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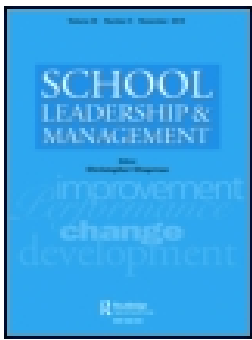
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Gender differences in instructional leadership: how male and female principals perform their instructional leadership role

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ABSTRACT

The current qualitative study sought to examine how male and female principals enact their instructional leadership. Data were collected through 59 semi-structured interviews with 36 female principals and 23 male principals from Israel, and analysed in a four-stage process – condensing, coding, categorising, and theorising. Findings presented two main differences between male and female principals' instructional leadership: (a) the source of authority nurturing their instructional leadership; and (b) the integration of instructional leadership with principal-teacher relationships. Gender theories were employed to explain these findings and further research possibilities in this realm are discussed.

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Recent decades have seen researchers, policy-makers and practitioners call upon school principals to demonstrate instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang 2015). Such leadership may be defined as 'the effort to improve teaching and learning for PK–12 students by managing effectively, addressing the challenges of diversity, guiding teacher learning, and fostering organisational learning' (Brazier and Bauer 2013, 650). Simply put, instructional leadership requires principals to focus their efforts on the core activities of schooling, which are teaching and learning. Top priority should be given to student learning, while everything else should revolve around the enhancement of learning (Hallinger 2011; Neumerski 2012; Rigby 2014).

When comparing men and women in the context of instructional leadership, research has indicated a small but statistically significant gender effect, with female principals consistently obtaining higher ratings on instructional leadership when compared with their male counterparts (Hallinger, Li, and Wang 2016). However, inquiry about gender differences in instructional leadership should explore not only *to what extent* male and female principals demonstrate

such leadership but also *how* they express it. That is to say, men and women may be different not only in their degree of applying instructional leadership but also in their ways of doing so. Thus, the current study explores how male and female instructional leaders differ. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions: How do male and female principals enact their instructional leadership role? What are the differences between them? What are the sources of these differences?

Understanding how gender influences or even shapes instructional leadership may allow us to use gender differences to our schools' advantage. It may help in defining the desired candidates for school leadership positions and identifying the capabilities necessary for instructional leadership, which could be developed in prospective and on-the-job school principals.

Theoretical background

Instructional leadership

Present-day school principals are expected to become instructional leaders, facilitating the improvement of teaching and learning (Hallinger and Wang 2015; May and Supovitz 2011; Walker and Slear 2011). Research has discovered a linkage between principals' instructional leadership and their students' achievements (Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon 2014). The effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was found to be three to four times as great as that of transformational leadership, which involves motivating and inspiring followers and holding positive expectations for them (Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). Thus, scholars contend that contemporary school principals should enact instructional leadership as one of their core responsibilities (Louis et al. 2010; Murphy and Torre 2014; Neumerski 2012), and in fact the requirement for principals to assume responsibility for instructional leadership has been spreading across educational systems throughout the world (Kaparou and Bush 2016; Park and Ham 2016).

Practically, instructional leadership reflects the actions taken by a principal to promote students' learning and academic success. Over the years, researchers have attempted to capture the meaning of instructional leadership via a multitude of frameworks (Blase and Blase 2004; Duke 1987; May and Supovitz 2011; Murphy et al. 2016; Sheppard 1996; Supovitz, Sirinides, and May 2010). Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) have summarised existing research related to methods used by principals to harness instructional leadership to meet their schools' goals, highlighting five core domains: (a) building and sustaining a school vision that establishes clear learning goals and garners school-wide – and even communitywide – commitment to these goals; (b) sharing leadership by developing and counting on the expertise of leading teachers to improve school effectiveness; (c) leading a learning community providing

meaningful staff development; (d) gathering data for use in instructional decision-making; and (e) overseeing curriculum and instruction by spending time in classrooms in order to effectively encourage curriculum implementation and quality teaching practices.

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership as presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) is one of the most widely used in research (Hallinger and Wang 2015). This framework consists of three dimensions characterising this leadership role, classified into ten instructional leadership functions: (1) The dimension of *defining the school mission* incorporates two functions: framing the school's goals, and communicating them. The principal is responsible for ensuring the clarity of the goal – to focus on all students' academic progress – and its dissemination to the staff; and for (2) The dimension of *managing the instructional programme*, which includes three functions: coordinating curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. This dimension focuses on the principal's role in coordinating and controlling the school's academic programme. (3) The dimension of *developing a positive school learning climate* is the broadest in scope, encompassing five functions: protecting instructional time, providing incentives for productive teachers, providing incentives for student learning, promoting staff members professional development, and maintaining high visibility of the principals.

Gender differences in instructional leadership

The growing emphasis on instructional leadership in educational policy and practice has prompted several researchers to seek and identify principals' personal characteristics that influence instructional leadership practices (Goldring et al. 2008; Hallinger 2011). Specifically, a few researchers explored how gender shapes male versus female principals' performance of instructional leadership (e.g. Kis and Konan 2014; Krüger 2008).

In a recent meta-analytic study, Hallinger, Li, and Wang (2016) examined if teachers and principals perceived male and female principals as demonstrating different patterns of instructional leadership. This meta-analysis quantitatively integrated findings from 40 independent data sets drawn from 28 studies, with data collected from principals and teachers. The data pertain to over 2500 principals from three countries and to a period of over 30 years. Their results indicated a small but statistically significant effect of gender on instructional leadership, showing more active instructional leadership by female principals. Rather than being concentrated in specific areas of leadership practice, the gender differences found were general. They concluded that they 'cautiously characterize the "small effect" identified in this study as "potentially meaningful"'(593).

Hallinger, Li, and Wang (2016) noted that their study elaborated on earlier gender studies concerning transformational leadership, which found that in

general and educational management, women demonstrated transformational leadership more than men did (Barbuto et al. 2007; Hyde 2005). An early meta-analysis, conducted by Eagly and her colleagues (1992), revealed that female principals tended to adopt more participatory, democratic, task-focused leadership styles than their male counterparts. In a subsequent meta-analytic synthesis, Eagly and her colleagues (2003) found that female leaders tended to achieve stronger ratings on transformational leadership as well as engaging in more contingent reward behaviours associated with transactional leadership. Among the five aspects of transformational leadership, women most surpassed men on individualised consideration, referring to supportive and encouraging treatment of subordinates (Eagly 2007). More than their male counterparts, women routinely used the transformational leadership skills of participative decision-making, individualised consideration, and interpersonal interaction, especially in the realm of communication (Melero 2011; see also Martin 2015). Hallinger and his colleagues (2016, 594) noted that their meta-analytic findings on instructional leadership broadened prior studies' assertion on transformational leadership showing women's 'stronger disposition to engage the principal's role as an instructional leader.' They.

The current study aimed to explore in detail how male and female principals perform their instructional leadership. Grogan (2014, 6) claimed that:

In education research, particularly in the educational leadership discourse, the nexus between gender and leadership appears to be less interesting than it was previously – not surprisingly – since the prevailing attitudes among many women and men is that gender is irrelevant;

however, this trend is seen by her as unjustified: 'Yet ... gender seems to matter just as much today as it always has.' Against this backdrop of seeming general indifference toward gender differences within the educational leadership context, the current study undertook an in-depth qualitative investigation of possible differences between men and women practicing instructional leadership.

Gender roles and gender differences

To examine gender-related differences in principal's instructional leadership, we may first turn to the literature on the subject. One of the topics discussed in this literature is gender inequity in employment in general, and in leadership and management roles in particular. Connell (2009) asserted that organisations have gender regimes, so to speak, that actually describe who does what sort of work, the social arrangements within the organisation, how emotional relations are developed, and how the organisation relates to families and other social institutions. According to Martin (2003, 343), 'men and women socially construct each other at work by means of a two-sided dynamic,'

which often negatively affects female workers. Despite an increase in the number of women who exhibit leadership in public roles, attention is always paid to the fact that they are women, and they are often criticised for using stereotypically female leadership approaches (Grogan 2014).

When it comes to school leadership, there is 'a general belief that equity issues for women are no longer a problem' (Coleman 2005, 16). However, in the United States where women are nearly 85% of elementary school teachers, they still hold only a slightly higher number of elementary school principal positions than men do (58.9%). In high schools, women hold less than one third of principal positions (28.5%). In superintendents the rate is even lower: women hold only nearly 24 % of superintendents (Kowalski et al. 2011). Similarly, in the OECD countries, the average percentage of female principals in lower secondary education is 44.6 (OECD 2016a), and the percentage of female principals has increased in recent decades at a very slow pace (Hill, Ottem, and DeRoche 2016; Krüger 2008; Marczynski and Gates 2013). Moreover, women tend to be hired for leadership positions and promoted at later ages, with both more experience and education than men (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2010; Roser, Brown, and Kelsey 2009). In sum, 'women continue to be underrepresented, under-valued, and underutilized as leaders' (Marshall and Wynn 2012, 884).

Social styles are an additional relevant topic discussed in the literature about gender differences. Chodorow (1978, 166) claims that boys come to deny and repress interpersonal relations and connections in the process of growing up, reducing 'their primary love and sense of empathic tie.' These early processes may explain gender differences in the realm of social style among adults. If women do indeed develop through identifications and relationships whereas men's development involves 'more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of boundaries' (Chodorow 1978, 166), women's ego boundaries are bound to be less solid. As a result, women cultivate affective relationships with others and tend to be much more empathic than men do.

While Chodorow (2012, 4) claimed that 'the fact that everyone's primary caregiver is a woman must be important to children's gender development and to the relations between the sexes,' other researchers pointed to evolutionary processes as the roots of gender differences in terms of social style. Men's tendency to form dominance hierarchies within groups is consistent with an evolutionary history of kin-based, male-male, coalitional competition. A related consequence is that men will maintain relationships with other in-group members using less one-on-one contact than women will. Women's tendency to prefer equality in their relationships, as opposed to acceptance of dominance hierarchies, is consistent with the proposal that these biases evolved in the context of relationships more heavily dependent on reciprocal altruism in comparison with relationships among men (Geary et al. 2003). It appears, then, that divergent social styles may reflect trade-offs between

behaviours selected to maintain large, functional coalitions in men and intimate, secure relationships in women (Vigil 2007).

Despite their divergent perspectives as to the origins of gender differences, both the early development approach and the evolutionary one view close interpersonal relationships as characterising women more than men. Concerning moral development, Gilligan (1982) also argued that in the process of reaching ethical decisions, women tend to attach special importance and prominence to the protection of interpersonal relationships. Thus, while the masculine moral voice tends to be logical and individualistic, emphasising protection of people's rights and assuring that justice is upheld, the feminine moral voice tends more toward taking care of other people. Similarly, [Noddings' (1984) feminine approach to the ethics of care also prioritises concern for relationships (see also Louis, Murphy, and Smylie 2016). Ethical caring means acting caringly out of a belief that caring is the appropriate way of relating to people, rather than because caring for another is natural, which would not require an ethical effort to motivate it. Noddings regards education as central to the cultivation of caring in society. Her approach reflects a feminine view in 'the deep classical sense – rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness'; on the other hand, she remarked, 'The approach through law and principle is not the approach of the mother. It is the approach of the detached one, of the father' (2).

The present study utilised both the literature on instructional leadership and on gender role development to understand gender differences in instructional leadership, aiming to clarify how male and female principals undertake and implement their instructional leadership role.

Research context

The current study focused on Israeli school principals. The national school system in Israel serves about 1.6 million students, with approximately 73% in the Jewish sector and 27% in the Arab sector (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics 2013). According to the Gini coefficient for measuring a nation's distributive inequality, Israel is among the countries with the broadest gap between rich and poor, alongside the United States and Mexico (OECD 2011, 2016b). In the wake of recent data portraying the great diversity among school populations in Israel, recent local educational policy has been directed toward achieving high levels of equality in educational outcomes across the board, thus aiming to narrow the achievement gap upward through growing performance pressure. In practice, however, Israeli student achievements are still characterised by a rising achievement gap, as evidenced in various international comparative examination studies (BenDavid-Hadar 2016).

Capstones, the institute that spearheads school principals' development in Israel, has defined the primary role of Israeli school principals as that of serving as instructional leaders in order to improve all students' education and learning (Capstones 2008). Four additional areas of management support this function: designing the school's future image – by developing a vision and bringing about change; leading the staff and nurturing its professional development; focusing on the individual; and managing the relationship between the school and its surrounding community (Capstones 2008).

Method

This study was qualitative in nature, as it was designed to provide rich textual descriptions of the complexities depicting participants' instructional leadership. Thus, interview methodology and content analysis explored the meanings that male and female school principals attach to their instructional leadership role (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016). Principals' self-descriptions of themselves as instructional leaders were used to learn about the way in which their gender differences were expressed in their instructional leadership.

Participants

Seeking to maximise the depth and richness of the data, maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell 2014), also known as heterogeneous sampling, was used. This purposive sampling technique captures a wide range of perspectives, gaining greater insights into a phenomenon by contemplating it from various angles (Merriam 2009). Maximal differentiation sampling was implemented in this study regarding principals' gender, age, years of work experience, education, ethnicity, school level (elementary, middle, high), school community's socioeconomic status, and school district. The study sample did not begin with a set number of participants, but rather developed on an ongoing basis as the study progressed (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016). Altogether, 81 school principals were approached, of whom finally 36 female principals and 23 male principals were found who could represent diverse sampling. On average, female principals (27 from the Jewish sector and nine from the Arab sector) had an average of 25 years of educational experience ($SD = 6.88$; range: 9–40), nine years of which they served as principals ($SD = 5.87$; range: 2–27). Most of these female principals ($n = 32$) had a master's degree, three had only a bachelor's, and one had a doctorate. They were principals of elementary schools ($n = 22$), junior high schools ($n = 1$), and high schools ($n = 1$), working in all seven Israeli school districts. Male principals (18 from the Jewish sector and five from the Arab sector) had an average of 22 years of educational experience ($SD = 7.74$; range: 4–36), with an average of 11 of these years spent as principals ($SD = 7.15$; range: 1–35). Most of these male principals ($n = 19$) had a master's

degree, three had only a bachelor's, and one had a doctorate. They were principals of elementary schools ($n = 8$), junior high schools ($n = 1$), and high schools ($n = 14$), working in all seven Israeli school districts.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with the interviewer developing and using an 'interview guide' (i.e. a list of questions and topics to be covered) which also 'allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic' (Merriam 2009, 90). Key questions were preplanned, but the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses whenever possible.

The issues discussed during the interview concerned the practices that principals adopt to improve teaching and learning. The term 'instructional leadership' was not mentioned during the interviews, in order to avoid priming interviewees to frame their discussions in terms of this concept. In addition, interviewees were not specifically asked about how gender may have influenced their practices of instructional leadership; instead, they were asked about their engagement in activities aiming to improve instruction, without any direct reference to their gender. A few questions included in the interview were: As a principal, what are your priorities in your work? If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal? Who is responsible for improving teachers' practices in your school – and how is that done? As a principal, how do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention – and why?

All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the study at any point in time. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (pseudo-names were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent based on their understanding of the purpose of the study. The interviews generally lasted one hour and were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis.

Data analysis

The data analysis in this study was a four-stage process of condensing, coding, categorising, and theorising. At first, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014), choosing the relevant male and female study participants' utterances about instructional leadership, so that they could be compared in order for gender differences to be sought. At the second stage – coding – each utterance was coded according to the aspect that it represented (Tracy 2013). Contrary to the previous stage, this stage was data-driven and not theory-driven, as it was not based on a-priori codes but rather on inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the

perspectives articulated by participants regarding instructional leadership (Flick 2009; Marshall and Rossman 2011; Rossman and Rallis 2012). After having captured the essence of utterances in the second stage, the third stage – categorising – consisted of assembling similar utterances into clusters in order to generalise their meanings and derive category definitions. Finally, the theorising stage aimed to reach a conceptual construct of the categories derived in the previous stage, and to see how they were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of one abstract construct (Richards and Morse 2013).

A member check (Koelsch 2013) was another measure taken to properly evaluate the soundness of the data. This meant that all participants' transcripts were sent back to them, along with a request that they evaluate their responses and make any necessary additions or modifications. This strategy facilitated the examination of the descriptive data versus participants' reactions, thus endorsing and solidifying principals' perceptions regarding instructional leadership. During the member check procedure, 16 out of 59 interviewees (27.1%) actually did change their answers, clarifying their former remarks or adding on to them.

In addition, attention was directed, as in any qualitative exploration, to the potential influences that researchers' backgrounds and personal experiences may exercise on the theoretical and methodological perceptions concerning the present inquiry. Since reflective journals have been recognised as an important aspect of qualitative research (Etherington 2004; Ortlipp 2008), researchers wrote personal reflective research logs throughout the study to ensure critical thinking. Furthermore, a panel of three educational leadership professors was formed to evaluate and comment on the researchers' assumptions, providing additional optional perspectives regarding data interpretation.

Findings

Qualitative data analysis revealed two main differences in instructional leadership exercised by male and female principals: (a) the source of authority of instructional leadership; and (b) the integration of instructional leadership with principal-teacher relationships. The interview data regarding these differences are presented below, supported by excerpts from participants' answers.

Instructional leadership's source of authority

Participants' utterances revealed that the first difference in instructional leadership between male and female principals concerns their source of authority as instructional leaders. While female principals often relied on their instructional knowledge and experience (61%; $n = 22$), male principals tended to rely on their decision-making ability and hierarchical authority (48%; $n = 11$).

In line with these gender tendencies, many female principals emphasised the centrality of their instructional expertise gained through experience for their

leadership practices. For example, Barbara, an elementary school principal with 14 years of experience on the job, said that due to her mastery of instructional techniques, she deals mainly with this area: 'No principal is a specialist in all the areas that school leadership involves. I'm a specialist in teaching and learning; thus, this is the area to which most of my scheduled time is dedicated.' Lisa, a high school principal who took office 11 years ago, used her instructional expertise to engage in supervision: 'I know very well what a good lesson is and how it should look, so I do a lot of first-hand observation in classrooms. I often share "gold nuggets" of exemplary practices, which are suggested steps for further improvement.'

On the other hand, male principals felt that they draw their authority for instructional leadership from their decision-making capacities. Donald, an elementary school principal with five years of experience as principal, described his involvement in a decision on first-grade textbooks: 'The teachers who participated in the discussion had much more experience than I did. In fact, I never taught first grade. Still, I knew better than them how to make strategic judgments.' He added: 'The knowledge about the content is not the most important thing. I know how to establish a positive decision-making environment and make a good decision with the information available to me.' Also Samuel, a middle school principal with 13 years of experience on the job, noted that he is not the most expert instructor in his school: 'Some of the teachers are older than I, as well as more experienced and more educated. [However,] I decide how teachers will teach because someone with more senior authority has determined that I am the one who decides.' By saying this, Samuel emphasised the hierarchical aspect of the school organisation. He considered his formal authority to be the source of his instructional leadership, proceeding to explain: 'I think it's a role-playing game. Some of these teachers might be my principals tomorrow. As of now, I am sitting in the principal's chair, so I decide what to teach and how it should be taught.'

Barbara and Lisa, who were mentioned above, represented the female principals who perceived their instructional proficiency as the source of their instructional leadership authority. However, there were also female principals who did not describe themselves as instructional experts (although none of the women principals spoke of themselves as lacking knowledge about instruction either). Similarly, Donald and Justin represented the male principals who considered their decision-making ability and even their mere formal position as the source of their authority. However, there were also male principals who noted that they possessed rich instructional experience and understanding. Thus, although the principals' utterances quoted here did reflect the group trends for men and women, these gender distinctions were not dichotomous.

In sum, female principals' reflections on their instructional leadership role revealed their frequent reliance on instructional experiences and knowledge, whereas male principals relied on the authority assigned to them by regulations,

as well as their decision-making skills. However, this gender difference may also be explained by the fact that male interviewees were mostly high school principals (61%) while women interviewees were mostly elementary schools principals (92%). Whereas the high school level requires more specific content knowledge, the elementary level content knowledge is more general. Thus, elementary school principals' content knowledge may more easily create the impression of instructional expertise.

Relationships and instructional leadership

Analysis of the data suggested an additional difference in instructional leadership between male and female principals: male participants perceived good relationships with teachers and instructional leadership as not related to each other, and even as incompatible (48%; $n = 11$). Some female principals believed that the two do go hand in hand (39%; $n = 14$).

Ruth, a high school principal with 14 years of experience, could serve as an example. In her opinion, good principal-teacher relationships are needed to increase teachers' commitment and work efforts, or in her words: 'As a principal, I've learned that interpersonal relationship spur motivation, which is a prerequisite for high quality instruction.' Also Dorothy, a high school principal with nine years of experience, viewed good relationships as the foundation for effective supervision: 'My supervision practices are not an evaluation aimed at grading the teacher. They are based on both sides' good will to create opportunities for teachers to expand their capacities for teaching effectively and caring for students.' Dorothy's view calls for the practice of professional supervision by school principals which involves supportive dialogue rather than judgment, thus encouraging positive principal-teacher relationships. On the other hand, Jacob, an elementary school principal with 22 years of experience, downplayed the significance of amicable relationships at school: 'The teachers and I are not here to be friends; we have a task, and it is my responsibility to see to it that this task is carried out in the best way possible.' During the interview, Jacob also stated: 'I don't know what teachers feel towards me, and it is not of much interest to me. [However,] I certainly know that the school works well.' Walter, an elementary school principal with eight years of experience, even perceived close principal-teacher relationships to be somewhat of an obstacle in the face of instructional leadership: 'I worry about not being too close a friend of my teachers. Either we are friends, or we are professional.' Walter believes that close relationships with teachers and professional work actually contradict each other.

Some female principals pointed to interpersonal collaboration as an important aspect of leadership. For instance, Margaret, a high school principal who took office five years earlier, remarked: 'Reaching instructional goals by myself is impossible, so I cooperate with teachers to evaluate issues related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In fact, I depend on leading teachers, who

provide me with valuable insights and ideas.' Margaret may be considered a principal who leads from the centre, rather than from the top: she did not force her own predetermined notions on anyone. Instead, she respected the teachers' voices and they all worked side by side to pave a common path. Moreover, her description may reflect a sort of professional learning community, where teachers work together to solve problems or to achieve a common goal, based on the knowledge that learning occurs as a result of authentic tasks embedded in real life. Similarly, Diana, a high school principal with 17 years of experience, emphasised collaboration not only between herself and the teachers but also among the teachers themselves: 'I led my teachers to recognise that they must work together to achieve our collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, we created structures to promote a collaborative culture.'

To conclude, female principals felt that they were performing their instructional leadership role by paying attention to the maintenance of good relationships and collaboration with the staff, whereas male principals only seldom described maintaining good relationships as related to leading their schools toward instructional improvement. However, as mentioned regarding the prior finding, here too there were atypical male and female principals who expressed different perspectives. Indeed, the excerpts presented here illustrate the general trends found in the context of gender distinction through this study regarding principals' emphasis on quality of relationships; however, this is not to say that in reality male and female principals' attitudes and behaviour patterns are actually dichotomous or polarised in this sense.

Discussion

To understand how male and female principals perform their instructional leadership, this study focused on qualitative analyses of principals' interviews concerning their engagement in instructional leadership. Findings have revealed two main gender differences. First, female principals seem to perceive instructional expertise as the source of authority of their instructional leadership, while male principals seemingly perceive their formal authority and decision-making ability to be the sources of their authority and instructional leadership. Second, female principals intertwined their perception of instructional leadership with that of the importance of maintaining positive relationships with teachers more often than did their male counterparts. These differences were not totally consistent or clear-cut, casting male and female principals at two polar ends of a continuum; as aforementioned, some male principals do rely on their instructional expertise and combine their instructional leadership skills with good relationships with teachers, while some female principals did not describe themselves as having instructional proficiency and did not ascribe importance to healthy interpersonal relations with teachers. Moreover, these capabilities may be developed and changed over time. This obviously means

that the various styles of instructional leadership are not limited to a binary gender categorisation. However, we found that these differences did distinguish between male and female principals.

The literature on gender related roles and differences reviewed above may help explain why these differences (which as aforementioned were not solidly established) exist. It posits that female and male principals possess different career characteristics. Women are usually selected as principals after they have gained more years of teaching experience and more academic and professional studies than men principals (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2010; Roser, Brown, and Kelsey 2009). One may claim that women's longer teaching periods and broader educations reflect their slower promotion processes based on gender inequality. In the twenty-first century, women are still underrepresented in educational leadership, and their low percentage in school leadership roles has not changed significantly during the past decade (Krüger 2008; Marczynski and Gates 2013). However, their greater number of years as active teachers tackling everyday classroom challenges before being appointed as principals may result in their possessing more in-depth first-hand knowledge about teaching and learning. Therefore, when female principals deal with instructional issues they habitually rely on their own experience and knowledge much more than do male principals, who have to find other sources of authority.

In fact, gender researchers consider the cultivation of close relationships to characterise women more than men. Women nurture affective relationships with others and tend to demonstrate empathy much more than men (Gilligan 1982). The gender differences in this area may be explained from several perspectives, such as the evolutionary one (Geary et al. 2003; Vigil 2007) or alternatively the psychoanalytic one (Chodorow 1978, 2012). Inasmuch as leadership is based on interpersonal relationships, female leaders who attribute much importance to protecting and promoting such relationships demonstrate transformational leadership – where leaders inspire, empower, and stimulate followers – more than men (Barbuto et al. 2007; Hyde 2005). It may be argued that for this reason male principals base their instructional leadership on formal authority, which may be seen as a more task-oriented approach. The second gender difference – that of regarding good principal-teacher relationships as instructional to instructional leadership – is consistent with Eagly and her colleagues' (1992) meta-analysis, which found that female principals tended to adopt more participatory, democratic leadership styles. This difference may also be explained by the literature on gender differences in social styles. According to the current study's findings, a substantial proportion of female principals linked instructional leadership to the maintenance of positive relationships with the school staff, which involves partnership, empowering others, and various forms of cooperation. Comparatively, only few male principals highlighted interpersonal relationships as an important aspect of their instructional

leadership role. These findings reflect women's general tendency to strive to be more socially liked in their interactions with others.

This research has significance to practice. First, women should be preferred in principal recruitment and selection. The percentage of females in the population of school principals, particularly in high schools, is much lower than the percentage of females in the population of teachers (Krüger 2008; Marczynski and Gates 2013). In addition to equity-based arguments for increasing the percentage of female principals, the current findings suggest that female principals may increase the likelihood of effective instructional leadership practices that can positively influence student outcomes. Another consideration that should be taken into account in principal selection is teaching experience. The findings of this study emphasise the role of instructional knowledge and experience gained over the years. School leadership candidates who were focused on instructional work in classrooms and while holding instructional positions within the school for many years (e.g. grade-level coordinators, pedagogical coordinators) would apparently be more likely to become active leaders of teaching and learning. In addition, the current qualitative findings suggest that principals of both genders should consciously foster good interpersonal relationships with teachers. Moreover, developing principals' capability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with teachers could enable them to better overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of a principal who aspires to be an instructional leader, leading to genuine improvements in student outcomes. Developing this capability may be beneficial for middle-level school leaders, who may be seen as prospective school principals; for preservice principals during professional training; and for principals throughout their career.

Compared with prior research, this study provides new data on gender differences in instructional leadership. However, the gender trends presented in this paper require further verification. Moreover, this study has several limitations. The first is the fact that male interviewees were mostly high school principals (61%) while women interviewees were mostly elementary schools principals (92%). Although this difference may reflect the prevailing reality, it makes the gender comparison less accurate, because one may claim that the elementary school is a more conducive environment of principals to exercise instructional leadership. Further research should test out the context issue of elementary vs. high schools. Second, inasmuch as the data presented here were collected within a particular context, its cross-cultural validity was not proven. Therefore, it would be advisable to replicate this study in various socio-cultural contexts, thus allowing for the generalisation of the findings to broader populations, and substantiating their intercontextual and international validity. In addition, since this study is based on participants' self-reporting, it follows that as with any self-reporting, there is little control over the possibility that respondents may provide socially desirable responses. Further research could complement principals' self-reporting with more objective data portraying their instructional leadership practices, such

as direct observation. Moreover, future research could explore if the gender differences in instructional leadership found here can be explained by intervening variables such as age, education, or school characteristics. Longitudinal studies, including repeated data collection among the same female and male school principals at different points in time during their career, would also be useful in revealing of their instructional leadership development.

Disclosure statement

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