Professional identities of school leaders across international contexts

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This EMAL special issue addresses the issues, challenges, and opportunities that arise in the study of principals’ professional identities by researchers working within and across seven international contexts – Canada, United Kingdom, Norway, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, and the USA. The articles in this special issue aim to build on previous studies of school leaders’ professional identities (e.g. Møller, 2003, 2012; Scribner and Crow, 2012) as well as extend case study findings and the narratives of successful school leaders from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (Day and Gurr, 2014; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Moos et al., 2011).

In their introduction Gary Crow and Jorunn Møller provide a conceptual overview which discusses research to date on school leaders’ professional identities. They contend that professional identities have individual and social elements, are socially constructed, multiple, fluid and dynamic. Crow and Møller note that more relational and values-based aspects of school leadership have been in tension with external pressures for accountability and compliance. In the end they argue for a critical constructivist theory of professional identity rather than a technical approach.

The next four articles adopt various theoretical approaches to the professional identity development of successful school leaders across four countries – New Zealand, Israel, Sweden, and USA. Ross Notman studied how two New Zealand principals (from an urban elementary school and a semi-rural secondary school) navigate the management of change during their second principalship. He found that both principals displayed examples of adaptive practices, linked to contingency leadership, and changed their leadership styles according to the new context and audience. In a second study also based in New Zealand, Sylvia Robertson examined the perceptions of an experienced late career principal about how his professional identity changed over time. She identifies three factors that contribute to the development of professional identity: the ability to clearly articulate values and beliefs, critical reflective practice, and influential role models and collegial networks. Robertson concludes that a well-developed sense of identity as an educational professional can contribute to longevity in the profession. Dorit Tubin analyzes the leadership-claiming practices of four successful Israeli principals and how they use the forces of fit, links and sacrifice to enhance their role embeddedness. Elizabeth Murakami and Monika Tornsen examine the professional identity development of two successful female secondary principals in the US and Sweden through a feminist post-structural discourse analysis, and conclude that even when female leaders are deemed successful because of student outcomes, they may be evaluated negatively by colleagues.

Denise Armstrong and Coral Mitchell use a critical intersectional lens and Black Feminist Thought to analyze how gender and race interact in powerful and paradoxical ways in the narratives of two African Canadian women principals. Faced with the expectations of organizational fit, these principals described shifting their professional identities by suppressing “undesirable” aspects of their racialized and gendered identities while also asserting a self-authored identity through standing up and standing tall for their values.
The next two articles take a generational approach to identity development. Lauri Johnson reports on the preliminary findings from a national UK study of the life histories of three generations of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) educators who led schools across a 47-year period (1968–2015). Pioneer Black and South Asian headteachers in the 1970s and 1980s narrate more collectivist identities as community leaders and race equality activists, while current BAME headteachers appear more individually focused on raising attainment for students who have been marginalized. A life history approach across generations emphasizes the influence of changing attitudes toward race and the shifting policy context on professional identities. Karen Edge, Katherine Descours, and Laura Oxley, as part of their larger study of cohorts of Generation X school leaders in three global cities (London, New York City, and Toronto), use a professional identity card sort tool to examine how Gen X leaders in each city align their personal and community identity and how they prove professional ability. The authors highlight the role of city context in leaders’ experiences of in-groups and out groups and what counts as diverse identities in each city.

In the final article, Vincent Cho and Jo Beth Jimerson analyze how social media influences school leaders’ digital identities. In their study of how 17 administrators in the US and Canada use Twitter, they note that the school leaders they studied intentionally use social media to create professional identities as 21st Century instructional leaders and focus on positive public relations for their schools, while often shielding or deemphasizing their social identities.

Collectively the articles in this special issue expand our understanding of how context matters in the study of professional identity development. Contexts highlighted include geographic, historical and generational (Edge; Johnson); gender in secondary schools (Murakami and Tornsen) and how gender intersects with race (Armstrong and Mitchell); how professional identities shift over time (Richardson) and respond to school-wide change (Notman); and the conditions under which school leaders claim leadership from followers (Tubin) and interact on social media (Cho and Jimerson).

As we see in the investigations in this special issue, school leaders socially construct and negotiate multiple identities that are changing rather than static, that are influenced by their constituents, and that develop according to, for example, family influences, personal career, social identities, macro policy environments, and school change. We believe that understanding how professional identities develop within and across diverse national contexts can inform not only international research, but leadership preparation and practice as well.

References