

Research Paper



# The effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation among principals of vocational special education secondary schools in malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership is an important leadership approach in strengthening the effectiveness of school management and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. However, the implementation of instructional leadership within the context of Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools (VSESS) involves more complex challenges, particularly when principals are required to balance administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership simultaneously. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the effects and challenges of implementing instructional leadership among principals of Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools in Malaysia. This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design involving five VSESS principals as research participants. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analyzed manually using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the implementation of instructional leadership has positive effects on strengthening the focus on teaching and learning, fostering professional collaboration between principals and teachers, and developing a school organizational climate that is more supportive of the learning needs of students with special educational needs. Nevertheless, the study also identified several key challenges in its implementation, including internal factors such as limited knowledge and skills in instructional leadership, as well as external factors such as time constraints and heavy administrative workloads. The implications of this study emphasize the need to strengthen principals' instructional leadership competencies to support the development of more effective and sustainable vocational special education schools. This study contributes to the educational leadership literature by providing context-based empirical evidence on the implementation of instructional leadership in vocational special education, an area that remains underexplored in educational research in Malaysia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education Secondary Schools (VSESS), the instructional leadership role of principals is considerably more complex than in mainstream schools. The learning needs of students who have special educational needs (SEN) and the need to combine academic learning with vocational skill acquisition and the need for specific customized teaching methods create a complex educational environment. The implementation of effective instructional leadership in vocational special education needs principals to apply their understanding of leadership principles through the creation of context-specific instructional management systems [1].

Existing literature shows that instructional leadership enables schools to develop a learning-oriented culture through its establishment of precise academic objectives and its ongoing assessment of teaching methods and its continuous assistance to teachers [2], [3]. The principals who regularly implement instructional leadership methods create environments where teachers work together and teachers stay motivated and students learn in spaces that welcome all individuals. The various structural and contextual factors that exist in vocational special education settings create difficulties which prevent the implementation of instructional leadership methods that have proven effective in other settings [4].

The three most common obstacles that people encounter in their work are excessive administrative duties and their inability to meet deadlines and the differing professional expertise and training backgrounds of school principals. The actual work of principals requires them to handle several different duties which include their responsibilities for human resource management and their need to follow institutional policies and their duty to work with other stakeholders and their responsibility to lead educational activities. Principal demands lead to a decline in their ability to participate fully in both teaching oversight work and efforts to enhance instructional methods [5].

The implementation of this leadership style in different schools is determined by their level of formal instructional leadership training their school staff members receive throughout the year. Instructional leadership practices develop through a step-by-step process which depends on the school's environment and the leader's abilities and the existing organizational resources. The implementation of instructional leadership by principals in vocational special education settings requires empirical research which provides specific insights about the practice.

The study investigates how instructional leadership creates benefits and operational problems for Vocational Special Education Secondary School principals through qualitative research which involves interviewing participants. The study uses principals' firsthand experiences to deliver detailed research results which will advance educational leadership knowledge while filling research deficiencies in vocational special education leadership and supporting policymakers and practitioners who want to establish better instructional leadership systems for vocational special education schools.

### 1.1 Research Problem

The implementation of instructional leadership has received increasing attention due to its potential to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in schools. In Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools (VSESS), principals function as instructional leaders to meet the requirements of their educational system because special education students have different needs and vocational education programs require students to master skills for future employment. Nevertheless, the implementation of

instructional leadership among VSESS principals continues to face various challenges that may undermine its effectiveness.

Failure to implement instructional leadership effectively may have significant implications for school performance, including weaknesses in leadership direction and instructional management. [6] Emphasized that school leaders who do not clearly enact instructional leadership are at risk of demonstrating poor performance and an unstructured leadership direction. Therefore, instructional leadership should not be practiced minimally or merely as a form of compliance; rather, it requires deliberate, systematic, and focused implementation [7].

The practice of instructional leadership in schools requires principals to work together with teachers while they provide ongoing assistance and direction which helps teachers improve their instructional methods according to [8]. Principals need to develop strong communication abilities which will help them deliver academic objectives to their staff members until all members of the team understand these goals and will work together to achieve them according to [9]. The assessment of teaching effectiveness requires planned classroom observations which function as structured monitoring systems to evaluate instructional methods and detect areas that need enhancement according to [10].

The VSESS educational system implements its instructional leadership framework through principal functions together with backing from both school personnel and community stakeholders according to [11]. Principals in school management must deal with various challenges which arise from both their internal school environment and external factors that impact their ability to lead instructional activities. Internal challenges include limited leadership knowledge and skills, low self-confidence, and communication weaknesses [12], while external challenges involve time constraints, heavy administrative workloads, and high levels of work-related pressure [13], [14].

These conditions may result in instructional leadership being implemented in a limited and fragmented manner, thereby restricting its impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Accordingly, there remains a need for systematic investigation into both the effects of instructional leadership implementation and the challenges faced by principals in enacting it within Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools. Therefore, this study seeks to examine these two aspects in order to provide a deeper and more contextualized understanding based on the lived experiences of VSESS principals.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify the effects of the implementation of instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools; and
2. To identify the challenges in the implementation of instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

## 1.3 Review of Previous Studies

Previous studies indicate that instructional leadership is a leadership approach that focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning through the active involvement of school leaders in academic processes. [15] Defined instructional leadership as the role of educational leaders in curriculum development, strengthening teaching and learning values, and enhancing the professional competencies of educators. The definition states that instructional leadership requires educational leaders to go beyond their administrative duties because they must actively participate in student learning processes.

In addition, [16] stated that instructional leadership reflects the attitudes and commitment of school leaders in ensuring that teaching and learning processes are implemented effectively and sustainably. The emphasis on principals' roles as instructional leaders is viewed as an important factor in developing a learning-oriented school culture and supporting improved academic achievement.

A study by [17] found that instructional leadership has a significant relationship with students' academic performance through the enhancement of teachers' organizational commitment. The findings indicate that principals' active engagement in instructional leadership can increase teacher motivation, which in turn contributes to instructional effectiveness and student achievement. This evidence

demonstrates that instructional leadership functions as a catalyst for overall school performance improvement.

However, previous research has also reported that the implementation of instructional leadership faces various challenges. Noted that a lack of leadership skills and competencies among school leaders is one of the main factors constraining the effective implementation of instructional leadership. [6] Further found that some principals do not fully practice instructional leadership due to insufficient specialized training, despite being competent in administrative management.

Administrative workload and time limitations together with skill-related factors present successful instructional leadership implementation challenges. [10] The research found that principals needed to spend their time monitoring teaching and learning but their work commitments and administrative tasks created barriers to this activity. These findings are consistent with the study by [14], which showed that school leaders' workload often hinders their active involvement in instructional leadership.

Overall, previous studies provide strong evidence that instructional leadership has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning as well as overall school performance. Nevertheless, its implementation continues to face multiple challenges that require sustained attention. Although numerous studies have been conducted in mainstream school contexts, research that specifically focuses on the implementation of instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools particularly based on the real experiences of principals within the Malaysian context remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation in VSESS.

## 2. RELATED WORK

Researchers have studied instructional leadership as a primary factor which determines how well schools function and how teachers perform and how students achieve academic success. Instructional leadership exists when principals take part in developing curriculum and monitoring classroom activities and supporting teacher professional growth according to sources [15], [16]. Research studies from multiple educational settings demonstrate that principals who practice instructional leadership create better teaching results and better student achievement outcomes according to studies [17], [18].

The research studies which have been conducted demonstrate that instructional leadership benefits teachers by increasing their dedication to their profession and their ability to work together with others. Instructional leadership indirectly boosts student academic results by enhancing teachers' dedication to their organizations according to study findings from [17]. The research conducted by [19] demonstrates that instructional leadership establishes positive school environments which enable teachers to collaborate and improve their professional confidence and work fulfillment. The results establish that instructional leadership functions as a mediator between schools which create effective teaching and learning environments.

Instructional leadership demonstrates its vital role in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and vocational schools because these institutions require students to develop practical skills through hands-on training. The research by [15] established that the instructional leadership activities performed by school principals positively impacted the development of practical skills among students in Kenyan TVET institutions. The study in reference [6] demonstrated that campus managers who executed their instructional leadership duties successfully enhanced their ability to boost vocational education instructional quality and student performance. The implementation of instructional leadership faces multiple challenges which research studies demonstrate yet organizations continue to implement it because of its proven advantages. The research study found that human resource abilities of leadership and teacher development programs for professional growth acted as fundamental internal obstacles which restricted progress [12]. School leaders who lack specific training in instructional leadership skills prefer to perform administrative duties instead of carrying out their instructional responsibilities according to [6]

research findings. The partial execution of instructional leadership leads to educational leaders selecting which parts of their role to execute and which parts to ignore.

The academic research community has established extensive evidence about the existence of time limitations and high administrative responsibilities which create external obstacles. The research conducted by [14], [13] demonstrated that teachers who face high administrative work requirements lose their ability to conduct regular instructional assessments and support their teachers. The study conducted by [10] discovered that school leaders' instructional leadership activities get interrupted because they have to handle their other obligations. Existing research studies offer important information about instructional leadership in regular educational settings and vocational training environments but there is a research gap that focuses exclusively on Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools VSESS in Malaysia. The existing research about special educational needs schools has not investigated their implementation of instructional leadership because these schools face extensive operational demands that exceed standard educational environments. Therefore, the present study extends existing research by examining both the effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation among VSESS principals in Malaysia, grounded in their lived experiences and contextual realities [20].

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable the researcher to explore in depth the experiences, perspectives, and actual practices of principals in implementing instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools (VSESS). The case study design allows the phenomenon of instructional leadership to be examined within the real context of school management, in line with the study objectives that focus on the effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation.

#### 3.2 Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of five principals from Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools in Malaysia. The researchers selected their participants through purposive sampling because the selected participants were school leaders who had experience with educational management. The participants of the study implemented instructional leadership at their schools which enabled them to provide essential information for the research study.

#### 3.3 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interview method was used because it allows the researcher to obtain in-depth, flexible, and detailed data related to the participants' actual experiences. An interview guide was prepared to ensure that the discussion remained aligned with the research objectives while allowing participants to freely elaborate on their views and experiences.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers transcribed the interview data into complete written form before they started their analysis. The research team used manual thematic analysis to conduct their data analysis. The analysis process required multiple steps which included reading the interview transcripts multiple times and performing initial coding and organizing codes into themes and subthemes and interpreting the research results according to research objectives. The researchers used this approach to demonstrate that they had correctly identified themes which matched the actual experiences and viewpoints of participants and reached complete data saturation.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were given due attention throughout the conduct of this study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interview sessions. The research results maintained participant anonymity through the implementation of coding systems which replaced their actual names. The researchers utilized all collected data exclusively for academic research purposes to maintain ethical research standards.

### Research Findings

The findings of this study were derived from five participants who were principals of Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools (VSESS). The data were analyzed manually using a thematic analysis approach. Based on the analysis, the study identified two main themes: the effects of instructional leadership implementation and the challenges in implementing instructional leadership in schools.

#### First Objective

To identify the effects of instructional leadership implementation in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

#### Subtheme 1: Strengthening Focus on Teaching and Learning

The findings revealed that the implementation of instructional leadership helps principals to maintain a clearer and more consistent focus on teaching and learning. Principals were directly involved in guiding, directing, and monitoring teachers' instructional practices to support the learning of students with special educational needs. This focus was identified as one of the key effects of instructional leadership in strengthening the implementation of teaching and learning in schools.

#### Subtheme 2: Establishing Collaborative Systems between Principals and Teachers

The findings also indicated that the implementation of instructional leadership contributes to the development of more effective professional collaboration between principals and teachers in VSESS. The existing working relationships enable principals and teachers to collaborate in a more structured manner in the implementation of teaching and learning processes.

#### Participant 3 Stated

"The implementation of instructional leadership allows me to collaborate effectively with teachers."

#### Participant 5 Stated

"Through the implementation of instructional leadership, I am given the opportunity to carry out my responsibilities effectively and comprehensively."

In addition, Participant 3 further stated:

"I strongly agree that the use of instructional leadership greatly helps in facilitating leadership tasks as well as teachers' teaching and learning for students with special educational needs."

Overall, the findings indicate that the implementation of instructional leadership has a positive effect on strengthening the focus on teaching and learning, particularly through the establishment of more effective professional collaboration between principals and teachers in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

#### Second Objective

The study aims to identify the obstacles which prevent schools from executing instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

The research results demonstrate that schools experience difficulties with instructional leadership because two types of factors which exist within the school and outside the school prevent successful

implementation. The identification of these challenges provides a clearer understanding of the constraints that influence instructional leadership practices in VSESS.

### **Subtheme 3: Limited Skills and Knowledge in Instructional Leadership**

The findings revealed that limited skills and knowledge related to instructional leadership constitute one of the main challenges faced by principals in implementing instructional leadership in VSESS.

#### **Participant 1 Stated**

“In carrying out my duties as a principal, we are still bound by traditional methods, even though we have tried to make continuous improvements.”

#### **Participant 2 Stated**

“It is indeed challenging to apply instructional leadership because we lack sufficient time to learn it in greater depth due to heavy workloads.”

Based on the interview data, the study identified that limitations in skills and knowledge represent an internal challenge that affects the consistent implementation of instructional leadership.

### **Subtheme 4: Time Constraints and Administrative Workload**

In addition, the findings identified time constraints and administrative workload as major challenges in implementing instructional leadership. Principals experienced difficulties in focusing fully on the monitoring of teaching and learning due to diverse administrative responsibilities.

#### **Participant 1 Stated**

“Sometimes I only manage to enter classrooms to check teachers’ and students’ attendance, especially in the morning.”

#### **Participant 2 Stated**

“I visit classrooms whenever possible to observe what is happening and to provide support to teachers, but time constraints often become a challenge.”

These interview excerpts indicate that time constraints are a significant external challenge that affects principals’ ability to implement instructional leadership on a continuous basis.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This discussion focuses on the interpretation of the findings related to the effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation among principals of Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools (VSESS). The discussion links the identified findings with previous literature to enhance understanding of their implications within the context of vocational special education in Malaysia.

The findings indicate that the implementation of instructional leadership has a positive effect on strengthening the focus on teaching and learning. The research discovered that instructional leaders who operate as principals conducted instructional monitoring because they needed to deliver professional development and ongoing educational support to teachers. This finding is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the importance of school leaders’ active involvement in instructional matters in supporting effective teaching and learning. The VSESS findings demonstrate that instructional leadership empowers principals to effectively manage the diverse learning requirements of students who need special educational support.

In addition, the findings reveal that instructional leadership contributes to the development of more effective collaborative systems between principals and teachers. Collaborative practices established through open discussions and continuous guidance were found to strengthen professional relationships and support the sharing of effective instructional practices. This finding supports earlier research that identifies instructional leadership as a catalyst for fostering a positive professional working culture. In the

context of vocational special education, such collaboration is particularly important in ensuring that teachers receive adequate support to implement instruction that is responsive to students' needs.

The findings further indicate that instructional leadership contributes to the development of a more supportive school climate for learning. The learning-oriented school culture requires continuous teaching and learning practice which leads teachers to develop their professional duties. The study confirms previous research which demonstrates effective instructional leadership generates positive effects on school climate. The VSESS personal needs educational system showed that optimal school climate conditions proved essential for students with special educational needs who need consistent supportive educational settings to succeed.

The study found various obstacles to executing instructional leadership because school principals need better training to develop their complete instructional leadership abilities. The study found that inadequate training together with restricted access to instructional leadership training results in ineffective execution of instructional leadership methods. The research findings show that vocational special education programs need specialized leadership training programs which help principals fulfill their instructional responsibilities through context-specific training.

The study found that time limitations together with administrative responsibilities create significant barriers to effective instructional leadership execution. School principals lost their teaching observation time because they had to handle excessive administrative responsibilities. School leaders face heavy workloads which prevent them from doing their instructional leadership work according to previous research findings. The existing circumstances demonstrate that educational leaders need more organizational backing and proper methods to manage their workload so they can succeed at their instructional leadership duties.

The discussion shows that instructional leadership effectively improves teaching and learning outcomes in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools. The implementation success depends on principals who must resolve all organizational and community challenges. The educational system needs unified three areas which include leadership development and organizational assistance together with better time management methods to achieve successful and lasting instructional leadership execution.

The research results confirm instructional leadership functions as a leadership style which adapts to different situations in vocational special education environments. The study demonstrates the necessity of developing instructional leadership training programs which tailor their content to special education environments so that school leaders can fulfill their instructional responsibilities with permanent success.

**Table 1.** Profile of Research Participants

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Years of Experience as Principal</b>
P1	Principal	Vocational Special Education Secondary School	More than 10 years
P2	Principal	Vocational Special Education Secondary School	6–10 years
P3	Principal	Vocational Special Education Secondary School	6–10 years
P4	Principal	Vocational Special Education Secondary School	3–5 years
P5	Principal	Vocational Special Education Secondary School	More than 10 years

**Table 1** presents the demographic profile of the research participants involved in this study. The study included five principals who worked at Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools located throughout Malaysia. All participants held leadership positions and were directly responsible for managing teaching and learning processes in their respective schools. The range of principals' professional experience ensured diverse perspectives on instructional leadership implementation. **Table 1** shows

different levels of experience which produced extensive and diverse qualitative information. The researchers used purposive sampling to choose participants who possessed appropriate leadership experience.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Instructional Leadership Implementation in VSESS

The conceptual framework for this study appears in Figure 1. The framework demonstrates how instructional leadership practices affect school operations through their impact on professional collaboration and school climate and teaching and learning activities which result in improved educational results for students with special educational needs. The effective implementation of instructional leadership in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools faces challenges from both internal and external sources which include limited leadership skills and time constraints and administrative workload.

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Analysis

Research Objective	Main Theme	Subtheme	Description
To identify the effects of instructional leadership implementation	Effects of Instructional Leadership	Strengthening focus on teaching and learning	Principals actively guide, monitor, and support instructional practices to improve teaching and learning for students with special educational needs.
-	-	Establishing collaborative systems between principals and teachers	Instructional leadership enhances professional collaboration, shared responsibility, and continuous support between principals and teachers.
To identify the challenges of instructional leadership implementation	Challenges of Instructional Leadership	Limited skills and knowledge in instructional leadership	Principals face difficulties due to limited exposure, training, and confidence in applying instructional leadership practices effectively.
-	-	Time constraints and administrative workload	Heavy administrative duties and limited time reduce principals'

			capacity to consistently monitor teaching and learning activities.
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## 5. CONCLUSION

This study identified the effects and challenges of instructional leadership implementation among principals of Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools in Malaysia. The research results demonstrate that educational leaders who implement instructional leadership practices successfully improve teaching and learning outcomes while creating professional partnerships between school leaders and teachers and establishing better learning environments for students who require special educational support.

The study discovered multiple obstacles that hinder schools from using instructional leadership because administrators lack necessary instructional leadership abilities and understanding while their operational duties consume their available time.

The research findings demonstrate a necessity for educational administrators to receive better training which focuses specifically on developing their instructional leadership abilities needed to lead vocational programs for students with special educational needs. The study identified two main requirements which needed to be satisfied by organizations to enable principals to perform their instructional leadership duties which required organizational support and structured methods for handling their workload. The research investigates how principals in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools view instructional leadership implementation which serves as a basis for new knowledge about educational leadership. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for stakeholders in efforts to strengthen instructional leadership practices and enhance the quality of vocational special education in Malaysia. Future research is recommended to incorporate the perspectives of teachers and students in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership implementation in vocational special education schools.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study brings valuable insights to its field of research yet contains various limitations which require acknowledgment. The study used five principals from Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools as its research sample which represented a small participant group.

The sample size meets the requirements for a qualitative case study but the results cannot be applied to all vocational special education schools across Malaysia or any other educational settings. The study explored only how principals understood their implementation of instructional leadership practices. School management level leadership practices received valuable insights from this method, but it failed to include teacher, student and support staff perspectives which could have improved understanding of instructional leadership implementation.

Research should include a wider selection of participants who will provide their input through their roles as teachers and students and other school stakeholders in order to achieve complete understanding of instructional leadership implementation in vocational special education environments. Future research should use mixed-method and longitudinal study designs to assess how instructional leadership practices evolve over time while measuring their effects on educational quality and student performance outcomes. The research findings would create a stronger foundation of evidence which supports instructional leadership within vocational special education environments.

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#### Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Rabthah Abd Rahim	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Syar Mezee Abdul Rashid	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

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#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

#### Informed Consent

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection.

#### Ethical Approval

The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the relevant institutional authorities.

#### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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