

Examining the Perceptions of the Assistant Principal as an Instructional Leader

Genesa Page

University of Phoenix, Phoenix, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT

This study investigated assistant principals' self-perceptions of their role as instructional leaders and examined the corresponding perceptions of principals. Grounded in Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model and using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), this quantitative study surveyed assistant principals and principals from a large suburban district. Findings reveal a gap: assistant principals rated themselves higher in instructional leadership than their principals. The results indicate that the assistant principal role requires a clearer definition, targeted professional development, and leadership succession planning. These findings offer implications for educational leadership training and school district practices.

Keywords: assistant principal, instructional leadership, principal, perception

The role of the assistant principal (AP) as an instructional leader is changing dramatically as school environments become increasingly complex and we demand greater academic success from our students. In common with other school leadership positions, APs are now expected to demonstrate a range of competencies, including interpersonal and strategic leadership, as well as a commitment to developing inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students (Hallinger et al., 2025). This shift highlights the important and challenging role the AP plays as a leader and resource for students and teachers. By committing to creating conditions that value educational success and community knowledge, the AP helps develop the school community (Shaked, 2019).

APs, once focused primarily on administrative and disciplinary tasks, now support instructional leadership in meaningful ways (Cansoy et al., 2021). Federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (2001, 2002) and Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) have reshaped the educational landscape and leadership roles within schools, pressuring school leaders to take responsibility for student achievement, instructional quality, and school improvement (Grissom et al., 2021). However, despite this shift, the AP remains an underutilized resource in instructional leadership, often relegated to managerial responsibilities such as student discipline, logistics, and supervision (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021).

A brief historical examination reveals that the assistant principalship originated in response to administrative demands as school populations grew in the late nineteenth century (Glanz, 1994). Initially, schools classified APs as "general supervisors" responsible for operations and "special supervisors" who supported teachers with instructional tasks. Over time, the distinction eroded, leaving most APs with administrative responsibilities and limited instructional influence (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). In modern schools, APs remain essential to day-to-day functioning but lack a clear pathway or preparation for engaging in the expected instructional leadership (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021).

Problem Statement

APs play a vital role in school leadership, yet they often struggle with uncertainty regarding their responsibilities as instructional leaders. Research highlights that many APs experience a lack of clarity in their roles, insufficient training opportunities, and a significant gap between the expectations placed upon them and their actual practices (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). This disconnect significantly affects APs' professional growth and limits their ability to support both teachers and students effectively. Because of this disconnect, APs urgently need more structured guidance and accessible resources to thrive in their roles and make a meaningful contribution to the learning environment.

APs often view themselves as effective instructional leaders; however, they are frequently granted neither the time, authority, nor trust to fulfill that responsibility (Jackson et al., 2021). Principals and district leaders tend to determine the roles of APs according to site needs and produce variations in APs' acquisition of instructional leadership skills (Goldring et al., 2021). This misalignment is problematic, given that the AP role is intended to prepare future principals (NCES, 2022).

Moreover, the research literature provides limited empirical insight into how APs perceive their leadership and how principals perceive APs' readiness or ability to lead instruction. This study examines how APs perceive their instructional leadership skills and how principals view them in this role within a large suburban school district in the southern United States. To do so, the study uses four research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do assistant principals perceive their instructional leadership across the PIMRS domains of defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate?
- Research Question 2: How do principals perceive assistant principals' instructional leadership across the PIMRS domains of defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate?
- Research Question 3: To what extent do assistant principals' self-perceptions of instructional leadership differ from principals' perceptions across the PIMRS domains?
- Research Question 4: How do assistant principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership vary by years of experience across the PIMRS domains?

Understanding these perceptions is critical, as they influence leadership development, succession planning, and the cultivation of effective school leadership teams (Carpenter et al., 2021). When empowered as instructional leaders, APs effectively enhance teacher development, boost student achievement, and improve the overall quality of instruction in schools (Shaked, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of the Assistant Principal Role

Historically, APs have focused on running schools operationally and managerially, leaving instructional leadership behind. The assistant principalship as a profession first emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, as schools began to struggle with the administrative demands of growing student populations (Glanz, 1994). As these new roles evolved, titles such as general supervisor and special supervisor emerged. These titles implied that some leaders managed the day-to-day school operations and others managed instruction. These titles phased out over time, leaving us with a title associated with discipline, logistics, and compliance (Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

Changes in expectations of what APs should know and be able to do have emerged from increased pressures for accountability and standards-based reform over the past few decades. Policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top spurred an increased emphasis on instructional quality and student achievement in schools (Grissom et al., 2021). School leadership roles have since been reimagined to focus heavily on holding schools accountable for student achievement by supporting instructional improvements and developing schoolwide initiatives to boost student learning (Grissom et al., 2021). Policies requiring APs to focus on improving instruction have increased expectations for APs to support both teacher and instructional improvement initiatives, as well as the development of schoolwide initiatives (Cansoy et al., 2021). However, research consistently shows that the AP position is used inconsistently and is often underutilized in instruction.

Role Ambiguity and Instructional Leadership Expectations

One common theme in many articles is the unclear role of the AP. While many anticipate that APs will serve as instructional leaders, they often lack the authority, time, or clear expectations to do so (Goldring et al., 2021). Principals

frequently decide the roles APs should take depending on campus needs. This allows for significant differences in APs' ability to take on instructional leadership roles across schools (Ho et al., 2021).

One reason for this disconnect between APs' beliefs about their ability to be instructional leaders and how they implement instructional leadership is this ambiguity. While APs may strongly believe in their ability to lead instruction, principals may still view them as managers of day-to-day operations (Jackson et al., 2021). This can make evaluation, mentoring, and succession planning difficult. It also inhibits APs from developing a strong leadership identity (Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

Preparation, Mentorship, and Professional Development of Assistant Principals

Research also identifies gaps in formal training and preparation, as well as in professional learning experiences specific to instructional leadership for APs. Most APs report receiving little to no training in leading curriculum, instructional coaching, or using data to inform decision-making before taking on their roles (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Much of the way APs learn to lead instruction occurs through informal learning opportunities, such as on-the-job training or trial and error (Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

Researchers note that AP professional learning experiences should intentionally focus on adult learning communities, developing proficiency in leading teachers, and establishing distributed responsibility rather than directing and supervising teachers (Cohen & Schechter, 2019). Mentoring frameworks and formalized induction programs show promise for helping APs grow as instructional leaders when paired with research-backed instructional practices. When professional learning opportunities are not strategically designed, APs can struggle to translate their leadership goals into practice (Jackson et al., 2021).

Instructional Leadership Frameworks and Distributed Leadership

Models of instructional leadership provide a necessary framework when defining AP responsibilities and outlining practice. Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model consists of five domains: establishing the school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, fostering a positive school learning climate, monitoring/evaluating instruction, and evaluating the instruction program. These five leadership areas are similar to those in the literature on leadership and school improvement (Munna, 2021).

One specific tool based on Weber's (1996) model is the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The scale breaks down instructional leadership practices into observable behaviors within three categories: setting the school mission, managing the instructional program, and developing a positive school climate. Studies based on PIMRS have shown promise as an evaluation tool, showing high-performance leadership practices and differences between perceived leadership needs and current leadership practices (Hallinger et al., 2025).

Distributed leadership theory also serves as an effective supplement to instructional leadership theory by emphasizing collective accountability and aligned leadership teams (Phillips et al., 2023). By placing APs as leaders on the administrative team rather than bystander leaders, schools can align school operations with instructional initiatives and focus on continuous improvement (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). For distributed leadership to run smoothly, schools must establish roles, build trust, and evaluate performance.

Gaps in Literature

Research on APs is growing but remains sparse. For example, only a handful of empirical studies have directly compared APs' self-perceptions of instructional leadership behaviors with principals' perceptions of those behaviors using the same validated instrument. Further, few studies have investigated how years of experience impacted these perceptions or closed the perception gap between APs and principals.

Previous research has offered several qualitative recommendations, including clearer roles, targeted professional development, and aligned leadership pipelines that reflect instructional leadership models. Quantitative data on perception alignment within the same school district remain limited. Closing these research gaps can better inform practices in leadership preparation, evaluation, and succession planning.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring APs' and principals' perceptions of instructional leadership within the various PIMRS domains in one large suburban district. Additionally, this study compared self-ratings to external ratings and explored experience as a factor. This research provides empirical data on APs' instructional leadership capacity and the conditions needed to foster their development.

METHOD

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-perceived instructional leadership of APs and compare this to the perspective of their principals. This study used a descriptive quantitative design and the PIMRS to measure the effectiveness of school leadership. The PIMRS was selected because it systematically assesses leadership practices related to articulating the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and developing a supportive learning environment (Hallinger et al., 2020). Knowledge of these areas is necessary to fully appreciate the roles of APs in developing successful educational environments.

The PIMRS is a 50-item Likert-scale questionnaire intended to measure the frequency and quality of leadership behaviors as perceived by principals and APs. The PIMRS instrument was selected for the present study because of its widespread use in educational leadership and its demonstrated validity and reliability. As the assistant principalship increasingly shifts its attention to instructional leadership, measuring the match between self-conception and external perceptions is critical to understanding how effective the leader is in their role (Hallinger et al., 2020).

The research instrument was intentionally designed to capture a quantitative comparison of how an AP self-perceives and how the principal perceives the AP, and to determine any difference based on specific demographic data, such as years of teaching experience. In addition, the research aimed to identify and explore how differences between APs' perceptions and principals' perceptions affect school culture and leadership.

Participants

The district selected for this study employs about 16,333 individuals, including 416 campus administrators. Principals average 7.6 years of experience, while APs average 6.6 years, both inside and outside the district (*Texas Education Agency - 2022–23 Texas Academic Performance Reports*, 2022). The study included 84 school leaders from a suburban district: 43 APs and 41 principals. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation across elementary to high school levels, enabling the selection of participants who could provide valuable insights into AP leadership behaviors. This approach ensured a diverse mix of professional experiences and backgrounds among the participants.

The APs were selected based on their experience, role, and length of time in the district to ensure a range of perspectives. This diversity allowed exploration of the impact of professional experience and perceptions of instructional leadership. Raters were site principals due to their familiarity with the APs and their leadership assessment practices. Principals from various educational levels were included to offer diversity and variety in the study's findings. Principals were contacted via district email and asked to nominate two APs from their campuses to ensure familiarity between raters and participants.

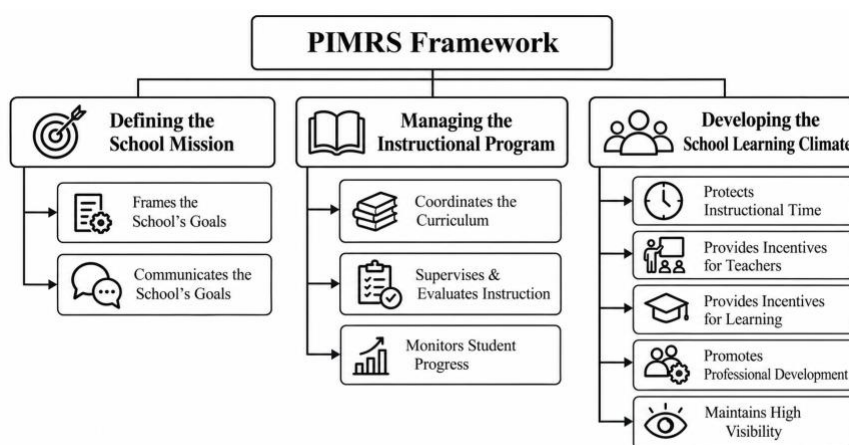
Survey Instrument

The PIMRS (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) was used for data collection across three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and creating a favorable school climate (Ahmad et al., 2025). These three dimensions include domains such as communicating the school's goals, monitoring student progress, supervising and evaluating instruction, and promoting professional development (see Figure 1). By analyzing these domains, the researcher assessed instructional leaders' effectiveness and their role in creating supportive learning environments.

APs and principals distributed the PIMRS to research participants to collect their insights about instructional leadership. APs assessed their leadership behaviors, whereas principals evaluated the leadership behaviors of APs. The research design enabled analysis of self-evaluations and external evaluations to reveal differences or similarities in perceptions between the two groups. The goal was to identify areas where APs may benefit from additional support or development based on their perceptions of themselves and their principals.

Validity and Reliability

Multiple studies, including those by Hallinger et al. (2025), have established the validity of the PIMRS instrument. These studies provided evidence of its construct validity and criterion-related validity. The instrument has been extensively used in educational leadership research and is reliable for measuring the instructional leadership behaviors of principals and APs.

Figure 1***Instructional Leadership Domains (PIMRS)***

Note. The instructional leadership domains in the PIMRS assessment come from Hallinger et al. (2025).

The reliability of the PIMRS was confirmed by internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. Previous research has consistently demonstrated strong reliability of the instrument, with alpha coefficients typically ranging from .80 to .90, indicating high internal consistency across subscales (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the Hampton University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The protocols followed ethical standards issued by the IRB to protect the participants' rights. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. After being fully briefed, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study without repercussion. The research team collected participant data through confidential means, maintaining participant privacy by anonymizing all responses. The data collected during the study were transferred into an electronic file for secure storage to maintain participant privacy.

Data Collection

The Qualtrics survey platform was employed to collect data as it supported anonymous survey distribution and completion. Qualtrics enabled a smooth data collection process by providing participants with a secure, user-friendly platform to submit their responses. The study team extended invitations to 90 principals, who each chose two APs to complete the survey. This sampling method enabled participation from a diverse set of APs with varied professional backgrounds and leadership positions across multiple school levels.

A total of 43 APs and 41 principals completed the surveys. Of the 90 principals invited to participate, 41 responded, representing a principal response rate of 45.6 percent. The survey responses provided data to examine and compare APs' self-perceptions of instructional leadership with principals' perceptions of APs' instructional leadership practices. The respondents were sent the survey link to their emails, which took them to the survey's online portal to minimize access difficulty. All respondents were asked to respond within two weeks. Reminder emails were sent as a follow-up to maintain motivation and get timely feedback from the members. To minimize the time commitment required of participants, the questionnaire was administered online and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the PIMRS surveys were analyzed using SPSS statistical software version 28. Descriptive statistics were initially used to summarize the sample's demographic characteristics and describe the overall response

patterns. Inferential statistical analyses, including one-way ANOVA, were conducted to compare the perceptions of APs and principals on individual items within the domains of instructional leadership.

Additionally, the data were analyzed across multiple demographic indicators, such as experience, for APs and principals to determine whether experience influenced their perceptions of instructional leadership. This analysis was important as it enhanced our understanding of how professional experience influenced the perceptions of instructional leadership among APs and principals.

RESULTS

The primary aim of this study was to examine the self-perceptions of APs regarding their role as instructional leaders and compare these perceptions with the perceptions of principals about their APs' instructional leadership abilities. This section presents findings related to the study's research questions. The data analysis presents self-reported data from APs and data provided by principals, offering insights into alignment and discrepancies between the two groups' perceptions.

Research Question 1

How do assistant principals perceive their instructional leadership across the PIMRS domains of defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate?

APs perceived themselves as frequently engaging in instructional leadership practices on all three domains of PIMRS. Table 1 shows that the mean self-rating scores ranged from 3.83 to 4.05 on the five-point Likert scale for all PIMRS subscales. APs perceived themselves as frequently effective at defining mission, managing instructional programs, and developing a positive school learning climate.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for PIMRS Instructional Leadership Functions

PIMRS Function	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency Rating	Interpretation
Defining the School's Mission	4.05	0.78	Frequently to Almost Always	APs report consistently articulating a clear vision and mission aligned with campus goals.
Managing the Instructional Program	3.94	0.76	Frequently to Almost Always	APs indicate frequent communication of goals to teachers, students, and stakeholders.
Promoting a Positive Learning Climate	3.83	0.54	Frequently	APs regularly use student-performance data to align instructional decisions with school goals.
Overall Mean*	3.91	0.59		APs perceive themselves as highly effective in defining and communicating the school's mission.

Note. Values represent mean scores on the five-point Likert scale (1 = Almost Never, 5 = Almost Always). *Overall mean computed across all items

Research Question 2

How do principals perceive assistant principals' instructional leadership across the PIMRS domains of defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate?

Principals' ratings of APs' instructional leadership skills varied across the three functions of managing the instructional program. Table 2 shows principals rated a moderate to frequent number of observed instructional leadership behaviors, with supervising and evaluating instruction receiving the highest rating and coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress receiving lower ratings. This suggests principals felt APs were more involved in supervising instruction but were less involved in other areas, such as monitoring student progress.

Table 2

Principals' Perceptions of Assistant Principals' Instructional Leadership Across PIMRS Domains

PIMRS Function	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency Rating	Interpretation
Supervise and Evaluate Instruction	4.15	0.75	Frequently	Principals report that APs provide some instructional feedback but less consistently across classrooms.
Coordinate the Curriculum	3.60	0.99	Frequently	Principals perceive limited involvement of APs in aligning curriculum across grade levels and content areas.
Monitor Student Progress	3.30	1.00	Occasionally to Frequently	Principals observe APs regularly reviewing student performance data, though less strategically than principals.
Overall Mean (Instructional Program Domain)	3.68	0.82	Frequently	Principals perceive moderate engagement of APs in instructional program management, below APs' self-ratings.

Note. Values represent mean scores on the five-point Likert scale (1 = Almost Never, 5 = Almost Always).

Research Question 3

To what extent do assistant principals' self-perceptions of instructional leadership differ from principals' perceptions across the PIMRS domains?

Because the 43 assistant principal self-assessments and 41 principal assessments were independent and unpaired, a one-way ANOVA was used for between-group comparisons. Table 3 presents four selected PIMRS items, calculated from the complete survey exports. These item-level findings should not be interpreted as evidence that every PIMRS domain differed significantly.

Table 3

One-Way ANOVA Comparing Assistant Principals' and Principals' Ratings on Selected PIMRS Items

PIMRS Domain	Assistant Principal <i>M</i> (Self-Rating)	Principal <i>M</i> (Rating AP)	<i>M</i> Difference	<i>F</i> (1, 82)	<i>p</i>	Interpretation
Review student work products	4.12	3.37	0.75	12.76	<.001	APs reported reviewing student work products significantly more frequent than principals reported observing.
Cover classes until substitute arrives	3.74	2.98	0.76	6.91	.010	APs reported covering classes until a substitute arrived significantly more frequently than principals reported observing.
Compliment teachers privately	4.67	4.34	0.33	3.92	.051	APs reported complementing teachers privately more frequently than principals reported observing; however, the difference was not statistically significant.
Recognize student achievement	3.79	3.15	0.64	6.86	.011	APs reported recognizing student achievement or improvement significantly more frequently than principals reported observing.

Note. Scores use a five-point frequency scale. The tests compare independent groups (43 assistant principals and 41 principals). *F* statistics and *p*-values were calculated from the complete Qualtrics exports. These are selected item-level comparisons, not domain-wide significance tests.

Research Question 4

How do assistant principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership vary by years of experience across the PIMRS domains?

APs' self-perceptions of their instructional leadership slightly differed by years of experience. Table 4 shows that APs' mean self-rating scores varied across the five experience categories, with no consistent increase in ratings as years of experience increased. Additionally, years of experience did not result in statistically significant differences in APs' perceived instructional leadership, $F(4, 38) = 0.88, p = .487$.

Table 4

Assistant Principals' Self-Perceptions of Instructional Leadership by Years of Experience

Experience	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
1 year (Novice APs)	6	4.04	0.51	Perceive themselves as effective but still developing consistency in instructional leadership behaviors.
2-4 years (Developing APs)	12	3.78	0.56	Report developing confidence in defining the school mission and managing instruction.
5-9 years (Mid-level APs)	12	3.74	0.68	Perceive themselves as engaged in instructional leadership practices, with opportunities for continued growth.
10-15 years (Experienced APs)	11	4.15	0.48	Report strongest sense of self-efficacy and impact on instructional practices.
More than 15 years (Veteran APs)	2	3.93	1.20	Report frequent engagement in instructional leadership practices.
Overall Mean	43	3.91	0.59	APs generally perceive themselves as frequently engaging in instructional leadership practices, regardless of years of experience.

Note. Mean scores are based on assistant principals' PIMRS self-ratings. All values were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Almost Never, 5 = Almost Always). Experience categories reflect the survey response options. The group with more than 15 years of experience included only two respondents and should be interpreted cautiously.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results showed differences between how APs perceive their instructional leadership and how principals evaluate it. APs generally reported frequent engagement in instructional leadership practices across the PIMRS domains, whereas principals reported varying frequencies of observed instructional leadership behaviors. Experience appeared to have no consistent effect on APs' self-perceptions, while its effect on principals' ratings was not examined. The data underscore the continuing need to clarify the AP's role, ensure equitable opportunities for instructional leadership, and strengthen professional development aligned with Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model.

DISCUSSION

Emerging Findings

The results of this study validate what many have long perceived: a gap between APs' and principals' perceptions of instructional leadership. This study goes further by quantifying the difference between how one views oneself and how others view them within the same theoretical framework. Based on Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model and measured by the PIMRS, these findings help explain what instructional leadership means, how it is carried out, and what may limit APs' ability to engage in instructional leadership within their roles. Quantitative data were used to compare principals' and APs' perceptions of overlapping instructional leadership domains, adding to the body of knowledge on role ambiguity, leadership preparation, and distributed leadership.

Considered alongside prior research, these results point to two broader issues: role ambiguity and the need for targeted professional development.

Role Ambiguity

These results may reflect the role ambiguity documented in prior research, in which administrative and disciplinary duties overshadow instructional priorities (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). APs rated themselves highly in instructional leadership, particularly in defining the school's mission, yet principals rated them lower on several items. This misalignment suggests that organizational culture and principal-determined role boundaries may shape APs' opportunities to lead instruction (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Addressing role ambiguity may require a clearer definition of AP responsibilities and shared leadership frameworks that empower APs to engage in instructional improvement (Moyer & Goldring, 2022).

Targeted Professional Development

APs and principals both indicated a need for professional development focused specifically on instructional leadership. Most preparation programs prioritize management over instructional practice, leaving APs to develop leadership skills through on-the-job learning. This aligns with findings by Cohen and Schechter (2019) and Jackson et al. (2021), which highlight the importance of differentiated professional development. Within Weber's (1996) framework, APs require growth in managing curriculum and instruction, while Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory suggests that structured mentorship can help translate leadership confidence into observable practice.

Together, these results suggest that APs need role clarity, professional learning, and systemic support to transition from operational managers to instructional leaders capable of advancing school improvement.

Comparisons with the Literature and Theoretical Framework

This study's findings both align with and extend existing literature on the AP role in instructional leadership. Consistent with the literature, APs in this study perceived themselves as competent instructional leaders across Weber's (1996) domains of defining the mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate, while principals' ratings were notably lower. This perception gap echoes findings by VanTuyle (2018) and Lim and Pollock (2019), who described the AP as a "leader in waiting" constrained by administrative tasks and unclear authority. Selected PIMRS items showed statistically significant differences between the independent AP and principal groups; these item-level tests do not establish significant differences across entire PIMRS domains. These results align with Goldring et al. (2021) and Somoza-Norton and Neumann (2021), who found that principals often view APs as more operational than instructional.

Research continues to show that APs' instructional leadership capacity is limited by site-level expectations, restricted authority, and inconsistent professional development (Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Jackson et al., 2021). This study's findings reinforce this trend—APs reported frequent engagement in instructional leadership practices, while principals' ratings reflected varying frequencies of observed instructional leadership practices. However, this study diverges from previous research by showing that years of experience did not consistently enhance APs' self-perceived instructional leadership (findings for research question 4). Unlike Cohen and Schechter (2019), who found little correlation between experience and leadership confidence, this study found no consistent increase in APs' self-ratings across experience groups. These findings suggest that perceptions of instructional leadership may depend on factors beyond years of experience, including communication and organizational culture.

Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model, with its five domains, provides a lens to interpret these results. While this study measured three related dimensions using the PIMRS, engagement appeared uneven, particularly in principals' ratings. Principals rated APs highest in supervising and evaluating instruction but lower in coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress. APs' self-ratings were more consistent, ranging from 3.83 in promoting a positive learning climate to 4.05 in defining the school's mission. The imbalance in principals' ratings supports Bhengu et al. (2014), who asserted that without shared leadership structures and empowerment, APs struggle to enact Weber's model holistically.

Integrating Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory further explains this pattern. APs' high self-perceptions suggest strong self-efficacy, yet organizational barriers—such as principal control, limited authority, and excessive managerial duties—restrict opportunities to demonstrate instructional leadership. This bridge between Weber's and Bandura's frameworks shows that while APs have the motivation and conceptual understanding to lead instructionally, contextual constraints prevent them from fully realizing these behaviors.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse by quantifying the perception gap between APs and principals, situating it within a robust theoretical framework, and aligning with recent scholarship advocating for structured mentorship, targeted professional development, and distributed leadership (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). The

findings also reaffirm Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) argument that leadership effectiveness depends on coherence among beliefs, behaviors, and expectations within school hierarchies.

In summary, while APs perceive themselves as instructional leaders aligned with Weber's model, principals continue to evaluate them primarily through an operational lens. Addressing this misalignment requires aligning leadership preparation, evaluation systems, and professional learning to reinforce shared instructional responsibility. By connecting the findings to both Weber's and Bandura's theories, this study underscores the need to clarify and strengthen the AP's instructional leadership role as a critical component of school improvement.

IMPLICATIONS

This study's results have critical educational leadership implications, especially for developing the AP's instructional role. The enduring perception gap between APs and principals underscores the importance of clarity and specificity of expectations, focus on professional learning, and deliberate mentorship in accord with Weber's (1996) instructional leadership model.

Districts must articulate the instructional aspect of leadership for APs and ensure that principals and APs have a common understanding of those expectations. Setting up mutual leadership frameworks can help close perception gaps, improve collaboration, and better distribute instructional authority. Professional development efforts should also extend beyond management functions to teach curriculum leadership, coach teachers, and empower data-informed pedagogical decision-making. Integrating mentorship, reflective practice, and peer-to-peer collaboration in AP training can reinforce self-efficacy, as theorized by Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, and encourage knowledge transfer into practice.

Lastly, structured leadership pipelines must align with all five of Weber's domains—defining mission, managing instruction, assessing programs, observing instruction, and promoting a positive climate—to best prepare APs for principalship. Improved preparation, mentoring, and evaluation systems will create greater school coherence, contributing to better student achievement.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of the study. First, the results may not be generalizable beyond the district studied. However, the study achieved a 45.6% response rate. District-level factors, including demographics and policy context, may vary across regions. Therefore, while the results highlight the value of APs, further research is needed to generalize the findings across different settings.

A further limitation is that it relies solely on self-reported data from the APs and principals. APs may have overrated their leadership ability due to socially desirable responses, which may have led to subjective assessments from principals. Although the PIMRS is a validated instrument, self-reporting can be subject to bias. External raters, observer-based assessments, or peer assessments could be used to increase objectivity in future studies.

Relying solely on a survey instrument like PIMRS does not provide us with the complete picture of what APs do. While it sheds light on their leadership behaviors, it does not help us understand how APs juggle their roles as instructional leaders with their numerous administrative responsibilities. To better understand these experiences, we would benefit from more personal methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, that let us hear their stories and gain insight.

This study focuses primarily on the experiences of APs and principals but overlooks valuable insights from teachers and other key stakeholders. Future research that incorporates a wider range of perspectives could significantly enhance our understanding of how effective APs are in guiding instruction. By adopting a more inclusive approach, we can better understand how APs play a vital role in creating effective learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the importance of aligning perceptions of instructional leadership between APs and principals. The consistent differences in their evaluations reveal a need to better define expectations and create conditions that empower APs to lead instructionally.

When leadership roles are clearly delineated and supported through coaching and professional learning, APs can more effectively implement Weber's (1996) model and fulfill the instructional responsibilities envisioned for them. Building self-efficacy through mentorship and shared leadership experiences, as explained by Bandura (1986), transforms confidence into practice and enhances instructional capacity across schools.

Clarifying the AP's role is essential not only for individual growth but also for the collective success of school leadership teams. By aligning preparation programs, professional development, and evaluation criteria, districts can elevate the AP position from operational management to instructional influence—contributing directly to teacher development, student learning, and sustained school improvement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the University of Phoenix's Research to Publication Workshop and College of Doctoral Studies for supporting the preparation of this journal article. Special thanks to the workshop reviewer, Dr. Andrew Lawson, for helping to prepare and finalize the manuscript. The author also thanks the members of her dissertation committee, Dr. Denise Charbonnet, Dr. Wendy Cotton, Dr. Syreeta Cason, and Dr. Queinnise Miller, for their guidance and support throughout the research process.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, D. N., Thomas, M., & Hamid, S. (2025). Teachers' perceptions regarding the effect of instructional leadership practices of primary school head-teachers on teacher effectiveness. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5164249>
- Bandura, A. (1986). The explanatory and predictive scope of self-efficacy theory. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 4(3), 359–373. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1986.4.3.359>
- Bhengu, T. T., Naicker, I., & Mthiyane, S. E. (2014). Chronicling the barriers to translating instructional leadership learning into practice. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 40(2), 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2014.11893317>
- Cansoy, R., Türkoğlu, M. E., & Balıkcı, A. (2021). What are the sources and negative effects of assistant principals' work intensification? *SAGE Open*, 11(3), 21582440211047582. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211047582>
- Carpenter, D., DeHerrera, M., Oleson, M., & Taylor, J. (2021). Effects of principal turnover on school performance. *NASSP Bulletin*, 106(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01926365211070488>
- Cohen, R., & Schechter, C. (2019). Becoming an assistant principal: Mapping factors that facilitate or hinder entering the role. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 14(1), 99–112.
- Glanz, J. (1994). Where did the assistant principalship begin? Where is it headed? *NASSP Bulletin*, 78(564), 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659407856407>
- Goldring, E., Rubin, M., & Herrmann, M. (2021). *The role of assistant principals: Evidence and insights for advancing school leadership*. Wallace Foundation. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/the-role-of-assistant-principals-evidence-insights-for-advancing-school-leadership-highlights.pdf>
- Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools*. Wallace Foundation. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf>
- Hallinger, P., Gümüş, S., & Bellibaş, M. Ş. (2020). Are principals instructional leaders yet? A science map of the knowledge base on instructional leadership, 1940–2018. *Scientometrics*, 122(3), 1629–1650. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03360-5>
- Hallinger, P., Liu, S., Aung, P. N., & Yan, M. (2025). A systematic review of instructional leadership research conducted with the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), 1983–2024. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432251358575>
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(2), 217–247. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461445>
- Hayes, S. D., & Burkett, J. R. (2020). Almost a principal: Coaching and training assistant principals for the next level of leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 31(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620912673>
- Ho, J., Shaari, I., & Kang, T. (2021). Vice-principals as leaders: Role ambiguity and role conflicts faced by vice-principals in Singapore. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(3), 575–593. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211002527>
- Jackson, T., McBrayer, J. S., Pannell, S., Cleveland, R. E., Miller, S. B., & Fallon, K. (2021). The effect of school tasks on principals' and assistant principals' leadership self-efficacy. *School Leadership Review*, 16(1), Article 7.
- Lim, L., & Pollock, K. (2019). Secondary principals' perspectives on the impact of work intensification on the secondary vice-principal role. *Leading and Managing*, 25(2), 80–98.

- Moyer, A., & Goldring, E. (2022). Match or mismatch? Assistant principals' roles and their perceptions of the evaluation system. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 0013161X2211370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x221137047>
- Munna, A. S. (2021). Instructional leadership and role of module leaders. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 32(1), 38–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879211042321>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, July 6). More than 80 percent of U.S. public schools report pandemic has negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development. https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 101, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002). <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ110/PLAW-107publ110.pdf>
- Phillips, D. R., Stewart-Fox, T., Phillips, S., Griffith, M., & Bhojedat, J. (2023). Distributed leadership in education: A systematic review of its role in fostering innovative practices and enhancing school performance. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 12(11), 2083–2089.
- Shaked, H. (2019). Boundaries of Israeli assistant principals' instructional leadership. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 19(3), 497–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1585552>
- Somoza-Norton, A., & Neumann, N. (2021). The assistant principal as instructional leader: The redesign of the AP position in the 21st century. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 6(1), 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jsard.v6i1.2444>
- Texas Education Agency. (2022). 2022–23 Texas academic performance reports. <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2024/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the Top program: Executive summary* (ED557422). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED557422>
- VanTuyle, V. (2018). Illinois assistant principals: Instructional leaders or disciplinarians. *Education Leadership Review*, 19(1), 1–21. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1200805.pdf>
- Weber, J. (1996). Leading the instructional program. In S. C. Smith & P. K. Piele (Eds.), *School leadership: Handbook for excellence* (3rd ed., pp. 253–278). ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.
-

GENESA PAGE, PhD, is an Associate Faculty member at the University of Phoenix. She earned her PhD in Educational Management from Hampton University. Her primary research interests include instructional leadership, educational administration, assistant principal leadership development, school improvement, and the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders in promoting students' achievement. Email: genesa.page@email.phoenix.edu

Manuscript submitted: **June 3, 2025**
Manuscript revised: **October 20, 2025**
Manuscript revised: **February 6, 2026**
Accepted for publication: **February 12, 2026**