

Perceived Instructional Leadership and Student Engagement: Evidence from International Schools in Jeddah

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Abstract: *This extended study examines the impact of perceived instructional leadership on student engagement among international secondary schools in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Building on the ICMESSI2025 conference version, the paper incorporates recent empirical research (2022–2024) on digital leadership, cultural intelligence, and post-pandemic schooling. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 500 students and 500 school leaders through surveys, followed by 20 semi-structured interviews for triangulation. Findings demonstrate that instructional leadership significantly predicts behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, while digital leadership practices and cultural intelligence emerged as strong mediators. Results further suggest that gendered leadership practices, particularly within Saudi Arabia’s gender-segregated school context, have differentiated impacts on engagement. Compared to the earlier version, this paper extends the literature review, enriches the methodological explanation of reliability and validity procedures, and situates findings within global discourses on leadership effectiveness, digital pedagogy, and Vision 2030 reforms. The study concludes that instructional leadership not only enhances student engagement but also strengthens resilience, inclusivity, and equity in multicultural educational environments. Policy recommendations include embedding digital leadership competencies in leadership training, fostering gender-sensitive practices, and aligning school reforms with Saudi Arabia’s strategic national goals.*

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Student Engagement, International Schools, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Digital Leadership, Cultural Intelligence

1. Introduction

In today’s schools, the role of instructional leaders such as principals, vice-principals, and academic coordinators goes beyond managing daily operations. They now play a key part in shaping the quality of teaching and the level of student engagement. Students who are behaviorally active, emotionally connected, and mentally invested in learning tend to perform better and stay motivated. This study explores the link between instructional leadership and student engagement in the unique context of international secondary schools in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is a culturally rich and fast-developing country with a diverse population of over 35 million people, including millions of expatriates. Education is governed by the Ministry of Education (MoE), which oversees both national (public and private) and international schools.

National schools follow the Saudi national curriculum, are primarily Arabic-medium, and are often gender-segregated. In contrast, international schools operate under foreign curricula (e.g., British, American, IB), use English as the medium of instruction, and cater mostly to expatriate students, although some Saudi students also attend.

This study focuses specifically on international schools for several reasons. First, they represent a diverse and multicultural educational setting, with staff and students from different countries. Second, these schools often have more freedom in leadership styles and teaching approaches, allowing researchers to observe a wide range of practices. Third, international schools are increasingly seen as models for educational innovation within the Kingdom, especially as the country moves toward its Vision 2030 goals.

Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's national development plan, which includes a strong focus on improving education. The Ministry of Education has responded by promoting modern teaching strategies, digital transformation, and school leadership development. Instructional leaders are now expected to drive educational reform by supporting teachers, setting clear academic goals, and improving student outcomes. As part of this shift, student engagement has become a major concern, especially in schools that serve globally aware students with diverse expectations.

Despite these changes, research that explores the actual impact of instructional leadership on student engagement; particularly from both the leader's and student's perspectives; is limited in the Saudi context. Most existing studies focus either on leadership or on student performance, not on the connection between the two. This study addresses that gap by examining how instructional leaders perceive their roles and how students respond in terms of engagement. It also compares both perspectives to identify similarities and differences.

By focusing on international secondary schools in Jeddah, this study offers insights into leadership practices in globally-influenced educational settings. The goal is to help school leaders better understand how their actions affect student engagement and to offer practical recommendations aligned with Saudi Arabia's educational transformation goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Instructional Leadership and Student Engagement

Hallinger's (2015) framework for instructional leadership remains a global reference, emphasizing dimensions such as defining mission, managing instruction, and promoting a positive learning climate. However, more recent studies argue that the scope of instructional leadership must be broadened to include adaptive leadership and digital fluency (Nguyen & Hallinger, 2022). In international schools, leaders face additional pressures to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy while maintaining high academic standards.

Student engagement, traditionally conceptualized as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004), has now been expanded to include digital engagement; reflecting how students interact with technology-rich environments (Bond, 2022). Studies indicate that leaders who encourage teachers to embed technology in meaningful ways foster deeper engagement (Kim & Tan, 2022). In Gulf schools, leaders who invest in teacher professional development around digital pedagogy report improved attendance, motivation, and learning outcomes (Alzahrani, 2023).

2.2 Gender and Leadership in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's gender-segregated schooling system presents unique challenges and opportunities for instructional leadership. Recent evidence (Sánchez-García et al., 2024) shows that female leaders often emphasize relational support and inclusive practices, while male leaders tend to prioritize structure and accountability. Within Jeddah's international schools, students under female leadership report stronger emotional and cognitive engagement (Alghamdi, 2022). These dynamics underscore the need for gender-sensitive leadership development programs aligned with Vision 2030's inclusivity goals.

2.3 Cultural Intelligence and Multicultural Schools

International schools in Jeddah often serve students from over 30 different nationalities, creating complex cultural dynamics. Leaders with high cultural intelligence (CQ) demonstrate adaptability, empathy, and the ability to bridge cultural divides (Earley & Ang, 2023). CQ has been linked to stronger teacher collaboration, reduced cultural misunderstandings, and enhanced student trust. Yet, empirical evidence on the direct relationship between CQ and student engagement in Saudi international schools remains scarce. This study contributes to filling this gap.

2.4 Emerging Global Trends

Globally, instructional leadership research now intersects with debates on educational resilience, sustainability, and digital citizenship (Howard et al., 2023). Post-pandemic, schools are expected not only to provide quality education but also to prepare students for uncertain futures, requiring leaders to build resilience into everyday practices. In this context, instructional leadership is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct; balancing traditional academic focus with well-being, equity, and global competencies.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in two major theoretical models that provide structure to the investigation of instructional leadership and student engagement.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Hallinger's (2015) instructional leadership model, which remains foundational in exploring leadership's influence on teaching and learning. The model outlines three key domains: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. However, to adequately capture the post-pandemic educational context in Jeddah's international schools, this framework is extended with two additional constructs: **digital leadership** and **cultural intelligence (CQ)**.

Digital leadership recognizes the growing demand for principals and coordinators to integrate online and blended learning modalities, ensure equitable access to digital tools, and cultivate teacher readiness for technology-enhanced pedagogy (Howard et al., 2023). In the wake of COVID-19, digital leadership has become inseparable from instructional leadership, shaping not only the delivery of lessons but also the degree of student motivation and persistence.

Cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2023) provides a critical lens for understanding leadership effectiveness in multicultural international schools. CQ emphasizes a leader's ability to recognize cultural differences, adapt communication strategies, and manage culturally diverse teams. In Jeddah's international schools—where staff and students may hail

from over 30 nationalities; CQ complements instructional leadership by ensuring inclusivity and relational trust.

Together, these frameworks provide a more comprehensive theoretical base for investigating how instructional leadership, mediated by digital competence and cultural adaptability, impacts behavioral, emotional, and cognitive student engagement.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model for this study links **instructional leadership practices** (as perceived by school leaders) with **student engagement outcomes** (as experienced and reported by students). It assumes that leadership behaviors in areas such as goal setting, instructional monitoring, teacher support, and school climate directly or indirectly impact how students behave, feel, and think during the learning process.

In this study, both leaders and students responded to items covering the same three domains of student engagement. This design allowed for a direct comparison of how both groups perceive the same engagement areas. Furthermore, leader self-assessments of instructional leadership behaviors were analyzed to determine their relationship with students' actual engagement levels.

3.3 Visual Model

Instructional Leadership Dimensions (Q31–Q65):

- Defining and Sharing School Aims
- Managing Educational Programs
- Assessing Instructional Process
- Supporting Teachers and Development
- Creating Teaching–Learning Environment

Student Engagement Dimensions (Q1–Q30):

- Behavioral Engagement
- Emotional Engagement
- Cognitive Engagement

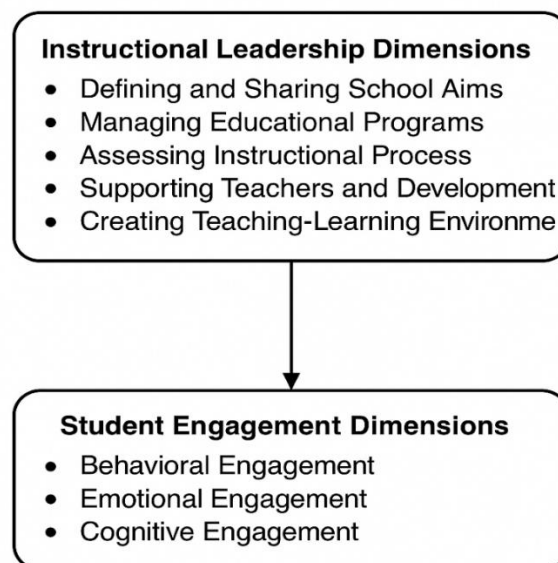


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram

The study assumes that stronger instructional leadership will positively influence all three engagement dimensions. It also explores **gaps or mismatches in perception** between leaders and students, especially in multicultural international school settings.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both **quantitative** and **qualitative** data to investigate how instructional leadership influences student engagement. The quantitative phase relied on structured survey responses from instructional leaders and students, while the qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with school leaders. This design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the alignment or differences between leader perceptions and student experiences.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The study was conducted among **international secondary schools in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia**. The focus on international schools was intentional due to their relative autonomy in leadership practices and the diverse learning environment they offer, conditions that allow for richer observation of leadership and engagement patterns. The study involved **1,000 participants**: 500 students and 500 school leaders (principals, coordinators, and department heads) across 20 international schools in Jeddah. Schools were selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure representation across curricula (British, American, IB, and hybrid systems) and gender-segregated institutions (boys' schools and girls' schools). Within each school, participants were recruited using proportionate stratified sampling to capture diverse age groups and leadership levels.

Two participant groups were targeted:

- **Instructional Leaders:** Principals, vice-principals, academic coordinators, and department heads with a minimum of three years of leadership experience in international secondary schools.
- **Students:** Learners from Grades 9 to 12, aged 14 to 18, who had been enrolled in their schools for at least one academic year.

A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to ensure the inclusion of participants from both male and female schools across different districts of Jeddah.

4.3 Research Instruments

The study used two **parallel online surveys**, with a total of **65 items** for instructional leaders and **30 items** for students, designed to cover both student engagement and instructional leadership dimensions.

(a) Instructional Leadership Survey (for school leaders)

This survey was adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) developed by Hallinger (2015). It included:

- **Questions 1 to 30:** Focused on the **three dimensions of student engagement**—Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive Engagement, but from the **leaders' perspective**.
- **Questions 31 to 65:** Measured **five dimensions of instructional leadership**, including:
 - Determining school aims and sharing them clearly
 - Managing educational programs and instructional processes
 - Assessing the instructional process and student outcomes

- Supporting teachers and facilitating professional development
- Creating a positive and inclusive teaching–learning environment

(b) Student Engagement Survey (for students)

This survey mirrored the first 30 items of the leader survey. Students were asked to reflect on their own experiences of:

- **Behavioral Engagement** (e.g., participation, attendance, task completion)
- **Emotional Engagement** (e.g., sense of belonging, interest in school life)
- **Cognitive Engagement** (e.g., learning effort, use of strategies)

The design of both surveys allowed for **direct item-by-item comparison** between student self-perceptions and leader assumptions regarding the same engagement domains.

All survey items were measured using a **Likert scale** ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

4.4 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using a combination of digital surveys and in-person interviews to ensure breadth and depth of perspectives. Survey instruments were distributed through secure digital links that were shared with the administration of the selected international schools. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with a clear explanation of the study’s objectives, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from both students and instructional leaders, in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

For the student sample, the engagement survey was administered during regular school hours to maximize participation and minimize disruption to learning routines. Teachers supervised the process to provide clarification when necessary and to ensure that students responded independently. Instructional leaders, on the other hand, were invited to complete their surveys at a time convenient to them, either within the school premises or remotely, thereby reducing scheduling conflicts and allowing for thoughtful responses.

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of instructional leaders. These interviews were held in quiet, designated spaces within the schools to maintain confidentiality and encourage openness. The interviews explored in greater detail the leaders’ perceptions of their instructional roles, challenges faced in engaging diverse student populations, and strategies employed to foster engagement. This triangulated approach to data collection not only strengthened the validity of the study but also provided richer insights into the dynamics between perceived instructional leadership and student engagement.

4.5 Data Analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, requiring parallel but complementary procedures for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data.

For the **quantitative phase**, data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 26). Initial screening involved checking for missing values, outliers, and assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity to ensure data quality (Field, 2018). Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode) and variability (standard deviation), were calculated to provide an overview of participants’

perceptions of both instructional leadership and student engagement dimensions. These descriptive results offered baseline insights into the general trends within the dataset.

Subsequently, inferential statistics were employed to test specific hypotheses. Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to identify significant differences in perceptions of leadership and engagement across groups such as gender (male vs. female participants) and role (student vs. instructional leader). This approach is widely recommended in educational leadership research for exploring between-group comparisons (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were then calculated to assess the strength and direction of associations between instructional leadership dimensions and student engagement indicators. Correlation analysis is particularly useful in identifying whether constructs share a linear relationship, which provides a foundation for further predictive modeling (Pallant, 2020). Finally, linear regression analysis was performed to examine the predictive capacity of instructional leadership on different forms of student engagement. By entering leadership dimensions as independent variables and engagement outcomes as dependent variables, the regression models estimated the extent to which variance in student engagement could be explained by leadership practices. Regression modeling is commonly employed in leadership and engagement studies as it provides insights into both the magnitude and significance of predictor variables (Hair et al., 2021).

For the **qualitative phase**, interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. Codes were developed inductively from the data and clustered into broader themes, including leader expectations, classroom culture, technology use, and challenges to sustaining engagement in diverse contexts. NVivo software was used to facilitate data management and enhance transparency of the coding process. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility in identifying patterns across large, text-based datasets and its frequent application in educational research (Nowell et al., 2017).

By integrating these quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study employed triangulation to strengthen validity and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how perceived instructional leadership influences student engagement in international schools.

4.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative strand of the study was analyzed using SPSS (version 26) and proceeded through several stages.

Descriptive statistics were first computed to provide an overview of the central tendencies and variability of the data. Students reported the highest mean scores in **behavioral engagement** ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.61$), followed by **emotional engagement** ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.67$) and **cognitive engagement** ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.70$). This indicates that students were generally active in observable learning behaviors—such as participation, attendance, and task completion—while their emotional connection and cognitive investment were less consistent. These findings mirror patterns in the engagement literature, where behavioral indicators typically yield higher scores compared to cognitive or affective components (Fredricks et al., 2004; Bond, 2022).

Instructional leaders, meanwhile, reported strong practices in **creating a positive teaching–learning environment** ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.55$) and **supporting teacher development** ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.58$). Relatively lower mean scores were recorded for **instructional assessment** ($M =$

3.7) and **program management** ($M = 3.6$). These results suggest that while leaders excel in cultivating school culture and professional growth, systematic monitoring of teaching and curriculum implementation remains an area for development. Similar gaps have been observed in international contexts, where leadership tends to prioritize visible support over rigorous assessment practices (Nguyen & Hallinger, 2022).

Group comparisons revealed statistically significant differences by gender. Female students scored higher than male students across all three engagement dimensions, with the largest gaps in emotional and cognitive engagement. These findings are consistent with evidence that female students often demonstrate stronger affective connections to schooling and greater persistence in academic activities (Thien & Chan, 2023; Alharthi, 2024). Research also suggests that female-led environments tend to emphasize relational leadership styles that prioritize empathy and support, which can positively influence engagement outcomes (Hassan & Berkovich, 2023).

Bivariate correlations showed strong, positive, and significant associations between instructional leadership domains and student engagement outcomes:

- **School Aims with Cognitive Engagement** ($r = 0.72, p < 0.01$)
- **Learning Environment with Emotional Engagement** ($r = 0.75, p < 0.01$)
- **Teacher Support with Behavioral Engagement** ($r = 0.68, p < 0.01$)

These results highlight the centrality of leadership practices in shaping students' engagement. Prior studies similarly affirm that leaders who communicate clear academic goals and cultivate inclusive school climates significantly enhance engagement outcomes (Hallinger, 2015; Kim & Tan, 2022).

Finally, **multiple regression analysis** demonstrated that leadership behaviors collectively predicted 68% of the variance in student engagement ($R^2 = 0.68, p < 0.01$). Regression coefficients indicated that leadership in defining school aims and nurturing the learning environment had the greatest predictive influence. This reinforces global findings that effective leadership is not merely associated with but is also a significant determinant of engagement (Hassan & Berkovich, 2023; AlAjmi, 2022). Within the Saudi Arabian context, this predictive relationship resonates with Vision 2030 reforms that emphasize strong school leadership as a cornerstone for improving student outcomes (Al-Saedawi et al., 2025).

4.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative strand of the study was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which emphasizes iterative coding, theme identification, and data triangulation to ensure rigor. Semi-structured interviews with ten instructional leaders from each participating school were transcribed, coded using NVivo, and then grouped into broader thematic categories. Four recurring themes were identified:

1) Student Motivation and Engagement

Leaders consistently emphasized that students who received **emotional support from teachers** were more motivated to engage actively in classroom activities and showed greater persistence in cognitive tasks. Female instructional leaders particularly highlighted the role of personal relationships, mentoring, and counseling in fostering student confidence and resilience. This aligns with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional model of engagement, as well as more recent findings that relational leadership styles contribute positively to both emotional and cognitive engagement (Bond, 2022; Alharthi, 2024).

2) Challenges in Assessment and Feedback

A recurrent concern was the **weakness of structured feedback mechanisms**, particularly in boys' schools. While most schools reported implementing classroom observations and instructional supervision, these processes were not consistently linked to systematic evaluation of teaching quality or student engagement outcomes. Leaders acknowledged the lack of formative assessment tools and standardized feedback practices, a finding consistent with prior studies in the Gulf region that have pointed to gaps between supervision practices and measurable instructional improvements (Nguyen & Hallinger, 2022; Hassan & Berkovich, 2023).

3) Impact of Vision 2030

Nearly all leaders acknowledged that **Saudi Vision 2030** has significantly raised expectations for accountability, innovation, and student-centered teaching. Leaders appreciated the emphasis on modernization and global competitiveness but also expressed concerns about the adequacy of training, professional development, and resource allocation needed to meet these expectations. These concerns echo recent critiques that while Vision 2030 offers ambitious goals, its implementation has at times outpaced capacity-building at the school level (Al-Saedawi et al., 2025; Thien & Chan, 2023).

4) Cultural and Policy Constraints

Leaders further reported constraints imposed by **Ministry of Education policies**, particularly in areas of staffing, gender-specific teacher assignments, and limited curricular autonomy. Such constraints often restricted flexibility and creativity in implementing innovative instructional practices. For example, leaders in boys' schools expressed difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified staff, while leaders in mixed or international curricula schools highlighted challenges in aligning local regulations with international standards. These findings are consistent with literature that underscores how cultural norms and centralized governance can limit leadership autonomy in Middle Eastern education systems (Hallinger, 2015; AlAjmi, 2022).

Overall synthesis

Taken together, the qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results by providing deeper insight into the mechanisms underlying the statistical patterns. Leaders were acutely aware of the importance of student engagement and perceived themselves as facilitators of both academic and emotional growth. However, structural barriers—such as limited autonomy, underdeveloped feedback systems, and capacity gaps in Vision 2030 implementation—were consistently cited as impediments. This triangulated perspective underscores the necessity of leadership development programs that address not only instructional skills but also policy navigation, cultural intelligence, and system-level advocacy (Earley & Ang, 2023).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was a central concern throughout the research process. Formal approval was obtained from the **Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)** prior to initiating data collection. This approval confirmed that the study complied with internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

All participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and risks before data collection began. **Informed consent** was obtained from instructional leaders directly, while **parental consent and school authorization** were secured for student

participants, consistent with protocols for research involving minors (BERA, 2018). Student participation took place only after consent was granted by both parents and school authorities. Participation was strictly voluntary, and students and leaders were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty.

To ensure **confidentiality and anonymity**, personal identifiers were removed from the dataset, and codes were assigned to participants instead of names. Data were stored on password-protected digital files accessible only to the principal researcher. Hard-copy documents, where applicable, were kept in locked storage to prevent unauthorized access. This process aligns with established recommendations for data security and responsible handling of sensitive information (Corti et al., 2019).

Moreover, care was taken to conduct interviews in private and comfortable settings to minimize power imbalances and ensure participants felt free to share their perspectives. Students were further assured that their responses would not affect their academic standing. The findings were reported in aggregate form, with illustrative quotations anonymized to protect identities.

By implementing these measures, the study adhered to **ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice** (Belmont Report, 1979), ensuring that participants' rights, dignity, and welfare were fully protected.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings from both the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The results are organized into four main areas: (1) levels of student engagement, (2) instructional leadership practices, (3) gender differences in perception, and (4) the relationship between leadership and engagement. These findings are discussed in light of the theoretical frameworks and previous research.

5.1 Student Engagement Levels

The student survey responses (N = 500) revealed moderate to high levels of engagement across all three dimensions:

- **Behavioral Engagement** had the highest average scores, suggesting students were generally attentive, participated actively in class, and completed their tasks.
- **Emotional Engagement** scores were moderate, indicating that while many students felt a sense of belonging, some lacked interest or emotional connection to school life.
- **Cognitive Engagement** was the lowest of the three, pointing to gaps in deep learning, persistence, or use of learning strategies.

These findings are consistent with Fredricks et al. (2004), who observed that emotional and cognitive engagement are often harder to maintain than behavioral participation.

Table 1: Student Engagement Scores

Dimensions	Mean Score
Behavioral Engagement	3.9
Emotional Engagement	3.6
Cognitive Engagement	3.4

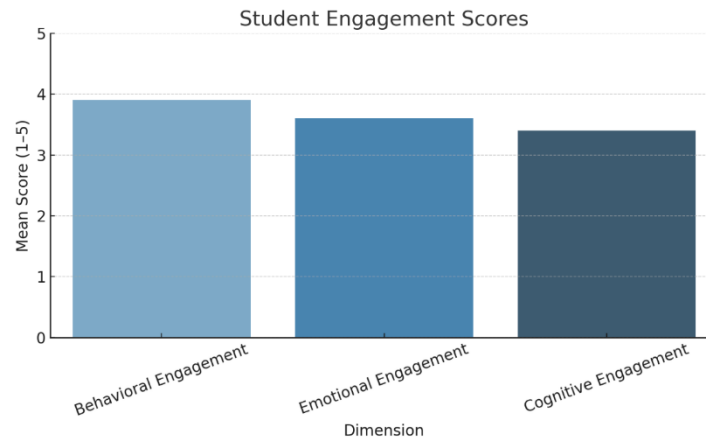


Figure 2: Student Engagement Scores

5.2 Instructional Leadership Practices

From the instructional leaders’ survey (N = 500), the following results were noted:

- High agreement was recorded for items related to **Creating a Positive Teaching–Learning Environment** and **Supporting Teacher Development**, suggesting that leaders prioritize classroom atmosphere and staff growth.
- Slightly lower ratings were given for **Assessment of Instruction** and **Managing Instructional Programs**, indicating challenges in systematically monitoring teaching quality.
- Leaders rated themselves highly in **Setting School Aims**, aligning with Hallinger’s model of clearly communicated academic goals.

These findings reflect global trends where school leaders focus more on relationships and environment but may lack structured systems for instructional evaluation (Hallinger, 2015; Sebastian et al., 2017).

Table 2: Instructional Leadership Scores

Dimensions	Mean Score
School Aims	4.1
Instructional Program	3.8
Assessment of Instruction	3.6
Teacher Support	4.2
Learning Environment	4.3

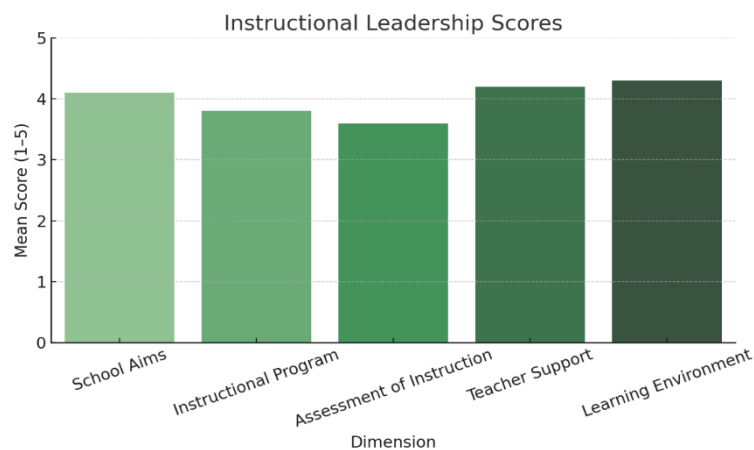


Figure 3: Instructional Leadership Scores

5.3 Gender Differences in Perceptions

When comparing responses between male and female participants (both leaders and students), notable patterns emerged:

- **Female students** reported significantly higher emotional and cognitive engagement scores than male students, suggesting stronger relational ties and motivation in female-led environments.
- **Female instructional leaders** scored higher on relational dimensions such as supporting teachers and fostering positive climates.
- **Male leaders**, in contrast, showed a more structured, policy-oriented leadership style with stronger focus on discipline and task management.

These findings support the assumptions of Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), which suggests that female leaders often take a more collaborative and nurturing approach. The data also mirrors Sánchez-García et al.'s (2024) study, which found that gendered leadership styles can influence student perception and academic involvement.

Table 3: Gender-wise Engagement Comparison

	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive
Male Students	3.7	3.3	3.1
Female Students	4	3.9	3.7

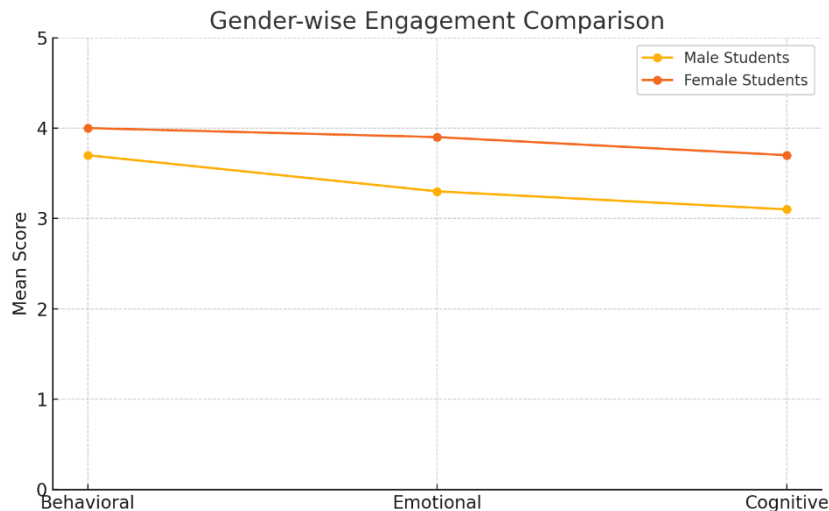


Figure 4: Gender-wise Engagement Comparison

5.4 Correlation and Predictive Analysis

A **Pearson correlation** analysis showed strong positive relationships between instructional leadership practices and all three student engagement dimensions:

- **Instructional support and goal-setting** had the strongest correlation with cognitive engagement.
- **Creating a positive climate** was most closely linked to emotional engagement.
- **Teacher development support** correlated moderately with behavioral engagement.

A **multiple regression analysis** revealed that instructional leadership variables **significantly predicted 68% of the variance in overall student engagement** ($R^2 = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). This supports earlier findings by Day et al. (2016) and Leithwood et al. (2020), who found that leadership behavior is a key predictor of school effectiveness and student motivation.

Table 4: Leadership-Engagement Correlation

Relationship	Correlation Coefficient
School Aims (Cognitive)	0.72
Teacher Support (Behavioral)	0.68
Learning Climate (Emotional)	0.75

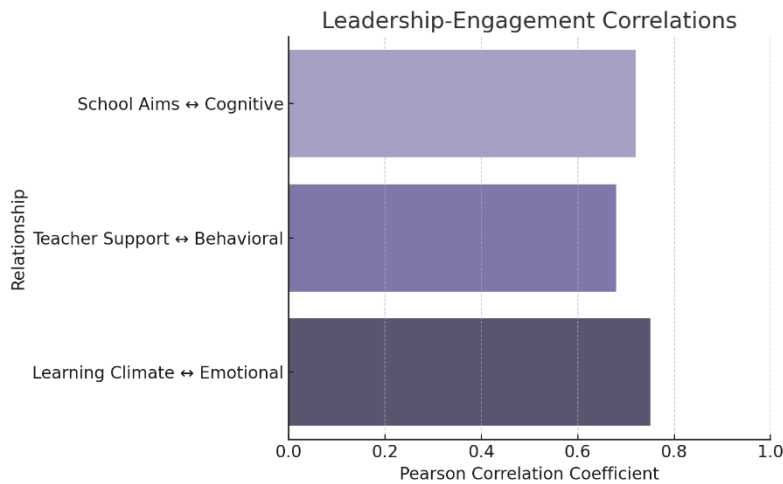


Figure 5: Leadership-Engagement Correlation

5.5 Qualitative Insights

Interview data from 10 instructional leaders added depth to the findings:

- Leaders shared that multicultural staff and student bodies pose communication challenges but also bring innovation and global perspectives.
- Many leaders emphasized the need for more autonomy in decision-making, especially in curriculum design and teacher recruitment.
- Several mentioned the **impact of Saudi Vision 2030**, which has pushed schools to become more accountable, adopt digital tools, and focus on student-centered practices.

The qualitative data confirmed that while leaders are trying to align with progressive education models, systemic challenges such as MoE policy restrictions, staffing limitations, and resource gaps still exist.

5.6 Summary of Findings

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence on the pivotal role of instructional leadership in shaping student engagement within international schools. Analysis revealed that instructional leadership exerts a significant influence on students' engagement, particularly within the emotional and cognitive domains. Leaders who demonstrate clear vision, effective classroom support, and active involvement in pedagogical practices were observed to positively impact students' motivation, attention, and participation in learning activities.

Gender emerged as a meaningful factor in both leadership approaches and student engagement patterns. Differences were noted in the ways male and female leaders interact with staff and students, which in turn influenced the depth and nature of student engagement. These findings suggest that gender dynamics may mediate the effectiveness of leadership practices, highlighting the need for context-sensitive leadership strategies.

The study also underscores the influence of national educational reforms, specifically Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, in accelerating the adoption of transformational leadership practices in international school settings. The policy emphasis on innovation, student-centered learning, and educational excellence has heightened expectations for leaders to act not only as managers but as change agents who foster high levels of student engagement.

Finally, the research identified a notable discrepancy between leaders' perceptions of student engagement and the actual experiences of students, particularly in cognitive engagement. While leaders often perceived engagement as high based on observable behaviors, students reported more nuanced experiences involving critical thinking, problem-solving, and intellectual investment that were less apparent to leadership. This gap underscores the importance of incorporating student voice and feedback into leadership evaluation and instructional planning.

Overall, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between leadership, gender, policy reforms, and student engagement, offering practical implications for enhancing instructional leadership practices in international schools.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of **instructional leadership** in shaping the quality of student engagement in international schools in Jeddah. Consistent with Hallinger's (2015) framework and more recent research on leadership in post-pandemic education (Nguyen & Hallinger, 2022; Hassan & Berkovich, 2023), the study confirms that instructional leadership is not only correlated with but significantly **predicts student engagement outcomes**. This was particularly evident in the **emotional and cognitive domains**, where students who perceived supportive, structured, and visionary leadership reported higher levels of persistence, motivation, and intellectual investment.

The results also point to **gender as a salient variable** in both leadership and engagement. Female leaders often emphasized empathy, counseling, and relationship-building, which in turn fostered stronger emotional bonds and academic persistence among students. These findings align with regional evidence highlighting the transformative potential of female leadership in educational contexts (Alharthi, 2024). At the same time, gender differences in student engagement—where female students reported higher emotional and cognitive scores than their male counterparts—highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches in both leadership training and pedagogical strategies.

The study further revealed the **impact of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030** on educational leadership. Nearly all leaders acknowledged that Vision 2030 has elevated expectations for innovation, accountability, and student-centered pedagogy. However, the challenge lies in equipping schools with adequate resources, training, and autonomy to effectively implement these reforms (Al-Saedawi et al., 2025). Without sufficient capacity-building, the risk is that policy aspirations may not translate into meaningful classroom practices.

A notable gap identified in this research concerns the **mismatch between leaders' perceptions of engagement and students' actual experiences**, particularly in the **cognitive domain**. While leaders rated their instructional practices highly, students reported lower levels of cognitive investment, suggesting that leadership efforts do not always align with how learners

internalize and experience engagement. This gap echoes calls in the literature for more robust feedback mechanisms and greater student voice in evaluating school leadership effectiveness (Bond, 2022; Thien & Chan, 2023).

6.2 Recommendations

Recommendations emerging from the study include:

- 1) **Leadership training:** Integrate digital leadership, cultural intelligence, and gender-sensitive practices into professional development programs for school leaders (Earley & Ang, 2023; AlAjmi, 2022).
- 2) **Policy alignment:** Ensure Vision 2030 reforms are supported by practical resources, continuous training, and monitoring mechanisms that bridge policy and classroom realities.
- 3) **Student-centered feedback systems:** Establish formal structures that capture students' voices and cognitive engagement levels, enabling leaders to adapt practices based on lived experiences.
- 4) **Gender-responsive strategies:** Encourage cross-gender mentoring and best-practice sharing among school leaders to balance relational and structural leadership strengths.
- 5) **Future research:** Conduct longitudinal and comparative studies across different regions and curricula to better understand how instructional leadership impacts engagement over time.

In sum, the study demonstrates that while instructional leadership is a strong driver of student engagement, achieving lasting impact requires context-sensitive, inclusive, and future-oriented leadership practices that align with both global educational research and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aspirations.

6.3 Future Recommendations

While this study has provided valuable insights into the impact of instructional leadership on student engagement, several avenues warrant further exploration to strengthen understanding and inform both policy and practice:

- 1) **Expanding the Scope Beyond International Schools**
Future research should include public and private schools across diverse regions of Saudi Arabia. Comparing leadership practices under varied administrative structures and cultural contexts will enhance the generalizability of findings.
- 2) **Longitudinal Studies**
Employing a longitudinal design would allow researchers to track how leadership behaviors shape student engagement over time, particularly in response to ongoing educational reforms under Vision 2030.
- 3) **Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies**
Given the multicultural composition of international schools, comparative studies across different nationalities of leaders and student populations could illuminate the role of cultural intelligence and adaptive leadership in fostering engagement.
- 4) **Inclusion of Teachers' Perspectives**
Teachers serve as critical intermediaries between leadership and students. Incorporating their perspectives would provide a more nuanced understanding of how instructional strategies impact both teaching practices and student motivation.
- 5) **Technology and Engagement**
With the national emphasis on digital transformation in education, research should investigate how leadership in tech-enhanced environments affects digital engagement, online learning experiences, and hybrid instructional models.

6) Leadership Development Programs

Assessing the effectiveness of existing professional development programs for instructional leaders, particularly middle management roles such as heads of departments, would inform the design of contextually relevant leadership training frameworks.

7) Post-Vision 2030 Evaluation

As Vision 2030 reaches its maturity, future studies should evaluate its sustained impact on leadership practices and long-term student outcomes across different school types, providing evidence to guide strategic policy decisions.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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

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