



International Journal of Leadership in Education

Theory and Practice

ISSN: 1360-3124 (Print) 1464-5092 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ledl20>

Framing research on school principals' identities

Gary Crow, Christopher Day & Jorunn Møller

To cite this article: Gary Crow, Christopher Day & Jorunn Møller (2016): Framing research on school principals' identities, International Journal of Leadership in Education, DOI: [10.1080/13603124.2015.1123299](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1123299)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1123299>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis



Published online: 11 Jan 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 402



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=tedl20>

Framing research on school principals' identities

Gary Crow^a, Christopher Day^b and Jorunn Møller^c

^aDepartment of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA; ^bSchool of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England; ^cDepartment of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Blindern, Norway

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a basis for a tentative framework for guiding future research into principals' identity construction and development. It is situated in the context of persisting emphases placed by government policies on the need for technocratic competencies in principals as a means of demonstrating success defined largely as compliance with demands for the improvement in student test scores. Often this emphasis is at the expense of forwarding a broader view of the need, alongside these, for clear educational values, beliefs and practices that are associated with these. The framework is informed by the theoretical work of Wenger and Bourdieu as well as recent empirical research on the part played by professional identity and emotions in school leadership. In the paper, we highlight different lines of inquiry and the issues they raise for researchers. We argue that the constructions of school leadership identities are located in time, space and place, and emotions reflect complex leadership identities situated within social hierarchies which are part of wider structures and social relations of power and control.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 May 2014
Accepted 13 Nov 2015

1. Introduction

The importance of leadership for school improvement and student learning has become firmly established in the research literature, especially from research into successful and effective leadership in the context of current high-stakes accountability reform (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Day et al., 2000, 2011). Such research has been conducted in contexts in which the texts found in policy standards and training and development documents in many countries have increasingly prioritized technocratic leadership skills and competencies which define effectiveness as the production of high student test scores over values, beliefs, dispositions and practices designed also to develop students' emotional as well as functional literacy and social values (Lumby & English, 2009).

Within the body of robust empirical international research on understanding what makes school principals successful, educational researchers have found that their sense of identity as educators with strong moral purposes is a critical antecedent and co-requisite of their capacity for effective practices and closely associated with their professional identities (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011; Moller, 2012; Scribner & Crow, 2012). Even here, though, the frame for researching leaders' identities is not yet accompanied by a consistent theoretical and coherent analytical framework. A

CONTACT Gary Crow  gcrow@indiana.edu

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

number of scholars have suggested different frameworks for understanding how we construct (and reconstruct) our identities, highlighting different lines of inquiry and different dimensions (e.g. Blackmore, 2004, 2011; Boler, 1999; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Day & Lee, 2011; Eacott, 2015; Gunter, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998, 2005; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003; Sugrue, 2005; Thomson, 2009, 2011). We offer a synthesis of existing work in the field in the belief that it will be helpful as a means of understanding how leaders' identities are constructed and developed and whether how and why they may change over time. This paper is thus intended to provide a basis for a tentative framework for guiding future research into principals' identity construction and development.

Our focus in this paper is primarily on professional identity. Other types of identity include social identity (membership in a group) or person identity (unique meanings that define an individual apart from roles and groups) (Burke & Stets, 2009). Burke and Stets also identify role identity which they define as 'the internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply to themselves' (p. 114). However, this definition ignores the interactions between role, person and social identity (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). An individual school leader's identity, e.g. as a woman, as a person of colour, as residing in a particular community and/or national context, influences the 'internalized meanings' attached to a role (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Hall, 1996; Moller, 2005a). Such identities are being negotiated but also constrained within culture and context (Lumby & English, 2009). Thus, while we focus here on these meanings related to the professional identity of the school principal, we acknowledge, also, that gender, race, class and other group factors influence this. Ryan's (2007) research, for example, implicitly supports this position. He distinguishes role and identity by identifying different elements: roles are scripted, deterministic and static, whereas identities are improvisational, emphasize human agency and are dynamic. The static and more uniform nature of roles are contrasted with identities which can be contradictory in different social contexts and are constantly being negotiated as individuals interact with various contexts (Ryan, 2007, p. 345).

These claims reinforce those made by Wenger (1998) who argues that 'One can design roles, but one cannot design the identities that will be constructed through these roles' (p. 229); and 'Institutions define roles, qualifications, and the distribution of authority—but unless institutional roles can find a realization as identities in practice, they are unlikely to connect with the conduct of everyday life' (pp. 244–245).

The connection of identity with practice has both individual and collective dimensions. Identity provides motivation for an individual to take on and enact a role. It is, 'The energy, motivation, drive that makes roles actually work, require that individuals identify with, internalize, and become the role' (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 38). For example, research on so-called turnaround schools suggests the importance of leaders in these contexts having a strong sense of urgency and agency that motivate their actions (Public Impact, 2007). Other researchers connect identity with decision-making. For example, Schwenk (2002) argues that identities are evoked by the decisions we make in daily life.

Previous studies have shown that, like those of teachers, leaders' identities are multiple, subjectively constructed and reconstructed and may change through interactions within and between personal, work and policy, and with contexts (e.g. Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Day et al., 2007; Sugrue, 2005; Sugrue & Furlong, 2002). Three major features of principal identities will be discussed in this paper. First, principals' composite occupational identities are influenced by cultural, class, race, biographies, gender factors and their values, attributes, attitudes, aspirations for practice and practices themselves. Second, a profound dynamic interaction exists among identity, educational policy environments and the school and its community as the primary sites of principal engagement. Third, principals' emotional awareness and management are important elements in the relative stability/instability of their identities (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The paper is divided into five parts. In the first part, we discuss the nature of professional identity and, within this, the strengths and limitations of socially constructed theories. In the second part, we consider the emotional dimension, focusing upon three competing dimensions: professional, situated and personal. The third part discusses the use of narrative as a means of researching professional identities. In the fourth part, we highlight how identity is embedded in power relations, ideology and

culture. This leads, in the fifth part, to a tentative analytical framework which is intended to contribute to researching principals' identities and identity construction.

2. The nature of identity: individually or socially constructed?

Before articulating the elements of identity that must be considered in providing a tentative framework for researching principals' identity construction, we visit a historical philosophical dilemma that has influenced current understandings. Although there are several sources of this dilemma, typically it is credited to the differences between two seminal philosophers, Hegel (1806/1977) and Kant (1781/1966), in regard to whether and to what degree identities are constructed by the individual who freely chooses a set of identities (Kant) or the degree to which these are culturally and historically determined (Hegel). According to Kant, the mind shapes and structures experience through common elements such as space and time. Hegel, in contrast, held that our mind interprets things in relation to the other; that we cannot know ourselves in isolation because our thoughts, values and beliefs are derived from the cultures in which we live. This philosophical dilemma has influenced other, more contemporary views. For example, Bourdieu (1996), anchored in critical sociology, argues that the social is always within agents and their actions cannot be seen as individual; the logic of the field, i.e. the codification process which normalizes activities and removes ambiguity, must be considered since the agents recognize and misrecognize their position and positioning through how they as individuals expect the game to be played within practice. Giddens (1991), following the Kantian perspective, developed a theory of 'structuration' within which there are constant tensions between the 'structures' we inhabit and our ability to exercise 'agency' within them. He argues that the individual is free to construct identities that make sense to that individual. Thus, it is possible for individuals to construct narratives to embody their values, dispositions, knowledge and actions. The most recent populist social theory is that proposed by Wenger (1998).

Wenger follows a Hegelian perspective that is social constructivist in its orientation, acknowledging that the cultural context of individuals influences their identity construction. He emphasizes the temporal quality of identity and the 'constant becoming' (Wenger, 1998, p. 154) in which identity is neither a fixed course nor a destination. Instead, identity becomes a work in progress that is shaped by our efforts, our past, future and present, and is negotiated. According to Wenger, identity is negotiated experience within engagement in multiple communities of practice. 'Practice involves the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context' (p. 149). He argues that identity develops through participation in a community; for example, the principal's engagement within a school organization or, indeed, broader culturally embedded groupings (e.g. principal cadres in China). His notion of identity as 'lived experience' involves, then, both individual and collective dimensions. This lived experience or identity, according to Wenger, is the pivot between the social and the individual. He maintains that in everyday life, it is difficult to tell where the individual and the social begin and end and that, within communities of practice, the 'lived experience' of identity includes five dimensions: (i) identity as negotiated experience; (ii) as community membership; (iii) as learning trajectory; (iv) as nexus of membership and; (v) as relation between the local and the global (p. 149).

He reminds us that identity does not rest solely in what either we or others say about us—what we call ourselves or the stories we tell about ourselves. Although these are certainly influential, the lived experience of identity involves a constant process of negotiating our different selves in the multiple contexts in which we live, work and play. In the case of principals, experiences are negotiated, for example, with teachers, parents, students and, more distantly but no more less powerfully, policy-makers.

Wenger (1998) identifies three elements in communities of practice: (1) mutuality of engagement, in which we learn who we are as we play a part in our relationship with others; (2) accountability to an enterprise, in which we develop a perspective that includes actions, choices and values; and (3) the negotiability of a repertoire, in which the history of practice presents events, references, memories and experiences (pp. 152–153). Relevant to the current reform contexts in which school principals work, confronting new practices presents potential for conflict, competition, concern and identity crises.

Wenger (1998) argues that we are involved in multiple communities and that our membership in any particular community of practice represents only part of our identity or, one might argue, only one of our several selves that at any given time may be neither stable nor unstable and are always subject to fluctuation. Key to successfully negotiating our stable selves is the reconciliation of the multiple identities which are constructed in these multiple communities of practice. Again, in relation to the work of principals, Wenger (1998) acknowledges that identity involves a local–global interplay. Principals are not only engaged in a local context—school, district and government units—but also in the broader contexts of politics and reforms. Both of these contexts also influence the construction of identity by impacting the knowledge, skills and values of the communities of practice.

There are limitations, however, to Wenger's theory. He bases his understanding of learning on a social theory which is based upon four major premises: (1) we are social beings; (2) knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises; (3) knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is of active engagement in the world; and (4) meaning—our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it is as meaningful—is ultimately what learning is to produce (p. 4).

These assumptions grow out of a conceptual framework which uses theories of social structure, theories of situated experience, theories of practice and theories of identity (p. 12). Although Wenger (1998) acknowledges the multi-layered construction of identities and emphasizes the relation between the local and the global, his view may be criticized as inadequately recognizing the mutually constitutive nature of complex social, political and economic struggles over time and 'the history in person' where identities are historical and contested in practice (Holland & Lave, 2001). In addition, the importance of the content of learning—how certain concepts frame our ways of understanding identities—is not problematized in Wenger's social theory of learning.

Moreover, Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning is dependent on participation as the active engagement of individuals with each other in communities of practice. 'Participation in this sense is both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations' (pp. 55–56). Participation certainly involves dialogue, but it includes as well the multiple and numerous artefacts of the community, including stories, actions and meetings. Participation involves engagement with these artefacts. Wenger (1998), we would argue, does not sufficiently emphasize how these artefacts become and are used as tools for active engagement in communities of practice. Our studies of school leaders in multi-national contexts demonstrate the role that stories, meetings and other artefacts play in the identity construction process (Crow & Scribner, 2014).

This last observation expands the notion of meaning-making that is essential for researching and understanding identity construction. The negotiations that occur in communities of practice that are integral to the construction of identity make use of material practices, such as stories, actions, meetings, ceremonies, rituals and presentations. Acknowledging our focus on identity also requires that we distinguish identity from role. Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others. It is culturally embedded but subject to change. There is an unavoidable interrelationship, also, between the professional and the personal. Crucially, also, the concepts of identity found in the work of Hegel and Wenger ignore a critical component, namely the place of emotion as a central feature of principals' work and professional identity.

3. The emotional dimension

Educational literature on teachers (for example, Day & Lee, 2011; Nias, 1996) recognizes that the broader social and emotional conditions and contexts of teachers' work and lives and claim that emotions are at the heart of teaching (Hargreaves, 1998). They are, 'intimately involved in virtually every aspect of the teaching and learning process and, therefore, an understanding of the nature of emotions within the school context is essential' (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002, p. 67). Emotions suffice person–environment transactions and power relations (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008) and, therefore,

impact to a greater or lesser extent upon teachers' sense of self or identity and their capacity to function intellectually (Salzberger-Wittenburg, Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1996).

While much of the literature focuses upon teachers' emotions (e.g. Hargreaves, 2005; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Boler, 1999; Zorn & Boler, 2007), it is reasonable to suppose that emotions play a similar influencing role in principals' own sense of identity and the way they lead others through their relationships and interactions, since a key function of principals is to create, develop and work with school culture and promote and nurture teachers' motivation, well-being and job satisfaction and fulfilment. Although, as Beatty pointed out (Beatty, 2000), leaders' emotions were an un-charted area of research as recently as 15 years ago; since then, there has been an upsurge of research in this area. Some of this has focussed broadly upon a culturally oriented broad exploration of 'structures of feeling' in theorizing relations between power and emotions (Harding & Pribram, 2004); other research has raised issues of leaders' emotions as expressed in contexts of neoliberal external reforms (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Blackmore (2011), for example, deconstructs the discourses of emotional labour and emotional intelligence in research on educational leadership by analysing how emotions have been translated and adapted across different epistemic fields, highlighting the interplay between gender, emotionality, identity, power and leadership. Her main argument is that emotions are part of wider structures and social relations of power and control, and emotions reflect our complex identities situated within social hierarchies. Crawford (2007) argues that emotionality is not just a peripheral phenomenon in educational leadership, but constitutes the heart of it. Linked to Gronn and Lacey's (2004) study on aspirant principals, Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet (2011) highlight that the inevitable normative character of education contributes to a sense of vulnerability and emotionality in leadership, and the principal is caught in a web of conflicting loyalties and the struggle between loneliness and belonging. Principals find themselves at the crossroads of different interests from different actors in and around the schools. Kelchtermans et al. (2011) use the metaphor of 'the gatekeeper' as a frame to capture some of the particular complexities of principals' emotional experiences of themselves. Other literature (e.g. Leithwood & Beatty, 2008) has addressed the ways in which principals may lead and manage teacher emotions in schools in order to manage change better, and the role of emotional intelligence in this process (George, 2000).

These research findings demonstrate clearly and unequivocally that principals are likely to experience a range of sometimes contrasting, competing and fluctuating emotions which sometimes challenge their abilities to construct and sustain stable identities as a consequence of their work in various communities of practice, e.g. parents, teachers, policy bureaucrats and students (Moller, 2005b). Entering a position as school principal can be seen as a 'dialogical struggle' in which individuals variously 'import' something of their previous identities (cf. Bradbury & Gunter, 2006), while also opening them to change in the new contexts that they inherit. Thus, there is likely to be a period in which, like new teachers, principals struggle to construct a stable professional identity as they learn to manage old and new multiple identities in an ongoing performance of the self (Lumby & English, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that, because of their need to manage and nurture their own and teachers' emotional well-being, they can experience vulnerabilities when control of long-held principles and practices is challenged by policy changes or new expectations for standards, when their moral integrity is questioned, or when trust and respect from parents, the public and their teachers is eroded (Day & Gurr, 2014; Scribner, Whiteman, & Crow, 2011).

Previous research has either suggested that identity is stable (Nias, 1989), affected by work contexts (Beijaard, 1995) or fragmented (Maclure, 1993). Several educational researchers (Hargreaves, 1994; Nias, 1989, 1996; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Sumsion, 2002; Zembylas, 2003; and Day & Lee, 2011), among others, have noted that *teacher and principal identities* are constructed from and affected by the emotional influences of self, role and work context. With Barbalet (2002), we argue that they are the link between the social structures in which teachers work and the ways they act:

[E]motion is a necessary link between social structures and social actor. The connection is never mechanical because emotions are normally not compelling but inclining. But without the emotions category, accounts of situated actions would be fragmentary and incomplete. Emotion is provoked by circumstance and is experienced

as transformation of dispositions to act. It is through the subject's active exchange with others that emotional experience is both stimulated in the actor and orienting of their conduct. Emotion is directly implicated in the actor's transformation of their circumstances, as well as the circumstances' transformation of the actor's disposition to act. (p. 4)

Our thinking on the emotional dimension of identities is informed, also, by Hochschild's (1983) research on 'emotional work' and 'emotional labor' and by previous, large-scale longitudinal research on teachers' identities which suggests that identity itself is a composite consisting of interactions among personal, professional and situational dimensions (Day et al., 2007). This applies equally to principals' identities. This research found that identities are neither intrinsically stable nor intrinsically fragmented, but that they can be more or less stable depending upon the capacities of teachers to manage these three constituent dimensions of their identity within a number of competing scenarios (Day et al., 2007):

- (1) *Professional* dimension: This reflects social and policy expectations of what a good teacher is and the educational ideals of the teacher. It is open to the influence of long-term policy and social trends as to what constitutes a good teacher or classroom practitioner. It could have a number of competing and conflicting elements such as local or national policy, continuing professional development, workload and roles and responsibilities.
- (2) *Situated or socially located* dimension: This occurs within a specified school, department or classroom. The situated dimension is located in a specific school and context and is affected by local conditions (i.e. student behaviour, demographics and level of socio-economic condition), leadership, support and feedback. It is also affected by students, support and feedback loops from teachers' immediate working context, and is connected to long-term identity.
- (3) *Personal* dimension: The personal dimension is located in life outside school and is linked to family and social roles. This dimension of identity could involve various competing elements such as being a father, son or partner. Feedback comes from family and friends, and they often become sources of tension as the individual's sense of identity can become out of step.

This research (Day et al., 2007, 2011) found that teachers experienced tensions within and between these three dimensions at any given time and that each dimension of identity was subject to a number of positive and negative influences. The strength of teachers' commitment, job satisfaction, well-being, self-efficacy and vulnerability, agency and resilience, and perceptions of effectiveness was affected but not necessarily determined by these influences. This is because each of these was mediated by teachers' strong sense of vocation/moral purposes/values and the interaction between these and their working environment. Any one (or more) of these three dimensions of identity, at a particular time and in particular scenarios, was dominant, thus challenging the relative stability of existing identities. Managing such new (or persisting) instabilities and tensions, however, required additional time and emotional energy from the teacher, and this affected their sense of commitment, job satisfaction, well-being, agency and effectiveness. Instability itself was not necessarily negative. Rather, it stimulated a re-evaluation of current thinking and practices.

The effects of these dimensions on instability relate as well to principals. Instabilities, whether of a personal, professional or situated nature or a combination of these, and especially in their early years of leadership, are likely to create stresses in the emotional fabric of principals' sense of identity (Metlife Inc, 2013).

In contexts of intensive and persistent changes in expectations, working conditions and practices, principals' emotional identities may be affected not only by challenges to these in the internal and external environments but also the ways, and extent to which, they enact (manage, mediate, adopt and adapt) these successfully. For example, within new approaches governing education, the pressure for increased external accountability may be difficult for some practitioners to resist (cf. Hall, Gunter, & Bragg, 2013). In other words, existing identities may become what MacLure (1993, p. 312) has described as 'a continuing site of struggle'.

4. Understanding identity through constructing narratives

As researchers, we are interested to discover how principals themselves construct their identities. How they interpret experiences and make their meanings explicit, and the stories they tell about themselves, are important in terms of how they come to understand themselves and how they act as embodied beings in the world. Giddens (1991, p. 80) argues that narrative is at the core of identity. He suggests that identity should be seen as an increasingly reflexive project. Within this perspective, the idea of identity involves growing and sustaining a narrative. As we have shown, identity cannot be regarded as something inherited at birth. Nor is it entirely determined by the society in which individuals live. It is a way of making sense of yourself, within yourself and through interaction with others. Although stories told by school principals are likely to be shaped by and reflect the perspective of the teller, this is in turn shaped and structured within a wider socio-historical, political and economic framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Hall, 1996; Norquay, 1990; Sparkes, 1995). In addition, the stories told by school principals to researchers will be shaped by the relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. For instance, the way the interviewer acts, questions and responds will influence the ways the school principals give their accounts of experience (Scribner & Crow, 2011; Moller & Spindler, 2002).

How school principals experience their jobs, how they interpret their positions, what they understand about what they do and what they know and do not know are neither individual choices nor simply only the result of belonging to the social role category 'school principals'. They are a matter of their position and the position of their communities within broader social structures. However, in the course of doing the job and interacting with others, they are likely to be negotiated. Their identities are also products of their histories and values which themselves may, for example, transcend those which other individuals or systems seek to impose. Being a principal in a school whose neighbourhood is categorized as disadvantaged, for example, influences the principal's identities, but the principal's own history and values related to perceptions of the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) in these neighbourhoods also impact the construction of identities. They create what Gronn and Ribbins (1996) have called 'situated portrayals' through which the person's biography is located within time and space.

In terms of research, when people tell their career stories, they are likely to reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones. Change of status, conditions of service, workplace influences and unanticipated personal events trigger such instability. It is also likely that people construct a number of narratives as they are positioned in different discourses which create rules about what is possible to think, do and be (Scribner & Crow, 2012). Research, then, involves looking not only for subjectivities but also for which subjectivities that are legitimated or made illegitimate, the meaning that comes from power relations in which inclusions and exclusions are being made (Gunter, 2001; Thomson, 2011). Each story will be positioned and presented from the perspective of someone with certain intentions at a specific moment in historical time. And it is situated in expectations about who could be in the audience (Eisenhart, 2000). The story tells something about the relationship between the individual and the society, and individuals have multiple subject positions from which they make sense of the world (Moller, 2005a). Identities include our ability and our inability, our willingness and our lack of willingness, our capacity and our lack of capacity to believe that we can shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belongings. For instance, the process through which school principals work themselves into positions in mainstream society as 'a normal school principal' may entail silencing and forgetting of experiences in their lives.

Four contexts seem especially salient in principals' lives and work (Smulyan, 2000). First, the personal context of the individual, including home and educational background and training and path to the principalship seem to be significant. The personal context also contains how concepts as tools for understanding and framing what happens in everyday practice are developed. Second, the community context consists of two constituencies: the families served by the school and the teachers who work within it. Third, the institutional context includes two components: the people in positions of power who control process and product, and the structural regularities of schools and districts that govern

the actions of school principals. Finally, the historical and social contexts encompass and reflect all of the others. They include the historically accepted patterns of behaviour, hierarchies of power and norms of interaction that shape us and that principals, in turn, may perpetuate, resist or mediate.

Through interactions and what the school principals say they are doing, or not doing, they are making visible who they are or are becoming. These stories influence the individuals who hear them and respond to them. In the case of school principals, teachers, parents, students, community members and supervisors hear the narratives that principals construct and respond to them in a variety of ways. They may affirm them, reject them, revise them or any number of other alternatives; and how they respond may, to a greater or lesser extent, in turn influence principals' existing sense of identity (Moller & Spindler, 2002; Scribner & Crow, 2012). A feature of social interaction is that others serve as mirrors into ourselves, i.e. we look at ourselves through the others' eyes (Gronn, 1999). This is part of the social negotiation of identity construction—an ongoing process of positioning, i.e. narrating one's position in relation to others. Listeners of these narratives use their own experiences and meaning-making in responding to the principals' narratives. In particular, their own narratives and constructions of identity interact with principals' narratives. For example, principals who see themselves as instructional reformers negotiate that identity with teachers who may see themselves as innovative in similar or different ways. Principals can never take their authority by the state or jurisdiction or (positional) authority in the school for granted, so that their legitimacy with various stakeholders must continually be negotiated and renegotiated (Helstad & Moller, 2013). Within this perspective, identity is temporally constructed in the process of shaping a learning trajectory consisting of both convergent and divergent trajectories. Because the trajectory is constructed in social contexts, it is not like a path that can be charted or foreseen. It is like a continuous motion—one that has a momentum of its own, but also opens to a field of influence. As trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future in negotiating the present (Moller, 2005b). Nevertheless, for their schools and their leadership to survive and flourish, principals need to construct identities which are relatively stable at any given time.

One may argue, then, that professional identity is not constantly in flux because there are periods of relative stability that are punctuated by periods and events (critical incidents and crises) of relative instability.

5. Embedded in power relations, ideology and culture

The interplay between agency and structure is complex, and a poststructural perspective implies understanding identity as constantly becoming in a context embedded in interactions among the self, power relations, ideology and culture. Bourdieu's work provides us with effective 'thinking tools' to understand this interplay (Lingard, Taylor, & Rawolle, 2005; Thomson, 2005). Although Bourdieu (1996) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) does not use the concept identity construction in his social theory, his concepts habitus, field, cultural capital, doxa and misrecognition contribute to a way of understanding the interaction between the fields of education and identity construction, a way of understanding how people are negotiating and positioning themselves in the field of education. These concepts are particularly helpful 'thinking tools' and offer ways of theorizing the narratives and self-held truths about one's professional identity (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006). He focuses on the field in which one is situated historically and sociologically and how certain discursive practices gain hegemony within the social field, and argues that there might be processes of 'misrecognition in which power relations are not seen for what they are but are interpreted in a way that is seen as legitimate' (English, 2012, p. 168). Bourdieu emphasizes, for instance, that gender inequality is a result of 'symbolic violence'. Different forms of 'symbolic violence', like positioning women as uninformed, misinformed, too emotional, incapable to take strong decisions or not being ambitious enough, might frequently be used to position women as outsiders. For example, based on a study of 20 female head teachers who are also mothers in England, Bradbury and Gunter (2006) show how the labels 'mother' and 'head-teacher' 'co-exist in a flexible state, with one sometimes growing and encroaching on the territory of the other, at other times vice versa, and also underpinning or supporting each other' (pp. 489–499).

They argue that ‘women who are mothers and headteachers recognize and misrecognize their position and positioning’ (p. 500). While each school principal is likely to have distinctive features, they are also connected to and are part of the field of education historically situated within a national context.

6. Towards a collective framework for analysing principals’ identity construction

In this paper, we have sought to bring together different frameworks for understanding how principals construct and reconstruct their professional leadership identities, highlighting different lines of inquiry and the issues they raise for researchers, e.g. how principals balance or reconcile possibly conflicting narratives from different aspects of the self, internal and external cultures. Alongside these, we also acknowledge the influence on our thinking of a corpus of empirical research on successful school leadership (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day & Gurr, 2014). Thus, we recognize that the constructions of identities are both an emotional and cognitive, values-informed process influenced by biographical, national and local cultural and policy contexts, which may be subject to change. For instance, the normalization of the position as a school principal within a specific context constructs identity and knowledge by comparing, differentiating, hierarchizing and excluding. In addition, multiple insecurities in professional identities, as we have shown, can operate simultaneously (Collinson, 2003, pp. 528–529).

Following this argument, school principals construct narratives within the context of their school communities, personal backgrounds and historical settings, and these narratives are affirmed, rejected, negotiated or even revised through interactions with others in the internal and external communities with whom they work. Becoming a successful school principal, then, is the beginning of a long and ‘bumpy’ journey and this implies the need for intellectual and emotional investment, commitment and engagement. Enthusiasm and struggle are part of negotiating experiences and being accountable to the different stakeholders. Gaining legitimacy is crucial and authority can never be taken for granted. In researching the professional identity formation of school principals, we suggest a collective framework which offers a synthesis of existing work in the field. It includes the following five dimensions:

- (1) *The narrative dimension*: School leadership identity as temporally and socially constructed in the process of shaping a learning trajectory. It involves identity as a reflexive project, and identity construction as a ‘tool’ for legitimation.
- (2) *The epistemic dimension*: The construction of school leadership identity as a cognitive activity, a kind of reasoning that results in judgements about what to do under circumstances of indeterminacy. School leaders are expected to justify their decisions by reference to knowledge about education, teaching and learning, and the epistemic dimension is about specific kinds of knowledge, modes of thinking, values and norms gained through authorising to practice as a professional.
- (3) *The emotional dimension*: School principals’ identities for ‘wearing and showing’; it involves identity as a dialogical struggle, the enactment of a ritualized role, managing and regulating emotions and becoming skilled at ‘impression management’. It is about understanding how emotions are part of wider structures and social relations of power and control.
- (4) *The historical and cultural dimension*: School leadership identity as a discursive practice reflects historically and culturally accepted patterns of behaviour. Normative discursive practices act as identity work, working their way into the professional lives of school principals. It includes how experiences of national reforms and possible conflicts between managerial accountability and professional beliefs and ethics are rooted in personal engagement, and how the status accorded to the identity of each principal is being negotiated, taken for granted and constrained within culture and context.
- (5) *The political dimension* reflects power structures within a national and local context: leadership identities are discursively positioned within the administrative field within education; it implies understanding the reciprocal interplay as the principalship is shaped by, and shaping of, the contemporary conditions where it takes place in time and space. It is about how

principals understand their position, how others are positioning them and how the individual principal anticipates the game to be played within practice.

In synthesizing existing work in the field and proposing this tentative framework for guiding future research into principals' identity construction, we anticipate expanded research possibilities that will inform policy and practice. In the context of national high-stakes accountability policies that confront most principals, research that examines how the different reform perspectives and initiatives influence their professional identity construction is important for informing how new principals are prepared, developed and evaluated. External change contexts and their purposes constitute an important part of the cultural and historical settings which influence the narratives that new principals construct. However, it is as well to remember that these contexts and purposes will interact with and likely be mediated by principals' existing educational values, beliefs and practices and that they may well not become the dominant influence that drives their professional identity constructions.

In this paper, we have argued that principals have multiple identities framed in personal, situated and professional perspectives and narratives. Their existing and long-held educational values, emotions and beliefs may coincide, conflict with or differ in important ways from the expectations of others in the reform environment. Research on how these principals are in dialogue with these multiple, and possibly conflicting, identities by constructing narratives will provide valuable information on how preparation programmes and support systems need to be developed to enable successful narratives that balance, or even hold in tension these conflicting identities. We have noted the absence of the epistemic, the emotional and political dimensions in Wenger's (1998) concept of identity. Empirical studies are needed that examine the role that emotions play in the identity formation process. The productive research on the role of emotions in teachers' identities should be extended to research on principal identity. We have suggested, also, the value of the use of narratives as central to researching identity construction. Other tools, including rituals, ceremonies, meetings, language and other artefacts, can serve in the identity formation of principals. In particular, Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' (habitus, field and capital) open up opportunities to examine how the tensions in the experience of work are lived and settled. Understanding how the political and cultural contexts support, constrain and mould, together with personal elements, identity construction will be useful for professional development systems as well as for individual principals reflecting on their own identities.

Finally, although we have identified the kinds of elements that contribute to identity formation in principals, we have not attempted to determine the salience of these elements in relation to each other or in relation to different types of identity formation. The philosophical dilemma, with which we began this paper, suggests that the salience of the personal, cultural and political elements of professional identity formation may vary depending on, for example, personal life experiences, emotions, reform expectations, school culture and other influences. The composite of these elements may also affect the relative stability or instability of identities that principals experience. As the research on leadership continues, the need for more subtle and less uniformly technocratic understandings and perspectives on the principalship grows. In this paper, we have provided a collective framework for research into identity formation that may contribute to the generation of more nuanced understandings of how school leadership develops and is practiced. We anticipate that this more nuanced view would enrich our understanding not only of what leaders do but why they do it and the values, beliefs and practices that shape, challenge and perhaps change their professional identities.

Acknowledgements

This is a revision of a paper presented within a symposium about 'The Identity Construction of School Leaders: Multiple National Perspectives', at the European Conference on Educational Research 2012 at University of Cádiz, 18–21 September. The authors wish to thank the following scholars for their contributions to the development of the article: Michael Uljens, Åbo Akademi, Finland and Barry Bull, Indiana University, USA.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Gary Crow is a professor and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University, USA. His research focuses on the principalship, leadership development, mentoring and educational reform. He has conducted research in the USA and England on principal socialization, successful school principals and leadership identity. His recent publications include *International Handbook on the Preparation and Development of School Leaders* (with Lumby and Pashiardis), *Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders* (with Young, Murphy, and Ogawa) and *The Principalship. New Roles in a Professional Learning Community* (with Matthews).

Christopher Day is a professor of Education and co-director of the Centre for Research in Leadership and Management (CRELM) at University of Nottingham, England. He currently heads up a 20 country research project on Principalship in Successful and Under-Performing Schools; an ESRC-funded project on 'Leadership for Learning in Schools in Challenging Urban Contexts'; and Leadership in Secondary Schools in Rio de Janeiro State (in cooperation with University Federale Fluminense). Recent publications include: *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (2014); *Successful School Leadership and Pupil Outcomes: linking learning and achievement* (2012); and *Successful Principalship: International Perspectives* (2007).

Jorunn Møller is a professor at University of Oslo, the Department of Teacher Education and School Research. Her research interests are within educational leadership, reform policy and accountability. She has been involved in international projects on school leadership, educational reform and leadership identity. At present, she is leading a cross-disciplinary project designed to disentangle the complexity of legal standards and school leaders' professional judgement with a focus on students' right to a good psychosocial learning environment and special needs education.

References

- Ackerman, R., & Maslin-Ostrowsky, P. (2004). *The wounded leader: How real leadership emerges in times of crisis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Barbalet, J. (2002). Introduction: Why emotions are crucial. In J. Barbalet (Ed.), *Emotional sociology* (pp. 1–9). London: Blackwell.
- Beatty, B. (2000). The emotions of educational leadership: breaking the silence. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 3, 331–357.
- Beijaard, D. (1995). Teachers' prior experiences and actual perceptions of professional identity. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1, 281–294.
- Blackmore, J. (2004). Leading as emotional management work in high risk times: The counterintuitive impulses of performativity and passion. *School Leadership and Management*, 24, 439–459.
- Blackmore, J. (2011). Lost in translation? Emotional intelligence, affective economies, leadership and organizational change. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 43, 207–225.
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bradbury, L., & Gunter, H. (2006). Dialogic identities: The experiences of women who are headteachers and mothers in English primary schools. *School Leadership and Management*, 26, 489–504.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009). *Identity theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press/Blackwell.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). Understanding. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 13, 17–37.
- Chubbuck, S., & Zembylas, M. (2008). The emotional ambivalence of socially just teaching: A case study of a novice urban schoolteacher. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, 274–318.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1998). Stories to live by: Narrative understandings of school reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 28, 149–164.
- Collinson, D. L. (2003). Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization*, 10, 527–547.
- Crawford, M. (2007). Emotional coherence in primary school headship. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 35, 521–534.
- Crow, G. M., & Scribner, S. P. (2014). Professional identities of urban school principals. In H. Milner & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *Handbook of Urban Education* (pp. 287–304). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Day, C., & Gu, Q. (2014). *Resilient teachers, resilience schools*. London: Routledge.
- Day, C., & Gurr, D. (2014). *Leading schools successfully: Stories from the field*. London: Routledge.
- Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H., & Beresford, J. (2000). *Leading schools in times of change: A multiperspective study of effective headteachers*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Day, C., & Lee, J. C. K. (2011). *New understandings of teacher's work: emotions and educational change*. Dordecht: Springer.
- Day, C., & Leithwood, K. (Eds.). (2007). *Successful principal leadership in times of change*. Dordecht: Springer.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Leithwood, K., Hopkins, D., Gu, Q., Brown, E., & Ahtaridou, E. (2011). *School leadership and student outcomes: Linking with learning and achievement*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Day, C., Stobart, G., Sammons, P., Kington, A., & Gu, Q. (2007). *Teachers matter: Connecting variations in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Eacott, S. (2015). The principalship, autonomy, and after. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 47, 414–431.
- Eisenhart, M. (2000). Boundaries and selves in the making of 'science'. *Research in Science Education*, 30, 43–55.
- English, F. W. (2012). Bourdieu's *misrecognition*: Why educational leadership standards will not reform schools or leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44, 155–170.
- George, J. M. (2000). Emotions and leadership: The role of emotional intelligence. *Human Relations*, 53, 1027–1055.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gronn, P. (1999). *The making of educational leaders*. London: Continuum International. ProQuest ebrary. Web. October 15, 2015.
- Gronn, P., & Ribbins, P. (1996). Leaders in context: Postpositivist approaches to understanding educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32, 452–473.
- Gronn, P., & Lacey, K. (2004). Positioning oneself for leadership: Feelings of vulnerability among aspirant school principals. *School Leadership & Management*, 24, 405–424.
- Gunter, H. (2001). *Leaders and leadership in education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Hall, D., Gunter, H., & Bragg, J. (2013). Leadership, new public management and the re-modelling and regulation of teacher identities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16, 173–190.
- Hall, V. (1996). *Dancing on the ceiling: A study of women managers in education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Harding, J., & Pribram, E. D. (2004). Losing our cool? *Cultural Studies*, 18, 863–883.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times*. London: Falmer Press.
- Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14, 835–854.
- Hargreaves, A. (2005). Educational change takes ages: Life, career and generational factors in teachers' emotional responses to educational change. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 967–983.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1806/1977). *Phenomenology of spirit* (A. V. Miller, Trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Helstad, K., & Moller, J. (2013). Leadership as relational work: Risks and opportunities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16, 245–262.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (2001). History in person: An introduction. In D. Holland & J. Lave (Eds). *History in person. Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities* (pp. 3–36). Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Kant, I. (1781/1966). *Critique of pure reason*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Kelchtermans, G., Piot, L., & Ballet, K. (2011). The lucid loneliness of the gatekeeper: Exploring the emotional dimension in principals' work lives. *Oxford Review of Education*, 37, 93–108.
- Leithwood, K., & Beatty, B. (2008). *Leading with teacher emotions in mind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin and Sage.
- Leithwood, K., & Louis, K. S. (2012). *Linking leadership to student learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Lingard, B., Hayes, D., Mills, M., & Christie, P. (2003). *Leading learning*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Lingard, B., Taylor, S., & Rawolle, S. (2005). Bourdieu and the study of educational policy: Introduction. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20, 663–669.
- Lumby, J., & English, F. (2009). From simplicism to complexity in leadership identity and preparation: Exploring the lineage and dark secrets. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12, 95–114.
- Maclure, M. (1993). Arguing for your self: Identity as an organising principle in teachers' jobs and lives. *British Educational Research Journal*, 19, 311–322.
- Metlife Inc. (2013). *The Metlife Survey of the American teacher. Challenges for school leadership*. New York, NY: Author.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, XXXI, 132–141.
- Moller, J., & Spindler, J. (2002). Language games played in the process of co-construction. change. transformations in education. *A Journal of Theory, Research, Policy and Practice*, 5, 70–91.
- Moller, J. (2005a). Old metaphors, new meanings: Being a woman principal, Chapter 3. In C. Sugre (Ed.), *Passionate principalship: Learning from life histories of school leaders*. London: Routledge Falmer, 42–56.
- Moller, J. (2005b). Reason and emotion: Coping with accountability, Chapter 6. In C. Sugre (Ed.), *Passionate principalship: Learning from life histories of school leaders*. London: Routledge Falmer, 89–104.
- Moller, J. (2012). The construction of a public face as a school principal. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 26, 452–460.
- Nias, J. (1989). *Primary teachers talking: A study of teaching as work*. London: Routledge.
- Nias, J. (1996). Thinking about feeling: The emotions in teaching. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26, 293–306.

- Norquay, N. (1990). Life history research: Memory, schooling and social difference. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20, 291–300.
- Public Impact. (2007). *School turnarounds: A review of the cross-sector evidence on dramatic organizational improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center for Innovation and Improvement.
- Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44, 635–674.
- Ryan, J. (2007). Dialogue, identity and inclusion: Administrators as mediators in diverse school contexts. *Journal of School Leadership*, 17, 340–369.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I. (1996). The emotional climate in the classroom. In G. Alfred & M. Fleminf (Eds.), *Priorities in education*. Durham: University of Durham, Fieldhouse Press.
- Schutz, P. A., & Lanehart, S. L. (2002). Introduction: Emotions in education. *Educational Psychologist*, 37, 67–68.
- Schutz, P. A., & Zembylas, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Advances in teacher emotion research: The impact on teachers' lives*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Schwenk, C. R. (2002). *Identity, learning, and decision making in changing organizations*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Scribner, S. P., & Crow, G. M. (2012). Employing professional identities: Case study of a high school principal in a reform setting. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 11(3), 243–274.
- Silins, H., & Mulford, B. (2002). Schools as learning organisations. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 40, 425–446.
- Smulyan, L. (2000). *Balancing acts. Women principals at work*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sparkes, A. (1995). Living our stories, storying our lives and the spaces in between: Life history research as a force for change. In T. Tiller, A. Sparkes, S. Kårhus, & F. Dowling Næss (Eds.), *Reflections on educational research: The qualitative challenge*. Bergen: Caspar Forlag.
- Sugrue, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Passionate principalship. Learning from the life histories of school leaders*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Sugrue, C., & Furlong, C. (2002). The cosmologies of Irish primary principals' identities: Between the modern and the postmodern? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 5, 189–210.
- Sumsion, J. (2002). Becoming, being and unbecoming an early childhood educator: A phenomenological case study of teacher attrition. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 869–885.
- Sutton, R. E., & Wheatley, K. F. (2003). Teachers' emotions and teaching: A review of the literature and directions for future research. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15, 327–358.
- Thoits, P., & Virshup, L. (1997). Me's and we's: Forms and functions of social identities. In R. Ashmore & L. Jussim (Eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues* (pp. 106–133). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, P. (2005). Bringing Bourdieu to policy sociology: Codification, misrecognition and exchange value in the UK context. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20, 741–758.
- Thomson, P. (2009). *School leadership. Heads on the block?* London: Routledge.
- Thomson, P. (2011). Deconstructing educational leadership and management. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 43, 203–206.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice. Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zembylas, M. (2003). Emotions and teacher identity: A poststructural perspective. *Teachers and Teaching*, 9, 213–238.
- Zorn, D., & Boler, M. (2007). Rethinking emotions and educational leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 10, 137–151.