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Okul Müdürü

## Kırsal Bölgede Öğretim Liderliği Engelleri

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### ÖZ

Bu araştırma, kırsal bölgelerde görev yapan okul müdürlerinin öğretim liderliği rollerini yerine getirmelerini engelleyen faktörleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Okul müdürlerinin öğretim liderliği bağlamında karşılaştıkları zorlukların tespit edilmesiyle, bu konuda literatürdeki boşluğun doldurulması ve araştırmacılara çözüm önerileri sunulması hedeflenmiştir. Araştırma, temel nitel araştırma deseni ile yürütülmüştür. Bu desen, katılımcıların karşılaştıkları zorluklar ve deneyimlere dair derinlemesine bilgi edinmeyi hedefler. Araştırmaya, Türkiye'nin Batı Karadeniz Bölgesi'ndeki kırsal bölgelerdeki on resmi ilkokul ve ortaokul müdürü katılımcı olarak dahil edilmiştir. Veri toplama aracı olarak açık uçlu sorularla yapılan görüşmeler ve gözlem tekniği kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler doğrultusunda, kırsal kesimdeki okul müdürlerinin öğretim liderliğini engelleyen faktörler üç ana tema ve beş kategori altında sınıflandırılmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, kırsal bölgelerde görev yapan okul müdürlerinin öğretim liderliğine aktif katılımını engelleyen başlıca faktörleri ortaya koymaktadır: düşük gelir ve eğitim seviyesi, ilgisiz aile profili, okul binasındaki fiziki yetersizlikler, mali eksiklikler, insan kaynakları eksikliği ve aşırı iş yükü. Bu bulgular, kırsal bölgedeki okul müdürlerinin öğretim liderliği rolünü yeterince yerine getirememelerinin nedenlerini anlamaya yönelik önemli kanıtlar sunmaktadır.

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## Obstacles to Instructional Leadership in Rural Areas

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the factors that hinder school principals in rural areas from fulfilling their instructional leadership roles. By identifying the challenges faced by school principals in the context of instructional leadership, it is anticipated that the research will fill a gap in literature and provide solutions for researchers. The study was conducted using a basic qualitative research design, which aims to gather in-depth information about the challenges and experiences faced by participants. The research included ten principals from public primary and secondary schools in rural areas of Turkey's Western Black Sea Region as participants. Data was collected using interviews with open-ended questions and observation techniques. Based on the collected data, the factors that hinder instructional leadership in rural school principals were categorized under three main themes and five subcategories. The findings of the study reveal the primary factors limiting the active participation of rural school principals in instructional leadership: low income and educational levels, disengaged family background, physical limitations arising from school facilities, financial constraints, lack of human resources, and excessive workload. These findings provide significant evidence for understanding the reasons why school principals in rural areas are unable to fully perform their instructional leadership roles.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1970s, instructional leadership has been a topic of research (Cansoy, Polatcan & Kiling, 2018; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger et al., 2018; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marks & Printy, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010). It is noted that instructional leadership plays a key role in enhancing student outcomes, teaching quality, and school improvement efforts (Dorukbaşı & Cansoy, 2024; Louis et al., 2010; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Neumerski, 2012). Scholars today emphasize the necessity for all school principals to exhibit instructional leadership behaviors (Louis et al., 2010; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Neumerski, 2012), and many nations have integrated these behaviors into their educational systems (Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Park & Ham, 2016). Thus, in the 21st century, all school principals have come to be recognized as instructional leaders who are considered the most powerful determinants of learning (Louis et al., 2010; Smith & Andrews, 1989).

Today's school principals are expected to go beyond managerial roles with a contemporary approach, engaging in activities that enhance and strengthen the technical core of education and instruction (Özdemir, 2018). An instructional leader is one who, focusing on student learning, articulates the school's vision and mission, creates a learning-focused school climate (De Beovise, 1984; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), prepares suitable conditions that meet the needs of teachers and students (Greenfield, 1987), is open to innovations, taking risks, and knows how to use different teaching methods and techniques (Blase & Blase, 1999). As can be understood from this, the school principal is not just a manager but a true leader in instruction. This concept involves a direct impact on students, teachers, the curriculum, and the teaching-learning process (Murphy, 1998). According to Hallinger (2005), instructional leadership is important for increasing the expected academic outcomes from schools and ensuring their accountability. Therefore, instructional leadership distinguishes itself from other leadership approaches by directly focusing on the technical core of the school.

However, upon reviewing the literature, the duties, roles, and behaviors of school principals have not been standardized due to the diverse roles and behaviors associated with instructional leadership (Gümüşeli, 2014). Additionally, not every behavioral pattern produces successful outcomes in every context (Bossert et al., 1982). Principals should be able to develop styles that are appropriate for the local context of their schools. From this perspective, school and district organization become crucial factors in managing educational organizations and implementing effective leadership. As emphasized by Hallinger and Heck (1996), it is challenging to draw accurate conclusions regarding the applicability of findings to real contexts without considering the institutional context. Previous studies have shed light on both the relationship between context-leadership and the relationship between

principalship-leadership, yet they have underestimated the impacts of environmental and organizational constraints on leaders' behaviors. Characteristics such as community type, school size, students' socio-economic status, and school level determine how principals approach their jobs (Bridges, 1982; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986a, 1986b; Leithwood et al., 1990).

Some studies have indicated that the school context shapes the instructional leadership behaviors of school principals, emphasizing the need for qualitative and mixed-methods studies to reveal the meaning of leadership within its own context (Hallinger, 2018; Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). When the relevant literature is reviewed, it is evident that detailed research on the instructional leadership practices of school principals working in rural areas and the constraints they encounter is insufficient. Identifying factors that hinder instructional leadership in rural schools can narrow the empirical knowledge gap in instructional leadership, leading to both theoretical and practical implications (Shaked, 2021). Therefore, the aim is to identify the obstacles that school principals face by examining their instructional leadership practices within the contextual characteristics of their schools, thus filling the gap in literature.

## 1.1. Theoretical Background

### *Conceptualization of Instructional leadership*

The behaviors of school principals have been the subject of hundreds of studies, the central role of the principal has been examined, and it has been documented in many academic studies that principals have both a direct and indirect effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood et al., 2008; Şişman, 2018), with definitions provided in various ways. Research on effective schools has concluded that the responsibility for improving education falls on the school principal (Smith & Andrews, 1989). In essence, beyond traditional school management duties such as budgeting, scheduling, and facilities maintenance, instructional leaders are now expected to prioritize instructional leadership and school development, deeply engaging in the learning process (Rigby, 2014). Literature defines an instructional leader as someone who places student learning at the center, articulates the school's vision and mission, and creates a learning-focused school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). This leader interacts with school members to understand each student's individual development (Reyes-Gonzalez, 2007; Smith & Andrews, 1989), prioritizes the quality of education above all else, and dedicates all their time and energy to the school's academic development, vision for effective teaching and learning, the professional growth of teachers (Cansoy & Polatcan, 2024), and fostering an environment that supports and enhances instructional activities (Gedikoğlu, 2015; Şişman, 2018). It becomes clear that school leaders are expected to be knowledgeable in every area and capable of solving any problem, almost as if they possess heroic qualities, which

has sparked debate in the literature (Gedikoğlu, 2015; Hallinger, 2003).

The instructional leadership model, widely used in educational organizations and forming the conceptual background of this study, was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) (Gedikoğlu, 2015; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Shaked, 2021). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) provided a framework defining principals' instructional management behaviors in specific work behaviors after examining the instructional management behaviors of ten elementary school principals in a school district. This framework highlighted personal and organizational activities related to fundamental instructional management behaviors. In this approach, the instructional leadership behaviors of school principals are grouped into three dimensions: defining the school's goals, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate. Under these dimensions, the instructional leadership functions of school principals are outlined. This model includes behaviors used as tools by other researchers and derived from program and instruction studies, effective school research findings, and more (Şişman, 2018). As emphasized in Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) study, balancing direct and indirect activities to manage the curriculum and instruction in an environment with limited resources and numerous objectives is crucial. Achieving this balance requires considering contextual factors that constrain instructional leadership, such as the expertise level of the staff, student enrollment, school size, number of administrative staff, school community, and high-level expectations.

Currently, not all school principals have the necessary resources for implementing instructional leadership practices. Factors such as the lack of training for school administrators, increasing bureaucracy, changing needs, and time constraints make it increasingly difficult to demonstrate instructional leadership, particularly in countries like Türkiye (Gümüşeli, 1996). Griffin (1993) emphasized that the most significant barriers to instructional leadership are time constraints, legal and bureaucratic limitations, and conflicting role expectations. Hallinger and Murphy (1987) noted that factors limiting instructional leadership stem from principals' insufficient knowledge of the curriculum and instruction. McEwan (1994) argued that the barriers to instructional leadership are due to a lack of vision, determination, and courage. A review of the literature reveals that the factors hindering instructional leadership include a lack of knowledge necessary to lead teaching and learning (Cuban, 1988; Goldring et al., 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Shaked, 2018; Spillane & Louis, 2002), encountered legal and bureaucratic limitations (Aslanargun & Bozkurt, 2012; Balcı, 2011; Balıkçı & Aypay, 2018; Bursalioğlu, 2021; Çinkır, 2010; Yalçın et al., 2020), insufficient financial resources (Gümüşeli, 2014; Hoşgörür & Arslan, 2014; Lingam et al., 2014; Çetin, 2019), socio-cultural factors (Budge, 2006; Du Plessis, 2017; Hamad et al., 2021; Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Shaked, 2021; Starr & White, 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), and time constraints (Balyer, 2014; Camburn et al., 2010; Griffin, 1993; Grissom et al., 2013; Gümüşeli, 2016; Kaynakacı, 2003; May & Supovitz, 2010;

Shaked, 2019; Şahin & Gümüş, 2016).

Research indicates that community variables within which a school functions influence the instructional leadership of school principals. Needs, opportunities, resources, and constraints are variables presented to school leaders by community contexts (Hallinger, 2016). Although there is extensive research on instructional leadership in the relevant literature, there are relatively few studies investigating the limiting and hindering factors that school principals face while implementing instructional leadership practices. Therefore, this study is designed to identify the instructional leadership practices of school principals working in rural areas, considering institutional context, socioeconomic level, and cultural differences, and to determine the obstacles they encounter. For this reason, in this study, the questions used are as follows:

1. What does it mean to be a principal, especially in a school located in this region? Could you evaluate this role?
2. Do you encounter any issues in the implementation of the curriculum?
3. Do you believe that every student is capable of learning? What are your thoughts on this matter?
4. Do you experience challenges in obtaining the necessary resources to achieve your school's goals?
5. When you think about a typical week, could you describe the tasks that take up most of your time?
6. Could you tell me a bit about your school's relationship with the Ministry of National Education?
7. How does the socio-cultural environment surround your school impact it? What steps do you take to address any challenges that arise?
8. Are you able to communicate with teachers, students, and parents? How do you handle situations with those who face difficulties in communication?
9. In your opinion, what should be done to support the professional development of teachers in schools? What are the obstacles in this regard?
10. Do you feel that your knowledge is sufficient regarding the supervision processes for teaching? Have you received any training on this?
11. As a principal, how do you assess your role in improving teaching among the various areas that require your attention? And why?
12. What kind of obstacles do you face in creating a climate open to change?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Research Design**

The methodological approach of the current study aimed to achieve a qualified and in-depth dataset on the challenges encountered by school principals in rural areas and the factors that hinder instructional leadership behaviors. To achieve this goal, the basic qualitative research method was deemed appropriate for this study. It has been stated that basic qualitative research is philosophically derived from other qualitative research types, and that other qualitative types differ from basic qualitative research in certain aspects. Nevertheless, the general purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. In this regard, basic qualitative research is largely a type of qualitative study used more frequently in the field of education than in other fields of application (Merriam, 2009). Understanding the participants' experiences from personal and cultural perspectives is a primary focus of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2018). Thus, within the scope of this study, school principals working in rural areas form the boundaries of the research, and the factors that hinder their instructional leadership behaviors are the phenomena being investigated.

### **2.2. Study Participants**

The criteria for selecting schools to be included in the study are that the schools must be in areas classified as rural and that the school principals must have at least two years of work experience at their current schools. In the first step of the research, schools located in areas classified as rural were identified. In the second step, interview and observation forms were developed, and a pilot study (n=1) was conducted and evaluated. In the third step, participants (n=10) were reached using a snowball sampling technique, and fieldwork was carried out. During the fieldwork, all parts of the school (such as the schoolyard, principal's office, corridors, bulletin boards, multipurpose room, etc.) were observed and notes were taken. This technique allowed the identification of willing school principals who were ready to share their knowledge and experiences, even within a difficult-to-reach sample group. The following table presents the demographic information of the participants and school profiles included in the study context.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information's of Participants and Profiles of the Schools

Participants	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Type of School	Duration of Principalship	Teachers Count	Students Count	Region	Socio-economic Status
K1	Female	38	Bachelor's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	3	13	110	District	%80
K2	Male	42	Bachelor's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	2	15	150	Town	%50
K3	Male	40	Bachelor's Degree	Secondary School	3	19	220	Village	%25
K4	Male	54	Bachelor's Degree	Secondary School	7	8	65	District	%90
K5	Male	31	Bachelor's Degree	ImamHatip Middle School	2	7	57	District	%70
K6	Male	38	Master's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	3	37	350	District	%50
K7	Male	33	Master's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	4	11	73	Village	%50
K8	Male	38	Master's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	5	16	150	District	%30
K9	Male	62	Bachelor's Degree	Primary-Secondary School	5	16	90	Village	%50
K10	Male	41	Bachelor's Degree	Secondary School	5	14	130	District	%70

### 2.3. Data Collection

During the administration of interviews, Hallinger and Hosseingholizadeh 's (2019) "Investigating instructional leadership in Iran: a mixed methods study of high and low performing principals" was a source and semi-structured interview forms prepared within the framework of Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) Instructional Leadership Model were used in the study. Semi-structured interviews are open-ended questions that allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, while also following a flexible structure (Bryman, 2012).

Before beginning the data collection process, the interview form was revised multiple times based on the corrections and suggestions of a field expert. Necessary



modifications were made, and additional questions for clarification were added, resulting in a finalized open-ended interview form designed to address the phenomenon under investigation. The research questions were tested in a selected pilot school (n=1) before the field study, and the ones that did not respond to the research question were reviewed and necessary corrections were made. Although the purpose of the interviews was the obstacles faced by school principals in their instructional leadership practices, the term “instructional leadership” was not used directly in the interview questions in order not to affect the answers given by the participants.

#### **2.4. Data Analysis**

During the qualitative data analysis, data is coded, codes are combined and reduced into themes, and the resulting data are presented in tables or figures (Creswell, 2013). In the analysis phase, each piece of data was carefully examined, and after the examinations, codes were assigned to each piece of data to try to make sense of the data. By combining the responses from the participants and observation notes, a holistic perspective was aimed at being achieved considering the instructional leadership literature. Content analysis was conducted using an inductive method, leading from codes to categories and from categories to themes. As a result, all findings were grouped under three themes and interpreted. While coding the data, the research problem and the conceptual framework were taken into consideration. Thus, the phenomena studied was examined without altering natural state.

#### **2.5. Validity and Reliability**

Creswell (2013) defines validity as the researcher’s ability to deeply understand the phenomenon and document this understanding by cross-referencing it with information from various sources. In this context, for research findings to be considered valid, they must be accurately interpreted by the target audience and be perceived as meaningful, compelling, and convincing. In addition, ‘interpretive validity’ concerns the researcher’s ability to faithfully represent participants’ views (Durdu & Özden, 2016). To achieve this, the analysis included direct quotes from participants to reinforce the findings. During the interview process, the researcher remained neutral, avoiding any prompts that might influence participants’ responses. In the data analysis stage, the researcher took a critical approach, carefully evaluating the interpretations and revisiting the findings multiple times to ensure their validity.

On the other hand, reliability refers to the consistency of research findings when the study is repeated by different researchers or with different tools. However, achieving this level of reliability can be challenging in qualitative studies. In qualitative research, the goal is to understand a particular situation experienced by a specific group or individuals. Therefore, maintaining a critical perspective throughout the research process is essential, involving the questioning of data authenticity, response sincerity, and assumption validity, all of which are crucial for the study's reliability (Durdu & Özden, 2016). To enhance reliability, audio recordings were made, extensive time was spent in the field conducting observations, and a research diary was maintained. Ultimately, to ensure coding reliability, Patton's (2002) "triangulation" method was used, where the data were independently reviewed in collaboration with a field expert, and the results were compared

## 2.6. Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered a tool (Patton, 2018), and therefore, the researcher made efforts to maintain neutrality and objectivity. During the data collection and analysis process, the researcher avoided reflecting personal knowledge gained through literature review and professional experience, thereby demonstrating 'empathetic neutrality.' During the interviews, the researcher refrained from influencing the participants' responses, ensuring that the research was conducted with respect, in accordance with ethical guidelines, and that the data were analyzed objectively.

## 2.7. Research Ethics

The researcher followed the steps below to meet the ethical guidelines:

1. After developing the data collection instruments to examine the targeted phenomenon, ethical standards were observed, and the necessary permissions were obtained. Following the evaluation by the Ethics Committee of the Social Sciences Institute at Karabük University, the study's compliance with ethical guidelines was confirmed in the official letter No. 111081, dated 24.02.2022. Subsequently, on 29.04.2022, permission was requested from the Karabük Provincial Directorate of National Education to implement the research, and approval was granted on 20.05.2022.
2. Before conducting the interviews for data collection, informed consent was obtained from the participants. The research topic and its purpose were explained in detail to the participants, including where and how the interview data would be used, as well as the potential benefits the research might provide.

3. The participants' personal information and school names were kept confidential, and each participant was assigned a code name (e.g., K1, K2).

### 3. FINDINGS

This study focused on identifying the factors that hinder the instructional leadership practices of school principals working in rural areas. The research findings were classified into three main themes and five sub-themes end of the analysis of the data set obtained from the participants. The study findings correspond to the reasons described in the literature as mentioned above.

**Table 2.** Table of 'Themes' and 'Categories'

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Participants
Community context	Low income and Education level	*Education is not supported by families *Most parents' livelihood comes from farming and livestock *Parents have low average age and education levels *Students' physiological needs are not met	K1, K2, K3, K4 K5, K6, K7, K9, K10
	Disengaged family profile	*Broken family structures *Lack of school-family cooperation *Inability to communicate effectively with parents	K1, K2, K3 K4, K6, K7, K8, K9, K10
Insufficiency of Resources	Physical inadequacies stemming from school infrastructure	*Insufficient classrooms * Insufficient administrative areas *Old school building *Using a Single Building for Multiple School Levels	K2, K3, K9, K10
	Financial constraints	*The budget allocated to the school is insufficient *Weekend courses cannot be offered *The contributions to the school-family association are very low *Low canteen rental income	K1, K2, K4, K5, K6, K7, K8, K9, K10
Lack of human resources	Lack of human resources	* Inexperienced teachers	K1, K2, K4, K5, K6
		*Lack of assistant principals and administrative staff *No cleaning staff	K7, K10

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		*Routine tasks	
		*Bus service inspection	
		*Canteen inspection	
		*School technical maintenance	K1, K2, K3, K4 K5,
Workload	Workload	*Meetings	K6 K7 K8, K9,
		*Disciplinary issues	K10
		* Ensuring school security	
		*Inability to collaborate with parents	

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### 3.1. Community Context

Under the theme of community context, two categories that hinder the instructional leadership practices of school principals have been identified: i. Low Income and Education Level and ii. Disengaged Family Profile.

#### 3.1.2. Low Income and Education Level

During the current study period, it has been observed that nine school principals emphasized the negative impacts of the region's low income and education level. Economic concerns in rural areas hinder parents and students from focusing on academic achievement, leading the school principal, as an instructional leader, to spend time addressing external issues brought into the school rather than enhancing the quality of education. K3 expressed this situation as follows: *'The majority of parents consider their children's attendance at school sufficient. Therefore, both academic and national-moral values are weakly acquired by their children.'* The resources available in the regions where schools are located shape the leadership behaviors of school principals. For instance, in rural areas, school principals struggle to prioritize student learning. Reflecting on this, K7 stated: *'Children come to school without having breakfast. We manage with teachers and collect money among ourselves to feed them. Additionally, we do not receive much support from parents for purchasing educational materials and meeting school needs.'*

In the example above, as seen, school principals in rural areas with low-income and low-education parent profiles primarily struggle to meet students' physiological needs and subsequently strive to provide the academic support they require. This is supported by K1's statement: *'The low educational levels of parents are a problem. Most parents are engaged in farming and animal husbandry and do not pay attention to their children; they are in poor economic condition.'* The educational leaders struggle in enhancing instruction and ensuring continuity in teaching by developing collaboration with the school community and securing parental support. The insufficiency of parents' income, low educational levels, and inadequate interest shown towards the school diminish the efforts of school principals in motivating students to learn and ensuring their continuation to the next educational level. The lack of sufficient support for education within families also reduces students'

academic achievement, thereby diminishing the impact of the school principal as an instructional leader. K5 summarized this situation as follows:

"I had a student with strong numerical intelligence. We discussed with the parent about sending this child to a good high school, but the parent said they would not educate the child and would instead engage them in animal husbandry...the parent argued that engaging in this work rather than studying would be more sensible for their child's future."

### 3.1.3. Disengaged Family Profile

The theme of disengaged family profiles has frequently been articulated by nine school principals, often expressed through concepts of disengaged and broken family structures. Broken family structures divert the school and the school principal's energy towards ensuring students' well-being, addressing issues like students' sense of belonging and security, before focusing on academic success. Highlighting the necessity for parental education and awareness to enhance success, as emphasized by K4:

"Our families are disengaged, with low educational levels. If we want to increase success, we need to educate parents as well."

Additionally, some school principals have emphasized the significant impact of broken family structures on students. It has been noted that some of these students are cared for by extended family members such as grandparents or distant relatives, and they are unable to communicate directly with their parents. Due to the absence of relevant and supportive parents with whom school principals could collaborate, their leadership in education remains confined within the school boundaries:

"Some broken families have their children looked after by grandparents or other close relatives." (K9)

"The disadvantage here is the high number of broken families, which naturally adversely affects education. Moreover, the average age of parents is quite young. The economic situation of families in high villages is very poor." (K8)

Under this theme, parents' negative attitudes towards school, education, and educational leadership, as well as their reluctance to collaborate with the school, pose a barrier to school principals' efforts to foster teamwork and develop a "we" mentality in education. As a result, broken or disengaged family structures lead educational leaders to prioritize students' emotional well-being over academic success. In schools where these students are prevalent, academic achievement tends to be lower. The following descriptive examples from the current study illustrate how educational leaders in rural areas struggle with uninvolved parents

who do not support academic achievement:

“Our families mostly earn a living through agriculture and animal husbandry. After school, children help their families. When a parent comes, they request permission to take their child to tend to the animals.” (K1)

“The parent says, ‘I have fields and animals; these will sustain you. There is no encouragement for the child to study.’” (K7)

### 3.2. Insufficiency of Resources

The theme of insufficiency of resources has been categorized into three categories:

i. Problems arising from the physical structure of the school, ii. Financial inadequacies, and iii. Shortage of human resources (teachers, support staff, etc.).

#### 3.2.1. Physical inadequacies stemming from school infrastructure

Four school principals emphasized the physical inadequacies of school buildings. For example, participant K2 pointed out that the school building being shared between preschool, elementary, and middle school grades (different lesson hours) creates student circulation in the school corridors. This situation forces the school principal to allocate managerial time towards addressing problems arising from student circulation:

“The preschool and elementary levels are on the same floor, while middle school students are on the second floor, with a shared courtyard and canteen. This arrangement poses difficulties for us in terms of supervision. Lunch breaks are not synchronized due to different class schedules. As a result, there can be chaos during student entries and exits. While one group of students is leaving class, others may still be in session, creating noise and disruption.” (K2)

Additionally, the condition of the school building being quite old, and the necessity for the school principal, vice-principals, and school clerk to share the same office space, is a situation that affects the motivation of the school principal as an instructional leader. School principal K9 expressed this situation as follows: *‘Due to classroom shortages, administrators don’t have a separate office. Therefore, as you can see, the school principal, two vice-principals, and the clerk all share the same office.’* In rural schools, it is observed that school principals struggle to implement practices that would enhance student learning and improve the quality of the education provided, due to current conditions and limited resources available to them. Instead of focusing on instructional leadership practices, school principals often allocate their energy towards improving the physical and financial structure of the school organization. Moreover, the shared use of buildings across different educational levels poses a potential source of chaos in terms of both managing control and utilizing shared spaces in schools. Many school principals have highlighted difficulties in finding shared spaces and materials for certain lessons,

which sometimes results in shortcomings in achieving the educational goals outlined in the curriculum. This situation, as seen in the following descriptive example, diminishes the quality of education in schools and prevents students from experiencing diverse learning opportunities:

"This building is not designed for middle school; it used to be an elementary school. It is one of the oldest schools in the province. We don't have a conference hall here. We don't have any facility that would allow children to engage in activities." (K10)

### 3.2.2. Financial Constraints

It has been emphasized by nine school principals that they face challenges in finding financial resources to achieve school goals. The budget allocation sent to schools by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) is often insufficient to cover school expenses, leading school principals to constantly seek additional financial resources. This ongoing pursuit of financial support is one of the major obstacles school leaders encounter in improving the quality and standards of education. Principal K2 expressed this situation with the following words:

"...tremendous economic challenges. Our only source of income is the canteen. We do not collect dues or contributions from parents. I try to involve our parent-teacher association in all school activities, but we have financial difficulties. We try to handle this through personal relationships, asking financially well-off individuals in the region." (K2)

On the other hand, according to the Ministry of National Education regulations, at least 10 students are required to open supportive and developmental courses. In rural areas, the current number of students in classrooms is low, and many students commute to school as part of transportation services, making it difficult to reach the required number for opening supplementary courses as stipulated by the regulations. Participant K2, facing this situation, mentioned: *'We want to open courses, but we cannot do this due to low student numbers or because children are transported, making it difficult to find transportation on weekends.'* School principals, already grappling with numerous challenges, also mentioned being often left to fend for themselves in terms of financial resource shortages. Considering the reality that everything nowadays hinges on economics, the differences and innovations in leading education in rural areas pose a significant challenge for educational leaders in creating new learning environments. It's crucial to note the importance of socioeconomic difficulties in low-income families and regions where even students' basic needs are attempted to be met by school staff. The insufficient amount of aid provided to schools further compounds the economic struggles faced by school principals. Additionally, due to the low number of students and problems arising from

transportation services, it has been found that it is exceedingly difficult for school principals to enhance education and organize various enriching educational activities during non-class times:

“We face many problems. Now, if we can find benefactors from outside, we try to meet our needs. This is the biggest disadvantage of village schools.” (K9)

### 3.2.3. Lack of Human Resources

When asked about the resources they need to achieve school aims, seven school principals expressed the need for human resources. Therefore, some school principals mentioned that due to the lack of support staff, they occasionally must take on technical tasks such as school cleaning, maintenance, and repairs by themselves. School principals, whose primary role is to lead education, mentioned that they find themselves addressing shortages in areas where support staff are needed, such as cleaning and maintenance, alongside their administrative duties: *“We are facing significant challenges with personnel. The cleaning staff is consistently absent. We are addressing the need for teachers with temporary teachers.”* (K5)

Small settlements, referred to as rural areas due to their relatively distant location from the center, generally do not have teacher positions opened by the Ministry during the initial teacher appointments. Teachers often choose these schools by opting for placements outside the province, and due to the challenging conditions, they complete certain criteria and often request transfers back to the provincial center. Therefore, in such areas, some schools cope with the shortage of permanent teachers by employing substitute teachers. K6 expressed the difficulties in this regard as follows: *“We often face staffing shortages. The Ministry doesn’t assign teachers here. Finding support staff is also very difficult. Security is especially a serious problem.”* Moreover, deficiencies can also be observed in the administrative and support staff of schools. This situation increases the workload and responsibilities of school principals, preventing them from focusing on educational activities and instead allocating their time to tasks arising from staff shortages. As seen in descriptive examples, school principals cannot find enough time and energy to fulfill instructional leadership practices such as guiding and directly engaging in teaching:

“From the perspective of teachers, apart from initial appointments, teachers are not assigned to us. We are not preferred because we are in a rural area. In larger schools, every staff member is available with a division of tasks, but sometimes we do tasks that should be done by the clerk or even the assistant principal.” (K1)



### 3.3. Workload

The study identified another factor that blocking school principals' instructional leadership practices: workload. This finding was supported by ten school principals. The complex and multi-dimensional duties and responsibilities limit the time needed to conduct activities that will maximize student learning, effectively manage the curriculum, make necessary improvements, and mentor the school organization when needed. This situation indicates that school principals struggle to fulfill their administrative duties when burdened with heavy teaching responsibilities, or they cannot allocate sufficient and effective time for instructional leadership practices due to heavy administrative tasks. For instance, Participant K7 described the workload as follows:

“Dealing with students' meals and transportation alongside their family situations means performing both administrative and manual labor tasks simultaneously. It's a process that extends to even lighting the heaters.” (K7)

In the findings, it is observed that school principals lament about their excessive workload, which hinders tasks from being performed at the desired level. This situation is a factor that prevents tasks from being carried out effectively. It also hinders school principals from engaging in activities that would enhance the effectiveness of education, causing their time and energy to be diverted to different areas. For example, K5 emphasized, *'As a school with transportation services, we deal with bus inspections and sometimes maintenance tasks. If given the opportunity, I wouldn't want to be involved in school renovation and maintenance, as it forces me to redirect the time and energy, I would otherwise spend improving the school's educational practices.'* The study revealed that many school principals in rural areas face more challenging and restrictive conditions due to the limited resources available in schools. For example, 70% of participant school principals highlighted their workload related to technical tasks, primarily because there is insufficient staff to handle these responsibilities. Additionally, 50% pointed out the intensity of routine tasks, which reflects the absence of administrative support staff such as clerks or vice principals who could share these responsibilities in many rural areas. Furthermore, 40% mentioned the challenges related to transportation services, attributed to most students commuting from surrounding villages, which increases their duties regarding bus inspections and student safety. Moreover, 20% of participants mentioned discipline events and communication with parents and security issues, while another 10% emphasized canteen inspections and meetings:

“For instance, due to rain, water channels on the north side have emerged, causing walls to absorb water and swell. It worries me, but I don't have any staff to fix it. Hiring someone externally is costly, so I'll have to climb up and attempt to repair it myself... We don't expect medals for what we do, but we

are questioned about why things are the way they are.”(K4)

“We have about 72 students, and approximately 50 of them come by transportation. When issues arise, such as transportation to their villages, their daily arrivals and departures, and their safety, you are responsible for inspecting the buses for safety, including seat belts. For example, if someone enters the school yard, you must deal with it..We don't even have a security guard.” (K7)

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study was designed to uncover the reasons hindering instructional leadership practices of school principals working in rural areas. Through the analysis of the collected data, efforts were made to identify why school principals in rural areas encounter difficulties in implementing instructional leadership practices. In this regard, an evaluation was conducted on the instructional leadership practices outlined by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) within the context of rural areas. Thus, reasons why school principals struggle to implement instructional leadership practices were presented.

**Table 3:** Restricted Instructional Leadership Dimensions

	Community Context	Insufficiency of Resources	Workload
<b>Hallinger and Murphy Instructional Leadership Dimensions</b>			
Defining School Purposes	✓	✓	
Ensuring the Sharing of School Goals	✓	✓	
Coordinating Curriculum			
Monitoring Instruction and Assessment			✓
Tracking Student Progress			
Protecting Instructional Time		✓	✓
Promoting Professional Development			
Providing High Visibility			
Motivating Teachers			

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Establishing and  
Strengthening High  
Academic Standards

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Motivating Students

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✓

Firstly, the "community context" emerges from characteristics such as parents' socioeconomic status, parental and community involvement in school, and geographic location (e.g, urban/suburban/rural) (Hallinger, 2016). The study findings also indicate that under this theme, principals struggle with difficulties arising from (i) *low income and education levels*, and (ii) *disengaged family profiles*. Factors such as families' economic status, education levels, occupations, number of children, physical study environments provided for children, relationships between families and their children, and regional influences are significant factors influencing individuals' academic achievements (Aslanargun et al., 2016; Çiftçi & Çağlar, 2014). According to the OECD (2012) report, Turkey is one of the countries where strong relationships between socioeconomic status and academic achievement are observed. Relevant studies provide ample empirical evidence that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience significant disadvantages in education compared to their peers (Coleman, 2011; Çömlekçioğulları, 2020; Dolu, 2020; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Şemin, 1975). Family income levels affect the quality of educational opportunities provided to their children, thereby influencing their academic motivation. Academic success is associated not only with intelligence but also with good family qualities. Therefore, parents' unconcerned attitudes, low education levels, and insufficient socioeconomic status directly impact students' academic achievements.

Contemporary approaches emphasize the necessity of shared responsibilities between schools and families, such as coordination, collaboration, and school-family unity (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). In the current study, it has been observed that principals complain about parents' negative attitudes towards the school and emphasize that parents do not support collaborative efforts to enhance students' academic success. In this regard, school principals emphasized that students primarily experience social and emotional deficiencies and need psychological support in these aspects. As noted by Shaked (2021), instructional leadership requires a focus on students' learning and outcomes, but in rural areas, parents tend to perceive these matters as less important. Due to the direct impact of external factors on the school, the role of a principal in a rural school stands out centrally within both the school and the wider community (Latham et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), yet societal norms within the community somewhat inhibit their efforts to enhance teaching and learning (Shaked, 2021).

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) identified the dimension of *defining school mission*

within the framework of instructional leadership, defining it as a significant function of the principal's administrative role and necessitating the framing of goals across the school to unify the school community around these objectives. In the behavioral dimension of instructional leaders, it is crucial for them to share these goals identified with school stakeholders comprising students, teachers, and parents, and to communicate school goals to them. School principals struggle to establish goals aligned with regional needs when defining school goals. The unconcerned attitudes of parents towards the school hinder principals from fostering collaboration in communicating school goals. Therefore, it appears quite challenging for an instructional leader who lacks sufficient support to unify the school community around common goals in the dimension of defining the school mission. On the other hand, as emphasized by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) in the dimension of *developing a learning climate in the school*, organizational norms, expectations, and beliefs are factors that shape the learning climate, with the principal playing a key role.

Additionally, it was found that school principals encountered barriers under the theme of insufficiency of resources including (i) *physical inadequacies of the school building*, (ii) *financial constraints*, and (iii) *lack of human resources*. It has been observed that some school buildings continue to be used despite being very old, or new school buildings are constructed by combining several school levels, which hinders the provision of rich learning environments that would enhance student learning (Baykal, 1995; Burden, 1995; Çetin, 2019; Gümüşeli, 2014; Uline and Tschannen-Moran, 2008). On the other hand, one of the fundamental problems of the Türkiye education system is stated to be the financial constraints experienced in schools (Çinkır, 2010; Hoşgörür & Arslan, 2014). As emphasized in the study by Lingam et al. (2014), school principals working in rural areas face multifaceted problems such as financial issues and limited educational resources in their instructional leadership practices. Çetin (2019) highlights that school principals refrain from becoming instructional leaders due to the problems they experience, while participants in the current study also emphasized that the challenges they face hinder their ability to lead teaching and create rich learning environments for students. They expressed their desire to focus on the educational activities of the school but indicated they lacked the resources to do so. Achieving school goals and providing effective learning environments often require adequate financial resources. The inability to have sufficient budgetary resources emerges as a significant factor hindering instructional leadership. This finding is consistent with many studies in the literature (Çinkır, 2010; Deniz, 2015; Gedikoğlu, 2015; Gümüşeli, 2014; Hoşgörür & Arslan, 2014; Lingam et al., 2014; Sertkaya, 2015; Türkoğlu, 2022; Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001).

In addition to financial constraints, school principals indicated that many of the school students come to school from distant villages early in the morning using school buses, and they spend a significant amount of their time on the way to school. As a result, when they return home, they expressed that they lack the enthusiasm

and energy to study due to fatigue. School principals find it challenging to conduct efforts to improve education within the transportation education system due to financial constraints. There are many empirical studies in the literature indicating that the transportation education system brings along many negatives (Karakütük, 1996; Yalçın, 2006; Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2006; Özgün, 2007). Expenditures made by the government for the "Transportation Primary Education Application" are inadequate, thus turning the positive aspects of the implementation into negatives (Şan, 2012).

According to participants' views, another inhibiting factor identified is the lack of human resources. The pathway for educational organizations to achieve predetermined goals is possible through effective utilization of human resources. They have also added that schools do not have enough permanent teachers, thus the shortage of teachers is compensated by hiring temporary teachers. They have emphasized the shortage of administrative staff in these schools as well. They mentioned difficulties in finding assistant principals and highlighted that the absence of administrative staff increases routine administrative tasks such as tracking official correspondence. Among the existing human resources in schools, school administrators, teachers, and students play crucial roles in creating conditions necessary for education and learning, while support staff also contribute to preparing the school environment for education. Similar findings are evident in the study by Avcı and Turhan (2022); school principals require support staff for cleaning, security, gardening, and technical tasks. They noted the negative aspects of employment such as cultural mismatch, inadequate performance, temporary employment, and lack of equipment and experience (Avcı & Turhan, 2022). Çalık and Kılınç (2018) emphasized in their study that managing human and financial resources is one of the fundamental components of instructional leadership. Alpay (2011) pointed out in his study that principals try to meet the school's needs through non-budgetary sources, face personnel shortages, and strive to secure donations, highlighting the necessity for the government to allocate a separate budget for primary schools. Additionally, similar findings are observed in the literature in studies by Erol (1995), Tosun and Filiz (2017), Ünver (2019), and Yıldız (2018).

In the framework of instructional leadership by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), the dimension of *developing the school's learning climate* encompasses four functions for the school principal: preserving instructional time, promoting teachers' professional development, being visible throughout the school, and providing incentives for learning. The finding that school buildings are physically inadequate for educational activities and that schools lack sufficient budgets emerges as a factor hindering instructional leaders from fully fulfilling the functions of preserving instructional time and providing incentives for learning. Furthermore, within the dimension of Defining the School Mission as specified by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), framing and communicating school goals involve the school principal

mobilizing all energies to effectively engage school personnel and resources in the right direction.

According to the opinions of the school principals interviewed, another obstacle they face is "workload." It has been found that school principals working in rural areas have excessive responsibilities, with many not having assistant personnel at their schools, thus attempting to handle many tasks beyond their duties on their own. This finding resonates with research highlighted by Starr and White (2008). Tasks imposed from outside do not align with the contextual priorities of schools, reducing the time principals can dedicate to students and the school's learning activities. Small rural schools lack assistant principals and lament the lack of administrative support to meet external demands (Starr & White, 2008). These challenges may be seen as common experiences among many school principals, yet in small rural areas, these factors can exert a greater impact on school principals (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001). This finding from the study supports the findings of Dwyer et al. (1983), Goldring et al. (2008), and Silins & Mulford (2010). Participants in the study mentioned factors increasing their workload include transportation of students, canteen supervision, meetings, routine tasks, technical school duties, disciplinary incidents, communication with parents, and security issues. They indicated that technical school duties and routine administrative tasks consume most of their time. These findings align with the findings of studies by Balyer (2014), Çinkır (2010), Griffin (1993), and Şahin & Gümüş (2016).

In the dimension of Managing the Instructional Program (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), school principals are expected to exhibit four distinct leadership behaviors: curriculum knowledge and effective instruction, supervision and evaluation of teaching, curriculum coordination, and monitoring student performance. Supervising and evaluating teaching requires school principals to actively participate in classroom activities and engage in formal and informal communication with teachers. Coordinating the curriculum necessitates organizing lesson content and ensuring coordination between classes. Monitoring student progress entails school principals tracking academic development using various data tools. However, due to the workload factor highlighted in the current study, school principals in rural areas struggle to fulfill this dimension of instructional leadership. Similar findings are evident in the literature in studies by Akçay & Başar (2004), Du Plessis (2017), Memduhoğlu et al. (2012), Starr & White (2008), Sağır (2011), and Sindhvad et al. (2020).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The responses provided by the participants are directly related to the rural context, causing them to avoid educational leadership practices. The framework of instructional leadership by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) emphasizes the importance of defining the school's goals, managing the curriculum, and promoting the school climate. However, Hallinger (2003) noted that instructional leadership is a "top-down" approach. Shaked (2020) further suggested that this model embodies task-oriented leadership qualities and emphasized that approaches inconsistent with the characteristic features defining rural contexts also hinder the implementation of instructional leadership. The variability in instructional leadership practices among principals is observed to be associated with the social contexts of schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

In these areas, principals play a crucial role in shaping school culture, organizing daily school operations, and hold significant roles within the community (Wioczonek & Manard, 2018). However, as seen in this study, rural schools and communities face several barriers to achieving academic success. Principals serving in rural areas tend to avoid instructional leadership behaviors to align with the worldview of teachers, families, and the community. The needs of the school community impact the creation of a positive learning climate, and the lack of adequate support from parents hinders principals from uniting the school community around common goals as instructional leaders. Furthermore, insufficient resources in schools limit principals in behaviors such as preserving instructional time and providing stimulation for learning. Additionally, overwhelmed by factors increasing their workload, school principals are unable to exhibit effective instructional leadership behaviors in managing the curriculum. In the long term, enhancing the school's effectiveness and implementing sustainable practices does not seem achievable solely through the instructional leadership practices of the principal. The principal must bridge the school and the community, respond to the needs of both, and coordinate efforts effectively. Achieving balance between the school and the community is essential for the school to meet the needs of the community. Unfortunately, progress in academic terms is challenging without family involvement and support, which are crucial pillars of education. Research findings indicate that the context in which the school operates influences organizational culture and poses a limiting factor in creating a positive learning culture academically. Overcoming biases against learning, both by students and parents, is a factor that prevents principals from exhibiting effective instructional leadership behaviors in creating a positive learning climate within the school organization.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for Practitioners

Based on the findings, it is recommended that school principals take steps to enhance school-family collaboration, as their current workload often prevents them from effectively engaging parents in the educational process. To increase parental support, principals could organize more frequent school meetings, host parent seminars, and conduct home visits to families with whom communication is challenging, ensuring their involvement in both the school and their children's academic success. Furthermore, it is advised that principals maintain a strong and determined vision, persist through challenges, and explore new ways to collaborate with teachers and parents to improve educational outcomes.

### Future Research Suggestions

Future researchers could conduct in-depth qualitative studies with larger participant groups across different rural areas to examine school leadership in rural regions in more detail.

Studies comparing the instructional leadership roles of school principals in rural and urban areas could be conducted. This would help identify how instructional leadership in rural areas differs from urban areas and determine the unique challenges faced in rural settings.

Research that includes the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and students, could be conducted. This could provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges faced by rural school principals.

### Recommendations for Policy Makers

The findings obtained from this research provide evidence that school principals in rural areas face difficulties in fulfilling their instructional leadership roles and encounter several barriers. In this context, the Ministry of National Education (MEB) could organize parent education programs aimed at improving school-family partnerships. Collaborative training seminars could be held to raise awareness among families about the importance of supporting schools.

Increasing financial resources for schools in rural areas could help reduce the financial constraints faced by school principals. Such support is important for improving school infrastructure, providing educational materials, and enhancing school activities.



By assigning more teachers, counselors, and necessary support staff to rural schools, the workload of principals can be reduced. Strengthening human resources provides school principals with more opportunities to focus on their instructional leadership roles.

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