Rethinking Instructional Leadership Through Teachers' Experiences: A Reflective Study from a Municipal Education Directorate in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership has traditionally been analyzed through school leaders' actions, such as supervising instruction and supporting teacher growth. Nonetheless, leadership is also a subjective, relational process, as teachers interpret and assign meaning to leadership practices in different ways. This reflective paper revisits a quantitative study that examined how teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership vary by years of experience, academic qualifications, and grade levels taught within the Old Tafo Education Directorate in Ghana. The original study used a cross-sectional design and analyzed 231 teacher responses using descriptive statistics and a three-way ANOVA. Results showed significant main effects for teaching experience and grade level taught, while academic qualification had no significant main effect. The study also identified a significant interaction between academic qualification and grade level taught. This paper uses a formal reflective approach and researcher positionality to interpret these findings through frameworks such as instructional leadership theory, social constructivism, distributed leadership, and adult learning. The reflection highlights that teachers' leadership experiences are not uniform; instead, they are shaped by professional background, instructional setting, autonomy, and the nature of work. It also emphasizes that instructional leadership in Ghana should be differentiated, relational, context-aware, and attuned to teachers' developmental needs. Lastly, it calls for moving beyond mere statistical differences to understand their implications for leadership practice, teacher development, and school improvement.

Keywords: Teacher perceptions, teaching experience, academic qualification, grade level, distributed leadership, teacher leadership

INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership is central to educational leadership research because of its relationship to teaching quality, teacher professional development, school improvement, and student learning. Unlike leadership approaches that emphasize primarily administrative functions, instructional leadership places teaching and learning at the center of school leadership through practices such as setting instructional goals, supervising classroom instruction, monitoring student learning, providing feedback, coordinating curriculum, and supporting teachers' professional development (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008). In Ghana, headteachers and educational administrators are expected to combine administrative responsibilities with instructional supervision, teacher mentoring, curriculum implementation, and school improvement (Ghana Education Service [GES], 2010; Ministry of Education, 2018). Understanding instructional leadership requires attention not only to what leaders do but also to how teachers experience and interpret those practices.

This reflective paper draws on an empirical study by Boakye et al. (2026) that examined teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership in relation to teaching experience, academic qualification, and grade level taught in the Old Tafo Municipal Education Directorate, Ghana. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, the study administered an adapted Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) via Qualtrics.

The study analyzed 231 completed responses. Teaching experience and grade level taught significantly influenced teachers' perceptions, whereas academic qualification had no significant main effect. However, academic qualification and grade level taught showed a significant interaction.

These findings raise questions beyond statistical significance. Why might teachers at different stages of their careers interpret instructional leadership differently? Why might teachers working at different grade levels experience the same leadership practices differently? Why did academic qualification not independently produce a significant difference, while its interaction with grade level did? This reflective paper therefore revisits the findings through a broader theoretical and professional lens. Rather than treating the quantitative results as the conclusion of the research process, this paper considers what the findings reveal about the relational, contextual, and developmental nature of instructional leadership. This reflective paper draws on four complementary perspectives: instructional leadership theory, social constructivist theory, distributed leadership, and adult learning theory.

Instructional Leadership Theory

Instructional leadership provides the primary theoretical foundation for the study. Hallinger (2005) conceptualized it and identified three core dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate. The assumption is that school leaders can improve teaching and learning by intentionally focusing on instructional improvement. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Old Tafo, where school leaders' responsibilities extend beyond administration to teacher supervision, instructional support, curriculum implementation, and professional development. The original study similarly treated instructional leadership as guidance for teaching and learning, instructional supervision, teacher support, and professional development. Its findings, however, suggest that leadership should not be understood solely as a set of leader behaviors; teachers' experiences give leadership practice meaning. This distinction matters because a leadership behavior that appears supportive from the leader's perspective may not be experienced as supportive by every teacher.

A recent evidence reinforces the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of instructional leadership. Zhang et al. (2025), for example, found significant relationships between principal instructional leadership and teacher self-efficacy, particularly through dimensions involving the work environment and teacher-student engagement. Their study of 459 teachers also demonstrated the importance of contextualizing instructional leadership within the cultural and institutional setting in which it occurs. Bellibaş et al. (2026), meta-analysis of 31 peer-reviewed studies, found a positive association with teachers' instructional practices, although the strength of these relationships varied across leadership approaches. Together, these studies support the need to examine instructional leadership in relation to its context and the ways teachers experience it.

Social Constructivist Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective offers a second lens for interpreting teachers' perceptions. From this perspective, people construct knowledge and meaning through social interaction and experience. Teachers do not passively receive leadership. Rather, they interpret leadership through relationships, professional experiences, organizational expectations, and interactions with colleagues and administrators. This perspective helps explain the differences observed in the original study.

Two teachers may experience the same headteacher's instructional supervision but construct different meanings from it. A beginning teacher may view classroom observation as valuable guidance, whereas a veteran or experienced teacher may regard it as unnecessary oversight if it does not recognize existing professional competence.

Teachers' perceptions should not automatically be interpreted as objective measures of leadership behavior; they represent teachers' interpretations of their experiences within organizational and instructional contexts (Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996; Veletić & Olsen, 2021). This theoretical position strengthens the rationale for treating teacher perceptions as meaningful evidence rather than mere subjective opinion.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership provides a third perspective by recognizing that instructional improvement is not the responsibility of the school head alone. Teachers, department leaders, senior teachers, instructional coordinators, mentors, and other school personnel may contribute to instructional leadership. Research highlights the role of teacher leadership in facilitating professional learning, strengthening collaboration among teachers, and supporting instructional improvement within schools (Abrahamsen & Helstad, 2025). The researchers examined teacher leaders who facilitated their colleagues' professional learning in a Norwegian upper-secondary school. Their findings suggest that teacher leadership can help shift professional practice from an individual focus toward greater collective professionalism.

Similarly, research on teacher leaders indicates that effective teacher leadership promotes improvements in teaching, facilitates professional learning communities, and encourages collaborative inquiry and sustained efforts to improve instructional practices (Grimm, 2024). This perspective is especially relevant to the finding that experienced teachers reported more positive perceptions of instructional leadership. Instead of viewing experience solely as a demographic variable, it may also be considered a potential leadership resource. Experienced teachers can contribute through mentoring, professional learning communities, peer observation, curriculum development, and instructional coaching. This suggests that experienced teachers should not be merely recipients of instructional leadership; they can also contribute to it.

Adult Learning and Professional Development

Adult learning theory provides a fourth theoretical perspective of this paper. Knowles' (1984) concept of andragogy emphasizes the importance of adults' prior experiences, relevance, autonomy, self-direction, and problem-centered learning. Teachers are adult professionals whose learning needs evolve with experience. This perspective helps explain why leadership should not be identical across career stages. A beginning teacher may need structured instructional guidance and mentoring, while an experienced teacher may value autonomy, professional collaboration, leadership responsibility, and opportunities to solve problems.

The findings that experienced teachers reported significantly different perceptions from less experienced colleagues are consistent with the view that professional needs change over time. Teachers' accumulated experiences become an important resource for professional learning and leadership development. Saltmarsh (2026) study highlights how communities of practice can strengthen instructional leadership by reinforcing attention to teaching and learning, collaboration, and resource sharing among school leaders. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives frame instructional leadership as instructional, relational, contextual, distributed, and developmental.

REFLECTIVE METHODOLOGY

This paper uses retrospective reflection to reinterpret findings from the original quantitative study. The original study employed a cross-sectional survey and analyzed the data using descriptive statistics and a three-way ANOVA. The present paper introduces no new participant data. Instead, it examines the empirical findings in relation to theoretical perspectives and relevant scholarship to consider their meaning and implications for instructional leadership.

The reflective process involved four stages: first, revisiting the empirical findings to identify the most consequential patterns. Second, questioning and interrogating assumptions underlying the interpretation. Third, connecting findings with theoretical perspectives on instructional leadership, teacher learning, and leadership distribution. Fourth, translating reflection into implications for leadership practice and future research.

This approach is appropriate as it extends the quantitative findings by asking questions that statistical analysis alone cannot answer. For example, ANOVA can show that experience is associated with differences in perceptions, but it cannot, on its own, explain the lived professional experiences underlying those differences.

Reflective Analytic Process

The reflective analysis focused on three central empirical findings:

- Teaching experience significantly influenced teachers' perceptions;
- Grade level taught significantly influenced teachers' perceptions; and
- Academic qualification did not demonstrate a significant main effect but interacted significantly with grade level taught.

The analysis then examined each finding through the four theoretical lenses. This process shifted the interpretation from purely statistical to contextual. For example, experience was initially understood as a difference between groups. Through reflection, it was reinterpreted as a marker of professional identity, autonomy, accumulated knowledge, and leadership capacity. Similarly, grade level was a categorical demographic variable, but the analysis repositioned it as an indicator of instructional context, curriculum demands, student developmental needs, and teachers' professional responsibilities.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality matters in reflective scholarship because researchers do not approach educational leadership research from a completely detached position. The researchers acknowledge that professional experiences, educational background, and familiarity with school leadership contexts shape interpretations of instructional leadership. The study was situated in the Ghanaian educational system, where instructional leadership is embedded in formal administrative structures and expectations set by the Ghana Education Service.

Accordingly, the researchers approached the study with an understanding that leadership involves more than administrative compliance. It includes relationships, teacher development, instructional supervision, professional learning, and school improvement. This positionality creates both an interpretive resource and a potential source of bias. Professional familiarity with education can help a researcher recognize contextual meanings that might otherwise remain unnoticed. At the same time, such familiarity can create assumptions about what effective leadership should look like.

The reflective process therefore required deliberate attention to the possibility that the researcher's own expectations could influence interpretation. The quantitative design provided an important counterbalance because the central findings were derived from systematically collected survey data and statistical analysis rather than solely from personal impressions. Nevertheless, the researchers recognize that decisions concerning conceptualization, instrument selection, interpretation, and discussion are not entirely value-free. The positionality adopted in this paper is therefore one of critical reflexivity: recognizing the researcher's relationship to the educational context while committing to representing the empirical findings accurately and avoiding interpretations that extend beyond what the data support.

Reflective Findings

Teaching Experience: From Demographic Variable to Professional Development Continuum

The study's findings showed a significant effect of teaching experience on teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership. Mean perception scores increased across experience categories, from 16.49 among teachers with 1–5 years of experience to 18.68 among teachers with 21 or more years of experience. Post hoc comparisons identified significant differences among several experience groups, including comparisons between teachers with 1–5 years of experience and those with 16–20 years or more than 20 years of experience. Reflectively, these results suggest that professional experience may influence the lens through which teachers interpret leadership.

Beginning teachers may rely more on instructional guidance, whereas experienced teachers may have developed greater confidence and professional autonomy. The relationship between leadership and experience may therefore be developmental rather than merely demographic. This interpretation aligns with scholarship that emphasizes professional learning, collaboration, and leadership development in strengthening educators' practice and supporting school improvement (Liu, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024). This implies that instructional leaders should ask not only How should I lead teachers? but also, what does this particular teacher need from leadership at this stage of professional development?

Grade Level: From Classification to Context

The study also demonstrated a significant main effect for grade level taught. Kindergarten teachers reported the lowest mean perception score (M = 15.89), whereas Junior High School teachers reported the highest (M = 18.23). Post hoc comparisons showed significant differences between Kindergarten and Junior High School, Kindergarten and Senior High School, and Primary and Junior High School. The reflective interpretation is that grade level is more than a demographic classification.

Teachers at different levels work in distinct instructional environments. Their students have different developmental needs, curriculum demands vary, and assessment expectations differ. As a result, the professional support teachers need may also vary. Current research similarly emphasizes that instructional leadership is shaped by context, rather than experienced in the same way everywhere. For example, Zhang et al. (2025) showed that leadership dimensions related to the work environment and teacher-student engagement were strongly connected to teacher self-efficacy in another national context. This cross-national difference matters: although the Chinese findings cannot be generalized directly to Ghana, they offer useful comparative evidence for the broader theoretical proposition that leadership operates through context and relationships.

Academic Qualification: Questioning Credential-Centered Leadership

Academic qualifications showed no statistically significant main effect in the study, with mean scores of 16.63 for diploma holders, 17.73 for bachelor's degree holders, and 17.96 for master's degree holders. The main effect was also not significant ($p > .05$). These findings warrant caution in assuming that academic credentials automatically determine teachers' perceptions of leadership. More importantly, the significant interaction between qualification and grade level taught suggests that the relationship between qualification and perceptions may depend on instructional context. This finding, in turn, challenges credential-centered approaches to teacher development. Academic qualifications are important, but leadership responsiveness should also consider experience, classroom assignment, professional responsibilities, school context, and individual developmental needs.

The Relational Nature of Instructional Leadership

One of the strongest insights from reflection is that instructional leadership is relational. Leadership is not simply an activity administrators perform. It is experienced by teachers. A headteacher may believe that classroom supervision demonstrates instructional support. A teacher may experience the same supervision as professional learning, accountability, surveillance, or interference, depending on the relationship, communication, purpose, and context. This relational dimension helps explain why teacher perceptions are important.

Research supports this position. Zhang et al. (2025) found strong relationships between principal leadership and teacher self-efficacy, with work environment and teacher-student engagement emerging as particularly important dimensions.

Similarly, another study on teacher leadership emphasizes collaboration, professional learning, and collective professionalism rather than leadership as a purely hierarchical activity (Abrahamsen & Helstad, 2025; Ma & Marion, 2024). Thus, instructional leadership should be understood as co-constructed through relationships among leaders and teachers.

Implications for Instructional Leadership in Ghana

The findings suggest that professional development should be differentiated by teachers' career stage, recognizing that beginning and experienced teachers may have distinct professional learning needs. This interpretation aligns with the present study, in which teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership differed significantly by years of teaching experience.

Teachers with 16–20 years and more than 20 years of experience reported significantly higher perceptions than those with 1–5 years of experience (Boakye et al., 2026). For beginning teachers, emphasize mentoring, instructional coaching, structured feedback, classroom observations followed by developmental dialogue, opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues, and participation in well-supported professional learning communities.

Research indicates that mentoring can strengthen beginning teachers' self-directed learning and their capacity to address instructional challenges, while context-responsive mentoring can provide important professional and relational support during the early years of teaching (Maloch et al., 2025; Maras et al., 2025). Importantly, mentoring should be developmental rather than merely supervisory; research suggests that when mentors and beginning teachers have different understandings of the mentoring role, the relationship's potential benefits can be weakened (Curtis et al., 2024).

For experienced teachers, create opportunities for professional autonomy, peer coaching, teacher and curriculum leadership, mentoring less-experienced colleagues, and participation in school improvement decisions. This approach recognizes experienced teachers not only as recipients of professional development but also as important sources of professional knowledge and instructional leadership within schools. Evidence indicates that teachers at different stages of professional development have distinct developmental priorities, with veteran teachers placing greater emphasis on leadership development, while teachers at other career stages may require different forms of professional support (Yuan et al., 2025).

Similarly, the OECD's TALIS 2024 findings indicate that greater teacher autonomy is associated with stronger professional outcomes and that opportunities to participate in leadership and school-level decision-making are positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction and professional agency (OECD, 2025).

Thus, a differentiated professional-development model should not assume that experienced teachers need less support; rather, it should shift support from primarily directive assistance to collaboration, autonomy, mentoring, instructional leadership, and meaningful participation in school improvement. This approach aligns with the present study's conclusion that novice teachers may require structured guidance, while experienced teachers can benefit from greater collaboration and autonomy (Boakye et al., 2026).

Strengthening Teacher Leadership

The findings provide a basis for reconsidering experienced teachers as potential instructional leadership resources. Rather than treating them solely as recipients of leadership, schools can create structures that enable them to contribute to professional learning. Research suggests that teacher leadership can foster collective professional learning and strengthen teachers' participation in instructional improvement. Distributing leadership responsibilities among teachers and school leaders may also reduce overreliance on headteachers as the sole source of instructional expertise (Ma & Marion, 2024; OECD, 2025; Okiri & Hercz, 2024).

Leadership Across Grade Levels

The significant grade level effect suggests that instructional leadership should be attuned to the instructional realities of different educational levels. Professional development for school leaders should therefore address how to adapt instructional supervision and support to Kindergarten, Primary, Junior High School, and Senior High School contexts. Rather than applying identical supervisory expectations, leaders should engage teachers in identifying the instructional challenges specific to their grade level.

Communities of Practice

Research suggests that communities of practice can strengthen instructional leadership capacity by providing structured opportunities for collaboration, shared professional learning, teacher agency, and resource exchange (Saltmarsh, 2026; Shal et al., 2024). For Ghanaian schools, communities of practice could include headteachers, assistant headteachers, experienced and beginning teachers, subject or grade-level leaders, and education directorate personnel, such as circuit supervisors. These structures can shift professional development from isolated workshops to sustained collaborative learning.

Implications for Educational Policy

The findings also have implications beyond individual schools. Educational authorities should consider integrating differentiated instructional leadership into leadership preparation and professional development programs. Leadership preparation should include competencies in instructional coaching, teacher mentoring, professional learning communities (PLCs), teacher leadership, contextualized supervision, adult learning, teacher voice and feedback, collaborative decision-making, and data-informed school improvement. This approach would complement existing expectations for school leaders while strengthening the relational and developmental dimensions of leadership. The emerging literature also suggests that leadership development benefits from sustained professional learning rather than one-time training. Saltmarsh's (2026) study illustrates how communities of practice can support school leaders' ongoing development and strengthen their focus on teaching and learning.

Methodological Reflection and Future Research

The quantitative design effectively identified differences among teacher groups. However, the reflective analysis also exposes the limitations of relying exclusively on quantitative measures. The original study relied on teacher self-reports and collected data at a single point in time. It therefore cannot establish how perceptions develop across teachers' careers or explain the mechanisms underlying the differences observed. The original study appropriately recognized that its focus on a single education directorate also limits broader generalization.

Future research should build on the present study using mixed methods. A sequential explanatory design could begin with quantitative measures and then use interviews or focus groups to explain statistically significant differences. For example, future researchers could ask: Why do beginning teachers perceive instructional leadership differently? What leadership practices do experienced teachers value most? Why do teachers at different grade levels experience leadership differently? How do teachers interpret classroom supervision? How do teacher leaders contribute to instructional improvement? Longitudinal research could also examine whether teachers' perceptions change as they move from early-career to experienced professional stages. Such research would move the field from identifying whether differences exist to understanding why they exist.

Limitations of the Reflection

This reflective paper has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the reflection is based on an existing quantitative study rather than newly collected qualitative data. Therefore, readers should not treat interpretations as direct evidence of teachers' lived experiences. Second, some theoretical interpretations go beyond what the original statistical analysis can directly establish.

These interpretations are presented as reflective explanations rather than empirical conclusions. Third, the original study was conducted within one municipal education directorate; thus, the findings should not be automatically generalized to all Ghanaian schools. Fourth, the original study relied on self-reported perceptions. Perceptions matter, but they do not necessarily align perfectly with observed leadership behavior. These limitations reinforce the value of future mixed-methods and longitudinal research.

CONCLUSION

Revisiting the quantitative study through a reflective lens has transformed how the findings are interpreted and understood. The quantitative analysis indicated that teaching experience and grade level taught significantly influenced teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership, while academic qualification did not show a significant main effect. The study also identified a significant interaction between academic

qualification and grade level taught. The reflective analysis suggests that these statistical patterns should not be interpreted simply as differences between demographic categories. Teaching experience may represent professional identity, accumulated knowledge, confidence, autonomy, and changing developmental needs. Grade level may represent instructional context, curriculum demands, student developmental characteristics, and different professional responsibilities. Academic qualification may contribute to professional capacity without necessarily determining how teachers experience leadership.

The broader lesson is that instructional leadership is not one-size-fits-all. Teachers experience leadership through the lens of their professional histories and instructional contexts. Effective instructional leadership therefore requires leaders to listen, adapt, collaborate, and differentiate their approaches. Integrating instructional leadership, social constructivism, distributed leadership, and adult learning provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding these findings. Leaders set instructional direction, while teachers construct meaning through experience and interaction; leadership may be shared across professional communities; and teachers' developmental needs evolve throughout their careers. Recent scholarship supports this interpretation, showing significant relationships among instructional leadership, teacher self-efficacy, professional learning, teacher leadership, and instructional practice (Hallinger et al., 2025; Luo et al., 2024; Thien & Liu, 2024; Dorukbaşi et al., 2024).

This reflective paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on instructional leadership by re-centering the concept on teachers' experiences and perspectives in Ghana. First, the paper offers a conceptual contribution by shifting attention from traditional, principal-centered instructional leadership to a teacher-centered paradigm. Instead of treating educators as recipients of top-down direction and oversight, this reflection positions them as active agents whose professional judgment, experiences, and classroom realities must inform leadership behaviors. Second, it offers immediate practical implications for school leaders and educational administrators. It highlights the critical need to shift from compliance-driven supervision toward supportive leadership practices rooted in coaching, actionable feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. Adopting such practices enhances teacher engagement and fosters the institutional conditions necessary for sustained instructional improvement.

The central reflection is that instructional leadership becomes more effective when leaders move from leading teachers as a homogeneous group toward understanding teachers as professionals with different experiences, contexts, capabilities, and developmental needs**.** For Ghanaian education, this means that leadership development should extend beyond administrative competence toward relational leadership, instructional coaching, teacher leadership, collaborative professional learning, and context-sensitive supervision. The significance of instructional leadership lies not simply in what leaders intend to do, but in how teachers interpret, experience, and transform those practices into professional learning.

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