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Managing the Instructional Program: A Case Study of Principal Leadership Practices in Public Secondary Schools in Ouémé, Benin

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Abstract

Instructional leadership is central to improving teaching and learning, yet little is known about how secondary school principals in Benin's Ouémé region conceptualize and enact this role. This study explores principals' perceptions of instructional leadership and their management of instructional programs. Using a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight principals in public secondary schools. The findings reveal a tripartite model of instructional leadership integrating relational influence, strategic orchestration, and pedagogical competence. Principals view relational influence as essential for engaging teachers, strategic orchestration as critical for aligning instructional processes with school goals, and pedagogical competence as a source of legitimacy and efficacy in improving classroom practices. Monitoring student progress emerges as the central mechanism for operationalizing leadership, linking teacher performance to student outcomes through data-driven diagnosis, collaborative problem solving, and targeted interventions. Principals also utilize distributed supervision networks to address resource constraints and expertise gaps, thereby ensuring continuous professional development and curriculum fidelity. The study highlights that effective instructional leadership in this context is not merely a set of behaviors, but a professional identity that integrates credibility, relational skill, and systemic orchestration to sustain high-quality teaching and learning. These insights have implications for principal training, policy development, and the design of instructional leadership frameworks in resource-constrained educational settings.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Principal Practices, Curriculum Coordination, Instruction Supervision and Evaluation, Student Progress Monitoring

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Introduction

Instructional leadership is one of the most extensively researched yet most challenging forms of leadership to demonstrate (DeWitt, 2020). It has long been recognized as a vital responsibility of school principals and remains relevant in efforts to enhance school quality and student learning (Seong, 2019). As instructional leaders, principals play a critical role in driving student achievement (Jones & Henry, 2022). However, the role of the principal has become dramatically more complex, overloaded, and unclear over the past decade (Fullan, 1991, as cited in Chell, 1995, p. 144). Hallinger (2019) emphasizes that instructional leadership remains highly relevant as one of the fundamental roles of school leaders. Indeed, the role of the principal has been in transition, shifting from that of an instructional leader. Today, most school leaders strive for a balance among their roles as manager-administrator, instructional leader, and professional developer (Jenkins, 2009). Research indicates that instructional leadership can have a significant impact on student achievement and overall school performance, either positively or negatively (Marzano et al., 2005). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) posit that school effectiveness depends on the support of an effective instructional leader. The principal's ability to lead academically is closely tied to their organizational and management skills (DeWitt, 2020). Some schools still rely heavily on administrative procedures, lacking a strong focus on instructional leadership. Like any other organization, Scheerens (2000) highlighted that performance levels vary from school to school and are influenced by several factors: the quality of management, the commitment of teachers to educational objectives, the quality of relationships between teachers and students, the effectiveness of the principal's administrative and pedagogical management, and parental involvement. Together, these factors create an environment conducive to student learning.

"Leading a school requires school leaders to perform in ways that school staff and others will gladly and confidentially follow them" (Jones & Henry, 2022, p. 7). When schools struggle to deliver quality education, there is often pressure to achieve rapid improvements, making strong instructional leadership essential. Effective teachers, supported by strong instructional leadership, are more likely to produce students with higher academic performance. Strong leadership is essential for the successful operation of a school (DeMatthews, 2014). Sometimes, a lack of strong instructional leadership practices is due to leaders' need to stay in the role of manager, and at other times, it is because they don't know where to start as an instructional leader, even after completing their leadership training (DeWitt, 2020). Research suggests that a principal's leadership style, practices, and behaviours significantly affect teaching, learning, and assessment processes, ultimately impacting

student outcomes. Despite the growing importance of this topic, limited research exists on the instructional leadership practices of secondary school principals in Benin's Ouémé region. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring principals' perceptions of instructional leadership and analyzing how their management of instructional programs affects teacher performance, addressing the following research questions: What are principals' perceptions of instructional leadership, and how do they manage instructional programs?

Literature Review

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership, widely acknowledged as a pivotal factor in school improvement and student achievement, has evolved into a rich and complex field of study (Hallinger, 2011). At its core, it is understood as an educational leadership approach that directs principal efforts toward the fundamental purpose of schooling: teaching and learning (Shaked, 2023; Naidoo & Mestry, 2019). This involves a principal's active, daily engagement in a wide range of practices aimed explicitly at enhancing instructional quality and, consequently, student learning outcomes (DeWitt, 2020; Reitzug & West, 2011).

Scholars have articulated this core focus through various conceptual models and behavioral frameworks. An important and highly influential model by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) delineates three key dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program (including supervision and curriculum coordination), and fostering a positive school learning climate. This framework underscores that instructional leadership extends beyond mere administration to encompass a strategic, practice-oriented role focused on the school's technical core (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Building on this foundation, Hallinger (2008) emphasizes that instructional leadership consists of principal behaviors that directly influence student learning and academic growth. Contemporary perspectives expand instructional leadership beyond direct supervision to include shared and distributed practices. Hanna (2010) views instructional leadership as a collaborative process enacted through coaching, reflection, study teams, and problem-solving with teachers. Shaked (2018) further conceptualizes instructional leadership as context-responsive leadership, arguing that effective principals adapt their instructional leadership practices to their specific school environments, striking a balance between direct instructional involvement and strategic delegation. According to Shaked

(2018), instructional leadership is not limited to monitoring teaching but involves cultivating conditions that enable teachers to improve their instruction collectively.

More recent conceptualizations reinforce this by describing instructional leadership as the suite of leadership functions directly associated with supporting teachers and students in the daily work of educational excellence (DeMatthews, 2014). Importantly, contemporary literature emphasizes that effective instructional leadership is not a solitary endeavor, but rather a collaborative effort performed by the principal and others. It is inherently collaborative, often manifesting as a shared leadership approach. This involves principals engaging in coaching, facilitating reflective practice, and promoting problem-solving among teachers, thereby leveraging collective expertise to improve instruction (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Despite strong theoretical consensus on its importance, a significant and persistent gap exists between understanding the concept and its effective implementation. Scholars note that although many school leaders use the term "instructional leadership," they often struggle to apply it in practice (DeWitt, 2020). Translating theory into effective practice is not a simple application of a model but a learned art that requires skill, deliberate practice, and a commitment to evidence-based decision-making (Jones & Henry, 2022; DeWitt, 2020). Ultimately, when principals successfully exercise this multifaceted leadership combining vision, instructional management, and collaboration, they significantly enhance teacher performance and create the conditions for improved student outcomes (Yego et al., 2020; Nwosu et al., 2022).

Principal Instructional Management Program

Coordination of the Curriculum

Within the instructional leadership framework, curriculum coordination is a principal's pivotal responsibility, central to ensuring instructional coherence and effectiveness (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990). This function requires principals to possess and apply specialized knowledge and skills related to curriculum and pedagogy (Murphy, 1990). While the principal is the ultimate guarantor of instructional quality, effective curriculum management is inherently a collaborative process. The task is often shared or delegated to vice principals, department heads, and teacher leaders, a practice that leverages distributed expertise and fosters teacher ownership (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2008).

This collaborative approach serves a critical strategic purpose: it facilitates the precise alignment of classroom instruction with curricular standards and assessment systems, a hallmark of instructionally effective schools (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Furthermore, it creates structured opportunities for increased teacher interaction within and across grade levels to discuss instructional and curricular issues, thereby deepening curriculum implementation (Robinson et al., 2008). To lead this process meaningfully, principals must maintain a deep, active involvement in the school's curricular program (Murphy et al., 2006). This entails a comprehensive understanding of subject areas, monitoring instructional delivery, and supporting the development and implementation of effective strategies. Such engagement ensures teachers have a clear grasp of the curriculum and the necessary resources, and it enables principals to participate in substantive, relevant dialogues about teaching and learning. Ultimately, the principal's decisive influence as an instructional leader is demonstrated through this sustained, knowledgeable, and collaborative management of the curriculum, directly supporting teachers and students in the core activities of teaching and learning (Chen, 2018; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Supervision and Evaluation of Instructions

Supervision and evaluation are integral, career-long processes designed to enhance teacher performance, instructional quality, and, ultimately, student outcomes (Marshall, 2009; Brandon et al., 2018). While distinct instructional supervision focuses on providing support and guidance to improve teaching practices (Glickman et al., 2014), and evaluation involves the formal assessment of teacher effectiveness against established criteria (Danielson, 2007), their alignment is critical. When well-integrated, they form a powerful system that fosters professional growth, improves instruction, and strengthens overall school effectiveness (Zepeda, 2012; Marzano et al., 2011).

A principal's direct involvement in classroom oversight is a cornerstone of this process. By conducting regular classroom visits, reviewing lesson plans, and monitoring record-keeping, principals translate school goals into classroom practice, thereby gaining an authentic understanding of instructional dynamics (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Usman, 2015). Research consistently highlights the particular value of frequent, informal observations in this regard, as they enable systematic data collection, reflect a principal's instructional focus, and provide meaningful insights into everyday teaching (Marshall, 2009; Goldhammer, 2003; Chen, 2018). These practices are most effective when conducted collaboratively, fostering a partnership rather than a purely evaluative relationship between principal and teacher (Garza et al., 2016).

The core mechanism through which supervision impacts practice is constructive feedback. The primary aim of observation is to generate meaningful, actionable feedback that encourages teacher reflection and targeted improvement (Jenkins, 2009; Robinson et al., 2008). Effective principals are expected to provide clear, specific feedback that teachers can understand and apply, addressing both strengths and areas for development to improve daily teaching and school productivity (Danielson, 2007; Marshall, 2009; Abuko & Hebson, 2024). This feedback functions as a bridge between evaluation and ongoing instructional coaching (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Despite its recognized importance, significant implementation challenges persist. Studies indicate that principals often struggle to conduct thorough observations or provide specific, instructionally focused feedback due to time constraints, lack of subject-matter expertise, or competing managerial demands (Sarwan, 2013; DeMatthews, 2014). Consequently, effective instructional leadership in this domain often requires a distributed approach, leveraging the expertise of others to ensure comprehensive instructional oversight (DeMatthews, 2014).

Monitoring of Students' Progress

Monitoring student progress is a fundamental and data-driven component of instructional leadership, enabling principals and teachers to make informed decisions that directly impact instructional quality and student achievement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Ubben et al., 2006). This process involves the systematic collection and analysis of varied performance data, including both standardized tests and classroom-based assessments such as quizzes, observations, and student work reviews (Safer & Fleischman, 2005; Southworth, 2004). The primary purpose of this monitoring is diagnostic: to identify programmatic and individual student weaknesses, evaluate the impact of instructional changes, and ultimately tailor teaching methods and remediation to meet specific learning needs (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Anderson et al., 2020; Vilanova et al., 2019).

The principal plays a pivotal role in institutionalizing this practice. Effective leadership involves not only ensuring frequent monitoring but also facilitating the collaborative use of data. This includes providing teachers with timely, interpretive analyses of results and engaging staff in discussions about the data to refine instructional strategies (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Nwosu et al., 2022). By doing so, principals empower teachers to continually evaluate their own effectiveness and focus their efforts on helping students achieve mastery (Firmaningsih-Kolu, 2015). Ultimately, leadership is strengthened when it is

grounded in direct knowledge of classroom dynamics and robust evidence of student learning, progress, and achievement (Southworth, 2004).

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the conceptual framework developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), a robust and widely validated model applied in over 250 studies across diverse educational contexts (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). The framework provides a structured lens for analyzing the leadership practices of school principals, with the present research focusing specifically on its second dimension: managing the instructional program (Figure 1).

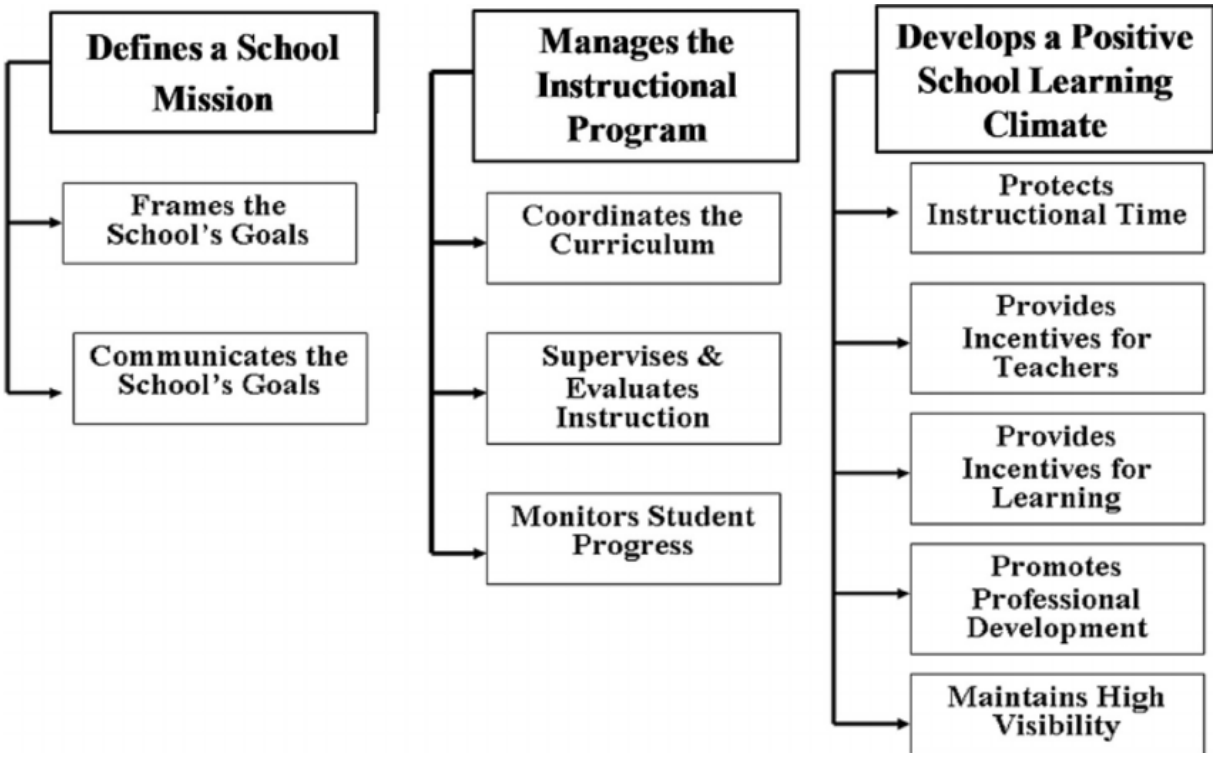

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Instructional Leadership Practices of the Principals

This dimension defines the principal's role in maintaining the quality and coherence of the school's technical core, the fundamental processes of teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008). It encompasses three interrelated leadership functions: coordinating the curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. Together, these functions require active leadership in curriculum alignment, instructional supervision, and data-driven assessment to drive academic performance (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). While the principal holds ultimate accountability for the instructional program, effective management often involves a broader

leadership team, especially in larger schools, where the responsibility for stimulating, supervising, and monitoring teaching and learning is distributed (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

The central goal of this dimension is to align school-wide objectives with classroom practices, ensuring instructional coherence and continuous improvement (Shaked, 2023; Seong, 2019). By focusing on these core managerial functions, principals directly influence critical school mechanisms, including teacher professional development, instructional quality, and student academic achievement, thereby making a decisive contribution to the achievement of performance objectives (Hallinger, 2008; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987). This framework thus positions the principal not merely as an administrator, but as the key agent responsible for orchestrating and safeguarding the instructional process.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach. In qualitative research, the intent is to explore the general, complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the broad, varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted because it best enabled the researcher to understand the research problem and questions, and allowed for in-depth engagement with the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The use of a case study approach further enabled the researcher to experience the phenomenon directly and interpret it through the participants' perspectives. Ultimately, the aim was to gain insight into the research problem through the voices and lived experiences of the principals involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants

The researcher contacted 11 public school principals in Ouémé, explained the study, and ensured equitable participation. Three declined, resulting in a final sample of eight male principals, each with an average of 7.9 years of experience (range: 5–11 years). Participants were chosen based on having served at least five years in their current schools. Interviews were conducted at the principals' respective schools. Each participant who agreed to be interviewed was asked to complete a consent form confirming their agreement to the research conditions. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality, were strictly observed.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted over a four-month period from March to June 2022. This method was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of principals' definitions of instructional leadership and their concrete practices in managing instructional programs to enhance teacher performance. The semi-structured format provided the necessary flexibility for participants to share detailed narratives and personal experiences freely (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while the face-to-face setting facilitated rapport and trust, thereby encouraging richer, more cooperative dialogue (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

The interview protocol was developed based on the three core dimensions of instructional leadership proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985): defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate, with particular emphasis on the dimension of managing the instructional program. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, was audio-recorded with prior informed consent, and was later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

In this case study, data were collected through one-on-one interviews with secondary school principals. Each interview was audio-recorded using a digital recorder. Immediately following each session, the recordings and accompanying field notes were transcribed. To ensure accuracy, participants reviewed the transcriptions (participant validation), and necessary corrections were made. The validated transcripts were then coded based on key domains identified in the literature review. The researcher organized and segmented the data into manageable units, applied codes, and searched for emerging patterns. This approach enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the principals' instructional management program practices and contextualize their actions within the framework of school management. The analysis led to the identification of themes and sub-themes, structured according to Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) conceptual framework.

Findings and Interpretations

Instructional Leadership as Contextualized Influence and Strategic Coordination

The principals' definitions construct a nuanced model of instructional leadership that integrates personal influence, strategic organization, and pedagogical competence. Principals view their role not as one of authority, but of exerting qualitative influence to motivate teacher engagement and shape the teaching-learning process. Principal A describes it as "the qualitative value that a leader has to impact the teaching field in his school." Principal G refers to it as "all the means that the principal tries to put in place to get teachers to engage in teaching, learning, and evaluation activities fully and to give the best of them to have a good result." Principal E views it as "an influence process that a leader gets from their teachers to implement effective teaching and learning activities to have good student achievement."

Beyond influence, principals emphasize the capacity to organize and implement strategic actions and techniques to achieve concrete school goals. This dimension frames instructional leadership as a systemic function. It involves designing and managing the structures that ensure the coherent functioning of teaching, learning, and evaluation. Principal B defines it as "the capacity of the principal to organize in order to achieve some teaching and learning goals." Furthermore, Principal C defines it as "all implementing techniques needed for effective work by the teachers and the learners to have a good functioning of the learning, teaching and evaluation process." Principal D explains that "instructional leadership of the principal is all the actions or measures that he or she implements in the teaching and learning process to have good outcomes."

Principals ensure that all components work toward defined objectives. Principal H notes that it is "all teaching and learning characteristics that a principal has to achieve the school goals and objectives." Principals assert that their influence and strategic effectiveness are dependent on their own instructional expertise. Principal F defines it as "the pedagogical skills that a principal has in order to affect students' achievement".

Curriculum Coordination as a Contextually Responsive Leadership Practice

The coordination and monitoring of curriculum implementation emerged as a core instructional leadership function, characterized by a structured hierarchy of oversight. Principals described a system in which the vice principal serves as the coordinator of curriculum execution, supported by the heads

of each subject, who in turn report to the principal for verification. Central to this process is the leadership team's consultation of official curriculum documents to guide practice and resolve uncertainties. As one principal explained, possessing these materials is foundational: "We have the program and guides at our level...we refer to the guides about the teaching material...if we are in that domain, it goes like a letter to the post office because we know the steps to follow" (Principal A).

Principals emphasized that active and regular monitoring is essential to maintain instructional consistency, depth, and proper pacing. This oversight ensures teachers progress effectively through the mandated content, as one principal cautioned, "It's an obligation to monitor the execution of the program because if the teacher is allowed to implement it alone, he may not progress effectively through it. He might choose only aspects that seem easy…" (Principal D). Monitoring is the tool principals use to manage, assess, and ensure the coordinated plan is being followed effectively. "We monitor the progress of the courses and evaluate how far they have advanced in the curriculum, either through the vice principal or by checking the records of work" (Principal G). In the same way, Principal B noted "we monitor the progression of the curriculum by class and by grade level… This allows us to assess each teacher's performance in implementing the curriculum". Thus, monitoring is linked to teacher performance assessment. The ultimate goal is to ensure complete and proper coverage, with one principal stating, "We follow the established program and check whether the teacher is implementing it properly. He must complete the program and ensure that all its components are actually covered" (Principal H).

A key finding is the collaborative nature of this leadership task. Principals actively engage subject specialists and external advisors to strengthen curriculum implementation by drawing on their specialized expertise. As one principal detailed, "We regularly monitor the program by checking class records of work and drawing on the expertise of heads of subject, pedagogical inspectors, and advisors. We consult them when necessary. They act as instructional leaders in their respective subjects because they possess in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and its implementation" (Principal D).

Supervision and Evaluation as Contextualized Mechanisms for Managing the Instructional Program

The principals' approach to supervising and evaluating instruction is not a simple application of best practices, but a strategically balanced, resource-conscious system tailored to their environment. They deploy an announced and unannounced classroom observation strategy that serves complementary

leadership needs. They use each observation for a specific purpose within the instructional program. Announced classroom observations function as a formative, capacity-building tool designed to reinforce standards and build teacher confidence. This method is intentionally pre-scheduled to allow teachers to prepare, thereby showcasing their optimal teaching practices: "The teacher knows in advance and can present the best face of their teaching, including class management and learning interaction" (Principal D). The stated purpose is formative: "We conduct announced classroom observations to help the teachers prepare and show that they have the capacity to do the job correctly" (Principal A). These planned visits are seen to create a formal mechanism for growth, as "announced visits provide a structured platform for feedback that promotes improvement in pedagogical practices" (Principal C). Ultimately, this approach is designed to reinforce standards and support teachers, as "this form of observation ensures alignment with pedagogical objectives and builds teacher confidence" (Principal E).

In contrast, unannounced classroom observations serve an assurance and accountability function. This principal's mechanism is for verifying the fidelity and consistency of instruction, ensuring that the "real nature" of teaching aligns with goals even without preparation. These spontaneous visits are intended to reveal everyday teaching realities: "When we conduct unannounced classroom observation, we have the real nature of the teacher's approach and classroom management" (Principal A). A key rationale is to foster constant readiness, as "unannounced classroom observations ensure the teacher is ready at all times and do not only prepare for formal evaluations" (Principal E). This practice aims to address immediate issues and encourage genuine practice, since "these unannounced visits help address spontaneous challenges and encourage authenticity in teaching" (Principal G). Collectively, the goal is sustained alignment, as "unannounced observations ensure that teachers are consistently aligned with pedagogical goals" (Principal B).

Beyond direct classroom observation, principals described supplementing their oversight through administrative reviews and scheduled meetings. This includes monitoring instructional materials, as noted by one principal: "We also supervise in the school offices through the checking of the records of work and attendance books" (Principal D). Furthermore, structured dialogue is used to review progress: "We meet the teachers and heads of subject at least three times a year to review the instructions and to see if the teachers have respected the objectives and goals of the school" (Principal H).

Feedback is framed not as a top-down judgment, but as a delicate, relational process aimed at sustainable improvement. Feedback mechanisms were described as pivotal for professional development, with principals emphasizing the delivery of constructive and actionable insights. A central principle was that feedback should guide rather than discourage: "The feedback is not to demotivate but to guide the teacher towards better practices" (Principal F). To this end, feedback was characterized by specificity and clarity, with one principal noting, "We provide specific examples of what could be improved, ensuring feedback is clear and actionable" (Principal C). This approach was seen as part of a balanced growth strategy, as reflected in the view that "Both positive and critical feedback are essential for a balanced approach to professional growth" (Principal D).

Principals also highlighted the importance of context and rapport in the feedback process. To preserve the dignity of the teacher and maintain the classroom environment, one principal described a private setting: "I provide the concerned teacher with the comments after classes in my office, not to frustrate the learners and the teacher" (Principal G). This practice was linked to fostering a climate of trust and open collaboration, which in turn allowed principals to understand better and support their staff: "I am sincere and direct about instructions and the teachers have a frank collaboration with me; this makes me closer to the teachers and to know their personal needs" (Principal G). This positions feedback as the bridge between managerial oversight and supportive mentorship.

Several principals acknowledged the limitations of their subject expertise, which affect their ability to provide detailed instructional feedback across all disciplines. As Principal F observed: "I am not an expert in all fields and modern teaching methods, so I cannot provide relevant feedback to teachers in every specialization." Similarly, Principal H reflected on the challenge of having taught only one subject area: "I was a teacher in one specific subject; therefore, I cannot provide any relevant feedback to teachers in other fields." To address these limitations, principals described strategies of delegation and collaborative supervision. Principal G explained: "I invite heads of subject, pedagogical inspectors, or advisers to supervise teachers. I also delegate other members of the administration to support supervision." Principal C added: "I have a panel of people who conduct observations for teachers… including members of the administration and heads of subject." Likewise, Principal B noted the importance of shared responsibility when administrative duties compete for their time: "We also delegate other members of the administration to do that if we are busy with administrative work." This transforms a limitation into a strength by creating a collaborative instructional leadership team.

The findings also underscore the critical need for adequate teaching materials and resources, as their absence poses a significant barrier to instructional effectiveness. Most principals noted that there are not enough pedagogical advisors and inspectors to assist them in supervising and evaluating the instructions. "We ensure the teacher has guides and materials to prepare adequately for their lessons", expressed principal G. "To have good performance from teachers, it is important to provide teachers appropriate teaching materials", as noted principal F. Principal B reinforced this idea by stating: "teachers need access to books and resources to align their teaching with the curriculum". Principal B remarked, "Without appropriate materials, teachers cannot deliver lessons effectively." Principal E added, "material support, although limited, is pivotal in shaping effective classroom practices". Principals link effective supervision to a foundational element that is often lacking in practice.

Monitoring as a Core Mechanism of Systemic Instructional Leadership

Monitoring student progress was identified as a key indicator of teacher effectiveness and a primary driver for instructional improvement. Principals explicitly tie teacher effectiveness directly to student outcomes. As one principal noted, "The aim of the Principal is to improve the teachers' performance through the students' scores and progress… it helps them to revise their teaching strategies and skills, their assessment planning and implementation, and their support to students' development" (Principal H). To systematize this process, principals utilized various tools to track and analyze performance data. These included administrative records and evaluation tracking systems: "There are the school assessment record books by class… we have a class evaluation-tracking sheet… we have a statistical data is on the wall of the vice principal office" (Principal A). This data collection was part of a formal oversight process, where principals "control the summative and formal evaluations done by each teacher in his area, see if the evaluation is effective, and respect the norms" (Principal A).

This monitoring serves two main purposes: diagnosing learning gaps and enabling timely intervention. Principals explained that "monitoring student progress allows us to identify the subjects in which students excel or struggle, enabling us to intervene on time" (Principal D). The process involves both formative and summative assessments: "Monitoring student progress is a way for the principal and the vice-principal to assess the quality of student learning. It involves using formative and summative evaluations to see how students are improving in some subjects" (Principal H). This leads directly to the core practice of remediation, which was frequently mentioned as a critical outcome. When issues are identified, principals engage teachers to adjust their methods. For instance, "When I look at the

assessment record book of a class… and I notice that many students did not get average grades, I ask the teacher in question what went wrong and suggest a remediation" (Principal E). Effective remediation requires understanding student needs, as "remediation requires that the teacher gives the learner time to say what he did not understand… The teacher then has solid elements to base his action of remediation" (Principal F).

Finally, leadership extends the monitoring process beyond the administrative office to create a collaborative support network. This includes collaborating with pedagogical leaders and, crucially, engaging parents and students themselves. One principal stated, "I involve the heads of each subject and the parents to raise awareness… The effective teaching and learning will be positively affected by the involvement of parents in these schools" (Principal E). Student feedback was also valued as a direct source of information, as noted by another: "We can receive information from students about the progression of the course to know which dispositions are best to do. For example, to know if the students understand well the courses in order to remediate and to give feedback to the concerned teachers" (Principal D).

Discussion

While global models such as Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) framework delineate the core functions of instructional leadership, most notably the management of the instructional program, the findings of this study reveal the deeper perceptual foundations of agency and legitimacy that principals believe are required to enact these functions effectively within their specific context. From the principals' narratives emerges an instructional leadership that integrates relational influence, strategic management, and pedagogical expertise. For these principals, instructional leadership is not merely a repertoire of practices to be implemented, but a professional identity constructed through three interdependent sources of authority: moral–relational authority (influence), managerial authority (organization), and expert authority (pedagogical competence).

A particularly salient and contextually distinctive finding is the primacy of pedagogical competence as the foundational source of leadership legitimacy. While contemporary distributed leadership models often de-emphasize the principal's role as a pedagogical expert (Hanna, 2010), principals perceive subject-matter expertise as non-negotiable for credibility and effective influence. In this context, instructional leadership praxis (Shaked, 2018) appears to require leaders to first establish legitimacy

through demonstrated instructional knowledge before collaborative or strategic leadership practices can be fully enacted. This emphasis on competence-based legitimacy offers a vital nuance to existing instructional leadership literature, particularly in contexts where formal positional authority alone may be insufficient to secure professional trust and compliance.

The model also illuminates how principals conceptualize bridging the persistent theory–practice gap identified in leadership research (Jones & Henry, 2022). Rather than viewing instructional leadership as the mechanical application of prescribed frameworks, principals perceive effectiveness as emerging from the integration of personal influence with systemic action. The "strategic, organizational role" they describe represents the mechanism through which the abstract goal of instructional improvement is translated into the concrete techniques, routines, and monitoring practices that structure daily school life. In this way, strategic management serves as the operational bridge between leadership intent and instructional reality.

The findings confirm that, consistent with global instructional leadership frameworks, principals view curriculum coordination as a pivotal, collaborative responsibility central to instructional coherence (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2008). However, beyond this confirmation, the findings reveal the specific, contextualized mechanisms and emphases through which this management is operationalized in this region. While Al-Mahdy et al. (2018) and Robinson et al. (2008) establish collaboration as a hallmark of effective curriculum management, the findings detail a formally hierarchical and systemic model of distributed coordination. Coordination is more than a standard set of values; it represents an organized and hierarchical chain of authority. This structure transcends the concept of leveraging expertise for ownership; it functions as a pragmatic accountability and control mechanism, likely adapted to manage large faculties and ensure fidelity to a centralized national curriculum amidst resource constraints. The principal's role, therefore, shifts from being a direct coordinator of all teachers to being the architect and chief auditor of this coordination system. Coordination is intrinsically and operationally linked to monitoring. The principal's "deep, active involvement" (Murphy et al., 2006) is enacted not through direct daily oversight of each teacher, but through monitoring the data and reports that flow upward through the coordinated chain. The vice-principal coordinates the execution, but the principal monitors the coordinator's oversight. This refines the theoretical understanding of coordination by showing it has a dual nature: it is both the strategic alignment of instruction with standards (Hallinger & Wang, 2015) and the creation of a formal infrastructure for gathering performance intelligence. The collaborative dialogues mentioned in the

literature (Robinson et al., 2008) are often formalized meetings within this hierarchy, used to review monitoring data in this setting.

Furthermore, the study reveals a nuanced purpose for this structured coordination. Principals explicitly state that without such coordination, teachers might selectively teach only "easy" aspects of the curriculum. Thus, coordination in Ouémé serves a critical gatekeeping and depth-ensuring function, safeguarding the integrity and comprehensiveness of the curriculum delivery in a way that may be less emphasized in contexts with different accountability pressures or teacher autonomy norms. This contextualized model enriches the global theory of instructional leadership by detailing one of its core functions in action within a specific, understudied educational context.

This study confirms that, in alignment with the literature, principals in this context view supervision and evaluation as integrated, career-long processes central to instructional management (Zepeda, 2012). However, the findings reveal how these processes are strategically reconfigured into a pragmatic and adaptive leadership system in response to the specific challenges of this environment. While theoretical models emphasize the importance of principals' direct, expert oversight (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), this study uncovers a more nuanced reality. Principals demonstrate strategic pragmatism by balancing formative (developmental) and assurance-focused (evaluative) observations not as a best-practice checklist, but as a deliberate tactic to simultaneously cultivate teacher capacity and maintain systemic accountability within a resource-constrained setting.

A key finding of this study lies in explicating how principals navigate a well-documented implementation challenge: the limitation of their own subject-matter expertise (Sarwan, 2013). Rather than allowing this to undermine supervision, as literature often suggests, they proactively architect a distributed instructional network. They formally delegate substantive supervision roles to subject heads and, where possible, pedagogical inspectors, thereby transforming a personal limitation into an institutional strength. This goes beyond the concept of distributed leadership as a collaborative ideal (DeMatthews, 2014); it is a calculated managerial strategy for quality assurance, creating a system of checks and balances that compensates for the principal's inability to be an omnipresent expert.

Furthermore, the study adds a critical layer to understanding feedback, a core mechanism noted in the literature (Blase & Blase, 2004). The principals' emphasis on relationally mindful delivery, providing feedback privately to preserve dignity, highlights a context-sensitive adaptation. It underscores that in this interconnected professional environment, the how of feedback is as crucial as its content for

maintaining trust and ensuring teacher receptivity. This relational dimension is the social glue that makes the distributed supervision network functionally effective. Instructions' supervision and evaluation are not an isolated leadership function, but as the strategic core of a broader resource advocacy and management role. Principals manage the instructional program by building and maintaining a coherent, internally distributed system for instructional quality.

While confirming that monitoring student progress is a cornerstone of data-driven instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), this study elucidates how this process functions as the primary operational mechanism through which leadership influence flows in Ouémé region secondary schools. The principal's primary managerial tool becomes systematic monitoring of student progress through a predefined structure. The findings extend beyond the established view of monitoring as a systematic, diagnostic tool (Safer & Fleischman, 2005) to become the core lever of leadership control and support, revealing its dual function as both an accountability lever and a catalyst for collaborative professional learning. Principals use the data flowing through the coordination chain not only to identify learning gaps but to hold each node in the network accountable and to trigger mandated support from subject heads or pedagogical inspectors. Specifically, the principals in this study did not merely collect data to identify weaknesses (Anderson et al., 2020); they institutionalized a visible, multi-stakeholder cycle of inquiry.

The public display of data, the mandated consultation of subject heads, and the direct solicitation of student feedback extend the traditional teacher-principal feedback loop into a networked accountability system. This contrasts with literature emphasizing principal-teacher dyads (e.g., Firmaningsih-Kolu, 2015) and highlights a context-specific adaptation where leadership navigates systemic constraints by distributing instructional oversight. The findings reveal a distinctive extension of this model: the intentional inclusion of parents and students as monitoring stakeholders. This moves beyond the professional learning community described by Robinson et al. (2008) to create a broader accountability community. By soliciting student feedback and engaging parents, principals leverage the networked model outward, using social and familial capital to reinforce the instructional system. It demonstrates a pragmatic adaptation of instructional leadership principles to local realities. Therefore, it is vital to re-conceptualize monitoring not just as a leadership practice, but as the core infrastructure for instructional leadership in this setting, one that actively constructs a community of practice around student learning evidence.

Concluding remark

This study concludes that effective instructional leadership in this Ouémé region context is enacted through a strategically integrated, monitoring-driven system. Principals' perceptions form a tripartite model where pedagogical competence establishes legitimacy, relational influence motivates engagement, and strategic orchestration directs action toward instructional goals. This identity is operationalized through a structured coordination framework, where continuous monitoring serves as the central leadership mechanism, transforming plans into practice by diagnosing needs, assessing fidelity, and triggering collaborative support. Leadership is thus demonstrated not through omniscient oversight, but through the pragmatic orchestration of people, processes, and limited resources to build a self-improving instructional ecosystem. Ultimately, in this setting, instructional leadership is reframed from a set of administrative tasks into a dynamic, data-informed practice of systemic stewardship, where monitoring serves as the core lever for aligning teacher performance, curriculum delivery, and student outcomes.

Implications

For principals, this study highlights the importance of developing an integrated leadership identity that combines in-depth pedagogical knowledge, relational influence, and strategic system management. Leadership training should move beyond checklist approaches to cultivate expertise in data-informed instructional stewardship, where monitoring is a core leadership tool for fostering collaborative improvement, not merely an administrative duty.

Policymakers must address the systemic constraints identified, particularly the shortage of teaching materials and pedagogical support staff. Investing in these resources is foundational. Additionally, policies should formalize and strengthen distributed instructional leadership by clarifying the instructional roles of subject heads and vice-principals, while ensuring principal selection prioritizes demonstrated teaching excellence and instructional credibility.

This study provides a contextualized, tripartite model of instructional leadership that merits testing in similar resource-constrained environments. Future research should investigate the causal pathways within this model, particularly how pedagogical legitimacy enables influence, and examine the longitudinal impact of this monitoring-driven, system-orchestration approach on sustained student achievement.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for School Principals

Topic: ***Managing the Instructional Program: A Case Study of Principal Leadership Practices in Public Secondary Schools in Ouémé, Benin***

1. How long have you served as a principal in this school?
    - 3–5 years
    - 5–10 years
    - More than 10 years
2. How do you define instructional leadership in the context of your school?
3. In your view, what are the key roles of a principal as an instructional leader?
4. How do you manage the instructional program in your school?

a. How do you coordinate the curriculum across subjects and grade levels?

b. How do you supervise and evaluate classroom instruction?

c. How do you monitor students' academic progress?

5. How do you determine whether teachers understand and support your instructional directives?
6. Do you hold meetings with teachers or instructional leaders to discuss the instructional program?

a. How often do these meetings occur (daily, weekly, monthly)?

b. What issues are typically discussed during these meetings?

7. What challenges or difficulties do you encounter in your instructional leadership practices?
8. How do these challenges affect the management of the instructional program and teacher performance?

Thank you for your participation in this study. You may be assured that all responses will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for academic research purposes.