Schechter, 2022). This study aims to explore how principals enact their instructional leadership practices in the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP). Research has highlighted that principals' instructional leadership significantly impacts school effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Yet, in many countries, curriculum reform efforts are initiated without adequately integrating or prioritizing instructional leadership as part of the policy framework (Ralebese et al., 2022; Pont, 2020). This oversight can result in fragmented implementation processes that hinder the success of curriculum changes. In Lesotho, while the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (MoET, 2009) outlines the need for comprehensive educational reform, the formalization of and support for instructional leadership remain limited, leaving principals to navigate these responsibilities with minimal systemic guidance (Moorosi & Komiti, 2020; Raselimo & Mahao, 2015).

The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) has often been used as a robust framework for assessing the instructional management behaviors of school leaders (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Sebastian et al., 2018). Studies utilizing this framework have shown that even in contexts with limited formalized structures, principals can embody key instructional leadership practices such as defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive school climate (Alsharija & Watters, 2021; Karacabey et al., 2022). In Lesotho, where instructional leadership is not formally embedded into the educational system, understanding how principals adapt and enact these practices is crucial for informing future policy and training programs. Principals in climes with limited support often face unique challenges, including inadequate resources, a lack of professional development, and resistance to change among staff members (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). These challenges can impede their ability to implement curriculum reforms effectively. Despite these obstacles, some principals demonstrate resilience and adaptive strategies that align with established instructional leadership models such as the PIMRS (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Shaked, 2020). Such adaptations have the potential to provide valuable insights into the capabilities and limitations of school leaders when tasked with implementing complex educational reforms without sufficient systemic backing.

By examining how principals in Lesotho enact their instructional practices in CAP implementation, this study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of CAP implementation and instructional leadership in under-resourced and under-supported educational systems. Insights from this study can inform policymakers and education stakeholders on the importance of integrating comprehensive instructional leadership frameworks into curriculum reform initiatives to enhance their effectiveness.

2. Literature Review

Current research on instructional leadership reveals a limitation in its lack of in-depth qualitative studies. Many studies rely predominantly on survey data from principals' self-reports, which have not provided a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2013). In-person observations are deemed essential to fully capture how instructional leadership is enacted, particularly in the context of curriculum reform (Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane & Zuberi, 2021). Some studies have employed time-use observational data to examine how principals prioritize their activities. Findings consistently indicate that principals spend comparatively little time directly overseeing teaching and learning, devoting limited time to classroom visits and teacher coaching as well as curriculum evaluation and professional development planning (Goldring et al., 2020; Horng et al., 2010; Sebastian et al., 2018). Research indicates that principals often allocate insufficient time to instructional leadership due to the admin-

istrative demands that dominate their schedules (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Ombonga & Ongaga, 2017).

Moreover, principals may lack the specialized skills required for effective instructional leadership, particularly in areas outside their expertise, underscoring the need for tailored professional development (Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019). However, most research on principal leadership is concentrated in Western contexts, providing limited insights into African settings, where educational systems face unique challenges. For instance, in many African countries, leadership development for school leaders is often insufficient, with instructional leadership not fully integrated into educational systems (Bush, 2020; Moorosi & Komiti, 2020). In developing countries, principals' instructional leadership is frequently constrained by inadequate training and resources, impacting their ability to lead curriculum reforms effectively (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2018). In Lesotho, for instance, the education system has historically emphasized managerial duties for principals, overlooking their instructional leadership roles (Mphutlane, 2018). The implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) in 2013 marked a significant shift, aligning education with Lesotho's socio-economic needs (MoET, 2009). However, the CAP's rollout did not sufficiently address the role of instructional leadership, leaving principals to guide teachers with limited support (Moorosi & Komiti, 2020; Raselimo & Mahao, 2015).

Principals play a critical role in facilitating teachers' understanding and application of curriculum changes. Research highlights that principals influence the reform process by shaping what teachers focus on and guiding them through associated challenges (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). Effective instructional leadership requires principals to possess knowledge of curriculum policies and the skills to motivate and support teachers (Alsaleh, 2019; Ganon-Shilon & Chen, 2019). However, studies show that many principals lack the training needed to interpret policy requirements effectively and align their school's mission with reform objectives (Bros & Schechter, 2022; Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). The development and enactment of instructional leadership skills require ongoing professional development and institutional support according to Karacabey et al. (2022). Principals are expected to foster an environment where teachers feel supported and empowered to implement instructional changes effectively. Professional development initiatives are essential for equipping principals with the skills necessary for effective leadership (Fairman et al., 2023; Kumari, 2020). However, the inadequacy of leadership training in many African countries, including Lesotho, underscores the need for targeted programs that strengthen principals' instructional leadership capacities to support curriculum reform (Ralebese et al., 2022). Without such support, principals may struggle to fulfill their instructional roles effectively, ultimately affecting the success of educational reforms (Hallinger & Lee, 2013). The literature emphasizes the vital role of instructional leadership in supporting curriculum reform, yet also highlights substantial challenges, particularly in developing contexts. In Lesotho, the traditional focus on managerial roles, coupled with limited formal instructional leadership training, presents obstacles for principals tasked with implementing the CAP.

3. Conceptual Framework

The PIMRS framework developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) offers a structured approach to understanding instructional leadership. The three dimensions of PIMRS—defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate—serve as a comprehensive model for examining how principals enact their leadership roles. This framework has been employed to study principals' practices across various contexts and provides valuable insights into the relationship between leadership actions and school effectiveness (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). In the context of Lesotho, where instructional leadership

is not formally integrated into educational policy, using the PIMRS framework can help identify the strengths and weaknesses in principals' leadership practices. By examining how principals define their school's mission, manage instructional programs, and foster a positive climate, researchers can better understand the challenges and opportunities that exist for instructional leadership in curriculum reform.

The three critical dimensions of instructional leadership are as follows. First, when developing the school's mission, principals play a vital role in defining and communicating the school's goals, objectives, and vision, leveraging a distributed leadership approach to ensure clear alignment among all stakeholders (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Second, managing the instructional program involves supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress—core responsibilities that remain primarily within the principal's purview even with collaborative teacher input (Okeke & Okaforcha, 2019). Lastly, promoting a positive school learning climate requires principals to safeguard instructional time, support teachers' professional development, maintain high visibility, and foster a culture of continuous improvement through incentives and positive reinforcement (Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). These dimensions are often used quantitatively and in quantitative studies. However, in this study, we qualitatively explore these dimensions to obtain an in-depth understanding, bearing in mind that this study is a component of a bigger study that had examined the PIMRS framework in quantitative terms. Here, interviews and observation protocols were adapted to align with the dimensions of interest, shaping the focus on how principals enact their instructional leadership. This framework not only supports the development of targeted questions for interviews and observations but also aids in the systematic analysis of data related to curriculum reform in the context of Lesotho.

4. Problem Statement

The challenges faced by principals in many contexts include limited resources, inadequate professional development, and staff resistance to change, all of which can compromise the effective implementation of curriculum reforms (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Fairman et al., 2023). Yet, some principals display adaptive leadership practices that align with established models such as the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), which assesses instructional behaviors such as defining school missions, managing instructional programs, and fostering a positive school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Alsharija & Watters, 2021; Karacabey et al., 2022). Understanding how these principals enact instructional leadership without formalized frameworks is essential for developing strategies that support effective leadership in similarly under-resourced environments. The existing literature has shown that instructional leadership practices, even when not formalized, can be pivotal for effective curriculum reform. However, there is a limited understanding of how principals in contexts like Lesotho enact these practices and navigate the barriers they face. This gap in research underlines the rationale for studies that explore the on-the-ground realities of principals tasked with implementing curriculum reforms without robust systemic backing (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Shaked, 2020).

This study addresses this gap by examining how principals in Lesotho enact their instructional practices to implement the CAP. By employing qualitative methods to capture in-depth perspectives, this research aims to diversify the global understanding of instructional leadership in contexts where systemic support is lacking, a position suggested in previous studies (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2022; Goldring et al., 2020). Insights gained can inform policy and practice, highlighting the necessity of embedding comprehensive instructional leadership frameworks into educational reforms and providing targeted professional development to empower principals. Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate the prac-

tices and adaptive strategies of principals that can contribute to the effective enactment of curriculum reforms, despite the limitations of their support systems. Such insights may be crucial for creating policies and training programs that bolster the leadership capacities of school principals in Lesotho and similar settings.

5. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing that social reality is constructed and shaped by social meanings, perspectives, and social locations and highlighting the importance of deliberate action (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). The adopted descriptive qualitative case study aims to explore and describe the instructional leadership practices of principals in Lesotho as they implement curriculum reform, focusing on their unique perspectives and actions within a specific cultural and educational context. The qualitative approach used in this study is particularly well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena, providing deeper insights into the instructional leadership practices of school principals (Cohen et al., 2018; Hollstein, 2011). By employing semi-structured interviews and observations, this approach captures rich, descriptive data that allow for an in-depth examination of the subjective experiences and practices of principals, offering a nuanced understanding of how they navigate curriculum reform within the bounded context of Lesotho's primary education system.

5.1. Sampling

The purposive sampling technique was employed to select three primary school principals in Maseru, Lesotho as participants based on convenience and accessibility in their enactment of the curriculum. This non-random sampling allowed for the intentional choice of participants based on their relevance to the study's objectives (Cohen et al., 2018). This method aligns with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) emphasis on selecting information-rich cases to obtain comprehensive data.

The criteria for inclusion required that participants had been leading the implementation of the new curriculum reform in their schools for at least two years. This ensured that the selected principals possessed the necessary experience to provide meaningful insights. The principals who agreed to participate were interviewed and observed in their daily instructional leadership activities. The use of purposive sampling facilitated the collection of in-depth data within a manageable timeframe and ensured this study's relevance.

5.2. Instrumentation

This study utilized two primary data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews and direct observations, each aligned with this study's objectives to understand how principals enact instructional leadership within the context of curriculum reform in Lesotho. The semi-structured interview protocols, titled the General Interview Protocol (GIP) and the Post-Observation Interview Protocol (PIP) based on the PIMRS model, were designed to capture in-depth insights into the principals' instructional leadership practices across three main dimensions: developing the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate, with each representing a section in the instrument (see Supplementary Materials).

The first of the three sections—developing the school mission—explored how principals develop and communicate the school mission, the influence of their personal beliefs, and the role of curriculum policy. Managing the instructional program focused on the methods principals use to monitor instruction, support teachers, and handle challenges related to curriculum implementation. Promoting a positive school climate investigated

how principals foster a conducive learning environment, including teacher motivation, social cohesion, and support for teachers' personal needs.

Direct observations were performed using the Observation Protocol (OP) based on the PIMRS model. This was where a practical understanding of principals' leadership practices within the school environment was obtained through observation, providing an opportunity to witness first-hand the enactment of instructional leadership (see Supplementary Materials). The following focus areas guided observations. Regarding developing the school mission, observations focused on instances where principals communicated or reinforced the school mission and values, especially in meetings or collaborative sessions with teachers; regarding managing the instructional program, the researcher observed routine and random classroom visits by principals, documenting the frequency, purpose, and interactions with teachers. Emphasis was placed on capturing feedback sessions, curriculum-related guidance, and any efforts to address instructional challenges. Lastly, regarding promoting a positive school climate, this aspect involved observing interactions and events to foster a supportive environment, including motivational feedback, social activities, and efforts to address teachers' needs.

5.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved a combination of semi-structured interviews and direct observations to capture a holistic view of how principals enact instructional leadership during curriculum reform. To achieve this aim, semi-structured interviews and observations were instruments for three purposefully selected primary school principals in Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho. The GIP and OP were the instruments for data collection. The data collection process was conducted in two phases.

Initially, each principal participated in a general interview, which was conducted once on the first day for approximately 40–60 min. That was where each principal provided background and the context in which they work based on the three dimensions of the PIMRS. Apart from that, prior to observation, there were start-up meetings each day for principals to outline their daily leadership plans/schedules. These lasted between 10–15 min. Following these, each principal was observed performing their duties for six and seven hours (school working hours) for three consecutive days to capture a broad range of activities. Observational notes were taken to document interactions, leadership actions, and the context in which these actions occurred (see Supplementary Materials).

Post-observation interviews were then conducted to discuss the observed activities, allowing the researcher to clarify and enrich the data with the principals' perspectives. Each interview lasted approximately 40–120 min and was conducted in a quiet setting within the school, ensuring privacy and comfort for the participant (see Supplementary Materials). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling the researchers to explore additional themes as they emerged. This comprehensive approach ensured the collection of robust primary data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The data analysis involved coding according to the three dimensions of the PIMRS, which provided a comprehensive view of instructional practices and leadership enactment (Lester et al., 2020). The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis with pre-determined themes based on the framework adopted in this study. First, all interview recordings and observation notes were cataloged, transcribed verbatim, and stored electronically. This step facilitated familiarity with the data, which was essential for initial coding. The transcripts were read multiple times, and notes were taken to identify significant statements and themes related to the enactment of instructional leadership. The analysis employed a thematic approach, where the three dimensions of the PIMRS served as predefined themes. Descriptive codes were assigned to relevant data segments,

explaining how principals enacted instructional leadership. Excerpts from the interviews and observation notes supported these descriptive statements. The final stage involved corroborating these statements with the existing literature, ensuring that the findings were both evidence-based and contextually grounded.

5.4. Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, triangulation and peer reviewing were employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation involved cross-referencing data collected from interviews and observations to validate findings. Peer review included input from three experienced scholars who critically examined this study's methodology and findings. These processes ensured the reliability and credibility of the research outcomes.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2021/1358/21/22). Prior to data collection, permission was secured from the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) District Office and the school principals involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of their rights and could withdraw at any stage without repercussions (Cohen et al., 2018). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for participants and schools, and data were stored securely on a password-protected computer accessible only to the principal researcher. These measures aligned with ethical research standards and safeguarded participants' identities (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Therefore, the following section presents the findings and discussions that were obtained through data collected using the above methodology.

6. Findings and Discussion

This study sought to examine how principals enact their instructional practices for CAP implementation in Lesotho. The three principals in this study have been assigned the pseudonyms P1, P2, and P3 for anonymity.

6.1. Developing the School Mission

The findings of this study underscore the active role that principals play in shaping and managing their schools' missions, which are informed by a mix of personal beliefs, curriculum policy knowledge, and a commitment to aligning educational goals with daily practices. This discussion explores the implications of these findings within the framework of instructional leadership and the literature on school mission development, curriculum alignment, and instructional management.

The findings from this study reveal that principals in Lesotho play a vital and proactive role in shaping their school's mission, which often reflects a blend of personal beliefs, agendas, and curriculum policy knowledge. P1 emphasized the importance of skill acquisition in his school's mission: *"We make sure that every one of our learners, when they get to grade 7, they have acquired a skill of some sort as contained in the school mission"*. He also expressed resistance to certain curriculum ideas that he found disagreeable: *"There were things that I did not understand about the new curriculum. That I was reluctant [to implement] as a teacher, and I didn't want them to happen"*.

6.1.1. Influence of Personal Beliefs

P3's mission was influenced by his belief in learner-centered teaching, which is the focus of the new curriculum: *"I wanted to see learner-centred teaching taking place in my school because I believe in learner-centred teaching. . . I planned to have the teachers move in that direction"*. Similarly, P2 described his motivation to pioneer new initiatives: *"I wanted to create the*

waves... have an impact, to have something that I have started from scratch". He elaborated that there had been no mission statement in the school when he arrived: *"When I arrived here, there was no mission statement"*. Thus, he spearheaded a collaborative mission-setting process: *"Then we just decided to brainstorm our objectives as a school..."*

This finding might suggest that principals have room for autonomy and discretion when developing school missions for their schools. This flexibility seems to allow them to tailor their missions to the unique needs of their schools.

This aligns with scholarly views that recognize the centrality of a principal's vision in driving educational change (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Stager, 1989). Leithwood and Stager (1989) argue that principals frequently operate with a high degree of clarity regarding their personal principles, using these beliefs to guide their decisions. For example, in this study, P1 prioritized skill acquisition, incorporating it into the school's mission with the intention that *"every one of our learners, when they get to grade 7, they have acquired a skill of some sort"*. Similarly, P3's mission focused on learner-centered teaching, a pedagogical belief that he held deeply, while P2 focused on pioneering the development of the school's mission. This personalization of school missions underscores how leaders' individual convictions can become institutional values (Gawlik, 2018), enabling them to steer the school's culture and instructional focus toward specific educational ideals.

However, the interplay between personal beliefs and external mandates presents challenges and raises questions about alignment with broader educational goals (Pont, 2020). For example, P1's resistance to elements of the curriculum that he found to be unaligned with his beliefs highlights the potential for conflicts between principals' personal priorities and policy demands (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). While personalization of the mission can be empowering, it may also risk marginalizing essential aspects of standardized policies, which could lead to inconsistencies in policy implementation (Ralebese et al., 2022). Bros and Schechter (2022) argue that principals who integrate their personal beliefs with external mandates might unintentionally dilute curriculum reforms by focusing selectively on aspects that align with their views. This brings to light the importance of balancing personal beliefs with structured guidance, as the inconsistent application of reforms can undermine policy effectiveness.

6.1.2. Using Their Knowledge of Curriculum Policy

P2 and P3 highlighted that their understanding of curriculum policy shaped their visions. P2 noted that they used core competencies from the integrated curriculum as a guide: *"It was said that this curriculum was going to focus on these core competencies. I said, let us check ourselves as a school in relation to each core competence"*. This prompted revisions of the school's objectives to align with policy requirements: *"We edited this mission statement... according to the integrated curriculum"*. P3 also emphasized the CAP's stipulation of learner-centered teaching: *"The policy... stipulates learner-centredness... which is the direction that I wanted the teachers to take"*.

Moreover, the findings suggest that principals' knowledge of curriculum policy itself plays a significant role in shaping the school's mission, particularly when principals actively interpret and adapt these policies to fit their context. For instance, P2's and P3's use of core competencies from the integrated curriculum to inform their school's objectives underscores how curriculum policy knowledge enables principals to align their vision with broader educational standards. This finding is encouraging because it suggests that principals make attempts to align their school missions with the reform policy. However, it is equally puzzling to observe their attempts because the reform policy lacks guidelines on how principals should develop school missions.

In contrast to the traditional view that policies are simply enforced, [Canon-Shilon and Schechter \(2017\)](#) emphasize that principals act as mediators, actively shaping how teachers interpret and implement reforms. Thus, principals' knowledge of curriculum policy enables them to refine school missions that are both policy-aligned and contextually relevant ([Bros & Schechter, 2022](#)).

6.1.3. Reinforcing the Vision Through Reflection

The principals used reflective practices to reinforce their school's vision, ensuring that teachers remained aligned with the overarching goals. P1 explained: *"One important thing we have every year. . . is a retreat; we reflect on ourselves to our work"*. He noted that fostering understanding among teachers was key: *"The most important thing is to help each other understand. . . only then it becomes easier to implement"*.

Similarly, P2 conducted end-of-year reviews: *"We reflect on our performance as teachers"*. He highlighted the importance of continuous reminders: *"You still have to remind them time and again. . . keep reminding them that this is what is supposed to take place"*. P1 also leveraged external figures, such as a local priest, to reinforce the school's vision: *"We get a priest for that. . . they help impart the vision"*.

The practice of reinforcing the school mission through reflection and collaboration with teachers highlights yet another essential facet of instructional leadership: maintaining an alignment between vision and practice. The principals in this study adopted a range of reflective practices, such as retreats and end-of-year reviews, to engage teachers in understanding and upholding the school's mission. P1, for instance, described using an annual retreat as an opportunity for the school community to "reflect on ourselves to our work". This finding suggests that principals believe that reflective discussions with teachers can lead to a deeper understanding of the school's mission and ensure that they are aligned toward a common goal.

This approach is consistent with [Hallinger and Hosseingholizadeh's \(2019\)](#) assertion that principals must ensure that the school community is not only aware of the mission but also committed to it. Moreover, [Woulfin and Rigby \(2017\)](#) argue that reflective practices foster coherence by providing teachers with space to align their instructional approaches with the school's overall goals, thus creating a unified school culture. Yet, while reflection is an effective tool, it is not without its challenges. Studies indicate that not all teachers may readily embrace a principal's vision, particularly when it entails changes to long-standing practices or values ([Shaked & Schechter, 2019](#)). Additionally, as [Gawlik \(2018\)](#) notes, fostering alignment through reflection requires strong relational leadership skills, as principals must create an atmosphere where teachers feel valued and involved. This points to the need for principals to possess interpersonal and communication skills that encourage teacher buy-in, an area often underdeveloped in leadership training ([Moorosi & Komiti, 2020](#)).

6.2. Managing the Instructional Program

This study found that principals actively managed instructional programs through both routine and random checks.

6.2.1. Conducting Routine Checks

P2 mentioned conducting monthly class visits: *"I have that supervision schedule that every month I should have reached every grade"*. These visits were brief, with a focus on observing teaching aids and classroom management: *"I think a maximum of 5 min. . . I don't document anything"*. Similarly, P3 conducted bi-weekly checks of teachers' records: *"For me to know what you have taught, you need to record and bring it for me to see"*.

Another critical finding concerns principals' active management of instructional programs, which they achieve through both routine and random monitoring. This proactive involvement in instructional programs demonstrates the commitment of principals to ensuring academic excellence within their schools. In addition, their hands-on approach allows them to effectively oversee and improve the quality of education provided to learners.

Research highlights that such engagement is central to instructional leadership, enabling principals to uphold instructional quality and provide real-time feedback to teachers (Horng et al., 2010; Sebastian et al., 2018). By routinely monitoring classroom practices, principals are better positioned to identify instructional challenges and support teachers' professional growth. This aligns with Spillane and Zuberi's (2021) view that close engagement with teachers fosters a collaborative culture and enhances the instructional capacity of the school. However, studies also caution that while principals' active monitoring supports teaching quality, it must be balanced with autonomy to avoid perceived micromanagement, which could stifle teachers' professional judgment and creativity (Spillane et al., 2001).

6.2.2. Conducting Random Checks

P1 reported using a flexible approach: *"The time I get to your class... it doesn't have that specific time or specific day... but... a year will not end before I reach all their classes"*. He described verifying lesson plans and student work during these visits: *"When I get to class... I check the correspondence of what you are delivering with what you planned"*.

A potential limitation of the principals' approach to instructional program management, as seen in Lesotho, lies in the reliance on random checks without a structured support framework. Random monitoring can offer insights into teachers' daily practices, yet it may lack the consistency needed to systematically support professional development. Nonetheless, the principals show commitment to ensuring that learners receive high-quality education by monitoring teaching and learning.

To address this, Kilag and Sasan (2023) recommend integrating routine classroom visits with structured feedback and follow-up sessions, enabling principals to provide meaningful and sustained support. Further, Goldring et al. (2020) suggest that principals' time allocation toward instructional leadership is often limited due to administrative burdens, reinforcing the need for administrative support structures that enable principals to devote more time to instructional leadership.

6.2.3. Sharing Leadership with Teachers

All principals highlighted the importance of shared leadership. P3 stated: *"These various committees help to deal with different aspects that are involved in the running of the school"*. P1 added: *"Many of the things we do them through the committees... they are the leaders"*. This practice empowers teachers to take ownership of certain aspects of instructional management. By working closely with teachers in leadership roles, principals tap into their expertise and creativity to drive innovation and improvement in teaching practices. In this study, this finding could indicate that the principals use this approach to foster a sense of shared responsibility and promote a more cohesive and effective learning environment. In particular, this finding aligns with research by Kumari (2020), which found that distributed leadership enhances the teaching and learning process.

This study's findings emphasize the complex, multifaceted nature of instructional leadership, highlighting the challenges and opportunities involved in developing a school's mission, reinforcing its vision, and managing instructional programs. The principals' efforts to balance personal beliefs, curriculum policy knowledge, and reflective practices contribute to a cohesive school mission, yet challenges arise from conflicting policy demands and varying levels of teacher engagement. Furthermore, active instructional management is essential

but must be strategically supported to enhance teacher autonomy and promote professional growth. Ultimately, these findings reinforce the call for context-specific leadership training that enables principals to effectively balance policy mandates, personal convictions, and instructional responsibilities in ways that support coherent and meaningful educational reform (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2018).

6.3. Promoting a Positive School Climate

The principals also worked to foster a positive school climate through teacher motivation, social activities, and showing empathy to teachers.

6.3.1. Motivating Teachers

To motivate teachers, P3 highlighted the importance of immediate positive feedback: *"I usually praise them. . . I tell them right there and then that this is very good"*. P2 allowed teachers more autonomy as a form of recognition: *"It becomes an incentive that a teacher will have a privilege to manipulate allocation if they are working well"*.

The study findings highlight that principals play an active role in fostering a positive school climate by focusing on teacher motivation, social cohesion, and supporting teachers' personal needs. From this, it seems that these principals seek to create an environment where teachers feel valued and supported. This ultimately enriches the overall experience for both teachers and learners.

In motivating teachers, the principals in this study employed immediate and specific feedback as a recognition tool, prioritizing in-the-moment praise, reflecting an approach that not only acknowledges teachers' efforts but also reinforces desired behaviors in real time. From this finding, it seems the principals try to sustain teachers' motivation when implementing curricular changes. In this way, the principals cultivate a positive work environment that encourages innovation and ultimately improves teachers' instructional practices.

Additionally, this finding suggests that the autonomy given to high-performing teachers offers them the flexibility to influence class allocations based on their demonstrated commitment. This is likely to increase their job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. This can lead to improved student outcomes and overall success for the school. Empowering teachers in this way can also foster a positive work environment and encourage innovation in teaching.

This finding aligns with research emphasizing the principal's influence in establishing a collaborative and supportive school culture (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). By promoting a positive climate, principals create an environment conducive to teacher engagement and student success (Shava et al., 2021). This approach is supported by Gawlik (2018), who found that such targeted feedback can significantly boost teachers' motivation and reinforce a culture of high performance. Again, the autonomy-based motivation observed in this study aligns with research suggesting that empowered teachers are more likely to feel valued and satisfied in their roles, leading to higher morale and reduced turnover (Karacabey et al., 2022).

6.3.2. Improving Social Cohesion

Improving social cohesion among staff was another key strategy employed by principals to build a positive school climate. P2 noted the importance of organizing non-work activities: *"We have activities that we do together that are not part of our work. . . closing social for the teachers"*. These activities, intended to foster camaraderie and teamwork, help relieve stress and reduce the isolation teachers often feel in their professional roles. By fostering a sense of community and collaboration, these activities create a supportive environment where teachers can share ideas, resources, and best practices. This not only enhances the overall well-being of teachers but also improves the quality of education for students.

Through these initiatives, teachers can feel more connected and empowered in their roles, leading to a more positive and fulfilling work experience.

Other scholars support this approach, noting that social cohesion activities promote stronger interpersonal relationships among staff, which in turn enhances collaboration and collective problem-solving in educational settings (Manaseh, 2016; Maponya, 2020; Shava et al., 2021; Sukarmin & Sin, 2022).

6.3.3. Showing Empathy to Teachers

One aspect of fostering a positive climate is promoting a sense of belonging, which principals in this study achieved through empathy and personalized support. P1 highlighted the importance of showing patience and understanding, *“For them to understand that they belong to you is not an easy thing, but you have to be very patient”*. Additionally, principals recognized that supporting teachers’ personal needs directly impacts their professional focus. P3, for instance, noted, *“I think it is very important that when they come to school... their minds are fully focused on teaching”*. Interestingly, these two principals possibly recognize that when teachers feel supported in their personal lives, they are better equipped to focus on their students and excel in the classroom. This finding highlights that principals can help create a positive and productive work environment for their teachers by offering personalized assistance to teachers with challenges. Ultimately, investing in the well-being of teachers can lead to improved student outcomes and overall school success.

This holistic approach is corroborated by Kilag and Sasan (2023), who argue that a principal’s attention to the teachers’ personal needs can enhance their engagement and commitment to teaching. Furthermore, this leadership style resonates with findings that show that empathetic school leaders can significantly improve teachers’ performance if they demonstrate a genuine interest in the well-being of their teachers (Moorosi & Komiti, 2020).

Overall, these findings show the importance of a positive school climate for effective instructional leadership. Principals’ efforts in motivating teachers, fostering social cohesion, and addressing teachers’ personal needs contribute to a supportive environment that enables teachers to perform at their best. This multifaceted approach aligns with the literature, which suggests that creating a positive climate is essential for retaining motivated, committed, and high-performing teachers (Fairman et al., 2023; Kumari, 2020). Furthermore, these efforts highlight that the principals’ role extends beyond academic oversight. It includes fostering a community in which teachers feel valued and supported, ultimately benefiting student outcomes and the overall success of school reform initiatives.

7. Conclusions

This study sought to examine the enactment of principals’ instructional leadership practices in the implementation of the CAP in Lesotho. It reveals that primary school principals in Lesotho play a multifaceted role in instructional leadership as they work to implement the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP). Principals were found to shape and enact their school’s mission in ways that reflect personal beliefs and agendas, as well as an understanding of curriculum policy. This alignment underscores principals’ roles not only as policy implementers but as visionaries who adapt policies to fit their school contexts. Additionally, principals engage in active instructional management through a combination of routine and random classroom checks, supporting teaching and learning while tailoring oversight based on individual teacher needs. This proactive engagement highlights principals’ commitment to maintaining instructional quality, though it is challenged by systemic demands and limited instructional leadership training. The findings further illustrate that creating a positive school climate is a key component of instructional leadership, as principals work to motivate teachers, foster social cohesion, and address teachers’ personal

needs. These strategies align with the literature that emphasizes the value of a supportive and collaborative school environment, particularly during periods of educational reform. By reinforcing the school's vision through reflection sessions, principals encourage teacher alignment with shared goals, which strengthens the reform process and supports CAP objectives. However, we note that a lack of systemic support for instructional leadership encourages autonomy, discretion, and improvisation from principals, a situation that may work against the implementation of curriculum reform. Overall, this study stresses the need for targeted leadership training and resources to support principals in these multifaceted roles, especially in under-researched contexts such as Lesotho.

8. Contributions

This research contributes to the global understanding of instructional leadership by highlighting the unique challenges and approaches of principals in a developing context, affirming their crucial role in successfully navigating curriculum reform and enactment and fostering effective educational outcomes.

9. Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Studies

To improve the implementation of curriculum reform in Lesotho, it is recommended that educational authorities prioritize targeted professional development programs that focus specifically on instructional leadership. Such training should enable principals to balance their administrative tasks with instructional leadership responsibilities, equipping them with skills in classroom supervision, teacher support, and curriculum alignment. Formal policy recognition of the instructional leadership role is crucial, ensuring that principals receive adequate time and resources to fulfill these responsibilities. Furthermore, fostering a collaborative leadership approach through structured committees can empower teachers and build a stronger sense of collective responsibility for the school's mission. Sustaining teacher motivation and social cohesion should remain a priority for principals to foster a positive school climate that supports high-quality teaching and learning.

For future research, expanding this study to include a larger and more diverse sample of schools across various regions in Lesotho would provide insights into the consistency of these findings. Additionally, comparative studies between Lesotho and other African countries engaged in curriculum reforms could highlight common challenges and successful practices, enriching the regional understanding of instructional leadership. Finally, investigating the impact of structured instructional leadership training programs on principals' effectiveness in driving curriculum reforms could offer valuable evidence for the design and delivery of future professional development initiatives.

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