


Challenges and Strategies in School Improvement: School Principals' Experiences and Reflections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of public primary school principals in Istanbul in implementing school improvement strategies, addressing challenges, and assessing the outcomes of their efforts. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine experienced principals, focusing on their activities, challenges, and solutions in fostering educational change. The findings highlight the importance of systematic planning, creating supportive learning environments, and fostering participatory leadership to drive school improvement. Collaborative approaches, involving teachers, parents, and community stakeholders, were emphasized as key to achieving shared goals. Principals faced several challenges, including a lack of organizational culture, resistance to change, excessive administrative demands, inadequate physical conditions, and resource limitations. To address these issues, they employed strategies such as building participatory school cultures, establishing effective communication networks, and leveraging external support from NGOs and municipalities. These efforts not only mitigated immediate barriers but also strengthened stakeholder relationships and promoted a sense of collective ownership. The results indicate significant positive impacts on students, teachers, and parents. School improvement initiatives enhanced student engagement, increased teacher satisfaction, and improved school-community relationships. Principals also reported that their schools became more desirable within their communities, reflecting the broader benefits of their leadership efforts. This study contributes to understanding effective school improvement practices in urban settings and underscores the importance of systemic support and equitable resource allocation. It provides actionable insights for policymakers and educators, emphasizing the need for sustainable strategies to ensure continuous progress in education.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, school improvement has emerged as a critical focus for enhancing student outcomes and adapting to societal needs ([Howard et al., 2019](#); [Peurach et](#)

al., 2019; Pont, 2020). Public primary schools, as foundational institutions in national education systems, play a pivotal role in shaping future generations (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019; Kosim et al., 2023; Peurach et al., 2019). Central to this process are school principals, whose leadership and strategic initiatives significantly influence the quality and effectiveness of education. Globally and locally, trends such as increasing diversity, technological advancements, and the need for inclusive education demand innovative, participatory leadership to foster supportive learning environments (Anderson, 2019; Burbules et al., 2020).

School improvement refers to a systematic and planned effort to enhance the conditions of teaching and learning within a school to achieve specific educational objectives more effectively (Ainscow, 2020; Madani, 2019; Schildkamp, 2019). This concept encompasses various aspects, including fostering a participatory leadership style, creating a supportive learning environment, and engaging all stakeholders in the improvement process (García-Martínez et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2021). Participatory leadership, in particular, is defined as the practice of involving stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and community members in decision-making, thereby fostering a shared sense of responsibility and collaboration in achieving school goals (Afzal Tajik & Wali, 2020; Perry-Hazan & Somech, 2023; Yulianti et al., 2021). These principles form the backbone of successful school improvement initiatives.

Despite extensive research on school leadership and improvement, there remains a significant gap in understanding the real-world experiences of school principals in implementing these strategies, particularly in urban contexts such as Istanbul. Existing literature often focuses on theoretical frameworks or large-scale quantitative studies, leaving a limited understanding of the qualitative, experience-based insights from principals themselves. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of public primary school principals and their strategies for addressing the challenges of school improvement.

Beginning with a historical perspective, the evolution of school improvement highlights its increasing complexity. In the 1980s, the "bottom-up" approach emphasized practical knowledge and local ownership of change, contrasting with earlier top-down paradigms. By the 1990s, a broader focus on school culture, informal dynamics, and stakeholder relationships became essential. Today, school improvement is recognized as a multidimensional process requiring a nuanced understanding of both internal and external factors affecting the school environment. Within the Turkish National Education System, recent policies underscore the importance of school improvement teams and strategic planning to achieve sustained progress and student success.

This study aims to investigate the contributions of public primary school principals to school improvement based on their experiences. By analyzing their activities, challenges, and solutions, as well as the perceived impact of their efforts on their schools, the research seeks to provide practical insights for newly appointed principals and policymakers. Ultimately, it endeavors to illuminate the role of leadership in fostering a collaborative and dynamic educational environment that meets the demands of the 21st century.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, focusing on the real-world experiences of school principals to address the research objectives and sub-objectives. The case study design is particularly suited to exploring "human experiences" and gaining in-depth insights into participants' perceptions, assumptions, and prejudices in their social contexts (Miles, 1994; Van Maanen, 1998). A case study investigates one or more bounded cases over time using multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Creswell & Clark, 2023). This design was chosen to explore how school principals navigate challenges and implement strategies in the context of school improvement.

Research Participants

The study group consisted of nine primary school principals working in public primary schools in Istanbul's districts of Bakırköy, Ataşehir, and Maltepe. These principals were selected based on the criterion of having at least eight years of experience in administrative roles, reflecting their deep

familiarity with school improvement processes. Participants were chosen through a combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling, both purposive sampling methods.

Criterion sampling ensures that all cases included in the study meet specific, predefined criteria, allowing the researcher to focus on participants with the most relevant experience and knowledge ([Marshall et al., 2020](#)). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, involves identifying initial participants who can recommend additional knowledgeable individuals, creating a network of informed respondents ([Leighton et al., 2021](#)). This approach allowed the researcher to identify principals who were well-versed in the challenges and opportunities of school improvement and to prioritize participants whose insights would enrich the study's findings. The selected districts—Bakırköy, Ataşehir, and Maltepe—were chosen due to their diverse socio-economic profiles, representing a range of school contexts within Istanbul. This regional specificity adds depth and contextual relevance to the study's findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to encourage participants to share detailed narratives of their experiences in a "story-telling" format. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced data reflecting the principals' unique perspectives and practices. Interview questions were developed based on the study's objectives, focusing on principals' activities, challenges, and strategies related to school improvement. The interviews were conducted in participants' school offices, providing a familiar and comfortable environment, or online when in-person meetings were not feasible. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and follow-up interviews were conducted with some participants to clarify or expand upon their initial responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were securely stored to maintain data confidentiality and integrity.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data systematically, following the framework proposed by [Miles \(1994\)](#). This method allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns within the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the principals' experiences. The analysis process began with reviewing and organizing the transcriptions into a manageable format. Data were then coded to identify recurring themes and patterns, which were categorized into broader themes based on their relevance to the research objectives. Intertextual (between participants) and intratextual (within participants) relationships were analyzed to uncover connections between themes and sub-themes. Relationships among sub-themes were then synthesized into overarching themes that encapsulated the principals' experiences and reflections.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employed several triangulation techniques. Preliminary findings were shared with participants in "confirmation meetings" to validate the accuracy of the interpretations and gather additional insights. Feedback from participants was incorporated into the final analysis. The researcher also consulted with eight domain experts during one-hour sessions held over three months to refine the analysis and interpretation of the data. Themes and sub-themes were revised and finalized after multiple rounds of review and feedback from domain experts. The study also incorporated the "short anecdote" method in presenting findings, highlighting participants' experiences through narrative summaries ([Michael, 2012](#)). This approach emphasized the principals' voices and ensured that their perspectives were authentically represented.

RESULTS

School Improvement Strategies and Implementations

This theme focuses on how school principals design and implement strategies for school improvement. Central to their efforts were systematic planning, fostering a supportive learning environment, and involving multiple actors in the process.

School improvement planning emerged as a foundational step. Principals consistently highlighted the importance of forming dedicated school improvement teams and setting realistic short- and long-term goals. For example, P1 noted the need for: "*systematic and planned efforts, with non-utopic, realistic goals*". Similarly, P4 explained, "*We carried out our activities based on this plan,*" emphasizing the

importance of structured approaches. These plans were developed collaboratively, often involving vice principals, teachers, and parents. P7 shared, "*We hold meetings with the administration team, set goals, and prepare our plan as a team*", while P3 noted that their team included "*parent-teacher associations, volunteer parents, and donors*".

Creating a supportive learning environment was another key strategy. Principals emphasized fostering high expectations, effective leadership, and an organizational culture that promoted both academic and social development. P3 described their leadership approach: "*I work as a leader of teaching, setting high standards, guiding staff development, and implementing effective school leadership processes*". Activities to enhance the school environment included organizing celebrations, guiding students into extracurricular activities, and improving facilities. P5 shared examples such as "*sports competitions, a children's park, and multiple intelligence-based activities*". Involving actors in school improvement was seen as essential for creating a collaborative and inclusive culture. Many principals emphasized the importance of a shared vision, with P1 stating: "*We tried to establish a sense of us, not me, to unite stakeholders under the same goal*". Similarly, P7 highlighted: "*All school employees and students make an effort to achieve the shared goals*", underscoring the collective effort required for meaningful change.

Challenges Faced by School Principals

Principals identified several challenges during the school improvement process, including a lack of organizational culture, resistance to change, organizational bureaucracy, inadequate physical conditions, and limited resources. The absence of a strong organizational culture was frequently cited as a barrier. P1 noted, "*The lack of organizational culture and continuation of old habits were the most difficult factors*". This sentiment was echoed by P9, who stated, "*The absence of organizational identity and culture was a key obstacle*". Resistance to change also posed significant difficulties, with principals encountering opposition from teachers, parents, and staff. P8 observed, "*The resistance of staff not open to change hindered the process*" while P9 described the challenge of "*demolishing traditional teacher mindsets to create collaborative environments*".

Organizational bureaucracy further complicated efforts, with many principals expressing frustration at the excessive administrative workload. P8 remarked, "*Organizational bureaucracy is exhausting, with too much official correspondence*". P6 emphasized the burden on school leaders, stating, "*We deal with students, parents, and teachers simultaneously, and the district directorate offers little support*". Physical conditions in schools also presented obstacles, with overcrowded classrooms and insufficient facilities limiting the scope of improvement. P1 explained, "*We had to turn libraries and janitors' rooms into classrooms due to overcrowding*". Finally, insufficient resources were a major challenge. P1 noted, "*There are financial problems... the government doesn't provide janitors, yet expects clean schools*". P7 highlighted the difficulty of securing resources in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, stating, "*Parents' socio-economic limitations hinder resource collection*".

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Principals employed strategies that included fostering a participatory culture, building a robust communication network, and leveraging support from external stakeholders To address these challenges. Fostering a participatory and sharing-oriented culture was seen as vital for overcoming obstacles. P4 emphasized the importance of teamwork, stating, "*Sharing and trust are essential... treating everyone fairly helps create a sense of us*". P1 described initiatives to build organizational culture through social activities, such as organizing breakfasts and theater outings, which "*reduced group divisions among teachers and encouraged open communication*".

Building a good communication network and feedback system also facilitated problem-solving. P7 explained, "*I manage transparently and eliminate doubts through open communication*". P1 highlighted the importance of interpersonal dialogue, noting, "*Everything works with interpersonal communication*". Such networks not only resolved issues but also strengthened relationships within the school community.

Finally, leveraging support from external stakeholders helped principals address resource and infrastructure challenges. P8 described collaborating with NGOs and municipalities, which "*solved physical and technological challenges and improved educational activities*". P5 added that external

support transformed the school environment, stating, *"Using resources from the environment helped address numerous problems"*.

Impact on Stakeholders

The principals reported that their school improvement efforts had a positive impact on students, parents, teachers, and the broader school community. Improvement activities fostered happiness and success among students, parents, and staff. P5 stated, *"Success comes with a happy student, parent, and school. Students are happy, engaged in activities, and achieving success"*. These efforts also enhanced the school's reputation. P1 noted, *"We have become one of the preferred schools, and this has been reflected positively on all stakeholders"*. P2 described receiving appreciation from parents and the national education directorates, adding, *"Our transformation activities are exemplary for the community"*. Additionally, these efforts strengthened relationships within the school. P7 remarked, *"Every activity further strengthens interpersonal relations, promoting socialization within and outside the school"*. P1 observed that teachers' sense of belonging improved, noting, *"Our teachers started to spend more time at school"*, reflecting a stronger commitment to the institution.

DISCUSSION

School Improvement Strategies and Implementations

This study underscores the critical role of systematic planning, fostering a supportive learning environment, and involving diverse actors in the success of school improvement initiatives. The participants' emphasis on developing structured, realistic plans reflects an acknowledgment of the necessity for clarity and purpose in leadership. Systematic planning aligns with some researchers' framework of school improvement, which highlights the importance of clearly defined goals and consistent monitoring. Principals in the study frequently mentioned the inclusion of vice principals, teachers, and parents in creating these plans, which not only ensured practicality but also fostered a sense of ownership among stakeholders ([Afzal Tajik & Wali, 2020](#); [Mayger & Provinzano, 2022](#); [Wilson Heenan et al., 2024](#)).

The creation of supportive learning environments was another key strategy reported by principals. These environments focused on both academic and social development, emphasizing the holistic needs of students. Activities such as sports competitions and student-centered programs resonate with research advocating for whole-child education approaches ([Gleddie & Morgan, 2021](#); [Li & Zhang, 2024](#); [Wall, 2021](#)). By prioritizing leadership that set high standards and encouraged organizational culture development, the principals demonstrated an understanding of the integral relationship between leadership style and educational outcomes.

Moreover, the collaborative involvement of various actors in school improvement highlighted the inclusive culture fostered by the participants. Their efforts to build a shared vision and establish collective goals align with theories of participatory leadership ([Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019](#); [Robinson & Gray, 2019](#)). Principals' accounts of uniting stakeholders—teachers, students, and parents—around common objectives demonstrate the efficacy of creating an "us, not me" culture. This approach not only promotes collaboration but also aligns with research suggesting that inclusive leadership strengthens institutional resilience and adaptability.

However, while the strategies were largely effective, some variation existed in their application. For example, the degree of community involvement and the scope of improvement plans were influenced by contextual factors such as the socio-economic profile of the school's location. This variability suggests that while the principles of systematic planning, supportive environments, and collaboration are universally relevant, their implementation requires customization based on specific school contexts. Future studies might explore how these strategies are adapted in rural or under-resourced settings, adding further nuance to the understanding of effective school improvement practices.

Challenges Faced by School Principals

The findings revealed a series of challenges that hindered school improvement, including a lack of organizational culture, resistance to change, excessive bureaucracy, inadequate physical conditions, and resource limitations. The absence of a strong organizational culture was one of the most significant barriers reported by participants. This aligns with previous research that effective school improvement requires transforming the existing culture to foster a shared commitment to progress ([Ainscow, 2020](#); [Lee & Louis, 2019](#); [Pineda-Báez et al., 2020](#); [Yurkofsky et al., 2020](#)). Participants' experiences of entrenched habits and fragmented identities within schools highlight the difficulties of initiating cultural change in environments resistant to reform.

Resistance to change from staff, parents, and other stakeholders was another critical challenge. This resistance often stemmed from entrenched beliefs and a reluctance to adapt to new practices. Previous research observation that successful change relies on stakeholders' trust and confidence in the new systems resonates with the participants' accounts ([Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022](#); [Wehn & Almomani, 2019](#)). The need for principals to manage resistance delicately, balancing persuasion with structural support, underscores the complexity of leading change in schools. Strategies to address this challenge must focus on building trust and providing clear evidence of the benefits of proposed changes ([Talwar et al., 2023](#); [Thompson & Parent, 2021](#); [Vincent et al., 2021](#)).

Organizational bureaucracy was also highlighted as a major hindrance, with principals reporting excessive administrative responsibilities that detracted from their ability to focus on pedagogical leadership. This finding echoes previous studies on the administrative burden of school leaders and calls for systemic reforms to streamline bureaucratic processes ([Bell & Smith, 2021](#); [Bozeman & Youtie, 2020](#); [Fuchong, 2022](#); [Woelert, 2023](#)). Participants' experiences of juggling multiple roles—educator, manager, and mediator—illustrate the unsustainable pressures placed on school principals, particularly in urban educational contexts.

Inadequate physical conditions and resource limitations compounded these challenges, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient facilities, and a lack of basic resources, such as janitorial staff, were recurring issues. These findings align with previous research critiques of inequitable resource allocation in education. Such disparities not only impede the ability of schools to deliver quality education but also exacerbate systemic inequalities ([Howard et al., 2019](#); [Taylor et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from policymakers to ensure equitable funding and infrastructure improvements.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Despite the significant challenges they faced, school principals demonstrated resilience and creativity in addressing these obstacles. One of the most effective strategies was fostering a participatory and sharing-oriented school culture. Principals emphasized the importance of involving teachers, staff, and parents in decision-making processes, which created a sense of collective responsibility and trust. This aligns with previous research findings that participatory leadership fosters engagement and reduces resistance to change ([Busse & Regenber, 2019](#); [Chan, 2019](#); [Khaw et al., 2023](#)). Social activities, such as staff breakfasts and theater outings, served as informal yet impactful methods of strengthening bonds and building a cohesive organizational culture.

Establishing robust communication networks and feedback systems was another critical strategy employed by principals. Transparent communication not only helped clarify goals but also provided a platform for addressing concerns and resolving conflicts. Participants' emphasis on dialogue and interpersonal communication echoes previous study assertions that effective communication is central to successful school leadership ([Ataguba & Ataguba, 2020](#); [Daniels et al., 2019](#); [Leithwood et al., 2020](#)). By fostering open channels of communication, principals were able to build trust, reduce resistance, and ensure alignment among stakeholders ([Belasen & Belasen, 2019](#); [Gara & La Porte, 2020](#); [Martínez-Peláez et al., 2023](#)).

Leveraging external support from NGOs, municipalities, and other community actors proved particularly effective in addressing resource and infrastructure challenges. Collaborations with external stakeholders provided schools with additional resources, such as technological tools and physical improvements, enabling them to overcome some of the limitations posed by inadequate government funding. These partnerships reflect the broader trend of community-based school improvement efforts,

which recognize the importance of local networks in enhancing educational outcomes ([Hill et al., 2021](#); [Smith et al., 2020](#); [Wallerstein et al., 2020](#)).

However, the reliance on external support raises questions about the sustainability of such initiatives. While these partnerships can provide immediate relief, they may not address the underlying systemic issues of resource allocation and funding disparities. Policymakers must work to institutionalize support mechanisms that reduce schools' dependence on external actors, ensuring that all schools have access to the resources they need for sustained improvement.

Impact on Stakeholders

The school improvement efforts described by principals had far-reaching impacts on students, parents, teachers, and the broader school community. One of the most notable outcomes was the enhanced happiness and engagement of students. Principals' accounts of students participating in extracurricular activities and achieving academic success highlight the transformative potential of inclusive and student-centered approaches. These findings align with the previous study's emphasis on making schools better places for learning, where all stakeholders thrive ([Daly-Smith et al., 2020](#)).

Teachers also benefited from the improvement efforts, with many reporting increased job satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging. Principals' efforts to foster a supportive and collaborative culture were instrumental in building this sense of community. P1's observation that teachers were spending more time at school reflects the positive impact of these initiatives on staff morale and commitment. These findings reinforce the importance of relational trust in educational leadership ([Daniëls et al., 2019](#)).

Parents and the broader community were similarly impacted by the improvement efforts. Enhanced school reputations and increased stakeholder satisfaction were recurring themes, with several principals noting that their schools had become more desirable among parents. This suggests that school improvement initiatives not only benefit internal stakeholders but also enhance the school's standing within the community. These outcomes underscore the interconnected nature of school improvement, where the success of one group positively influences the experiences of others.

While the reported impacts were overwhelmingly positive, the findings also highlight the importance of sustaining these improvements. Principals emphasized the need for ongoing support and collaboration to maintain momentum and prevent regression. Future research could explore strategies for ensuring the long-term sustainability of school improvement efforts, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the multifaceted approaches, challenges, and outcomes of school improvement efforts as experienced by public primary school principals. It emphasizes the critical role of systematic planning, supportive learning environments, and collaborative leadership in driving meaningful change within educational institutions. Principals demonstrated that structured and inclusive school improvement planning is essential for success. By setting realistic goals and engaging stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and local communities, they established a shared vision that motivated collective action. The creation of supportive learning environments, characterized by high expectations, holistic development, and enhanced facilities, further underscored the importance of fostering both academic and social growth. These strategies not only improved student outcomes but also cultivated a stronger sense of community and belonging within schools.

Despite these successes, the findings reveal significant challenges that principals must navigate. The lack of a cohesive organizational culture, resistance to change, and excessive administrative burdens were persistent obstacles. Additionally, insufficient physical infrastructure and limited resources posed barriers to equitable and effective school improvement. These challenges highlight systemic issues within the education system, particularly in resource-constrained environments, and call for targeted interventions to address these gaps. To overcome these challenges, principals adopted innovative strategies such as fostering a participatory culture, building robust communication networks, and leveraging external support. These approaches not only resolved immediate issues but also strengthened relationships within and beyond the school community. The reliance on external

stakeholders, while effective in the short term, points to the need for sustainable, institutionalized support to reduce dependency on external resources.

Finally, the positive impact of school improvement efforts on stakeholders was evident. Enhanced student engagement, teacher satisfaction, and parental involvement demonstrated the far-reaching benefits of effective leadership. Schools became more desirable within their communities, further reinforcing the transformative potential of focused improvement initiatives. This study underscores the interconnected nature of school improvement, where benefits to one group ripple across the entire community.

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