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Vesna Kovač, PhD, Full Professor

Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies at the University of Rijeka

Sveučilišna avenija 4, Rijeka

vesna.kovac@ffri.uniri.hr

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0575-0543>

Monika Pažur, PhD

Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb

Savska cesta 77, Zagreb

monika.pazur@ufzg.unizg.hr

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0936-0048>

ACTIVITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF INSTRUCTIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Abstract: *This paper shows results of an empirical study on characteristics of instructional school leadership conducted on the sample of 30 Croatian elementary school principals. Two research questions were asked: 1. How elementary school principals describe and comment instructional school leadership activities that they conduct in their schools, observing them from their own role's perspective and instructional goals that they want to achieve and 2. How elementary school principals describe and experience circumstances that have an impact on initiation and implementation of previously described instructional school leadership activities. In regards to set questions, elementary qualitative interpretative research approach was used. Data was gathered using written interview, whereas the results of thematic content analysis revealed two key thematic categories: the list of most conducted instructional school leadership activities and key interactions of principals during the implementation of instructional school leadership. Variabilities in the implementation of instructional school leadership in several aspects were observed, out of which key instructional school leadership's contents and outcomes focused on the strengthening of students' and teachers' capacities are singled out as well as roles and principals' relationship in interaction with various subjects.*

Key words: *Instructional school leadership, school principals, principals' competencies, education policy, school founders*

INTRODUCTION

Interest for practical, scientific and even educationally-political construct of instructional school leadership is not new, especially in the international context where both studies and publications based on this topic are being continuously conducted and published since the 1970's (Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2013). Hallinger and Wang (2015) state that still-lasting renewed interest for instructional school leadership (ISL) that was spotted at the beginning of the millennium can be attributed to global education policy trends visible in encouragement of international measuring of students and schools' achievements as well as emphasizing principal's responsibility and role for the achieved results. Interest for ISL did not bypass Croatian context, where ISL construct is being especially mentioned in the national report of international OECD TALIS study¹ (Markočić-Dekanić et al., 2020). Based on the published results as well as with the intention to examine ISL's specificities in Croatian education context more precisely, an empirical study on the sample of elementary school principals was conducted. Its results will be presented and analyzed in this paper². Bearing in mind that the display of former notions about the phenomenon of instructional school leadership is already available in foreign and Croatian authors' publications (for example, Erčulj, 2014; Kovač, 2021a), for the needs of this paper, only the key determinants, essential for the creation of adequate scientific basis for the presentation of research draft as well as the formation of the display and discussion of this empirical study's results, will be singled out³.

Instructional school leadership can be briefly described through a set of roles and tasks of principals (and other subjects involved in school leadership) focused on the improving of learning process and teaching through guidance, support and ensuring resources for teachers and students in those processes (Horng et al., 2010; James et al., 2006; Male & Palaiologou, 2013; Southworth, 2002). Instructional leadership implies thought out investment in the development of social and academic capacities of students as well as professional and intellectual teachers' capital. These capacities have to be available in order to

¹ The publication explicitly state a *policy* recommendation that "...education system should ensure more opportunities for future principals to develop instructional school leadership competencies, which would be achieved through adoption of clear professional standards for instructional school leadership and stronger emphasis on this kind of school leadership during formal education and professional development of principals" (Markočić Dekanić et al., 2020, pg. 121.).

² Empirical study was conducted as a part of "Characteristics and predictors of instructional school leadership in Croatian schools" scientific project (number: uniri-drustv-18-96) which is being realized with the support of University of Rijeka.

³ Detailed display and systematization of past notions about instructional school leadership is available in Kovač, 2021a.

enable students' development, teachers' learning and higher teaching's efficiency (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Education policy and practice's interest for principals' instructional role is followed by the creation of principals' behavior repertoire that illustrates instructional leadership practice. Blase and Blase (1999) singled out a list of two behavioral categories and eleven key strategies which are being used by instructionally successful principals: discussion with teachers about their teaching (during which they used strategies such as giving feedback about their performance, forming clear suggestions for the improvement of teaching practice, demonstrating examples of successful teaching practice, analysis of teaching practices and rewarding successful teachers) as well as encouraging professional development of teachers (encouraging teachers to study ideas about teaching and learning, supporting initiatives that promote cooperation among teachers, encouraging collaborative learning among teachers, encouraging changes of teaching approaches and strategies, encouraging teachers to develop professionally as well as encouraging active research of teaching). However, the biggest corpus of research on instructional school leadership is characterized by the application of instrument used for the examination of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985): Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS). This instrument has been used in more than 325 published studies conducted in more than 30 countries as of today (Fromm et al., 2016) and according to available results of influential meta-analyses (for example, Hallinger et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2008), it is considered to be a leading and most influential instrument for the examination of instructional school leadership across the world. Instructional school leadership construct can be most appropriately described by displaying PIRMS' individual items. Original PIMRS constitutes of 50 items that describe (instructional) principals' behaviors which are grouped into three dimensions and ten instructional leadership functions: defining of school mission (refinement and articulation of school goals); instructional program management (monitoring and evaluation of teaching, instructional program's coordinating, monitoring students' achievements) and promoting of school climate that encourages learning (ensuring sufficient time to teach, teachers' professional development, principals' participation in pedagogical process, promoting high expectations as well as ensuring encouragement to both teachers and students for creative pedagogical work).

From the previously mentioned meta-analyses, four key groups of conducted studies were singled out: studies about direct influence of instructional school leadership either on students and schools' achievements or on certain aspects of school environment; studies about indirect influence of instructional school leadership on students and schools' achievements, through the impact of various contextual variables on the school level; the studies of reciprocal impacts between instructional school leadership and contextual variables as well

as students, i.e., schools' achievements and examination of factors that could directly (or indirectly) act as an instructional school leadership's predictors. From the previously conducted (mostly correlative) systematizations of research on instructional school leadership, key variables, whose impacts on students or schools' achievements, through instructional school leadership's mediation, were empirically reviewed and confirmed the most in various national systems, can be singled out. If the size of direct and indirect effects of individual ISL dimensions on students' achievements is observed, the biggest effects are found in principal's (instructional) role in the definition of school's vision and mission (Hallinger, 2005). Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2010) point out that the strongest ISL's indirect effects are visible through their impact on school's organizational variables (school culture, school climate, structure of work in school, work conditions). From the studies that observe the impact of certain variables as predictors of instructional school leadership, effects of both principal's certain personality traits (sex, years of service, principal's self-efficiency, possession of competencies needed for school leadership) and school's organizational variables (size, type of school, type of school's environment) were observed.

Nowadays, the results of studies focused on more precise operationalization of certain chosen predictors, can be found, with the aim of more precise understanding of their certain characteristics or specific impact on the success of principal's ISL. The researches were interested to find out which (principal's) competencies can act as potential predictors of ISL (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014; Orphanos, 2013; Shaked & Schechter, 2016). After more precise operationalization and observation of certain complex competencies such as the ability to systemically think, the ability to conduct assessments as well as interpersonal and communicative competency, certain dimensions that are potentially connected more strongly with successful ISL, were determined⁴. Results of the conducted studies have simultaneously pointed out towards dimensions of the previously mentioned competencies for which further training and development has to be ensured to the principals. Newer studies also operationalized a predictor which refers to a type of school environment in more detail, with special emphasis on the observation of impact of certain characteristics of local communities or individuals responsible for school management at the local government or self-government unit's level (Bredenson & Kose, 2007; Carraway & Young, 2015; Honig, 2012; Liou, 2016; McLeod et al., 2015; Whitt et al., 2015). The results of conducted studies reveal

⁴ For example, Le Fevre and Robinson (2014) observed principal's efficiency in the processes of leading demanding discussions with teachers and parents during which critiques on teachers' teaching practice were discussed. They observed the following dimensions of interpersonal skills: forming and expressing of their opinion on the question; noticing and understanding interlocutor's point of view; checking the understanding of interlocutor's point of view; encouraging others to consider other point of views; reconsideration of their views and reaching an agreement between both sides regarding the next steps. The results reveal that the principals show higher efficiency in the first dimension, while on the other dimensions show low to moderate efficiency.

that their certain roles showed higher effects on the strengthening of principals' instructional capacities, e.g., principal training services (Honig, 2012), encouraging cooperative learning among principals and schools (Schechter, 2011) as well as encouraging models of those curricula, teaching and assessments that encourage better students' achievements (Bredenson & Kose, 2007; Gann, 2016).

The studies on ISL in Croatian context are fairly rare and they mostly rely on TALIS' results, which show that over 60% of elementary and high school principals regularly participate in direct and indirect ISL forms. However, apart from data on the frequency of conducting, other data which would further explain certain ISL dimensions were not found out which ultimately encouraged conduction of this study. The results of the first qualitative research phase, conducted in 2020, on a sample of high school principals have pointed out towards certain specific ISL characteristics in Croatian schools (Kovač, 2021b). Regardless of principals' instructional activities being focused on strengthening of students, teachers or schools' capacities, the results show that their activities vary whether they are primarily focused on encouraging academic excellence (development-competitive activities) or preventing of academic failure (correction-preventive activities). Apart from that, their instructional activities vary in regard to the series of circumstances that can act as encouraging or inhibiting, during which they can focus on certain activities to a higher or a lesser extent, i.e., where they can be either more or less successful while conducting their instructional activities. Additionally, circumstances related to their principal's role (primarily related to personal engagement which they dedicate to ISL activities in comparison with other principal's duties), circumstance related to their relationship with teachers and expert associates (related to the volume and quality of cooperation and received support in ISL) as well as circumstances related to education policy (related to support that is focused towards principals and principal's profession), are being highlighted. In that context, higher or lower variations in the way and successfulness of principal's dealing with certain group of circumstances can be observed.

Based on the review of previous notions, certain specificities that can have an impact on expected variations in instructional school leadership's characteristics at the elementary schools' level in comparison to high schools can be anticipated. TALIS study results show that elementary school principals' practice ISL activities more often in comparison to high school principals (Markočić-Dekanić et al., 2020). If differences in evaluations are compared, it can be noticed that elementary school principals statistically significantly cooperate with teachers more often in order to deal with disciplinary issues in class as well as monitor classroom teaching more frequently compared to high school teachers. Elementary school principals are more frequently under the magnifying glass of the public after several conducted PISA studies' cycles, after which Croatian students repeated below average results in the reading, math and scientific literacy tests (OECD, 2016), which significantly reflect the

efficiency of compulsory education. Surely, ISL's effects on other outcome variables of elementary school students can be observed, especially on the desired enrollment in high schools. Furthermore, by bearing in mind that the higher ISL index is singled out as one of the more significant predictors of better students' achievements, it is expected that, in the future, more attention will be paid to the concrete principals' activities focused on both the strengthening of teachers' capacities for efficient teaching as well as students' capacities for successful learning.

Previous research phase encompassed high school principals in Croatia (Kovač, 2021b) who described the instructional school leadership activity in detail as well as offered certain frameworks which could be used in order to monitor and understand their instructional school leadership patterns more thoroughly. In this phase, the study is replicated on a sample of elementary school principals, in order to determine specificities of their instructional school leadership practice as well as notice potential similarities and differences in the approaches to the previously mentioned leadership style between these two groups of principals.

In this paper the answers to the two research questions will be presented and analyzed:

1. How elementary school principals describe and comment on instructional school leadership activities that they conduct in their schools, observing them from their roles' perspective as well as instructional goals which they want to achieve?

2. How elementary school principals describe and experience circumstances which impact the initiation and implementation of previously described instructional school leadership activities? How do they cope with different circumstances?

METHODOLOGY

In regards to the set research questions, the basic qualitative interpretative approach was used (Halmi, 1998; 2013; Merriam, 2009). Data was gathered using written interview that encompassed a sample of 30 elementary school principals in Croatia⁵, while the data gathering process lasted throughout November and December 2020. Maximal participant's differentiation was ensured according to several variables for which it was determined that they can potentially have an impact on the variations in statements based on the previous notions

⁵ In order to avoid potential restrictions in the extent and the quality of data gathered by written interviews as well as to ensure uniformed approach in answering, the principals received concrete instructions regarding expected quality and the type of answer. It was stated in the instructions that it is expected to produce detailed, extensive answers, supported by as many examples as possible, so it could be possible not only to interpret what the principals conduct, but also the circumstances in which they conduct the activities in question. Additionally, it was specified that the study encompasses period before the circumstances caused by COVID-19 pandemic, while the principals were invited to refer to previous experiences.

(e.g., Leithwood et al., 2010): the participants were selected from different counties (ten principals were selected from every county), it was taken into consideration that equal number of male and female principals were included, that principals of schools located in bigger and smaller urban as well as rural regions were included as well as principals of bigger and smaller schools in regards to number of students and principals with different tenures at principal's duty. The study did not start with predetermined number of participants, yet the sample was defined procedurally up to the point of meeting all differentiation preconditions (Taylor et al., 2016). In practice, the study started with the coverage of 200 participants, yet it was concluded after the response and selection of 30 participants who met all preconditions for differentiation and valid data analysis.

In accordance with research aims, interviews were, as in the previous phase, led according to two key themes whose questions were focused on fundamental determinants of instructional school leadership construct: 1. The principal's influence on strengthening of students' capacities as well as improving their achievements and 2. The principal's influence on strengthening of teachers' capacities and improving teaching performance. These themes were operationalized in the interview framework through sub-questions focused on the descriptions of concrete situations and leadership activities, interactions with other employees as well as circumstances that can positively or negatively influence instructional school leadership.

For data gathering purposes, firmly structured interview protocol was used. Each theme encompassed main open question whilst listing more orientational sub-questions, which were used to ensure more extensive and detailed answers in conditions where researcher and the participant are not in direct contact and with the aim of ensuring that every participant stayed focused on the same topics and aspects of questions⁶. The questions were mostly formed as descriptive and explorative. Data was gathered via Limesurvey online service: the system enabled participants' complete anonymity as well as flexibility in choosing time to provide data. All participants gave a statement to express their interest as well

⁶ For example, on the topic of „Principal's influence on strengthening of teachers capacities”, the following sub-questions were asked: *Do you monitor the way in which teachers perform teaching activities in the classrooms? Do you encourage teachers in Your school to use knowledge gained during professional development with the aim of implementing modern teaching methods, approaches and strategies? How do you do that? Provide us with the examples of activities which you introduce in order to improve teaching process. How would you describe personality traits of employees with whom you interact during this process? How does your communication look like with individual colleagues? In which way are decisions on this topic made and implemented? Provide us with the examples of these decisions. How do you monitor the implementation of decisions?* The questions are formulated according to suggestions for ensuring elaborated and extensive answers which ensure data suited for deep qualitative thematic analysis (Briggs et al., 2012; Flick, 2018).

as signed written interview consents. The average time needed to complete the interview varied from 45 minutes to one hour.

Thematic content analysis was conducted (Cartwright, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2014). Even though certain thematic categories were predetermined by protocol which was used to gather data as well as partially by the results of this study's first phase, inductive approach was used in order to identify higher number of thematic codes from the available data, which enabled the defining of new, even unexpected categories and themes which complemented those offered in advance⁷. Data coding framework was constructed within which two key thematic categories were ultimately singled out, along with associated themes, subthemes and their variations in practice.

First category refers to the **list of most frequently conducted instructional school leadership activities** (Table 1). This category encompasses activities that directly describe activity, that is principal's behavior ("*I attend every faculty meeting, when I get thoroughly acquainted with the situation in a particular class and I give my suggestions to the colleagues or I ask them how they can solve certain situation*"), while activities within this category can be divided into two fundamental groups: those *focused on students* and those *focused on teachers*. Data analysis determined that the displayed instructional principal's activities and behaviors vary to a biggest extent in regards to the role that the principal plays according to certain activities and *representation* of these activities.

Table 1. Key principal's activities

KEY ISL ACTIVITIES	PRINCIPAL'S ROLES DURING ISL	REPRESENTATION OF ISL ACTIVITIES
Activities focused on students	Low degree of influence (consults, observes...)	Higher
Activities focused on teachers	Moderate degree of influence (encourages, motivates...)	Lower
	High degree of influence (conducts, urges...)	

⁷ In regards to questions' structure, the expected categories are: "*activities focused on strengthening of teachers' capacities*" and "*activities focused on strengthening of students' capacities*". All themes within individual categories (e.g., key contents, principal's roles during the ISL implementation and similar) as well as belonging analytical codes (e.g., principal engagement's intensity) are derived inductively from the gathered data and represent new and unexpected findings of the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2014).

The second category refers to **key principal's interactions during instructional school leadership's conduction** (Table 2). Two themes were singled out in this category: Interactions happening in school which refer to *different groups of employees in school* (“*Minority of employees always offer resistance independently of set goals or chosen projects. These are so called stoppers, but we try to minorize them*”) as well as interactions happening outside of school which refer to *subjects in the local community* (“*We have a good cooperation with school's founder, local community and companies located in our region that have recognized the importance of quality education in the community*”). Data analysis determined that previously mentioned interactions vary in regards to the observed *relationship towards instructional school leadership practice* (as supportive or unsupportive) and *principal's relationship in interaction with the mentioned subjects*.

Table 2. *Key principal's interactions*

KEY PRINCIPAL'S INTERACTIONS DURING ISL	SUBJECT'S RELATIONSHIP TOWARDS ISL	PRINCIPAL'S RELATIONSHIP TOWARDS SUBJECTS
Interactions with subjects in school	Supportive	Low degree of influence (ignores, leaves the initiative to others...)
	Unsupportive	Moderate degree of influence (discusses, negotiates...)
Interactions with subjects outside school		High degree of influence (lobbies, requires...)

Data analysis determined that the highest potential for understanding instructional school leadership characteristics' variety of elementary school principals is found in the way and intensity of established principal's interactions with numerous subjects in and out of school. In that context, the results will be shown in relation to the observed interaction-communicative potential of principals while they deal with various instructional school leadership's activities, circumstances and subjects.

RESULTS

KEY INSTRUCTIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

Activities focused on teachers and those focused on students can be clearly noticed based on the principals' statements in which they describe and comment instructional school leadership activities. Both groups of principal's instructional activities vary in regards to the content of the activities prioritized by the principals, for example, either teachers' professional development or strengthening of certain students' competencies while also depending on the role which the principal takes during these processes. Moreover, several points, which could be used in order to observe and describe elementary school principals' instructional school leadership, can be singled out for every group.

When they describe ISL activities focused on work with teachers and students, the principals rarely mention concrete situations and examples, yet they mostly summarize their key approaches. When we try to derive most frequently used principal's instructional activities from their statements, it is possible to create a list of them (Table 3).

Table 3. List of most frequent ISL activities focused on teachers and students

ACTIVITIES FOCUSED ON TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES FOCUSED ON STUDENTS
Monitors and observes teaching	Obtains students' opinions by using surveys
Controls files, e-grade books	Monitors students' work by participating in (virtual) classroom
Provides feedback to the teachers	Monitors students' achievements and continuously examines notes kept in e-grade book
Encourages teacher' peer review of teaching	Cooperates in the development of special needs programs (e.g., communicative support for children with developmental challenges program)
Highlights examples of good practice	Ensures conditions and supplies resources for work with different categories of students
Praises and rewards successful teachers	holds meetings and workshops with students in person
Publicly publishes teachers' achievements	Encourages introducing work approaches that he/she evaluates as priority (single-shift teaching, all-day schooling and similar)

ACTIVITIES FOCUSED ON TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES FOCUSED ON STUDENTS
Holds meetings with teachers	Starts students' civic engagement projects by creating and conducting activities during his/her leisure time
Encourages teacher to develop professionally	Encourages the work of teams responsible for conduction of extracurricular activities (for sport, gifted students, cultural activities, civic education and similar)
Conducts professional development in person	Changes internal praise and reward policy
Organizes educations in school	Encourages the development of additional students' competencies
Encourages teachers to disseminate learned during professional development meetings	Encourages new extracurricular activities (e.g., work education, entrepreneurship education and students' cooperatives)
Encourages teachers to implement modern methods and technologies	Encourages competitions, testing, festivals, fairs and similar
Negotiates with teachers about topics encountered during professional development	Engages in consideration of certain pedagogical theme that needs to be empowered (e.g., games in teaching, ICT technology...)
Presents examples of good practice to the teachers	Conducts individual discussions with the students or participates in them if they are dealing with certain challenging situations
Provides teachers with guidelines and instructions	Participates in faculty's work
Helps teachers to deal with an issue	Introduces preventive programs
Defines treatment strategies	
Intervenes in challenging situations	
Analyses problematic situations	
Asks for information and reports on situations	
Encourages teachers to develop	
Encourages teachers to participate in projects	
Ensures teacher substitutions	
Selects high quality employees	

When describing ISL activities focused on the work with students, it can be noticed that the principals list less activities and examples compared to questions in which they describe activities focused on teachers. Furthermore, two key points according to which the activities can be described and interpreted can be singled out during the analysis of ISL activities. One refers to key contents, i.e., ISL's outcomes, while the other refers to the roles which the principals take during the conduction of ISL.

Key contents and outcomes of ISL activities. The highest number of principal's ISL activities is focused on several key contents or outcomes: *teaching process*, i.e., its monitoring, developing or innovating; *relationship with teachers/students*, i.e., offering support and creating positive atmosphere, *teachers' professional development*, i.e., empowering of teachers' capacities, *resources*, i.e., ensuring preconditions for smooth running of pedagogical activities, *additional programs/projects* focused on strengthening of basic or acquiring additional competencies of teachers and students. The following statements illustrate these contents, i.e., outcomes:

"I think that it is of utmost importance that we keep good working climate in school among the employees during these challenging times (which is reflected on the students), that they feel safe as much as possible in regards to conditions (I do that through good organization of teaching and abiding by the measures) and that they experience togetherness and that they feel involved into the life and work of school".

"My influence on the strengthening of teachers' capacities is visible primarily from the fact that I continuously encourage teachers to develop professionally".

"We were among the first 20 schools involved in "e-škole" pilot project. We were also one of the MSES"⁸ "Škola za Život" experimental schools. Goal of all of these projects was to further shift the education's paradigm and create conditions for better learning and teaching (students in the center, individualized approach, universal design, new competencies for new generation of students, digital literacy, using ICT in education, entrepreneurship, sustainable development, lifelong learning, life in the community, volunteering)".

Not a single principal describes all activities that they (probably) conduct in school, although every one of them surely conduct more than what they illustratively listed in their statements, so it can only be assumed that they refer to those which they conduct more frequently or which they estimate as the most important. Moreover, it is also characteristic that a lot of activities appears in only one principal's statements, even though it can be assumed that other principals surely conduct the afore mentioned activity. If these statements are

⁸ Ministry of science, education and sports.

compared with statements that make up key ISL's dimensions and functions gathered by PIMRS questionnaire (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), it can be noticed that activities from all three dimensions are mentioned. Additionally, it is noticed that there is no mention of principal's activities related to ensuring adequate conditions for teaching in any of the statements⁹, whereas there are certain statements which are not encompassed by PIMRS, which can indicate that certain principal's instructional activities, which are specific for Croatian context, exist. One example of this kind of activity is *"Starts students' civic engagement projects by creating and conducting activities during leisure time"* which illustrates the theme related to *encouraging activities of students in local community*.

Principal's role during ISL conduction. By conducting ISL activities, the principals take certain roles that vary in regards to their intervening intensity. In certain situations, this intensity or engagement is *lower*, even relatively unobtrusive (discusses, consults, observes), it is sometimes *moderate* (suggests activity, initiates); while in certain situation, they show *high* level of intervention or even directly engage (conducts activity, gives directive). The following statements illustrate various intensities of instructional roles:

"I encourage teachers to show their examples of improving teaching practice to other colleagues in school during faculty meetings as well as by publishing them on school's web page. We also publish interesting facts in organization of teaching in media (newspapers)."

"I check the way in which teachers successfully conduct teaching activities in the classrooms by having insight into teaching which I plan at the start of school year. Announcing that I monitor the introduction of technology by having an insight into teaching, I force those teachers who are not willing to introduce novelties into their work to do just that as well as to educate themselves."

"I start, in cooperation with expert associates, projects and activities with the aim of strengthening of socio-emotional skills of students, I start students' civic engagement projects through creating and conducting activities during leisure time (entertainment, volunteering, recreation) and I try to raise the level of sports activities by applying school for activities offered by School sports federation".

The above-mentioned principal's roles offer the possibility to search for dominant ISL approaches of individual principals, due the fact that it is possible to recognize principals that mostly take roles of lower, moderate or high intervening intensity in various statements. In certain cases, it can be anticipated that

⁹ The example of these statements encompassed by PIMRS are: *ensures that the time estimated for teaching is not interrupted due to extenuating circumstances; makes sure that certain extracurricular activities are not conducted during the time of regular classes.*

the intensity varies, not because of principals, but of the type of ISL activities which are focused on different key contents and outcomes, thus making this finding an extremely interesting point which can be additionally empirically examined in further research on a larger sample of principals. While describing ISL activities, the principals more frequently refer to the cooperation with expert associates and teachers, rather than on their individual engagements. They mostly emphasize their personal role in direct implementation in situation where students encounter problems in school, which is illustrated by the following statement: *“With certain students I do the talking. If the parents are called, I am always present in those discussions. Some of the students (if we are dealing with unjustified absence, multiple poor grades) I take “under my wing”, I do instructional work with them two times a week, but we also talk about their emotions and needs.”* Along with expert associates, they frequently rely on teachers, due to the fact that they know the students whom they teach better, therefore making their intervention frequently being only of moderate intensity. *“I would say that I very frequently leave the initiative regarding these types of matter to the teachers and expert associate because they know the children with whom they work better than me as well as their possibilities. It is my duty to create operative solutions for implementation”*.

Apart from variations in contents and roles, in smaller number of statements, certain sporadic variations in activities that principals conduct in their school, can be noticed. Due to the smaller number of statements in which previously mentioned variabilities can be observed, typical patterns of instructional leadership characteristic for certain principal's categories or related to certain situations cannot be found, but these patterns can represent the subject of additional review in certain future studies.

The way of deciding on (priority) ISL activities: Principals make decisions on ISL activities in various ways (by discussing and agreeing on matters during faculty meetings, personally based on consultations with expert associates, either smaller teaching teams or with the whole faculty, personal decree without prior consulting with the expert associates and similar). In higher number of statements, it can be observed that the principals act according to priorly defined procedures, especially when dealing with challenging or sensitive learning and teaching situations: *“All circumstances related to students are monitored, including potential disciplinary issues that are resolved through interaction between all subjects, according to Conduct Protocol. All students in conflict, their parents, homeroom teacher, admission staff and others involved into potential event, are included into problem solving process...”*. These findings can be put into context of recent discussions on desirable ISL approaches, which emphasize that the effects of instructional school leadership are stronger if the leadership is distributed and transformational (Robinson et al., 2008).

Reason to conduct ISL. The listed activities are stimulated by different reasons (hodograph or previously adopted school or principal's curriculum, identified problem, on teacher or parent's request or similar). In this context, activities are sometimes focused towards the whole faculty, certain teacher groups or individuals (trainees, teachers facing certain problems) as well as certain student groups (gifted, those with learning or behavioral difficulties, average ones). The following statement illustrates above mentioned variability: *"I ensure that the students who are very good as well as their mentor have everything they need; if they need certain additional education, I have to ensure resources, as well as for the supply of various materials needed for work (books, robots, devices...).* Mostly, it is only needed to encourage this effort and enthusiasm among very successful students/colleagues, praise their achievements and support them and they will do the job".

Previous ISL studies, for example those conducted by using PIMRS questionnaire, were not focused on monitoring variations in selecting priority contents or outcomes, (the intensity) of principal's roles in the conduction of certain ISL activities or in the way of deciding or stimulating ISL conduction. Therefore, additional monitoring of the previously mentioned varieties would give an interesting insight into ISL's characteristics in Croatian elementary schools.

KEY PRINCIPAL'S INTERACTIONS DURING ISL

In this group of statements, principal's interactions with school employees as well as interactions that take place with subjects outside school, can be observed.

Interactions with school employees. When they mention school employees with whom they interact the most during instructional school leadership activities, the principals, in general, mention teachers gathered in various thematic teams (these are most frequently quality assurance teams, but they also mention other teams, such as sports team, teams for gifted students and similar). Additionally, they mention them in positive context as employees who support them the most in the instructional initiatives. Apart from them, the principals also mention expert associates in positive context. Furthermore, by analyzing principals' statements regarding school employees, it is possible to single out three groups of employees and their characteristics, where principals explicitly state the most frequent behaviors of these employees as well as describe the role which they take while dealing with them.

1. Those who support principal's instructional activities, where they are described as open, ready to cooperate, cooperative, flexible, diligent. One statement sums up their key traits, describing them as people graced by *"high level of social responsibility, belonging to the community, self-esteem and ability to aim toward higher goals (towards better and more structured society)"* or

they emphasize that they represent “...people who always learn, try new tools, methods...” or “*Teachers-supporters have the role of locomotives.*” They sometimes group them according to other traits, where it can be observed that this is more frequently the case with younger employees in the faculty, although there are examples of different experiences where the support was given by the employees with longer years of service: “*Significant contribution is given by teachers with many years of work experience, who have encountered with similar problems during their career. This is exactly the way how they pass on their valuable experience to younger teachers.*”

2. Those who offer resistance to the principal’s instructional activities, described as “*minority who offers little resistance, those are usually people whose ego got hurt (they lost privileges that they had during the previous principal’s mandate)*” or “...colleagues who are in a bad mood... and they feel these represent unnecessary additional activities/work.”. They label them as “*breakers*” or they state that “*the resistance is offered by those who are under normal circumstances not ready to leave the comfort zone* “. They are often found among the older employees, especially those who are nearing their retirement, but they emphasize that they are not bothered by them as they represent a relatively minor group of employees. The following statement illustrates how the principals describe the reasons of a teacher who offers resistance towards the implementation of distance education: “*Teachers who do not understand the purpose, have an excuse in a sense that “students cannot do that, those (students) do not work enough anyway”, that it is harder for them to control the situation which makes them unsure in the result which they cannot monitor “traditionally”, they believe that classroom exam is the law.*” Yet, from the majority of statements, it can be noticed that the least resistance is observed while facing with challenging situations, which principals describe as mutual desire to solve that particular challenging situation.

3. Those indifferent towards the principal’s instructional activities, described as those who *have no issues, are neither ambitious, proactive nor motivated* and those who are *uninformed*. It is noticed that the principals perceive precisely this category of employees as one that represents the biggest problem in ISL as well as one that is the hardest to motivate. “*Most frequent problems are caused by colleagues who are “OK”, golden middle. They are the hardest to motivate. Due to the fact that they do not have any issues, they often do not have the will to improve.*” They are aware that working with this type of employees represents their greatest challenge: “*The most impart thing is to attract positively-neutral to join and interest the negatively-neutral ones.*” They describe them as those who “...work adequately, but do not improve”, “...stand still and do not try to modernize or enrich their teaching, they work using established methods” or “...believe that it is not their job to work more than they are paid for”.

When describing their ISL roles while facing with various group of employees, a stronger, moderate as well as lower degree of influence can be observed. Several statements indicate that the principals notice and count on the influence that supportive colleagues can have on those who either offer resistance or are indifferent, thus, in these cases, applying the role of *relying on the motivated*, i.e., they leave their influence to the motivated colleagues:

“These are teachers who stir up both those who are not as motivated as well as the interested ones who still give a so-so contribution.”

“...they usually impose their ideas very easily to those who “at first” do not show interest...”

“Among those (indifferent) colleagues, they only option is to start something, so when they see that the majority is working that way, they show effort to become “the same as others”.”

“The biggest support are motivated colleagues who pass their enthusiasm to others. Those colleagues frequently stir up people around them more successfully compared to the principal because I am always in the position with more power compared to them, while they perceive their colleagues as equal.”

“...so I decided to start from people who are motivated, hoping that those who “lied dormant” during years will join after they see the results and change”.

The principals are not always successful in finding adequate coping strategy with those who offer resistance or are indifferent, thus resorting to the role of *ignoring* or they give up on any attempt to directly or indirectly influence them:

“I tried to stir them up, motivate them, but that is very hard, and, with regret, I have to admit that I gave up on some of them. We have decent communication, but these are colleagues who do not want to do anything besides what is assigned to them.”

“With “lesser quality” teachers, I have spent a lot of energy on discussions, but, because there is no improvement, I have left them to learn from colleagues who care, want and can”

“They are aware that they will not be punished.”

“Teachers who offer resistance do not represent a big problem, they have their advantages when it comes to scaling both positives and negatives of the suggested and ultimately, they accept what is positive in their opinion...”

Some principals describe the role of moderate intensity that is seen as *sharing initiative with expert associates*:

“One part of teachers does that less expertly with the explanations that the students can follow regular contents, but that they lack activity. Both me and school counselor have to engage frequently in order to expertly explain them and point out to appropriate working methods with these students.”

“I “fight” with one colleague about introducing modern technologies as well as general approach in teaching. He offers resistance primarily due to lack of knowledge in working with modern technologies, but, together with expert associate school counselor, we discuss, exercise control and try to educate him for more creative approach to teaching.”

The principals emphasize that they are more successful during instructional leadership when they adopt their initiatives to employees' traits, i.e., when they respect their interests or affinities. The following statements describe the roles of higher intensity which are seen as *adapting to colleagues*:

“I communicate with certain colleagues by saying: “What do you think”, “How do we fix it”? With others “We have decided to go into project... We need you?” “I expect you to participate” and to the third group: “I am sure you can do it”, “You have nothing to be afraid of”...”

“There are people who prefer certain things more, while others like different things and we make plan of activities according to personal habitus”

“The results of voluntary, rather than delegated choice of activities produced results second year of this approach because people spend much more energy into something they like”

Sometimes, they are more highly engaged by taking the role of *the authority to the associates*:

“...I rarely ask those for whom I think that they will show resistance (when you get burned once...). I assign them with tasks they cannot refuse.”

Interactions with subjects outside of school. When describing interaction with subjects outside of school, the principals mostly mention cooperation with the founder and institutions in the local community. Certain positive experiences of established interactions with the local community which are related to realized support to school in realization of school activities, material support and solving problems are found from the principals. The following statements illustrate the supportive relationship:

“We have good cooperation with the school's founder, local community and companies in our region that have recognized the importance of quality education in the community. We enjoy a long-term successful cooperation with xxx utility equipment company which is also school's friend. The school enjoys good support from the founder, equipping of school is regularly done by using the county budget's resources.”

“I am exceptionally proud of the cooperation with the founder and local community (even though we have opposite political views) and I enjoy their full support, which is visible when I have certain unplanned costs/needs, they always help. Thus, I can say that I have better working condition compared to other colleagues”.

“We have good support in our city... We have economic support through donations... There are a lot of sports and artistic contents who, all together,

encourage excellence (We have one of the best art schools in Croatia, sports clubs of which our students are a part of and who achieve excellent results not only at state, but also at international level)”

Supportive relations are recognized in situation in which partners from school's local environment recognize the role of school in the community, when they offer it (material) support and when they strive towards achieving good results. It is possible to see that these relationships are better in smaller regions. Additionally, they are based on proactive networking and establishing relationships between the principal and the founder's representative, i.e., the locally community: *“Specific circumstance which favors us is that I am a “child” of this school and this region. Most often, friendly relationships not only with the leading members of the community (mayor, entrepreneurs...), but also parents help me in dealing with potential problems (from disciplinary to material)”*. However, certain unsupportive circumstances are also found and they are mostly related to political interference in school's work: *“...the biggest issues of this job would be the local politics that, by using School boards, tries to promote their own particular interests, whilst disregarding school's needs as such”*. The principals do not have an influence on certain circumstances related to local environment, during which they mostly highlight economic development of the local community, demographic indicators, geographic location and the size of town in which the school is located: *“Specific circumstance that aggravates the situation is surely region's poor economic development as well as fragmentation of schools. It is impossible to have the same conditions in all 6 district schools, which are often far from the ones in central school. The decline in the number of students and demographic movements would bring the validity of investments in question, even if this possibility would exist.”*

When describing their way of facing subjects from the local community, the principals describe the whole variety of interactions: on the higher, i.e., proactive side, they mention roles such as *active lobbying* (*“ Specific circumstances are the ones that I know every important factors and I have no issues with going to someone and lobby the support for my goals”*), while on the weaker, i.e., more passive side, the principals clearly point out that they *do not have any influence* on certain circumstances (*“We are a school whose 1-4 graders go into our school, while 5-8 graders go into another school..., If we would now go to our school, according to the Pedagogic standard, it does not exceed 5 km and they aren't allowed transportation and as such they go into school 11 km away. These are the problems I have no influence on.”*). These statements, which mostly leave open questions about potential either founder or local community representative's moves, represent a basis for additional examination of ISL's specificities in local and regional areas of different characteristics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Data on instructional school leadership gathered on a sample of 30 Croatian elementary school principals offered a range of information about activities, roles, goals, associates as well as environments' characteristics in which the principals realize the processes of instructional leadership, which additionally represent solid basis for better understanding of varieties of principals' instructional behaviors. Most of the previous studies found out data about the frequency of certain instructional leadership activities' conduction in Croatian elementary schools (Markočić-Dekanić et al., 2020), so this study began based on the assumption that elementary school principals relatively frequently practice these activities. The results of this study indicate that the principals pay either more or less attention to certain instructional activities, while the varieties can be recognized in several points. Among the more significant varieties, ISL's contents, i.e., outcomes as well as principal's roles and interactions during ISL's conduction, can be singled out.

In regards to the observed varieties, it is logically to question yourself on which circumstances do the modalities of principal's instructional school leadership practice depend. If the ISL contents to which the principals pay more attention are observed, it is possible to assume that either the principals' personal preferences or their vision of the direction in which the school should go can have certain effect on what will be prioritized (*"...due to the fact that we are school for students with disabilities, our goals are directed towards individualized curricula; activities and collaborative teams are defined according to basic curriculum's projects"*). Surely, significant effect is also caused by jointly set goals and priorities adopted in the context of annual school plan (*"Together with teachers and expert associates I define goals and priorities of our school in a way where every one of us suggests activities that would lead to better students' achievements and their learning."*). The importance of school mission represents one of the key ISL's dimensions (Hallinger, 2005), while the practice of refinement and articulation of school's aims belongs among the principal's instructional behaviors that show the strongest effects on the strengthening of students as well as school's achievements (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

If the various intensities in which principals intervene or participate during certain ISL activities are observed, it can be assumed that the previously mentioned intensity depends on several factors. The way in which principal's elementary school instructional leadership is formed, surely depends on the established relationships between the principal, students, teachers and expert associates, i.e., the principal's ability to manage these relationships. Key dynamic can be observed in the power relation between the motivated teachers, those who offer resistance as well as those who are indifferent towards the conduction of instructional activities. The principals that have stronger support from their

associates in ISL activities, are more inclined to leave or delegate instructional initiatives to motivated teachers and expert associates, while their intervention during ISL becomes weaker or moderate. In these situations, ISL activities are running smoothly according to predetermined goals. In situations in which there is either a lack of motivated associates' support or it is significantly weaker, the principals are more inclined to adapt their activities to employees' traits, affinities and interest, which requires higher principal's engagement as well as their stronger influence during ISL's conduction. The least desirable circumstances are found in situations in which the principals report on weaker associates' support. Although relatively rare, these situations occur in the statements of those principals who either do not have any expert associates employed or they find themselves in undesirable faculty structure in school. In these cases, ISL's conduction is entirely dependent on principals' direct engagement as well as their stronger influence on decision making process. It is worth recalling the recommendations of previously conducted studies which emphasize that the school leadership's effects on strengthening of students' and school's achievements are stronger when the leadership is distributed (e.g., Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), thus making it is necessary to ponder on adequate strategies of principals' empowerment for conduction of distributed school leadership in this context.

Certain variations can be observed in various forms of established relationships with local community or the founder. Principals who express higher degree of satisfaction with established cooperation with local community, more frequently report on activities that not only illustrate the school and its employees as active members of the community, but also local community as an active and supportive school's partner (*"I have talked with the (county's) Head of social activities (Project leader also talked with her) and we have also received financial support. I have called the principal of xxx Elementary School so that school joined too. The project was very well received by both the students and teachers."*). It can be assumed that the successfulness of principals' realization of instructional activities depends on the nature of established relationships, which in, best case scenario, reflects not only a high degree of proactive principals' acting towards local community and the founders, but also a high degree of supportive (representative's) acting towards the principal., i.e., school. Bearing in mind the results of previously conducted studies which singled out positive effects of local self-government unit on the strengthening of principals' instructional roles (e.g., Hoing, 2012; Schechter, 2011; Bredenson & Kose, 2007), it would be valuable to devise and implement adequate policy mechanisms which would encourage local self-government units to regularly and consistently cooperate with principals and schools.

If the results of this study are compared with those on a sample of high school principals, several specific themes can be observed. High school

principals more frequently talk about their (instructional) acting focused on the strengthening of schools' capacities (Kovač, 2021b), something which is not recorded as a key theme in elementary school principals' statements. They mostly report on the school's material conditions in the context of statements on circumstances that can act as either supportive or obstructive during ISL's conduction, but they do not describe personal initiatives in ensuring previously mentioned conditions: *"I have found myself in numerous hard and challenging situations, I started with unequipped and disorganized school, demotivated employees. I admit that I am very happy and proud today, because we have excellent working conditions, the school is structured, energetically renovated, equipped with ICT, teachers are motivated, school climate is excellent, a lot of work, but also a lot of joy. Of course, material conditions can always be better and a room for improvement always exists."* Furthermore, in their statements, high school principals have more strongly singled out variable characteristics of student population, which revealed that students' needs and characteristics strongly influence priority ISL contents as well as set goals. For example, there are no cases in their statements where (expected) goal focused on strengthening of students' capacities is emphasized, which could potentially contribute to either better achievements on international tests (e.g., PISA) or better school achievements. In their statements, elementary school principals are more strongly focused on students' characteristics, which points out to the assumption that both teachers and expert associates' characteristics as well as the nature of cooperation with them, forms priority ISL activities more strongly. Besides that, it can be noticed that elementary school principals pay more attention to the relationship with local community, especially with the founder.

Although this study offered valuable answers on questions regarding variabilities of ISL's characteristics in elementary school, it is important to emphasize that it would be valuable to replicate this study by applying in-depth interview with principals, which would enable additional examination of reasons why found variations in leadership practice were present. Apart from that, this study on ISL's characteristics is based entirely on the principals' perspective, so it would be desirable to examine both teachers and expert associates' perspective as they, according to principals' words, play an active role in this process. It would be interesting to find out more data about principals' competencies for ISL's conduction. It is interesting that the questioned principals mostly feel competent for ISL, but it is neither evident from the statements which competencies are in question nor how do they apply them in their work. However, certain principals appear more ready to point out to the need and purpose of training for the function of principal: *"Of course, every school is specific due to its characteristics (city, village, number of schools, students, employees...) and it is impossible to expect that universal training for every situation exists, but certain basic leadership skills would make the start easier, which would surely*

lead to better end results). Bearing in mind the observed importance of principals' interactional-communicative potential in initiating and conduction of ISL activities, it can be concluded that elementary school principals' instructional efficiency to a large extent depends on their level of communicative skills (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014). Judging by observed roles and action strategies towards various subject inside and outside of school, especially towards those that imply the application of higher intensity roles and strategies (lobbying, negotiating, networking), more attention should be paid to the development of specific interactional-communicative skills in the principals professional training and development programs' framework.

The results of the conducted study reveal several other more significant elements in which more support should be given to the (elementary) school principals in their work, which would surely contribute to their higher efficiency in instructional leadership's conduction. Discussions that emphasize the need for stronger education policy's concern for the status as well as professionalization of principal's profession are not new (Kovač, 2021a; Vican et al., 2016). Similarly, the abovementioned discussion can be found in the statements of principals who have participated in this study: *"In order to become more efficient, independent and autonomous in doing this complex and, in scope, very demanding and diverse work, the principal should depend neither on the will of their superior nor political 'crosswords'. Their results must represent the benchmark for principal's performance."* Lastly, we should repeat the fact that the international comparisons singled out Croatia as one of the rare countries in which neither practice of formal assessment of principal work's quality exists nor examination of key principals' competencies before taking up this duty (OECD, 2019). However, the fact that the quality of local community units as well as regional self-governments' support is very rarely questioned in public should not be neglected, whereas the practice of formal assessment of their work's quality with schools in Croatia does not even exist. In the education policy's space, a lot of unused potential surely exists which could be directed towards ensuring quality of school management at local and institutional level. The question is when the formation and launch of this type of initiatives will finally become *policy* priority for decision-makers at education policy's national level.

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