Professional Identities of School Leaders across International Contexts:
An Introduction and Rationale[1]

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The primary emphasis in the research literature on the impact of school leadership on educational reform has focused on school leaders' competencies and skills, while much less attention has been paid to the rationale and motivation for how individual school leaders perform their leadership role. Moller (2003) argues for the need to "put 'real life' back into dominant discourses on school leadership" (p. 39). Studying professional identities of school leaders enables us to get in touch with the individual's passion, commitments, and shortcomings—important considerations which can influence the practice of educational leadership.

One outcome of this emphasis on school leaders' competencies and skills, especially in the educational reform literature, is the frequent exclusion of values, beliefs, and identities as essential to leaders' practices. This has resulted in what some scholars refer to as a technocratic orientation to the preparation and role expectations of school leaders (Lumby & English, 2009; Crow & Scribner, 2014). There are numerous causes of this technocratic orientation, including an over-reaction to the move to a postmodern society with its rejection of absolute values and truths. For some this has produced anxiety and uncertainty that result in superficial and ultimately distorted attempts at creating certainty. Within the educational reform environment, this emphasis on the technocratic as a way to respond to uncertain outcomes and policy mandates

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[1] Portions of this chapter were taken from Crow, G. (2016). Leadership in uncertain times: Moving beyond a technocratic view of educators' roles, keynote address at the Values and Leadership Conference of the Consortium for the Study of Leadership and Ethics in Education, London, Ontario, Canada, October 21, 2016. In addition, within the International Successful School Principalship Project, ISSPP, the authors have been involved in developing a framework for guiding future research into principals' identity construction and development (cf. Crow, Day & Møller, 2017).

can be seen in such initiatives as corporatizing public education ostensibly to guarantee accountability around questionable goals and increasing the use of standardized testing in inappropriate areas for example, teacher evaluation. Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009) identify three paths of distraction from authentic changes in educational reform: autocracy, technocracy, and effervescence. One of these, the Path of Technocracy," has converted moral issues of inequality and social justice that should be a shared social responsibility into technical calculations of student progress targets and achievement gaps that are confined to the school" (p. 29). Phil Jackson (2012) quotes John Dewey, "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur" (p. 41, quoting Dewey, 1938).

This yearning for certainty and the technocratic response have infected our understanding of leadership, leaders, and leadership development as well. Leicht and Fennel (2001) found that more and more work roles have moved from a professional orientation to work to a managerial orientation with resulting emphases on the mechanics of the job. These authors argue that over time, roles that emphasized creativity, innovation, discretion, substantive complexity, and the importance of values have moved to specified, standardized, more mechanical ways of conducting work. A professional orientation to work (we acknowledge the contested nature of "professional") does not ignore the importance of expert knowledge but uses values, beliefs and identities to advance goals beyond personal satisfaction (Burke & Stets, 2009; Sullivan, 2005).

In educational leadership, moves to a technocratic orientation have occurred especially in terms of the standardization of the characteristics and assessment of school and district leaders. Lumby and English (2009) have drawn attention to the international trend toward increasing emphasis on skills and techniques while diminishing the emphasis on values, beliefs, motivations and identities. Peter Gronn (2003) in his analysis of the focus on leadership competencies in the U.S. and England described this trend as a move toward "designer leadership"—a move that is difficult for leadership preparation programs to resist. Some new standards for school leadership and leadership preparation programs acknowledge the role of ethics, values, and beliefs (see Young, 2016; Young and Crow, 2017). However, as Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) pointed out, it is frequently not the standards that are problematic; it is the standardization. When these standards are interpreted or assessed, a technocratic trend exists that ignores the importance of values, beliefs, dispositions, and identities. In her study of Australian principals, Sachs (2001) described this shift: "the conditions created by managerialist discourses give rise to and reinforce entrepreneurial identities, while democratic discourses provide opportunities for activist identities to emerge and flourish" (p. 155). Sachs also maintains that teachers and principals are surrounded by competing discourses. The articles in this special issue may contribute to balancing the technocratic trends in an age of uncertainty through helping us understand the importance of who leaders are, specifically their professional identities, and acknowledging that who they are influences what they do.

We know that context matters for school leaders' identities. By including articles from a variety of international contexts, we provide the opportunity to understand professional identity as complex and influenced by the larger historical, cultural, and political environments in which leaders enact their roles and develop their identities. Understanding how professional identities

develop within and across diverse national contexts also informs research and policy on leadership preparation and practice, which takes us beyond the mere mechanics of the role.

The remainder of this introductory article attempts to set a conceptual stage for the special issue on identities of school leaders. We do this by beginning with a conceptualization of identity—its definition, philosophical roots, nature, and components. We then move to a discussion of identity development and the various dimensions that characterize this development. The article ends with a brief discussion of a critical constructivist model of identity. Our intention in this article is not to create a framework that will be used by the articles, but to offer a conceptual stage that provides the conceptual background for understanding identity.

Conceptualizing Identities of School Leaders

Scribner and Crow (2012) define professional identities as "identities which individuals use to make sense of and enact (their) roles" (p. 246). The study of professional identity in leadership is a way to understand "…what influences a leader's behaviors and what drives a leader's willingness and ability to take on and enact creative and effective leadership in a high stakes, dynamic knowledge society" (p. 245). The type of identity on which this special issue focuses is work, role, or professional identity. Burke and Stets (2009) distinguish this type of identity from social identity (membership in a group) and person identity (unique meanings that define an individual apart from roles and groups). Thoits and Virshup (1997) point out, however, that the distinction among these three types of identity is misleading because all three interact. So, while we focus on professional identity related to the professional work of school leaders, we acknowledge that social and person identities interact with work identities. As we have noted previously (Crow, Day, Moller, 2017), "An individual school leader's identity, e.g., as a woman,

as a person of color, as residing in a particular community and/or national context, influences the 'internalized meanings' attached to a role." (p. 266)

In understanding the nature of professional identity, it is important to distinguish it from work role. According to Ryan (2007), roles are scripted, deterministic, and static, while identities are improvisational, stress human agency, and are dynamic (p. 345). Ryan, in fact, argues that it is not unusual for individuals to "take on different and sometimes contradictory identities in different social contexts." (p. 345). Wenger (1998) emphasizes this same distinction when he states, "One can design roles, but one cannot design the identities that will be constructed through these roles" (p. 229). "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).

Conceptualizing identities also involves understanding how it connects to practice. Identities are not simply who we say we are, but reflect the motivation, drive, and energy connected to our actual practices. Burke and Stets (2009) make this connection between identity and practice when they state, "The energy, motivation, drive that makes roles actually work, require that individuals identify with, internalize, and become the role" (p. 38). Schwenk (2002) makes a further direct connection with a more specific element of practice—the decisions we make every day in life that evoke particular identities.

The conceptions of identity have philosophical and theoretical roots, which need to be identified before moving on to a discussion of the elements of identity because these elements reflect dilemmas and controversies that in many cases still exist in academic discourse regarding identity. The theoretical roots of professional identity research exist in several disciplines, including philosophy, social psychology and sociology (Burke & Stets, 2009; Day & Leithwood,

2007; Gee, 2001; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In spite of these theoretical roots, we need to develop a more robust theoretical framework to investigate the identities of school leaders (Lumby & English, 2009). The Crow, Day, and Moller (2017) publication has attempted to synthesize the literature and initiate the beginnings of an analytical framework on the formation of school leaders' identities. We will return to this framework later in this article.

Although there are multiple philosophical dilemmas surrounding the nature of identity, the most pivotal resides in a philosophical controversy within the writings of Kant (1781/1966) and Hegel (1806/1977) regarding the philosophy of self. These two philosophers argued over the fundamental issue of whether individuals can freely choose their identities (Kant) or whether the cultural and historical environment in which they exist determines these identities. Kant held that identities are constructed freely by the individual through the mind which shapes and structures experience through common elements such as space and time. Hegel believed that we cannot create identities in isolation but rather we live, work, and play in cultural and historical contexts, which help determine our identities. Crow, Day, and Moller (2017) provide more detail of this controversy and how it has impacted more recent scholars of identity, including Bourdieu (1996) (Hegel), Giddens (1991) (Kant), and Wenger (1998) (Hegel). Our perspective follows much of Wenger (1998) in his argument that culture influences identity construction and that identities are temporal and "constantly becoming" through our engagement in communities of practice (p. 154), but at the same time we acknowledge the absence of the epistemic, the emotional and the political dimensions in Wenger's concept of identity.

The perspective we have used primarily from Wenger suggests several elements of the nature of identity. First, identity has both individual and social elements. DeRue and Ashford (2010) described three levels of self-construal: individual internalization, relational recognition,

and collective endorsement. Identity construction, according to these authors, is primarily about the "construction of a relationship" (p. 629). Wenger (1998) conceptualizes identity as "lived experience" which has both individual and collective dimensions. As Crow, Day, and Moller (2017) point out, identity is not totally cognitive, rather it is a collective process involving others as we interact, create and revise stories, negotiate, and interrogate our cultural and historical influences.

Second, identity is socially constructed. School leaders cannot simply stamp themselves as a moral leader, an advocate, or a change agent. These identities involve others' views of whether our actions reflect these meanings and whether we have successfully made the identity claims and had others grant that these claims are legitimate. Following Wenger (1998), this negotiation occurs as we engage in multiple communities of practice. "Practice involves the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context" (p. 149).

Third, identities are multiple. Because our lives and work are complex, the meanings we assign and negotiate are multiple. Lumby and English (2009) remind us that even though we have multiple identities there is a striving for coherence and for a unifying sense of self. The narratives we tell ourselves and others about our experiences are ways we have of representing, claiming, and revising that coherence and sense of self in a complex network of meanings and identities. Not only do we frequently have multiple identities simultaneously but our multiple identities may change through our interactions and encounters with, for example, new educational mandates and initiatives (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Scribner &Crow, 2012; Sugrue, 2005; Sugrue & Furlong, 2002).

Fourth, identities are fluid and dynamic. Moller (2005) reminds us of a temporal quality of identity construction—"of continuous motion" using both our past and our future to negotiate.

This fluid motion results from the socially constructed and negotiated processes whereby we construct, revise, repair, maintain and strengthen our identities within complex and fluid contexts. The interplay between agency and structure is complex and implies understanding identity as constantly becoming in a context embedded in interactions among the self, power relations, ideology and culture (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant,1992). Bourdieu (1996) argues that certain discursive practices tend to gain hegemony within the social field, and he 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 (cf. Bradbury & Gunter, 2006).

Identity Development

Another aspect of the conceptualization of identity involves its formation/development for school leaders. We base our presentation of this aspect on five dimensions proposed by Crow, Day, and Moller (2017) that provide an analytic framework for identity development. Here again we are not assuming that the articles in this special issue have explicitly used this analytical framework in their various studies, but rather provide this as part of the conceptual background for understanding the professional identity of school leaders.

Narrative dimension. The stories that individual school leaders tell themselves and others is critical in not only the presentation of identity to colleagues but also in the formation of identities themselves. Giddens (1991, p. 80) states that "narrative is at the core of identity" and that identity is a reflexive process. It is a work in progress. The identities of school leaders are "temporally and socially constructed in the process of shaping a learning trajectory." (Crow et al., 2017, p. 272). These identities, and therefore the narratives used in forming the identities,

take place in contexts. Smulyan (2000) identifies four contexts that are especially important for

school leaders as they develop, confirm, and revise the narratives they use: personal (home and

educational background); community (families and teachers); institutional (authorities and

structural regularities); and historical and social contexts (accepted norms and hierarchies of

power).

Epistemic dimension. School leaders' identity formation also involves a cognitive

dimension. Although identity is more than a cognitive activity, leadership is a complex endeavor

in which leaders reason about the judgements they make in an ambiguous and complicated set of

contexts. The various forms of knowledge, modes of thinking, values and norms become part of

the shaping of identities to respond to the substantively complex role dilemmas and problems

leaders encounter.

Emotional dimension. The emotional dimension has largely been ignored in the literature

on school leaders until recently (Beatty, 2000). However, principal work includes working with

teacher motivation, developing working conditions that support student learning, and attending

to job satisfaction. Various authors (Blackmore, 2011; Crawford, 2007; Kelchterman, Piot &

Ballet, 2011) argue that emotions are the heart of educational leadership, and Day and Lee

(2011) "have noted that teacher and principal identities are constructed from and affected by the

emotional influences of self, role, and work context." (Crow et al., 2017, p. 269).

Historical and cultural dimension. As should be clear from Hegel's philosophy of the

self as well as our earlier discussion, school leaders' identities are shaped by the historical and

cultural contexts in which leaders work, live, and play. "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."
(Crow et al., 2017, p. 273).

Political dimension. The political dimension of identity formation has both micro and macro level elements. Identity develops within the micro-level of school practices as principals present, claim, confirm, refine, and further negotiate their identities with teachers, students, community members, parents, and others. But identity formation also occurs at a more macro-level in which the leadership field takes on certain political values and power statuses at various governmental and societal levels. How principals position themselves in these power conflicts and relations helps to shape the various identities these leaders develop.

Critical Constructivist Theory of Identity

These elements of the nature of identity and dimensions regarding the formation of identity suggest a critical constructivist conception of identity. Certainly it is possible to use the concept of identity to reflect a status quo, managerial, sense of self that fits well with the technocratic orientation of much of the leadership literature. But identity construction is a more fluid process and a more collective process. Identity is not solely an individual construction of meanings. Identities are formed, revised, repaired, maintained and strengthened in the social context of communities of practice. These are clearly cultural and historical, as Hegel reminded us, in that we bring the culture of our past, present and future, the culture of the contexts for which we create meaning. As Crow, Day, and Moller (2017) maintain, identities are formed through the political dimension as well, "how principals understand their position, how others are positioning them and how the individual principal anticipates the game to be played within practice" (p. 274). Such a socially constructed view of identity helps emphasize that the meaning school leaders make of themselves is influenced by the political, cultural, and historical

environment—even an uncertain one—not simply a set of static skills and competencies. Clearly, school leaders need skills and competencies, and they are entrusted with discretionary power based on public trust that they will exercise discretion in an acceptable way (Molander, 2016). They have to know certain things that are required of principals, e.g., budgeting, data monitoring, conferencing skills. But their beliefs, values, and identities undergird and ground those skills. In other words, they need to know why we use the skills we do in particular cultural, historical, and political contexts and what educational purposes these skills and strategies reflect. Understanding and negotiating identities with others, then, become an antidote to a scripted, falsely secure understanding of our roles and helps us confront the critical but uncertain features of the environment.

In addition to being constructivist, our conception of identities involves making choices and having those choices confirmed or disconfirmed relative to some set of values and purposes—the transformation of education and schooling. As the earlier quote by Schwenk (2002) suggests, identities are evoked by the decisions we make. Understanding how identities relate to the moral and ethical purposes of education and change becomes critical. The process calls for the collective (within community) and individual process of interrogating and questioning identities related to the purpose of education. Jackson (2012) argues that "education is fundamentally a moral enterprise. Its goal is to effect beneficial changes in humans, not just in what they know and can do but, more important, in their character and personality, in the kind of person they become. Moreover, the beneficiaries of that process are not just the individuals being served but also the society at large. Ultimately the world in general stands to benefit from such an effort" (p. 94)

Conclusion

Our attempt in this article has been to provide a conceptual grounding for understanding professional identities of school leaders. Although the articles in this special issue do not explicitly use the entire frameworks identified in this introductory article, the individual pieces deal with various aspects of this conceptualization and provide the historical and cultural contexts in different international settings. We hope that using this grounding will enable readers to use the individual pieces as springboards for enriching and enlarging the research on professional identities of school leaders. We propose at least four avenues for future research that relate professional identities with the practice and development of school leaders.

First, in terms of leadership practice, a focus on identity provides a vehicle for understanding how leadership practice is more than skills and competencies. Our conceptualization of professional identity encourages examinations of the values, beliefs and motivation that influence practice and thereby move us beyond mechanistic practices that have limited usefulness. Research on leaders' identities would help us understand how school leaders use values, beliefs and dispositions to respond to the uncertainties of the role.

A second avenue for research also relates to leadership practice, i.e., how do contemporary education policy and accountability mandates influence the enactment of leadership practices and the formation of identities. Several pieces in this special issue suggest a role that reform agendas play in influencing school leaders' identities. Research that examines how identities influences the implementation or enactment, re-negotiation, and revisioning of mandates in specific contexts would enrich our understanding of the effect of these policies on leadership practice.

Third, research on school leaders' identities also contributes to leadership development. As we have argued, our critical constructivist perspective on identity acknowledges the "learning trajectory" aspect of identity development, i.e., what Moller (2005) refers to as "continuous motion." Understanding, for example, how cultural and historical factors influence the fluid and developmental nature of identities should motivate us to take such factors into account in our leadership preparation and professional development programs.

Finally, in this article we have emphasized what is obvious in the remaining articles— context matters. A one-size-fits-all notion of leadership preparation or what Gronn (2003) referred to as "designer leadership," does not recognize the roles that gender, race, generation, geography and the policy environment, to identify only a few, play in the development of leadership identities. Further research that unpackages the influence of cultural, historical, and policy factors on identity development would provide rich grounding for creating leadership preparation and development that recognizes the complex leadership necessary in uncertain times.

Such investigations have the potential for not only enriching the academic conversations but also broadening the perspectives on the practices of school leaders in an uncertain world beyond technical skills and competencies. In this way, we hope to "put 'real life'" back into the discourses on school leadership.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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