

ADAPTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED KINDERGARTENS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PRINCIPALS' STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership plays a critical role in improving learning quality in early childhood education; however, its enactment in resource-constrained kindergarten settings remains underexplored. This study examines how kindergarten principals implement adaptive instructional leadership in contexts characterized by limited resources, heavy reliance on honorary teachers, and demanding curricular demands. Employing a qualitative descriptive–interpretive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving kindergarten principals, teachers, and early childhood education supervisors in resource-constrained kindergartens. Data were analyzed using an interactive thematic analysis approach guided by the Adaptive Instructional Leadership framework. The findings reveal five interrelated leadership strategies: (1) pragmatically framing instructional vision under resource constraints, (2) enacting context-responsive academic supervision, (3) facilitating school-based professional learning as a substitute for formal development, (4) mediating curriculum implementation through contextual adaptation, and (5) sustaining instructional quality through relational and collaborative leadership practices. These strategies demonstrate that instructional leadership in kindergartens operates as a dynamic and adaptive process rather than a standardized set of practices. This study contributes to instructional leadership theory by foregrounding adaptation and contextual responsiveness as central mechanisms of leadership in early childhood education. The findings offer theoretical insights and practical implications for leadership development and policy initiatives to strengthen instructional leadership capacity in resource-constrained kindergarten settings.

Keywords: Adaptive, leadership; kindergarten principals; schools; early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership has long been recognized as a pivotal factor in improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes by positioning school leaders as the primary drivers of instructional improvement (Hallinger, 2020). In recent years, the discourse on instructional leadership has evolved beyond traditional managerial and supervisory roles toward more context-responsive and adaptive leadership practices, particularly in educational settings characterized by complexity and resource constraints (Bush, 2021; Robinson, 2022). This shift reflects a growing consensus that effective school leadership must be sensitive to contextual realities rather than relying on standardized leadership models detached from everyday school conditions.

In early childhood education (ECE), instructional leadership is particularly significant given the holistic nature of learning, which integrates cognitive, social-emotional, moral, and developmental domains (OECD, 2020). Despite its importance, leadership practices in kindergartens have received far less scholarly attention than those in primary and secondary education, especially in low-resource or rural contexts (Heikka et al., 2019; Douglass, 2021). Existing studies indicate that kindergarten principals often face unique challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate professional development opportunities, heavy reliance on temporary or honorary teachers, and increasing demands to implement curriculum reforms (Thornton et al., 2023). These conditions necessitate leadership strategies that are not only instructional in orientation but also adaptive.

Recent literature highlights the emergence of adaptive instructional leadership, a leadership approach that emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness, and contextual problem-solving in guiding instructional practices under constrained conditions (Leithwood et al., 2020; Brown, 2024). Adaptive instructional leadership acknowledges that principals in resource-constrained

schools must continuously negotiate between policy expectations, teacher capacity, and local sociocultural realities. In early childhood settings, this adaptive capacity becomes even more critical, as instructional leadership must align pedagogical quality with child-centered learning approaches and community expectations (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2022).

Despite growing recognition of adaptive leadership, empirical evidence on how kindergarten principals enact instructional leadership strategies in resource-constrained contexts remains limited. Most existing studies focus either on leadership outcomes, such as teacher performance and school effectiveness, or adopt quantitative approaches that overlook the nuanced processes through which principals adapt their leadership practices (Nguyen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2024). Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how principals operationalize instructional leadership day-to-day when faced with limited resources, diverse teacher capacities, and contextual curriculum demands.

This issue is particularly evident in kindergartens operating in developing regions, where principals often lead schools with minimal infrastructure, constrained budgets, and a workforce dominated by honorary teachers with varying levels of professional preparation (UNESCO, 2021; Azorín & Ainscow, 2023). While policy frameworks increasingly emphasize instructional leadership as a key competence for school leaders, the practical enactment of such leadership under these conditions remains underexplored. As a result, a significant gap persists between leadership policy ideals and leadership practices in early childhood education.

Several recent studies have attempted to address aspects of instructional leadership in ECE, yet important limitations remain. Brown (2024), for example, examined instructional leadership practices among pre-kindergarten principals in the United States and found that leadership efforts were frequently constrained by time pressures and accountability demands, limiting principals' ability to focus on instructional improvement. Similarly, Thornton et al. (2023) reported that early childhood leaders demonstrated strong commitment to instructional quality, but their leadership practices were often fragmented due to insufficient professional learning systems. Meanwhile, Li et al. (2024) identified a positive relationship between instructional leadership and teacher self-efficacy in early childhood settings; however, their quantitative design did not capture how principals adapt their leadership strategies in response to contextual constraints.

Collectively, these studies confirm the importance of instructional leadership in early childhood education but reveal a critical gap in methodology and conceptualization. Specifically, there is a lack of qualitative, context-rich investigations into how kindergarten principals adapt instructional leadership strategies in resource-constrained environments and how local conditions, teacher characteristics, and institutional limitations shape these strategies. Moreover, existing research rarely positions adaptive leadership as an analytical lens for understanding instructional leadership practices in early childhood education.

Addressing this gap is urgent for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, examining adaptive instructional leadership in kindergartens can extend existing leadership frameworks by integrating context sensitivity and resource constraints as central analytical dimensions (Hallinger, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). Practically, understanding principals' adaptive strategies can inform leadership development programs and policy interventions aimed at strengthening instructional leadership capacity in early childhood settings with limited resources (OECD, 2020; Azorín & Ainscow, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this study explores how kindergarten principals enact adaptive instructional leadership in resource-constrained contexts through an in-depth qualitative approach. Specifically, this research examines the strategies principals employ to guide instructional practices, support teacher professional development, and sustain learning quality amid structural and contextual limitations. By focusing on principals' lived experiences and leadership practices, this study aims to contribute empirically grounded insights into adaptive instructional leadership in early childhood education.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to analyze the adaptive instructional leadership strategies employed by kindergarten principals in resource-constrained schools, identify the key challenges they face, and develop a contextual understanding of how instructional leadership is practiced in early childhood education settings with limited resources. Through this contribution, the study seeks to advance leadership theory in ECE and offer practical implications for policymakers and practitioners working in similar educational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive–interpretive research design to explore how kindergarten principals enact adaptive instructional leadership within resource-constrained educational settings. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study sought to capture principals’ leadership strategies, adaptive decision-making processes, and contextual considerations as experienced and interpreted by educational actors in real school settings. Rather than measuring leadership effectiveness quantitatively, this study aimed to generate an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of how instructional leadership is adapted under conditions of limited resources.

The research was guided by the Adaptive Instructional Leadership conceptual framework, which conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic process shaped by contextual constraints, leadership practices, mediating school processes, and instructional outcomes. This framework informed the design of data collection instruments, analytical focus, and interpretation of findings.

Research Context

The study was conducted in kindergartens located in Arut Selatan District, Kotawaringin Barat Regency, Indonesia. This area represents a resource-constrained early childhood education context, characterized by limited financial and material resources, minimal instructional facilities, and a high reliance on honorary (non-permanent) teachers. In addition to structural constraints, kindergarten principals in this context are required to implement national early childhood education policies while simultaneously adapting to local curriculum mandates rooted in regional sociocultural values. This context was intentionally selected to examine how instructional leadership is practiced and adapted in early childhood education settings where structural limitations shape leadership priorities and strategies.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with direct experience of instructional leadership practices in kindergartens. Kindergarten principals were the primary participants because of their central role in instructional decision-making and school leadership. To enhance contextual depth and triangulation, kindergarten teachers and early childhood education supervisors were included as supporting participants. Sampling followed the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until recurring themes were identified and no new substantive insights emerged. This ensured that the findings reflected shared leadership patterns across different schools while maintaining analytical depth.

Data Sources and Data Collection

Data were collected over several months using multiple qualitative data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of adaptive instructional leadership practices. These data sources included: Semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and supervisors, focusing on leadership strategies, instructional supervision, professional development, and contextual challenges. Non-participant observations of leadership activities related to instructional supervision, teacher coordination, and school-based professional interactions. Document

analysis of institutional records, including supervision reports, school work plans, and curriculum documents. Interview protocols were aligned with the conceptual framework, allowing participants to articulate their leadership experiences while maintaining analytical focus. Observations and document analysis were used to corroborate interview data and provide additional evidence of leadership practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were first coded inductively to identify meaningful units related to adaptive instructional leadership. These initial codes were then organized into broader thematic categories informed by the conceptual framework, including contextual constraints, adaptive leadership practices, mediating school processes, and instructional outcomes. Throughout the analysis, emerging interpretations were continuously compared across data sources to enhance analytical rigor and ensure theoretical coherence.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the study’s trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing data from principals, teachers, and supervisors, while method triangulation involved integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy and credibility. These strategies strengthened the study’s credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and that their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities and institutional information, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. To enhance methodological transparency, Table 1 summarizes the key components of the research design and procedures.

Table 1. Overview of the Research Methodology

Component	Description
Research approach	Qualitative descriptive–interpretive
Theoretical framework	Adaptive Instructional Leadership
Research setting	Resource-constrained kindergartens in Arut Selatan District
Participants	Kindergarten principals (primary), teachers, and ECE supervisors (supporting)
Sampling technique	Purposive sampling with data saturation
Data sources	Interviews, observations, document analysis
Data analysis	Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s interactive model
Trustworthiness	Triangulation and member checking
Ethical considerations	Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation

Methodological Alignment with the Study Purpose

This methodological design enables a systematic and in-depth exploration of how kindergarten principals adapt instructional leadership strategies in resource-constrained contexts. By aligning qualitative inquiry with the adaptive instructional leadership framework, the study ensures coherence between research objectives, analytical procedures, and empirical findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that kindergarten principals enact adaptive instructional leadership through a set of interconnected strategies shaped by contextual constraints,

instructional priorities, and teacher capacities. Analysis of interview data, observations, and documents resulted in five major themes that illustrate how principals navigate instructional leadership in resource-constrained kindergarten settings.

Framing an Instructional Vision under Resource Constraints

Principals demonstrated a strong awareness of their role as instructional leaders by articulating a vision centered on improving learning quality and holistic child development. However, this instructional vision was not framed as an ambitious reform agenda; rather, it was intentionally adaptive and pragmatic, accounting for limited human and material resources. Instead of emphasizing standardized performance targets, principals focused on attainable instructional goals, such as improving daily classroom routines, strengthening teacher–child interactions, and ensuring the consistent use of developmentally appropriate practices. This adaptive framing allowed principals to maintain instructional focus without overwhelming teachers who were already facing heavy workloads and limited professional support. The findings indicate that instructional vision in resource-constrained kindergartens functions more as a guiding narrative that aligns instructional priorities with contextual realities than as a formal policy statement. Principals continuously adjusted their expectations based on teacher capacity and available resources, reflecting a leadership approach grounded in situational awareness rather than rigid goal enforcement.

Context-Responsive Academic Supervision as Adaptive Practice

Academic supervision emerged as a central yet highly adaptive leadership practice. Principals regularly conducted classroom observations and reviewed instructional documents; however, supervision practices extended beyond formal administrative monitoring. Given time constraints and limited supervisory training, principals blended formal supervision with informal, relational, and practice-oriented guidance. Rather than providing standardized feedback, principals tailored supervisory support to individual teacher needs, particularly for honorary teachers who often lacked formal pedagogical training. Supervision frequently took the form of brief post-observation conversations, modeling instructional strategies, or immediate problem-solving discussions related to classroom challenges. This theme highlights that academic supervision in resource-constrained kindergartens is enacted as a flexible support mechanism rather than a structured evaluation system. Principals prioritized maintaining instructional continuity and teacher confidence over strict compliance with supervisory procedures, demonstrating adaptive leadership that emphasizes instructional improvement within realistic constraints.

School-Based Professional Learning as a Substitute for Formal Development

Limited access to external professional development programs prompted principals to rely heavily on school-based professional learning strategies. These strategies included informal peer discussions, reflective meetings, and collaborative lesson-planning sessions embedded in routine school activities. Principals positioned themselves as facilitators of learning rather than formal trainers, encouraging teachers to share experiences, discuss classroom difficulties, and collectively explore practical solutions. This approach was particularly important in contexts dominated by honorary teachers, whose participation in external training was often restricted by financial and administrative barriers. The findings suggest that adaptive instructional leadership in this context involves redefining professional development as a continuous, practice-based process embedded in daily school life. While these informal strategies could not fully replace structured training programs, they played a critical role in sustaining instructional improvement and fostering teachers' professional commitment.

Negotiating Curriculum Implementation through Contextual Adaptation

Curriculum leadership, particularly the implementation of locally contextualized curriculum mandates, required significant adaptation on the part of principals. While national and regional policies emphasized integrating local cultural values into early childhood learning, teachers often lacked the pedagogical skills to translate these mandates into meaningful classroom practice. Principals addressed this challenge by simplifying curriculum expectations and encouraging incremental integration of local content, such as incorporating local stories, songs, and cultural practices into thematic learning. Rather than enforcing full compliance with the curriculum, principals adopted a negotiated approach, balancing policy requirements with teacher readiness and classroom realities. This theme illustrates how adaptive instructional leadership operates at the intersection of policy and practice. Principals served as mediators, translating abstract curriculum mandates into feasible instructional actions, thereby preventing curriculum overload and maintaining instructional coherence.

Sustaining Instructional Quality through Relational and Collaborative Leadership

Relational leadership emerged as a key mechanism through which principals sustained instructional quality despite structural limitations. Principals intentionally cultivated a collaborative school culture by fostering open communication, mutual support, and shared responsibility for learning outcomes. Trust-based relationships were particularly important in motivating honorary teachers, whose low job security and limited compensation often affected professional commitment. Principals used relational strategies—such as recognition, personal encouragement, and inclusive decision-making—to maintain teacher engagement and willingness to improve instructional practices. The findings indicate that adaptive instructional leadership in resource-constrained kindergartens relies heavily on social capital and collaboration as substitutes for formal resources. By strengthening interpersonal relationships and collective commitment, principals sustained instructional focus even when material support was limited.

Summary of Findings

Collectively, these five themes illustrate that adaptive instructional leadership in resource-constrained kindergartens is characterized by flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and relational support. Principals do not abandon instructional leadership ideals; instead, they reinterpret and enact them in ways that align with local conditions, teacher capacities, and institutional limitations. These findings provide empirical evidence that instructional leadership in early childhood education cannot be understood as a fixed set of practices. Rather, it is a dynamic and adaptive process, shaped by the interplay between leadership intentions, contextual constraints, and collaborative school processes.

Discussion

This study examined how kindergarten principals enact adaptive instructional leadership in resource-constrained contexts. The findings reveal that instructional leadership in early childhood education is not a fixed or standardized set of practices, but rather a context-sensitive, relational, and adaptive process shaped by structural limitations, teacher capacity, and sociocultural demands. This section discusses each major theme in relation to existing literature and highlights the study's theoretical contributions.

Adaptive Framing of Instructional Vision in Constrained Contexts

The findings demonstrate that principals framed their instructional vision pragmatically, prioritizing attainable improvements in instructional quality over ambitious reform agendas. This aligns with recent scholarship arguing that leadership effectiveness in constrained settings depends on leaders' capacity to translate aspirational goals into contextually feasible actions (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Unlike traditional instructional leadership models that emphasize strong goal-setting and performance targets, the adaptive vision identified in this study reflects

a situated leadership logic in which vision functions as a flexible guide rather than a rigid directive.

This finding extends Hallinger's instructional leadership framework by illustrating how vision-setting in early childhood contexts becomes adaptive rather than prescriptive. In line with Eacott (2021), leadership is presented here as relational and context-bound, challenging universalistic assumptions about the effectiveness of instructional leadership. The study, therefore, contributes to theory by demonstrating that instructional vision in kindergartens under resource constraints operates as a negotiated and evolving construct, rather than a static leadership function.

Reconceptualizing Academic Supervision as Context-Responsive Support

Academic supervision emerged not as a formalized evaluative mechanism but as a flexible, relational practice tailored to teacher needs and contextual realities. This supports recent arguments that supervision in early childhood education should prioritize professional growth and instructional support over compliance-driven evaluation (O'Gorman & Hard, 2021). Principals' adaptive supervision practices—such as informal mentoring and immediate feedback—reflect a shift from bureaucratic supervision toward developmental leadership.

This finding contributes to the theory by reframing supervision as an adaptive instructional process, aligning with Spillane et al. (2022), who emphasize leadership as distributed and enacted through everyday interactions. In resource-constrained kindergartens, adaptive supervision compensates for limited formal training structures, highlighting leadership adaptability as a critical competency in instructional leadership.

School-Based Professional Learning as an Adaptive Leadership Strategy

The reliance on school-based professional learning underscores principals' role as learning facilitators rather than instructional experts. This finding is consistent with recent research suggesting that informal, practice-based professional learning is particularly effective in early childhood contexts with limited access to external training (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2019). By embedding professional learning into daily routines, principals created sustainable learning opportunities despite structural constraints.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports a shift toward leadership-as-capacity-building, reinforcing the argument that instructional leadership should be understood as enabling professional agency rather than delivering technical expertise (Harris & Jones, 2020). The study contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating how adaptive instructional leadership expands the boundaries of professional development beyond formal training models.

Adaptive Curriculum Leadership and Policy–Practice Mediation

The findings show that principals acted as mediators between curriculum policy demands and classroom realities, simplifying and contextualizing curriculum expectations to align with teacher readiness. This supports international evidence that curriculum leadership in early childhood education often requires negotiation rather than direct implementation of policy mandates (Pyle et al., 2020).

Theoretically, this reinforces the concept of policy enactment in school leadership, where principals interpret and translate policy within localized contexts (Braun et al., 2021). By illustrating how instructional leadership operates at the intersection of policy and practice, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of curriculum leadership in early childhood education, particularly in non-Western and resource-limited contexts.

Relational Leadership as a Core Mechanism for Sustaining Instructional Quality

Relational and collaborative leadership emerged as central to sustaining instructional quality, particularly in motivating honorary teachers. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasizing the importance of trust, emotional support, and relational agency in educational

leadership (Kwan, 2020; Crawford, 2021). In the absence of material incentives, principals relied on relational capital to foster teacher commitment and instructional continuity. This extends instructional leadership theory by highlighting relationality as a core adaptive resource, rather than a peripheral leadership attribute. The findings suggest that adaptive instructional leadership in kindergartens is inherently social, reinforcing arguments by Uhl-Bien et al. (2020) that leadership effectiveness emerges from relational dynamics rather than individual authority.

Theoretical Contributions of the Study

This study offers three key theoretical contributions to the literature on instructional leadership and early childhood education: Conceptual Extension of Instructional Leadership. The findings advance instructional leadership theory by integrating adaptation and resource constraints as central analytical dimensions, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness depends on contextual responsiveness rather than standardized practices. Repositioning Early Childhood Leadership in Leadership Studies. By focusing on kindergartens, this study addresses the underrepresentation of early childhood settings in leadership research. It highlights their distinct leadership dynamics (Denee & Thornton, 2020)—Adaptive Instructional Leadership as a Dynamic Process. The study conceptualizes instructional leadership as an ongoing, recursive process shaped by contextual constraints, relational practices, and professional learning, contributing a process-oriented perspective to leadership theory.

Positioning within International Scholarship

By providing qualitative, context-rich evidence from a resource-constrained early childhood setting, this study complements and extends international research on leadership in challenging contexts (Murphy et al., 2021). While prior studies often emphasize leadership outcomes, this research illuminates the mechanisms and adaptations through which instructional leadership is enacted, offering transferable insights for similar educational contexts globally.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how kindergarten principals enact adaptive instructional leadership in resource-constrained contexts by qualitatively exploring leadership practices in early childhood education. The findings demonstrate that instructional leadership in kindergartens cannot be understood as a fixed or standardized set of behaviors. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic, context-responsive process shaped by structural constraints, teacher capacity, and sociocultural demands.

The study shows that principals adapt instructional leadership by pragmatically framing instructional vision, implementing context-responsive supervision, facilitating school-based professional learning, mediating curriculum policy demands, and relying on relational and collaborative leadership practices. These adaptive strategies enable principals to sustain instructional quality despite limited financial resources, constrained professional development opportunities, and a workforce dominated by honorary teachers. By foregrounding adaptation as a central leadership mechanism, this study extends instructional leadership theory beyond its traditional focus on goal setting and supervision. It highlights that leadership effectiveness in early childhood education depends not on the intensity of leadership actions, but on leaders' capacity to align instructional priorities with contextual realities. In doing so, the study contributes a nuanced, process-oriented understanding of instructional leadership that is particularly relevant for resource-constrained educational settings.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a specific geographical and institutional context, which may limit the direct transferability of the findings to other early childhood education settings with different policy environments or resource configurations. While rich contextual descriptions

were provided, leadership practices may vary across regions and systems. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data from principals, teachers, and supervisors. Although triangulation was employed, the findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations, which may be influenced by social desirability or professional positioning. Observational data partially mitigated this limitation, but future studies could incorporate additional data sources to deepen the analysis. Third, this study focused on leadership practices rather than direct measures of child learning outcomes. As a result, while instructional quality and professional capacity were examined, the study does not establish causal links between adaptive instructional leadership and student outcomes.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can build on this study in several important ways. First, comparative studies across regions or countries could examine how adaptive instructional leadership manifests in diverse early childhood education systems, thereby strengthening the framework's generalizability and theoretical robustness. Second, longitudinal research designs allow scholars to explore how adaptive instructional leadership evolves and how sustained leadership adaptation influences instructional quality, teacher development, and organizational learning in early childhood settings. Third, mixed-methods studies could integrate qualitative insights with quantitative measures of instructional quality or child development outcomes, enabling a more comprehensive examination of the impact of adaptive instructional leadership. Finally, future studies could explore the perspectives of additional stakeholders, such as parents or local education authorities, to better understand how adaptive instructional leadership interacts with broader community and policy contexts in early childhood education.

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