



## **Instructional Leadership Styles and Curriculum Delivery: Principals' Perceptions in selective Limpopo Secondary Schools**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents a qualitative case study that examined secondary school principals' perceptions of how instructional leadership styles support curriculum delivery in public secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Guided by Role Perception Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory, the study focused on principals' understandings and applications of transactional and transformational instructional leadership. A purposive sample of seven secondary school principals participated in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data in relation to existing scholarship on instructional leadership and curriculum implementation. The findings show that principals perceive transactional instructional leadership as a structure-driven and compliance-oriented approach that emphasises rewards, sanctions, monitoring, and the achievement of short-term performance goals. In contrast, transformational instructional leadership was described as a relational, empowering, and developmental approach that motivates teachers, fosters collaboration, and cultivates a positive teaching and learning environment. Principals reported drawing flexibly on both leadership styles to supervise instruction, monitor curriculum coverage, support teacher professional development, and manage school performance, although their practices were shaped by policy demands and contextual constraints such as resource limitations and administrative workload. The study concludes that a balanced and contextually responsive integration of transactional and transformational instructional leadership is essential for strengthening curriculum delivery and improving learner outcomes. It is recommended that targeted professional development initiatives be implemented to enhance principals' capacity to apply these leadership styles strategically and effectively within diverse school contexts.

**Keywords:** instructional leadership styles; transactional leadership; transformational leadership; curriculum delivery; role perception; school principalship; Limpopo Province

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing complexity of curriculum changes in South African schools, particularly under ongoing policy reforms and accountability demands, has heightened the importance of instructional leadership in mediating curriculum delivery (Ralebese, Jita & Badmus, 2025). In Limpopo Province, persistent educational challenges—including uneven curriculum implementation and unequal learner performance—underscore the need to understand how school principals enact instructional leadership to support teaching and learning.

Instructional leadership as a formal construct emerged in the early 1980s (Steward, 2006). Hallinger (2003) conceptualises instructional leadership around three core dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme, and promoting a positive school learning climate. Dimmock (1995), however, cautions that if leadership is perceived only as prescriptive and top-down, it may marginalise teacher agency. He argues that instructional leadership is more effective when it becomes a collaborative, bottom-up process involving multiple stakeholders in shaping teaching and learning.

Steward (2006) further argues that instructional leadership in curriculum delivery is pivotal because it integrates learners, teachers, instruction and teaching strategies. It provides opportunities for stakeholders to collaboratively promote a positive learning environment, supports teachers and learners to meet curriculum standards, and ensures continuous professional development of teachers as key agents of curriculum delivery. Effective instructional leadership thus provides direction for curriculum implementation, supports teachers, and nurtures an environment conducive to improved learning outcomes (Kilag & Sasan, 2023).

Leadership style is a critical element of instructional leadership. Emma (2024) contends that instructional leadership styles shape school culture and positively influence learner performance by establishing a climate of engagement and high expectations. Transactional instructional leadership is associated with clear structures, rewards and penalties, contributing to order, accountability and short-term performance (Emma, 2025). In contrast, transformational instructional leadership focuses on vision, inspiration, collaboration and continuous improvement, fostering deeper professional commitment and organisational learning (Aniebonam, Chukwuba & Taylor, 2023; Emma, 2024).

Within the South African policy context, the *Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship* (DBE, 2015) positions principals as instructional leaders responsible for leading teaching and learning, managing the quality of teaching and learning, and developing and empowering self and others. Yet evidence suggests that many principals are not adequately prepared for these roles, particularly in contexts characterised by socio-economic disadvantage and ongoing curriculum reform (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Hallinger, 2019; Ralebese et al., 2025).

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to explore how secondary school principals in Limpopo Province understand and use instructional leadership styles especially transactional and transformational styles to promote curriculum delivery. The study is guided by this research question “*What are the perceptions of secondary school principals on how instructional leadership styles promote curriculum delivery in Limpopo Province schools?*”

### **Problem Statement**

South African school principals are expected to lead curriculum delivery amidst continual policy shifts, accountability pressures and resource constraints (Ralebese et al., 2025). Scholars such as Hallinger (2011), Shava

and Heystek (2018), and DeMathews (2024) agree that principals, as instructional leaders, are mandated to foster and direct effective teaching and learning by supervising, supporting and developing teachers and learners.

However, there is a persistent concern regarding the depth of principals' understanding of instructional leadership as a concept and practice. It remains unclear whether principals fully recognise their roles and obligations as instructional leaders and whether they possess the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to enact these roles effectively (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Mestry, 2017). If principals are unsure about how to use instructional leadership styles to guide teaching and learning, they may be unable to motivate teachers, cultivate positive learning environments or secure desired learner performance outcomes.

Given these concerns, this study seeks to investigate principals' perceptions of instructional leadership styles—focusing on transactional and transformational styles—and how these are used to promote curriculum delivery in secondary schools in Limpopo Province.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of instructional leadership gained prominence from the 1960s through to the 1980s as researchers sought to identify factors contributing to effective schools (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). In many developing countries, including South Africa and Lesotho, principals often assume instructional leadership roles without sufficient training or a robust knowledge base on how to interpret and enact these responsibilities (Ralebese et al., 2025).

Instructional leadership denotes the actions and processes undertaken by school principals to motivate and guide teachers, thereby enhancing curriculum implementation and learner achievement (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Gading, 2024). Emma (2024) outlines four broad leadership styles relevant to educational contexts: *Transformational leadership*, which focuses on articulating a shared vision, inspiring stakeholders and reshaping the learning environment for quality education; *Transactional leadership*, which emphasises structures, clear expectations, rewards and penalties; *Servant leadership*, which prioritises serving others and meeting the needs of learners and staff; and *Instructional leadership*, which specifically focuses on improving teaching practices and learner performance. In this study, the emphasis is on transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles, as they most directly relate to principals' roles in curriculum delivery.

Transactional leadership is characterised by structured policies, clear expectations and contingent reward systems. Leaders using this style focus on task completion, performance monitoring and compliance with rules and regulations (Emma, 2024; Qaradaghi & Ahmed, 2024). Rewards are used to reinforce desired behaviours, while sanctions are applied when expectations are not met. Although transactional leadership can enhance order and short-term productivity, it may limit creativity and self-development if over-emphasised (Qaradaghi & Ahmed, 2024).

Transformational leadership, in contrast, is concerned with inspiring followers to exceed expectations, fostering creativity and aligning personal and organisational goals (Aniebonam et al., 2023; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Transformational leaders cultivate positive, collaborative school cultures, promote professional growth and encourage innovation in teaching and learning. They aim to transform both individuals and institutions, thereby contributing to sustainable school improvement and academic excellence (Emma, 2024).

In practice, principals often draw on both transactional and transformational elements, combining structure and

accountability with inspiration and professional development (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Mestry, 2017). Understanding how principals perceive and balance these styles is therefore crucial to understanding curriculum delivery in context.

### **The Role of Instructional Leadership Styles in Curriculum Delivery**

Instructional leadership plays a central role in shaping school culture and influencing learner performance (Emma, 2025; Shava & Heystek, 2021). The *Policy on the South African Standard for Principals* (DBE, 2015) identifies eight key areas of principalship, several of which directly relate to instructional leadership: leading teaching and learning, managing the quality of teaching and learning and securing accountability, and developing and empowering self and others.

Research indicates that when principals effectively enact these roles by supervising instruction, providing feedback, supporting professional development, and promoting an orderly yet collaborative school climate—curriculum delivery is strengthened and learner outcomes improve (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Gading, 2024; Kilag & Sasan, 2023; Shava & Heystek, 2021). Transactional instructional leadership contributes to curriculum delivery by ensuring policy compliance and curriculum coverage; Setting clear performance expectations and monitoring progress; Maintaining order and discipline; and Clarifying accountability among staff (Emma, 2024; Qaradaghi & Ahmed, 2024).

Whereas transformational instructional leadership enhances curriculum delivery by Inspiring teachers to work beyond minimum expectations; Creating positive and supportive learning environments; Encouraging innovation in teaching methods; Promoting collaboration and shared decision-making; and supporting continuous teacher professional development (Aniebonam et al., 2023; Emma, 2024; Ralebese et al., 2025).

In South African schools, where principals are expected to function as both managers and instructional leaders, the challenge lies in balancing these leadership styles in ways that are responsive to contextual realities such as resource limitations, socio-economic disadvantage and ongoing curriculum reform (Hallinger, 2019; Mestry, 2017).

### **Aim and Research Question**

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of secondary school principals on how instructional leadership styles specifically transactional and transformational instructional leadership promote curriculum delivery in schools in Limpopo Province.

The study is guided by the following research question “What are the perceptions of secondary school principals on how instructional leadership styles promote curriculum delivery in Limpopo Province schools?”

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by Role Perception Theory (RPT) and Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT). Role Perception Theory, developed by Merton in 1957, is based on the premise that the social roles individuals occupy, and the expectations attached to those roles, shape their behaviour and interactions (Parker, 2007, cited in Ralebese & Naidoo, 2021). In school settings, the role of the principal is guided by formal policies, normative expectations and organisational culture.

RPT is relevant to this study because school principals, as instructional leaders, operate within a social and policy framework that prescribes expectations regarding curriculum delivery (DBE, 2015). As principals assume leadership positions, they adjust their behaviour to meet the mandates and expectations of the education system (Ralebese et al., 2021). Their perceptions of instructional leadership styles are therefore filtered through their understanding of their role and the demands associated with it.

Transformational Leadership Theory, initially conceptualised by Burns (1978) and later elaborated by Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1997), focuses on leaders who inspire followers to transcend self-interest, embrace shared goals and pursue higher levels of performance and moral purpose (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016; Aniebonam et al., 2023). Transformational leaders motivate staff through idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration.

In school contexts, transformational leaders seek to improve conditions for teaching and learning by fostering collaboration, enhancing teachers' professional capacity and promoting a shared vision of academic excellence (Shava & Heystek, 2021; Mestry, 2017). Transactional leadership, in this framework, is recognised as a complementary style focused on exchange relationships, rewards and sanctions. In this study, TLT is used to interpret how principals understand and enact transformational and transactional instructional leadership, and how these styles influence curriculum delivery.

Together, Role Perception Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory provide a lens for analysing principals' perceptions: RPT foregrounds the expectations tied to the principalship, while TLT illuminates the nature and impact of their chosen leadership styles on curriculum delivery.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A qualitative single case study design was employed to explore in depth the perceptions and experiences of secondary school principals regarding instructional leadership styles and curriculum delivery in Limpopo Province. The "case" comprised a bounded system of seven secondary schools within a specific provincial context, allowing for rich, contextualised insights (Given, 2008). To strengthen the case study and enhance transferability, researchers sampled school principals from the seven districts in the province with different socio-economic backgrounds, leaner enrolment, different quintiles, and learners' performance.

### Population and Sampling

The study focused on seven public secondary schools in Limpopo Province. Purposive sampling was used to select seven principals (four females and three males) who met the following criteria: currently serving as principals of secondary schools; having at least five years of teaching experience; and directly responsible for overseeing curriculum delivery at their schools.

Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years, and their professional experience spanned between 5 and 25 years (Crossman, 2020). This sampling strategy facilitated an in-depth understanding of principals' perceptions and experiences regarding transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles. Two females and males are between the age 25 and 40. Their teaching experience ranges between 10-17years. While two female and two male principals age range between 45-55yrs. Their teaching experiences ranges between 20-35years.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the seven principals over a period of four months. Interviews were conducted at the district office at times convenient for participants. An interview guide, aligned with the research question and theoretical framework, was used to structure the conversations while allowing for probing and follow-up questions.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on principals' understandings of transactional and transformational instructional leadership, examples of how they applied these styles in their daily work, and their perceived impact on curriculum delivery.

Researchers were able to capture the field notes during the interviews, non-verbal cues, contextual information to enhance collected data during the interviews. The data were used during thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Caulfield, 2019; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The analysis followed these steps: that is, familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; Generation of initial codes related to leadership styles, roles, curriculum delivery and contextual factors; Collation of codes into potential themes; Review and refinement of themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set; Definition and naming of final themes; and Selection of salient quotations to illustrate each theme. The analysis was iterative and interpretive, with constant comparison between participants and alignment with the theoretical framework (TLT and RPT). Dependability was enhanced by the independent coding efforts of both researchers, followed by joint discussions to reach consensus on themes. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was ensured through attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Creswell, 2014; Jamieson, 2016): researchers ensured credibility through prolonged engagement with participants over several months, member checking of key interpretations, and triangulation through comparison of multiple participants' accounts enhanced credibility. To ensure dependability in this study, the researchers used clear interview guide, systematic thematic analysis and collaborative coding strengthened dependability. Confirmability in this study was grounded on the use of reflexive notes and the use of verbatim quotations supported confirmability by grounding interpretations in participants' voices. Lastly, researchers ensured transferability by using a thick description of the research context, participants and processes to support transferability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA). The Limpopo Department of Education granted permission to access the sampled schools. Written informed consent was obtained from all participating principals. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms (e.g. SSP@1–SSP@7), and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

## FINDINGS

The analysis yielded two main themes, that is, *Principals' understanding of transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles*; and *Principals' perceptions of the role of these styles in promoting curriculum delivery*.

### ***Principals' Understanding of Transactional and Transformational Instructional Leadership:***

Principals demonstrated a clear conceptual understanding of both transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles and articulated how these differ in focus and purpose. Transactional instructional leadership was described as an exchange-based style that uses rewards and sanctions to influence behaviour and ensure task completion:

*“Transactional instructional leadership style is a style that focuses on exchanging rewards and punishment to control behaviour. Transformational instructional leadership style is a style that focuses on transforming schools and classroom to improve teaching and learning.” (SSP@1)*

*“Transactional instructional leadership style emphasizes exchanging rewards and penalties for certain behaviours and objectives to educators and learners to motivate success. Transformational instructional leadership style involves inspiring educators and learners and motivating them to go beyond their responsibilities to create a positive impactful environment for better performance of the school.” (SSP@2)*

*“Transactional instructional leadership style outlines expectation and [wants] to see immediate results as subordinates are monitored. This style is concerned about achieving some end results and if such are not met there will be negative consequences. Transformational instructional leadership style sees the purpose of organisational leadership as inspiring others to change and grow as people.” (SSP@3)*

Several principals emphasised the structured and compliance-oriented character of transactional leadership:

*“Transactional instructional leadership style is based on structured rules, routines, and clear expectations.” (SSP@5)*

*“Transactional instructional leadership style is characterised by a more structured approach, concentrating on achieving specific, measurable outcomes... This style is generally effective in ensuring the achievement of short-term goals and maintaining order and discipline.” (SSP@6)*

By contrast, transformational instructional leadership was described as developmental, inspirational and collaborative:

*“TfIL focuses on developing teachers and staff personally and professionally, encouraging creativity, and pushing them to exceed expectations. It is a style where the leader seeks to inspire and motivate staff through a shared vision, fostering an environment of growth, empowerment, and collaboration...” (SSP@6)*

*“A transformational instructional leader seeks to instigate change by empowering staff to take ownership of their responsibilities, fostering innovation, and aligning their personal values with the school's mission.” (SSP@7)*

Overall, principals recognised that transactional leadership is effective for achieving short-term objectives and maintaining order, while transformational leadership is essential for long-term school improvement and professional growth.

### ***Perceived Role of Instructional Leadership Styles in Curriculum Delivery:***

Principals indicated that both transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles play important roles in promoting curriculum delivery. Regarding transactional instructional leadership, principals highlighted its role in supervision, monitoring and accountability:

*“For instance, the principal supervises and offer[s] professional advice to staff members. This correlates with the role of a transactional leader who monitors their subordinates. The principals prepare a plan on how academic performance at school will be improved which is in line with transactional instructional leadership style.” (SSP@3)*

*“Transactional instructional leadership style focuses on managing the daily operations of teaching and learning through clear rules, structures, and performance expectations. It emphasizes compliance with policies, curriculum requirements, and achieving short-term goals.” (SSP@6)*

For transformational instructional leadership, principals emphasised its role in motivation, professional development and school culture:

*“Transformational instructional leadership style assists principals to develop teachers personally and professionally, encouraging creativity, and pushing them to exceed expectations.” (SSP@5)*

*“Transformational instructional leadership style inspires teachers to go beyond their responsibilities thereby creating a positive and impactful environment for learners.” (SSP@4)*

Principals thus perceived transactional leadership as instrumental for ensuring curriculum coverage, policy compliance and short-term performance, while transformational leadership was seen as pivotal in fostering a positive learning environment, encouraging innovation and supporting sustained improvements in curriculum delivery.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings corroborate existing literature which suggests that school principals draw on both transactional and transformational instructional leadership styles in their daily practices (Emma, 2024; Shava & Heystek, 2021; Ralebese et al., 2025). Principals in this study demonstrated conceptual clarity regarding the distinctions between the two styles and articulated their complementary roles in curriculum delivery.

From a Role Perception Theory perspective, principals’ descriptions reflect an awareness of the expectations attached to their roles as instructional leaders—namely, to supervise teaching, ensure curriculum coverage, maintain discipline and promote learner achievement (DBE, 2015; Mestry, 2017). Their reliance on transactional leadership for monitoring and accountability aligns with policy-driven expectations emphasising measurable outcomes and compliance.

In line with Transformational Leadership Theory, principals also recognised the importance of inspiring teachers, fostering collaboration and promoting professional growth. Their descriptions of transformational leadership as empowering, vision-driven and relationship-oriented are consistent with the literature (Aniebonam et al., 2023;

Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). These practices support positive school culture and sustained improvement in teaching and learning (Shava & Heystek, 2021; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024).

The study thus highlights a dual emphasis in principals' perceptions: Transactional instructional leadership is viewed as necessary for ensuring policy compliance and curriculum coverage; maintaining order and discipline; clarifying performance expectations; and achieving short-term goals.

The study also gave insight to transformational instructional leadership as central to motivating teachers to exceed expectations; creating positive and collaborative learning environments; supporting teacher professional development; and enhancing learner performance over the longer term.

These findings echo the argument that effective instructional leadership in complex schooling contexts requires an integrated approach that combines transactional and transformational elements (Steward, 2006; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024). However, the study also raises questions about principals' preparedness to enact these styles consistently and strategically.

While principals appear to understand the theoretical importance of both styles, the data do not fully show the extent to which their practices are shaped by contextual constraints, such as large class sizes, resource shortages, administrative workloads or insufficient leadership training.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative single case study explored the perceptions of seven secondary school principals in Limpopo Province regarding the use of instructional leadership styles to promote curriculum delivery. The findings indicate that principals possess a nuanced understanding of transactional and transformational instructional leadership and recognise their complementary roles in supporting teaching and learning.

Transactional instructional leadership was perceived as vital for maintaining order, ensuring compliance with curriculum and policy requirements, and achieving short-term performance goals. Transformational instructional leadership was viewed as essential for inspiring teachers, promoting collaboration, fostering positive school cultures and enabling continuous improvement in curriculum delivery.

Collectively, these leadership styles contribute to enhanced curriculum delivery and improved learner performance, aligning with national policy expectations for effective principalship (DBE, 2015). However, the extent to which principals are formally empowered and professionally developed to apply these styles optimally remains an open question.

The study underscores the need for deliberate and sustained professional development interventions that equip principals with practical strategies to integrate transactional and transformational instructional leadership in their daily work in ways that are responsive to their specific school contexts

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the study proposed the following recommendations:

Targeted Professional Development on Instructional Leadership Styles to the Department of Basic Education, in collaboration with provincial education departments and universities, should design and implement structured professional development programmes focusing on transactional and transformational instructional leadership for

principals. These programmes should include practical examples, case-based learning and mentoring components to support principals in applying theory to practice.

Embedding Instructional Leadership in Principal Preparation Programmes to function as Pre-service and in-service principal preparation programmes should explicitly integrate modules on instructional leadership styles, curriculum leadership and change management, aligned with the *South African Standard for Principals* (DBE, 2015).

Supporting Principals' Reflective Practice should be encouraged to engage in reflective practice, using tools such as leadership self-assessment, peer coaching and professional learning communities to critically examine their leadership styles and their impact on curriculum delivery.

Balancing Accountability and Professional Growth using Policy frameworks and district-level monitoring systems should be implemented to enhance accountability demands (e.g. curriculum coverage, performance targets) with support for teacher professional development and collaborative school cultures, thereby enabling principals to enact both transactional and transformational instructional leadership.

Contextually Responsive Application of Leadership Styles by Principals should be supported to adapt instructional leadership styles to their specific contexts, considering socio-economic conditions, resource constraints and community dynamics.

Further Support for Teacher Professional Development is necessary since transformational instructional leadership emphasises teacher growth, school systems should allocate time and resources for ongoing teacher professional development, including workshops, mentoring and collaborative planning focused on curriculum delivery.

Districts should consider establishing principal mentorship networks where experienced instructional leaders support newly appointed principals in navigating the practical application of transactional and transformational leadership styles in diverse school contexts.

### **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has several limitations. First, it involved a small, purposive sample of seven secondary school principals from a single province, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, data were generated solely through interviews with principals; the perspectives of teachers, district officials and learners were not included.

Future research could address these limitations by Including multiple stakeholders and incorporating the views of teachers, heads of departments, district officials and learners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how instructional leadership styles are perceived and enacted in schools. Expanding the sample and settings through conducting comparative studies across provinces or including both primary and secondary schools to explore variations in instructional leadership styles across phases and contexts.

Linking leadership styles to learner outcomes through employing mixed methods designs to examine the relationship between principals' use of transactional and transformational instructional leadership and learner performance data. Exploring instructional leadership and inclusivity to investigating how instructional leadership styles are used to promote inclusive education, including support for learners with barriers to learning and those from marginalised communities. Examining the impact of professional development interventions to evaluate the effectiveness of specific professional development programmes in enhancing principals' capacity to implement instructional leadership styles that improve curriculum delivery.

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