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*Source / Izvornik:* **Život i škola : časopis za teoriju i praksu odgoja i obrazovanja, 2021, LXVII, 9 - 31**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.32903/zs.67.1.1>

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:186:497378>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-03-13**



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# INSTRUCTIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SCENARIOS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CROATIAN HIGH SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of an empirical study conducted on a sample of high school principals in Croatia. The study has focused on the description and understanding of instructional school leadership (ISL) characteristics as well as certain specific circumstances that could, according to principals' opinion, affect ISL practice. In order to set research questions, a basic qualitative interpretative approach has been chosen. Data was gathered using a written interview that encompassed a purposive sample of 16 high school principals in Croatia. Thematic content analysis was conducted while an inductive approach was used in order to identify two key thematic categories and associated themes, subthemes, and their variations in practice. The first category reveals characteristics of ISL priority activities focused on strengthening students, teachers, and schools' capacities, which can also reflect characteristics of either principals' development-competitive or prevention-corrective instructional activities. The second category reveals circumstances that can affect ISL characteristics which are referred to as those that can leave an impact on either school or education policy level. The results of this study describe and explain in more detail several instructional school leadership scenarios present in Croatian high schools that can be used in order to understand and interpret circumstances that can affect the development of various ISL characteristics.

**Keywords:** instructional school leadership, qualitative research, principals, school efficiency

## Sažetak

U ovom se radu prikazuju rezultati empirijskog istraživanja provedenog na uzorku ravnatelja srednjih škola u Republici Hrvatskoj koji su fokusirani na opis i razumijevanje obilježja instruktorskog školskog vođenja (IŠV-a) kao i nekih specifičnih okolnosti koje prema mišljenju ravnatelja mogu djelovati na praksu IŠV-a.

S obzirom na postavljena istraživačka pitanja, odabran je pristup osnovnog kvalitativnog interpretativnog istraživanja. Podatci su prikupljeni pisanim intervjuom kojim je obuhvaćen namjerni uzorak od 16 ravnatelja srednjih škola u Republici Hrvatskoj. Provedena je tematska analiza sadržaja i induktivnim su pristupom iz dostupnih podataka identificirane dvije ključne tematske kategorije te pripadajuće teme, podteme i njihove varijacije u praksi. Prva kategorija otkriva obilježja prioriternih aktivnosti IŠV-a usmjerenih na jačanje kapaciteta učenika, nastavnika i škola, a koje mogu odražavati obilježja razvojno-kompetitivnih ili preventivno-korektivnih instrukcijskih aktivnosti ravnatelja. Druga kategorija otkriva okolnosti koje mogu djelovati na obilježja IŠV-a, a odnose se na okolnosti koje djeluju na razini škole te okolnosti koje djeluju na razini obrazovne politike. Rezultati provedenog istraživanja pobliže opisuju i objašnjavaju nekoliko scenarija instrukcijskog školskog vođenja prisutnih u hrvatskim srednjim školama iz kojih se mogu razumjeti i tumačiti okolnosti koje mogu djelovati na razvijanje različitih obilježja IŠV-a.

**Ključne riječi:** instrukcijsko školsko vođenje, kvalitativno istraživanje, ravnatelji, učinkovitost škola

## INTRODUCTION

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Instructional school leadership became more frequently present in the Croatian education policy discourse only after the publishing of a recent national report on the results of the TALIS study, which, among other things, 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 the adoption of clear professional standards for instructional school leadership and a stronger emphasis on this kind of school leadership during formal education and professional development of principals*” (Markočić Dekanić, Gregurović, and Batur, 2020, pg. 121.). Even though TALIS results show that a significant number of Croatian (elementary and high school) principals are involved in both direct and indirect forms of instructional leadership<sup>1</sup>, there are still no available empirical data that would explain some other characteristics of this type of leadership. For example, it is not known if school principals evaluate themselves as successful in the performing of instructional school leadership activities, if they are professionally trained to do them or how they decide on priority instructional activities (Kovač, 2021). In order to gain more precise insight into additional ISL characteristics in Croatian schools, an empirical study was conducted on the sample of elementary and high school principals. This paper presents the results of the first phase of the study conducted on the sample of high school principals in Croatia, highlighting the description and understanding of ISL characteristics as well as certain specific circumstances that could, according to principals’ opinion, affect ISL practice<sup>2</sup>.

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1 In order to assess characteristics of principal’s leadership practice focused on learning, i.e., instructional leadership, they had to list how often they have participated in the following activities for the past 12 months: cooperating with teachers as they are solving classroom problems; teaching observation, presenting feedback after observation; encouraging cooperation between teachers with the aim of developing new teaching practices; ensuring that teachers take responsibility for the development of their teaching skills; ensuring that teachers take responsibility for their students’ higher achievements etc.

2 Empirical study was conducted as a part of “Characteristics and predictors of instructional school leadership in Croatian schools”

In previous studies on ISL, certain specific circumstances that can affect the appearance of specific characteristics of ISL practice in high schools can rarely be singled out. However, it is possible to list several assumptions that can form or encourage certain specific instructional activities of high school principals. It is worth reminding that ISL is singled out as a significant predictor of students' standardized exam achievements, which becomes a very significant matter in the high school context, especially during the students' preparation for better State Matura exam results. Additionally, the ISL's effects on the outcome variables of high school students can be observed, from the successful enrollment in colleges to students' achievements in the labor market. If the focus switches to the observation of indirect ISL effects, most frequently focused on various initiatives to strengthen teachers' capacities, specific variations of principals' instructional activities can be expected due to specific needs of different categories of teachers employed in high schools. Not only these but also other numerous circumstances indicate the need for more precise examination and understanding of ISL characteristics in high schools.

## DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CONSTRUCT

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ISL can be briefly described through a set of principals' roles and tasks (and other subjects involved in school leadership) focused on improving the learning process and teaching through guidance, support, and ensuring resources for teachers and students in those processes (Kovač, 2021). ISL implies thought-out investment in the development of student's social and academic capacities as well as teachers' professional and intellectual capacities. These capacities have to be available to enable students' development, teachers' learning, and higher teaching efficiency (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 2011). Southworth (2002) points out that instructional leadership is recognized through principals' special attention to teachers' behaviors while performing activities that encourage students' learning. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) point out the important distinction in the understanding of the role of principals who practice ISL: they think that instructional, more successful principals do not spend time participating in direct education (by observing or teaching), but rather in ensuring conditions and support to continuously improve this process. Furthermore, by operationalizing the instructional school leadership term, Male and Palaiologou (2013) refer to the list of practical activities focused on the learning and teaching processes that are conducted as a part of educational institution, whose most frequent aim is to coordinate these processes with externally set standards and expectations of students' achievements. In this context, instructional school leadership refers to comprehensive processes that adequately and efficiently encourage and coordinate those processes within an educational institution. Ylimaki (2012) highlights curriculum leadership as

a fundamental dimension of ISL, pointing out that focus on curriculum in the broader sense of the word transcends the focus on teaching processes. Moreover, it expands to social, cultural, and political processes which have an outside influence on the decision-making process about what to teach and for which purpose.

The highest number of empirical studies on ISL was conducted using the notable PIMRS questionnaire<sup>3</sup> (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). 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, Robinson et al., 2008; Hallinger, Hosseingholizadeh, Hashemi and Kouhsari, 2017), it is considered to be a leading and most influential instrument for the examination of instructional school leadership across the world. From the previously mentioned meta-analyses, key groups of conducted studies were singled out: studies about the direct influence of ISL either on students and schools' achievements or on certain aspects of the school environment; studies about the indirect influence of ISL on students and schools' achievements, through the impact of various contextual variables at the school level; the studies of reciprocal impacts between ISL and contextual variables as well as students, i.e., schools' achievements and examination of factors that could directly (or indirectly) act as ISL predictors<sup>4</sup>.

Insight into recent empirical studies on ISL shows heightened interest for the observation of direct and indirect effects of instructional principals' leadership on the strengthening teachers' academic capacities, especially their impact on teachers' professional development (Wolff, McClelland and Stewart, 2010; May and Supovitz, 2011; Ruddy and Prusinski, 2012; Sebastian and Allensworth, 2012; Erčulj, 2014; Woodlang, Barry and Roohr, 2014; Urick and et al., 2018; Liu and Hallinger, 2018; Zheng, Yin and Li, 2019 and others). Furthermore, one of the more significant findings of this group are those which indicate that positive effects of ISL on teachers' professional development can be expected only in situations where teachers deem professional development programs efficient and plausible, i.e., they can contribute to the improvement of both teaching process quality and students' achievements. Besides that, studies show that the best effects could be found in principals' activities which are used

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3 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).

4 Southworth (2002) concluded that the most (useful) studies' results were collected from the category of those who have observed indirect effects of instructional school leadership, so it is not surprising that this trend has been continuing for the past ten years. Some of the more observed contextual variables on the school level, independent of the fact whether their indirect or reciprocal effects are being observed, are: school climate, school culture, teachers' job satisfaction, teachers' devotion to work or school, teachers' participation in professional development, teachers' self-efficiency and use of efficient teaching strategies (for example, Hallinger and Wang, 2015; Halverson and Kelley, 2017).

to motivate teachers to implement those teaching approaches that have been scientifically proven to empower (instructional) school capacity for successful dealing with environmental changes (Wolff, McClelland and Stewart, 2010; Lai and Cheung, 2014). The abovementioned findings confirm that it is very important to conduct a more thorough examination of what lies behind the results based on the evaluation of principals' practice of individual ISL activities, as they mostly report about the frequency of certain principals' ISL practices such as encouraging teachers to participate in professional development programs.

Among the factors that have been recognized as key predictors of principals' instructional school leadership, the most frequently mentioned are those connected with principals' traits (for example, work experience, competencies, self-efficiency) along with those connected with the school as an organization (size and type of school, the type of school's external environment). Recent studies have also focused on several aspects of school local environment's impact, among which are certain characteristics of local communities or individuals in charge of school leadership at the local government or self-government level (Bredenson and Kose, 2007; Honig, 2012; Carraway and Young, 2015; McLeod, Richardson and Sauers, 2015; Whitt, Scheurich and Skrla, 2015; Liou, 2016 and others). McLeod, Richardson, and Sauers (2015) point out that instructional leadership, implemented by institutions responsible for education at a local level (founders), is essential for the empowerment of schools' academic achievements, so it becomes important to observe what kind of initiatives are being created at a local school management level and what are the effects of these initiatives. Furthermore, by having in mind that in Croatia there are neither available empirical data that could be used to find out about specific characteristics of principal's instructional school leadership practices, nor about the factors that directly or indirectly impact these characteristics, an empirical study was conducted with the aim of better understanding of ISL practice in Croatian schools.

## METHODOLOGY

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Previous studies' results show that high school principals in Croatia relatively often practice certain ISL activities. What cannot be revealed from the available data are the answers to certain questions which could contribute to the understanding of specific instructional leadership's characteristics like *How do principals conduct these activities and where do they take place?, i.e., whether they conduct them alone or with other associates' support; Does principal feel successful while doing these activities?; Do these activities result in a positive outcome?; Which circumstances encourage or obstruct practicing of this leadership type?*. Intending to identify specific circumstances of instructional school leadership used by Croatian high school principals as well as a better understanding of circumstances in which this leadership takes place, an empirical study was conducted on a sample of Croatian high school principals.

Two main research questions have been set:

1. How do high school principals in Croatia describe their ISL practice? Which activities do they initiate and conduct during this practice?
2. Which circumstances inside and outside of school could leave a positive or negative impact on the ISL?

A basic interpretative qualitative research approach was chosen to set the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Data was gathered using a written interview which encompassed a purposive sample of 16 high school principals in Croatia<sup>5</sup>. Principals from different types of high schools were included; both male and female, larger and smaller schools, schools located in bigger and smaller urban areas in different counties. All principals have served at least one mandate. They are also recognized as principals who practice ISL and are noticed for the initiatives connected with strengthening student and school achievements. The data gathering process was initiated in February 2020<sup>6</sup>. As the data analysis process took place simultaneously with the answers received, it became evident that the answers' structure was ready for analysis after conducting 16 written interviews.

Following the aims of the study, interviews were led based on two key themes whose questions were focused on fundamental points of the ISL construct: 1. The principal's influence on the strengthening capacities as well as improving students' achievements and 2. The principal's influence on the strengthening teachers' capacities and improvement of the teaching process. In the context of the interview, these themes were operationalized through sub-questions focused on the descriptions of concrete situations and leadership activities, interactions with other workers as well as circumstances that could leave a positive or negative impact on ISL.

For data gathering purposes, a firmly structured interview protocol was used. Each theme encompassed the main open question whilst listing more orientational sub-questions, which were used to ensure more extensive and detailed answers in conditions where the researcher and the participant are not in direct contact and to ensure that every participant stayed focused on the same topics and aspects of questions<sup>7</sup>. The implementation of a more firmly structured interview in this study was chosen due to the already existing rich theoretical background, developed in the framework of numerous conducted empirical studies in the ISL field, which enabled better researcher's focus to gather data that enable finding answers on the

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5 This is the first phase of an empirical research whose participants were high school principals. In the second phase, elementary school principals will be included in order to observe specific differences in instructional school leadership's characteristics between elementary and high schools from the perspective of their principals.

6 During the data gathering process, COVID-19 pandemic was proclaimed which led to schools cease their day-to-day activities. The event has not only slowed down the process, but also visibly reduced principals' motivation to participate in the interviews. Certain answers were short and inappropriate for data analysis. Therefore, more new participants were included in the process in order to gather enough various and detailed answers.

7 In order to avoid potential shortcomings of conducting written interviews in largest manner possible (delivering reduced answers, lack of concrete examples, descriptions, situations, etc.), during the interviewing process, principals were offered the possibility to contact researchers via direct phone calls or asking for e-mail explanations.

previously singled out open or unanswered questions. The questions were mainly formed as descriptive and explorative. Data was gathered via Limesurvey online service: the system enabled participants' complete anonymity as well as flexibility in choosing the time to give data. All participants have expressed their interest as well as signed written interview consents. The average time needed to complete the interview varied from 45 minutes to one hour.

Thematic content analysis was also conducted (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2014). Additionally, by using the inductive approach, a higher number of thematic codes was identified from the available data which enabled defining of new, even unexpected categories and themes that complemented those offered in advance. A 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.

Apart from the offered display of categories, themes, and subthemes, during the data analysis process, it was confirmed that specific (inter)connection patterns exist between certain categories, themes, and subthemes which represented a basis for the chosen method of reporting results<sup>8</sup>.

The first and the most extensive category refers to **characteristics of instructional school leadership priority activities**. In this category, data was selected referring to concrete content around which principals guide their instructional action (*"Additionally, we are currently conducting strengthening media literacy capacities and reading literacy which represents a common theme in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades through project-based learning*). Moreover, in this category, the statements can be grouped into three key themes with more associated subthemes: strengthening students, teachers, and school's capacities. Data analysis confirmed that presented activities and priorities vary regarding the *dominant focus* in two fundamental directions: focus on achieving academic excellence which was named as development-competitive activities and focus on either prevention or correction of academic failure which was labeled as correction-preventive activities. They additionally vary regarding the *representation of certain types of instructional activities* in an individual school.

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<sup>8</sup> Coding was independently done by the author of this paper. Additional examination of categories, themes, and subthemes, as well as practical examination of content interpretation from the high school principal's perspective was done by the project's associate.



Instructional activities and priorities	The dominant focus of the activity	Representation of certain activities
Strengthening students' capacities	Focus on development-competitive instructional activities (achieving academic excellence)	
Strengthening teachers' capacities	Focus on correction-preventive instructional activities (preventing or correcting academic failure)	Higher
Strengthening school's capacities		Lower

The second category consists of statements that principals use to recognize and describe **circumstances that impact instructional school leadership practice**. Three dominant categories were singled out within this category: circumstances related to principal's instructional role ("*... even though principal "neither teaches nor learns" directly in the classroom, the consequences of his engagement and effort can be seen in that classroom work...*"), circumstances related to other associates' characteristics in the instructional school leadership process (*Circumstances that prevent me from achieving those activities are: some of the faculties misinterpret the efforts we make for the common good, that is their indifference...*) and circumstances related to the relationship between education policy and principals ("*We still have to put a lot of work into understanding the role of professional responsibility for the work results, thus for that reason I believe that external school evaluation, teachers' and principals' licensing would help in that regard*"). Data analysis confirmed that introduced circumstances vary according to the way they impact ISL practice (either positively or negatively) as well as the evaluation of the principal's possibility to impact the previously mentioned circumstances (higher or lower).

Circumstances that impact ISL practice	The way the circumstances impact	The possibility to impact on circumstances
Circumstances related to the principal's role	Positively/supportively	Higher
Circumstances related to principal's associates	Negatively/unsupportively	Lower
Circumstances related to education policy		

This type of constructed coding framework offers a quality basis for presentation and interpretation of data which could be ultimately used to describe different scenarios of instructional school leadership from the high school principals' perspective, whilst the scenarios could be considered as successful or less successful (they lead to wanted results) as well desirable or undesirable (principals point out desirable or undesirable circumstances). It is important to emphasize that the quality basis for the description of leadership scenarios was facilitated by responses to the posed (sub)questions which were focused on gaining data on activities, aims, participants, and their roles, i.e., interactions, outcomes, and circumstances in which the activities were conducted (Flick, 2018, pg. 89). Offered scenarios can provide a better understanding of acknowledged data on some aspects of instructional school leadership as well as pondering about potential modifications of circumstances on which instructional school leadership practice depends<sup>9</sup>.

## RESULTS

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### Characteristics of ISL activities

By reporting on activities that lead to strengthening students, teachers, and schools' capacities, according to the principals' statements, it is easy to identify those that describe developing-competitive activities as well as those that focus on prevention-corrective instructional activities.

***Strengthening students' capacities.*** While emphasizing and describing activities and priorities related to *strengthening students' capacities*, most principals describe their actions in the context of planning and defining priority goals: the previously mentioned activities refer mostly to discussions with teachers and expert associates about goals, analysis of pedagogical documentation, and students' achievements, analysis and coordination of delivered proposals as well as approval of coordinated goals and priorities. Principals' statements reveal no examples of their direct work with students as they only sporadically mention conversations with them and parents in certain challenging situations. If we analyze the statements that illustrate the focus on the development-competitive activities, the emphasis has been placed on those related to students' preparation for competitions as well as the introduction of additional school programs that will ensure gaining additional competencies and better academic achievements. Therefore, a discourse has been identified that could relate to the effort to provide students with conditions for the realization of academic excellence. Even though it can be expected that this discourse will be more prevalent in grammar schools compared to vocational schools, the results show that this is not necessarily the outcome. Ambitious goals and activities are equally recognized in both types of high schools as illustrated in the following statements:

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9 Given the fact that results did not reveal any specific differences in answers of different groups of principals, their specific circumstances are not listed in the presentation of the results.

*“In strengthening students’ capacities, we focus on generic competencies and outcomes of cross-curricular topics... Improving students’ digital maturity... Through the EU project, we have completely changed the curricula as well as offered the students a new concept which is focused on research, practical work, laboratory work (we have introduced a new curriculum: Forensics, Robotics, Day-to-day chemistry, and Financial mathematics) ...”*

*“Priorities are international projects (Erasmus+), Knowledge Olympiads at the international level as well as participating in state and local projects and competitions”*

Furthermore, more statements should be identified specifying the activities focused on solving students’ disciplinary issues, prevention of undesirable situations in classes, and improvement of lower academic achievements. It seems that this group of activities represents a basis for more frequently anticipated scenarios of ISL in high schools.

*“Currently, an actual topic is “Drugs in schools – it is not a matter of yes or no, but rather how much of it is there?... The goal is to alleviate the existing problem by sharing experiences and initiating various applicable methods...”*

*“In this case, the achievements would be based on providing care for children, so they are not in the streets, but rather in schools, also increasing care for children with disabilities, remedial classes during the year for students who have enrolled in school, but cannot read or write, although they are often not absent from classes”.*

Principals’ statements clearly describe situations in which they feel most successful when performing the instructional role in strengthening students’ capacities. They feel successful when students get good and visible results in competitions, state Matura exams, or any other visible achievements during their actions (for example, if they are successful in volunteer work, achieve success in their further education, or prove themselves in the labor market by setting up their own company). However, certain statements show different experiences. A special light on the questioning the successfulness of their role was thrown by principals’ personal reflections on some specific or critical events which they have been faced with during their career:

*“After 20 years, now as an experienced principal, one student has attempted suicide at school. She has survived. She has not attended school for 2 years. Poor family. We have put enormous effort as well as knowledge and skills to bring her back to school, thus, we have organized home classes, and managed to help her get her diploma. After handing the student a final school certificate, her mother came, all teared up, unable to say anything except Thank you.”*

Moreover, by analyzing principals’ statements focused on strengthening students’ capacities, an assumption can be accepted i.e., it is not possible to precisely define the concept of neither *the instructional successful principal* nor *instructional successful schools* if the outcomes are not considered in the context of previously determined goals and priorities, i.e., in the con-

text of instructional leadership's dominant focus. In most conducted studies, ISL gets connected with predetermined indicators of students' or school's achievements (standardized tests achievements, academic success expressed in grades). However, it seems that this approach takes into consideration only those aspects of ISL that are focused on development-competitive activities, while the whole specter of circumstances, activities, and results of ISL focused on prevention-corrective activities stays completely neglected.

***Strengthening teachers' capacities.*** When describing principals' priorities and activities related to the *strengthening teachers' capacities*, a high number of statements confirms that normal types of instructional activities take place frequently (monitoring teaching process by observing teaching and giving feedback, encouraging professional development and dissemination of what has been learned/taught, encouraging project submission, providing support in solving problems, etc.). Only a small number of exceptions has been noticed which indicates the lack of this type of principal's instructional engagement (in all or just some activities), the main reason being the lack of spare time or the belief that teachers should take personal responsibility for the strengthening their capacities:

*"...So, my monitoring mostly comes down to monitoring through e-grade book from the "comfortable principal's seat". This is more of an administrative monitoring and if I notice certain worrying situations during this grade book check, I will invite the teacher to explain it".*

*"I monitor, but not enough, I admit. Only in a case of a trainee. I monitor teaching of those who are candidates for promotion (already a third grade at the faculty) and especially when students or parents submit a complaint regarding teacher's performance or if expert-pedagogical supervision arrives after parents' submissions or the anonymous ones".*

*"At the beginning of my career, I used to participate in solving minor disciplinary challenges, but I have learned that, after a while, teacher completely turns over the problem to the principal and/or expert associates and does not get personally involved in it...".*

While observing principals' statements in this group of priority activities, variations in instructional leadership practice can also be observed in regards to their two basic focuses: initiatives can be focused on strengthening capacities of a particular group of teachers that requires additional support (trainees, teachers who encounter challenging learning or teaching situations, etc.) or on strengthening capacities of teachers who want to further improve learning and teaching process (implementation of new teaching techniques and methods, application of new technologies). As for strengthening students' capacities, it can be assumed that the results will be more visible in situations where principals can focus more on development-competitive activities. However, in this segment, principals rarely revealed those indicators of success that would illustrate a realization of a certain starting goal related to the strengthening teachers' capacities such as the percentage of teachers who introduce certain innovative teaching methods or those who successfully cope with a certain challenging situation. When

describing successful experiences while working with teachers, principals most frequently mention outcomes in the terms of establishing and maintaining desirable social relationships among the staff as well as recognizing proactive teachers' behaviors:

*"I feel successful while nurturing good interpersonal relationships, creating a pleasant atmosphere in the school environment, encouraging teachers while they learn new values."*

*"My activities throughout previous years, as well as my experience and results which we have achieved together convinced teachers to trust my work. When you reach a level of trust and create an encouraging atmosphere in school – then all challenges and ambitions are more easily accomplished."*

*"I feel efficient when I successfully encourage teachers to individually initiate certain activity."*

In their statements, principals often mention activities related to the organization of teacher's professional development programs, most frequently emphasizing their dissatisfaction with its existing system. Key topics that can be singled out from these statements are related to offered content of these programs organized outside of schools, their accessibility to a higher number of teachers as well as schools' engagement in the organization of the abovementioned programs.

*"Unfortunately, regarding external educations which are organized by ETTA (Education and Teacher Training Agency) as well as regional professional development meetings, we express more and more criticism and dissatisfaction."*

*"...We also intensively participate in numerous employees' mobility programs through the EU projects because of which numerous teachers have gained broader experiences during international training which consequently created dissatisfaction with "domestic offer".*

*"Since we were pronounced as a Center for Regional Competitiveness, one of the reasons for candidature was the access to numerous [professional] development opportunities. I anticipate that teachers will seize this opportunity proposed for the next 2-3 years".*

According to the introduced statements, it is visible that the quality and accessibility of professional development programs acts as a significant success factor in strengthening teachers' (instructional) capacities, while in the current conditions, principals must rely on personal strengths and initiatives to a larger extent to ensure appropriate and quality programs that would fulfill teachers' needs in their schools. It seems that instructional engaged principals put more effort into the creation of an encouraging environment in which teachers can achieve their full instructional capital, recognizing this type of environment as an essential precondition in which they can achieve teachers' expected engagement during the improvement of both teaching and learning processes.

**Strengthening schools' capacities.** Even though this topic was not separately created in the interview framework, numerous principals, as a part of their instructional activities, list those related to *strengthening schools' capacities*, i.e., ensuring resources that enable better learning and teaching conditions. In their statements, they often emphasize them as their primary task in instructional leadership, which can be interpreted from the following statement:

*"For every degree that students study for, primarily, adequate conditions must be provided regarding space and material resources. If that is not the case, then a suspicion always arises that students' success is lower due to inadequate school equipment. Therefore, the principal's priority is to ensure the abovementioned conditions".*

It is important to emphasize that this group of statements is added mostly by principals who have highlighted their more significant engagement in two previous topics. Additionally, they mostly emphasize their engagement in acquiring equipment, applying for the projects, promoting the school in public, establishing cooperation and partnerships with various companies, organizations, and other subjects, while particularly emphasizing international cooperation. The following statement illustrates principals' entrepreneurial orientation:

*"School owes 35 hectares of agricultural field, greenhouses, completely new machinery. It also has a practicum for winemaking and enology (wine cellar and vineyard) as well as pomiculture (orchard). For every product, secure purchases and reliable partners have been ensured, which enables the school's self-sustainability and continuous source of income..."*

Principals particularly emphasize success indicators related to strengthening schools' capacities: they emphasize their impact on school equipment, applied projects, and school promotion in public. Regarding the frequency of this group statement, it seems that principals mostly experience their success when they ensure material conditions for better learning and teaching. The following statement illustrates this tendency:

*"I have established numerous national and international partnerships and cooperation with renowned companies, organizations, establishments, and institutions, out of which I single out... As well as with numerous renowned national and foreign companies such as... Only during last and this year, I have signed over twenty contracts of cooperation and partnership treaties, which have directly contributed to the school's development, education improvement and enabled a direct approach to the labor market and new technologies for my students and teachers..."*

Initiatives focused on strengthening the school's capacities also vary from those focused on development-competitive to those focused on prevention-corrective. Interviewed principals rarely mentioned statements that illustrate prevention-corrective activities, yet it has been revealed that certain school's capacities need strengthening and that schools still must ensure appropriate teaching equipment. One statement of this type indicates the need to strengthen the practical part of teaching:

*“As a possible drawback, I would mention the lack of practice in institutions, i.e., companies outside of school”.*

If we take into consideration the frequency of statements on initiatives about strengthening school's capacities, it can be concluded that (high school) principals experience their managerial or instructional role and responsibilities more powerfully compared to those instructional roles and leadership initiatives that are directly focused on strengthening teachers and students' capacities. This finding is additionally supported by the statements used for identifying circumstances that can contribute to the success of their instructional role's fulfillment.

### **Circumstances that impact ISL practice**

While analyzing all principals' statements, isolating those that emphasize the circumstances which can contribute to their success in ISL activities' realization, we can first identify those circumstances that leave an impact at a school level (related to personal traits of principals as well as traits of those employees with whom he interacts) and those that have an impact outside of school environment (at the education policy level).

***Circumstances that related to the principal's personality traits.*** In this group of statements, the most dominant topics are those that describe principal's relationship towards their instructional role. Thus, they can be summarized into two categories: a) evaluation of role's importance and personal engagement in its fulfillment and b) evaluation of competitiveness for the role's fulfillment. Principals do not cast any doubts about the (high) evaluation of their instructional role's importance, although they might not agree either on stating the most important aspect of that role or the aspect on which they focus more. Moreover, apart from not doubting about the importance of the mentioned principal's role and desirable engagement, they do not miss the opportunity to mention that this is just one segment of their principal's leadership which they rarely engage in due to a list of reasons, subsequently leading to a lack of motivation for these activities:

*“Along with all activities and work I do with administrative-technical personnel, local community, outside environment in which school acts, I do not have a lot of time to do activities related to learning and teaching processes, which represent fundamental school's responsibility...”*

Principals often emphasize the principles that lead them to the fulfillment of their instructional role and state certain traits that help them in this process, among which they frequently emphasize the importance of creating entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, openness, proactivity, and readiness for change. Expectedly, interviewed principals did not highlight the examples of undesirable principal's relationship towards their instructional role. However, according to one statement, it can be concluded what impression these principals get of their colleagues who are “different”, which makes it clear that different scenarios exist in practice:

*“I suppose you should care a little bit less, turn a blind eye on certain things and let them unfold without much responsibility (as I hear that one local principal went through whole “corona” without faculty meetings, without any guilt), but this is just not who I am...”*

Principals mostly feel competent to perform their instructional role. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of gained (principal’s) experience, established support network with other principals, and gained competencies, even though, they do not specify them.

*“The results also depend on the principal’s experience. I estimate that principals who have served at least two mandates have bigger chances to achieve goals.”*

Certain principals point out the need for further development of competencies, admitting that they often act intuitively and without prior knowledge about how to act in certain situations.

The above-mentioned statements lead towards a conclusion that the first important precondition for successful fulfillment of principal’s instructional role is their impression of their own instructional role’s importance followed by a strong personal engagement, a strong feeling of self-efficiency in this segment of principal’s work, and clear principles according to which they will direct their instructional activities. The question that was left unanswered in this study is related to the discovery of specific competencies that contribute to the experience of self-efficiency. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to examine how the professional identity of engaged, efficient, and goal-oriented instructional principals developed over time. Even though it was not explicitly expressed in principals’ statements, it is possible to conclude that the intensity of principal’s engagement in conducting ISL activities primarily depends on their autonomous decision, which can be perceived, in the context of actual educational *policy* suggestions on the importance of ISL, as a significant deficit of education policy that should directly encourage ISL practicing by using appropriate mechanisms.

***Circumstances that related to principals’ associates.*** Principals often emphasize that the success of ISL activities depends mostly on employees with whom they interact, which represents a big challenge in their work. Principals who participated in the study, almost without exceptions or significant variations, describe a high degree of cooperation with professional associates (if their professional support is available to them, i.e., if the school has employed expert associates) and teachers (individually or organized into professional faculties or smaller working teams) in most activities which they use to describe ISL processes. From this group of statements, we can single out those that describe desirable/undesirable and negative/unsupportive characteristics, i.e., behaviors of individual colleagues. In those situations, principals mostly refer to teachers as the ones who mostly show variations in the observed characteristics. Most of the interviewed principals point out that they see most of their colleagues as supportive, whereas the percentage of those who show resistant behaviors in their school is negligible. Moreover, they emphasize specific characteristics of both groups of teachers.



*“The most supportive are certainly coordinators of professional development meetings, which is expected as I have personally chosen them, and I expect the most from them.”*

*“My school counselor and teachers whose students achieve good results as well as teachers who are self-critical enough and want to work on themselves have been my biggest support...”*

When describing teachers' undesirable characteristics and behaviors, they mostly refer to those who do not believe in innovative teaching approaches and are strongly opposed to their inclusion. Furthermore, they neither accept criticism for their work nor see their mistakes, instead, they blame others for them, or they are nearing their retirement which makes them demotivated to innovate teaching. Apart from that, most principals successfully find and apply strategies that they use in their work with teachers that show resistance as they recognize circumstances that can increase teachers' motivation and engagement. Principals emphasize that teachers are successfully motivated by working in a well-equipped school, a school that represents an example of good practice compared to other schools, which they can use to boast in front of others as well as if they start to believe in the success of certain initiative or notice active engagement of other teachers.

*“From time to time I, of course, meet individuals who are absolutely against what we are trying to do: for example, to change teaching styles or introduce new projects, curricula...However with experience, I cope with these situations easier. With these employees, I try to develop empathy by asking appropriate questions to make them participate in a conversation and to change starting hostile attitudes as well as make them enjoy that discussion. If I make them think and discuss a problem, I have already improved...”*

However, examples have also been noticed where principals cannot find mechanisms that would help them influence those who show resistance.

*“...Also, sometimes as a principal, I have to face the fact that there are people who refuse to change anything, so I try to find an approach where they do not hinder the work of other high-quality individuals as well as a way to evade them, so they do not become an obstacle.”*

From the previously mentioned statements, it can be confirmed that instructional more successful principals are those, who have ensured continuous support from their expert associates, i.e., they work with the most motivated teachers as well as those who can choose and apply mechanisms to engage a higher number of employees, including those who are not interested in cooperation. It is important to highlight that principals warn about the lack of available mechanisms which they can also personally use such as either awarding successful or sanctioning demotivated employees, all while they turn their expectations towards the education policy level.

***Circumstances that related to education policy.*** Research participants emphasize several education policy characteristics that can influence the success of the principal instructional role's

fulfillment. Additionally, the significantly higher number of statements refers to unfavorable circumstances that must be changed. They mostly mention the insufficient influence of education policy in defining their profession, emphasizing undefined borders of work limit and work assignments, which lowers their possibilities to improve their teaching and learning practice:

*“To describe principal’s working conditions in more detail, I will mention one bizarre example: During holiday break in 2016 without any compensation or paid travel expenses, I personally planned, built, set up and installed wireless network, projectors in every classroom, video surveillance in the hallways, alarm, and burglar alarm system, sound system, and music in school as well as an automatic school bell. This is a job that I was doing for 14 hours a day and in which I have invested more than 300 hours of work...”*

Principals point out the possible solutions to this problem, by not only mentioning the importance of defining key principal’s responsibilities but also indicating the need to choose principal’s assistant. Additionally, they mention the matter of principal selection, performance evaluation, and the lack of autonomy at work, singling out concrete indicators which show that education policy has not ensured adequate conditions for the professionalization of this calling.

*“Every new re-election represents additional stress besides usually high-stress levels, I have to know how to balance well between all school’s employees and parents because all of them re-elect me ... The efficiency would be even higher if we had the support of all institutions related to education and that I can freely apply ideas regarding the improvement of the teaching process and teachers’ performance, i.e., that they do not participate in my re-election for the principal in this school.”*

Apart from education policy at a national level, principals, to a lesser extent, mention the matter of managing schools at a local level. Principals only sporadically recognize and emphasize the contribution of founders or the local community in the context of circumstances that can impact instructional leadership. These statements are neither detailed, precise, nor directed towards concrete contents. It is only possible to elucidate several statements concluding that the support was gained by their financing of certain initiatives and improving the school’s material conditions. Since the principals have reflected on this topic neither by listing concrete examples of desirable or undesirable actions nor from the perspective of their personal proactive role towards founders and local communities, in further research, more attention should be paid to this topic and encourage principals to describe the abovementioned relationship in more detail. In conclusion, circumstances related to the impact of education policy on ISL are common to all principals and they cannot influence them, although minor variations can be noticed in the ways of how individual principals face them.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

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Results of the conducted study thoroughly describe and explain several different scenarios of instructional school leadership present in Croatian high schools. It is important to remember that this paper emphasizes ISL scenarios in schools led by principals who are known for their proactive and successful impact on strengthening teachers' capacities, i.e., for the attention they direct towards the improvement of the teaching and learning process. It was noticed that the analysis of positive ISL practices highlights the existence of several possible scenarios, which, among everything else, differ in various (desirable) outcomes observed in the students, teachers, or school academic success' terms. These scenarios can be described and compared if we examine them according to several key points:

1. *School's context (scene)*. Even though the results of this study have not determined key differences between various types of high school and dominating principals' instructional activities, it is visible that differences stem from certain specific characteristics and schools' needs, emphasized by the principals. Expectedly, the principals mostly refer to students' demographic characteristics and pedagogical priorities in interactions with students in their schools, but certain findings have been revealed regarding some other factors that form principals' instructional behaviors: existing structure and the teachers training degree, existing state of material equipment in school as well as existing position and the role of school in the local community. Mentioned factors will, without a doubt, influence the formation of every principal's instructional leadership goals and principles and will result in different outcomes. This finding must be posed concerning the discussions about the phenomenon called successful or efficient schools (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011; Ažić-Bastalić, 2018), i.e., an emphasis is put on the topics that problematize certain success indicators that are used as reference points in proclaiming certain schools (or national education systems) successful or less successful. Most of the relevant studies that examine direct or indirect ISL's effects on certain students' or school's achievements use students' academic success expressed in grades or certain standard achievement test results as reference points (Hallinger and Wang, 2015). The study results highlight the importance of measuring some other indicators of students' achievements, thus, monitoring the success level of certain prevention-corrective measures' application can represent a big challenge.

2. *Dominating ISL activities (action)*. The study results show that high school principals report on ISL activities from the correction-preventive activities category more often, which means that, despite desirable and successful practice, the outcome of these activities will not be visible in students' excellent results on standard achievement tests. Additionally, the representation of their activities focused on strengthening students, teachers, and the school's capacities vary. If dominating ISL activities are commented in the light of successfully achieved ISL goals, then a whole variety of episodes will be displayed: Thus, on the one hand, some categories of

students can be identified, i.e., those who achieve notable results in competitions, students who have achieved great State Matura exams results or those who got desired jobs. On the other hand, students who have improved poor academic results reduced personal school absenteeism or resisted undesirable street temptations can also be recognized.

*3. Principal's role in ISL (main character).* In most situations, it has been noted that these are principals who recognize the importance of their role in ISL, thus, they feel motivated, competent, proactive, and innovative, but their personal engagement in the mentioned activities varies regarding other priority activities and duties that their position requires. According to their statements, data for precise competence ISL profile have not been found, but it is important to indicate that quality expert basis for the description of this profile exists in the Croatian context (for example in Vican, Radeka, and Sorić, 2016). Scenarios in which principals are overwhelmed with other (mostly administrative) duties, thus unable to work on ISL activities, are surely undesirable. Results of this study show that in favorable scenarios, those principals have the backing of supportive expert associates and motivated teachers, who, in these scenarios, conduct a part of ISL activities on their own, yet the question arises on what happens in schools where principals are both overloaded and without colleagues' instructional support. It can be assumed that there are schools, in which principals do not play the main role in ISL implementation. Instead, this role is left to the expert associate or motivated members of the faculty, so the scenario of successful teachers' instructional leadership can be observed (Mangin, 2007; Portin, Russell, Samuelson, and Knapp, 2013). However, it should be noted that these scenarios can only be realized if they are preceded by activities created for the thoughtful and systemic teachers' preparation to take over a part of ISL.

*4. Associates' role in ISL (other characters).* Generally, instructional school leadership implies a high degree of cooperation and interaction between the principal and other employees in school, especially with expert associates and teachers. In dominating ISL scenarios, attention is directed towards motivated teachers who want to improve and innovate teaching practices. Additionally, they develop professionally which makes the principal's engagement considerably easier. Only in a smaller number of cases, principals confront those who exert resistant behaviors and do not want to cooperate actively. However, not everyone is equally successful in finding appropriate approaches to this problem. Also, more welcome scenarios are those referring to both desirable and supportive associates' activities and principals' strategies that result in the transformation of roles from less desirable to desirable ones. These findings additionally confirm the importance of strengthening the principal's capacities related to human resources management, which was indicated by almost 50% of high school principals, stating priority needs for professional development according to the TALIS study's framework. (Markočić-Dekanić et al., 2020).

*5. Education policy context (environment).* Education policy context at the national level is identical in all scenarios: borders between principal's work responsibilities and overload are

not defined; principal's competencies and results of their work do not necessarily affect their election and re-election, but it is rather, often, influenced by politics; quality of principal's work is neither systematically monitored nor evaluated. It can be noted that principals' statements point out practices that have been singled out as the weakness of Croatian education policy in the international context for some time (OECD, 2016; Markočić-Dekanić et al., 2020). Even though the context related to education policy is identical in all scenarios, certain minor variations can be observed in ways in which individual principals cope with the existing circumstances. Minor variations in this context can also be found in the education policy at the local level. Thus, in some cases, a relatively good and previously well-established relationship between founders and school/principal can be detected, while in some statements, this context cannot be noticed. Furthermore, having in mind the results of recent studies which recognize exactly this aspect of the relationship as the predictor of efficient principal's ISL (Honig, 2012; Carraway and Young, 2014), it can be assumed that more desirable scenarios are those, in which principals successfully and (pro)actively cooperate with the founders, whereas founders offer more support to the teaching and learning activities in schools.

If the results of this study should be compared with previously known data on ISL, it is important to remember that, in most studies on instructional leadership, the data was gathered utilizing the PIMRS questionnaire or its shorter versions (Hallinger and Wang, 2015). These data precisely report about the frequency of certain principal or other subject's ISL practices, but from the formulation of specific items, it is not possible to identify whether principals are more focused on preventive-correction or development-competitive ones. Although more complex (correlation) research drafts of PIRMS studies mainly indicate indirect or reciprocal effects of certain contextual variables, results in this study revealed which data on the specific context inside or outside school can have a stronger influence on the ISL practice's characteristics in Croatian high school.

This study brought up a list of open questions that must be examined. It should be especially verified which scenarios dominate in schools whose principals conduct ISL activities to a lesser extent as well as which circumstances outside or inside school influence the principal's decision to either deal with these activities less or to leave them to the other employees (most frequently to expert associates). Results of this study have not revealed finer nuances of differences in the approach to ISL between principals of different types of schools such as grammar schools and vocational schools. Vocational school principals more often emphasize their teaching role in strengthening school capacities, which they especially emphasize in situations when the results of these efforts are visible in a well-equipped school. The applied data gathering methodology by using written interviews has surely restricted the amount and quality of obtained information, therefore, certain topics have not been brought up in this study.

In the end, it is worth asking how education policymakers should approach certain results of this study. First, they should start from suggestions that have been already mentioned in

the report on the conducted TALIS study, which emphasizes the importance of encouraging principals to practice ISL and to train them for this role. Following the principals' statements about the circumstances that obstruct ISL practice, those should be noticed that refer to (unfavorable) principal election practice, the scope of principal's responsibilities being too wide, the lack of assessment of the quality of their work as well as lack of support and autonomy in their work. An enormous step in preparing principals for their instructional role can start exactly by putting these topics on the Croatian education policy agenda.

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