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Role Identity of Instructional Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Instructional leadership was recognized as a pivotal function of principals who achieve promising school improvement outcomes. This study explored the role identity of instructional leaders, looking for the four components of role identity: ontological and epistemological beliefs, purpose and goals, self-perceptions and self-definitions, and perceived action possibilities. Study participants were 37 Israeli principals. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis included a two-step coding process. Findings indicated that the role identity of instructional leaders consists of two main elements— attribution of importance and sense of competence, related to two areas—instruction and instructional leadership.

Introduction

Within the research literature on understanding what makes school principals successful, the main emphasis has focused on principals' capabilities, skills, practices, and activities, while less attention has been paid to the rationale and motivation for how they perform their leadership role (Crow & Møller, 2017). Too often, there is an exclusion of identities and beliefs as essential to principals' practices, which may be referred to as a technocratic orientation to the preparation and role expectations of principals (Young & Crow, 2017). In particular, this is true of instructional leadership. Inasmuch as instructional leadership has been playing a major role in the educational administration realm since the middle of the last century (Hallinger, 2019), the question of what instructional leaders do has been an active area of deep inquiry for several decades (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Over the years, a multitude of frameworks of instructional leaders' behaviors was discussed in the literature (Adams et al., 2019). However, the beliefs and values, which make instructional leaders to be who they are, were much less explored (Campbell et al., 2019; Urick & Bowers, 2019). To narrow this gap in the available knowledge base, this study seeks to investigate instructional leaders' role identity.

Identity can be explained as the unique set of characteristics associated with a particular person relative to the characteristics of others (Noonan, 2019). Identity is moreover the sense that a person has of the self as an individual, including one’s self-image and self-awareness (Kind, 2015). It is important to note that each of us has multiple identities, because identity is a reflection of the context or activity in which the person is situated. Therefore, a person assumes the identity of a parent or partner when he/she is at home, but takes on his/her identity as a productive community member on entering a school board meeting (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). One of our identities is the role identity, which is used when we are at work (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Focusing on Israeli principals, this study sheds light on the role identity of instructional leaders. Holding both theoretical and practical implications, the contributions made by this study are likely to evoke interest among a broad swath of educational leaders who want to better understand their role as instructional leaders, as well as faculty members who teach various courses as part of academic programs in educational leadership and...
policy, principal preparation programs and professional development. Researchers will be able to find great value in new avenues for future research opened by this study.

**Literature review: dimensions, fundamentals, and enablers of instructional leadership**

The positive correlation between instructional leadership and school performance was well established in the research literature (Glickman et al., 2017). Principals who serve as instructional leaders contribute to an increase in student academic results more than principals who prefer other educational leadership styles (Bush & Glover, 2014; Murphy et al., 2016). The current study is based on the conceptual framework of instructional leadership presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), which is the most widely used in research (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). This framework consists of three dimensions. The first dimension is *defining the school mission*. This dimension concerns the principal’s role in determining clear, measurable, time-based school goals that concentrate on teacher effectiveness and student learning. It is also the principal’s responsibility to communicate these goals to various stakeholders so they are widely known and supported throughout the school community. The second dimension is *managing the instructional program*. This dimension focuses on the principal’s responsibility for coordinating and monitoring instruction and curriculum. It involves deep involvement in stimulating, controlling, and supervising teaching and learning throughout the school. The third dimension is *developing a positive school learning climate*. This dimension focuses on the principal’s responsibility to develop a culture of continuous improvement and high standards and expectations for teachers and students. The principal has to create norms and cultivate attitudes of teachers and students that influence learning in the school, mainly through launching policies and practices (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). These three dimensions are delineated into ten instructional leadership functions, as presented in Table 1.

Boyce and Bowers (2018) pointed to a notable divergence in how instructional leadership has been conceptualized over the last decades. For them, leadership for learning is the conceptual evolution of twenty-five years of diverse instructional leadership research. Leadership for learning requires a focus on learning as an activity in which everyone is a learner (Dempster et al., 2017). From this perspective, learning relies on the effective interplay of social, emotional and cognitive processes, and its effectiveness is sensitive to different contexts and ways in which people learn. The potential for leadership stems from powerful learning experiences, while opportunities to exercise leadership promote learning (MacBeath, 2019). The literature regarding leadership for learning is a natural counterpart to instructional leadership, given the significant overlap between these two conceptual frameworks of school leadership (Bowers et al., 2017).

Robinson (2010) proposed a model of three interrelated leadership abilities required for instructional leaders: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solve complex school problems, while (c) building relational trusting relationships with teachers, parents, and students. With regard to the first ability, researchers found that the greater their pedagogical knowledge, the better principals could take care of more aspects of instruction and move beyond the surface features of teaching to underlying pedagogy (Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Steele et al., 2015). The required knowledge was defined by Stein and Nelson (2003) as “that knowledge of subjects and how students learn them that is used by administrators when they function as instructional leaders” (p. 445). With regard to

| Table 1. Dimensions and functions of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Dimension                                    | Defining the school mission                    | Managing the instructional program             | Developing a positive school learning climate |
| Functions                                    | Framing the school's goals                      | Coordinating curriculum                         | Protecting instructional time                  |
|                                              | Communicating the school's goals                | Supervising and evaluating instruction         | Providing incentives for teachers              |
|                                              |                                                 | Monitoring student progress                     | Providing incentives for learning              |
|                                              |                                                 |                                               | Promoting professional development            |
|                                              |                                                 |                                               | Maintaining high visibility                    |
the second ability, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) attempted to directly correlate differences in principal problem-solving with differences in instructional leadership practices and student achievement, comparing expert instructional leaders with typical principals. Overall, they found less significant differences between the two groups’ use of problem-solving processes than expected. With regard to the third ability, through principal-teacher effective relationships, instructional leaders can engage with teachers in conversations about teaching quality which are both fruitful and respectful (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). Indeed, healthy principal-teacher relationships have proven to help teachers adopt more effective teaching methods (Alsobaie, 2015), demonstrating a key role in the improvement of student accomplishments (Edgerson et al., 2006; Price, 2015).

Despite enduring campaign efforts, which have strived to make instructional leadership a central component of principals’ work, principals appear to allocate only a limited percentage of their time to instruction-related activities (Goldring et al., 2015; Prytula et al., 2013). Several inhibitors to instructional leadership have been identified in the literature. First, principals were described as lacking adequate time to engage in endeavors to promote teaching and learning (Camburn et al., 2010). Principals’ attempts to work on instructional issues hardly reach fruition during day-to-day school operations because a considerable part of their time is spent on paperwork, bureaucracy, and unplanned issues (Murphy et al., 2016). Second, principals are said to lack the knowledge base needed for demonstrating instructional leadership, which as aforementioned applies to how students learn specific subjects, which teaching methods are effective in which contexts, and so forth (Goldring et al., 2015). Third, deep-rooted organizational norms, which perceive teaching as an area of teachers alone, push principals away from involvement in the instructional domain (Goldring et al., 2015). These norms have been found to deter principals from encroaching on the territory of teachers and relinquishing their status in the in-school hierarchy (Murphy et al., 2016). Fourth, principals limit their engagement in instructional leadership because they fear that it renders a negative effect on principal-teacher relationships. They believe that relationships with teachers are vital to a well-functioning school, and might be adversely affected by activities designed to improve teaching practices (Author, 2019b).

**Theoretical framework: components of role identity**

With the goal of exploring the role identity of instructional leaders, this study utilized the theoretical framework of Kaplan and Garner (2017), who have pointed to four components of role identity: (a) ontological and epistemological beliefs; (b) purpose and goals; (c) self-perceptions and self-definitions; and (d) perceived action possibilities. Each of these four components involves assumptions held as correct (e.g., about the world, about the self, about possible behavioral strategies) and emotions (e.g., related to certain assumptions about the world, specific goals, specific self-perceptions). These components, which are interdependent and partially overlapping, are presented next.

**Ontological and epistemological beliefs**

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality, while epistemology concerns knowledge and how to reach it. For the purpose of this paper, ontological beliefs refer to one’s assumptions regarding the world that is relevant to the role, attributions based on these assumptions, and the emotions that are associated with these assumptions and attributions (Weiner, 2012). For example, principals’ assumption that teachers have control over the behavior of their class, their attribution that indiscipline is due to teachers not taking responsibility, and their anger at those teachers. Epistemological beliefs refer to one’s assumptions about the certainty and reliability of their knowledge about the world that is relevant to the role and emotions associated with these assumptions (Hofer & Pintrich, 2004). For example, principals’ belief that their knowledge about cause and effect in their school is uncertain and the sense of anxiety associated with these beliefs.
Purpose and goals

Purpose and goals refer to one’s assumptions of an ultimate purpose of their role (e.g., the purpose of principals to provide strategic direction for their schools); the more concrete goals, objectives, and objectives in the role (e.g., the goal of a principal to handle student discipline); and emotions associated with these purpose and goals (e.g., a principal’s positive anticipation or anxiety about pursuing their goals). Purpose and goals can differ on many dimensions, including intrinsic-extrinsic, individual-social, proximal-distal, specific-global, and self-oriented-other-oriented, with consequences to affect and motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Self-perceptions and self-definitions

Self-perceptions and self-definitions refer to one’s assumptions and knowledge of their personal qualities and characteristics that they consider relevant when fulfilling the role and the emotions associated with them. Central self-perceptions in most roles are the one’s overall self-concept of ability in the role, self-efficacy to pursue particular goals successfully, and the emotions associated with these perceptions (Hattie, 2014). Self-definitions involve self-categorizations and group memberships, and the meanings and emotions associated with these categorizations (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). Besides, this component includes self-perceptions regarding personal worldview, ideology, values, and interests, that are deemed relevant for the role in that context, and the emotions associated with them.

Perceived action possibilities

Finally, perceived action possibilities refer to one’s perceptions of behaviors as available to them in the role, primarily as these behaviors are related to the promotion of purpose and pursuit of goals in the role, and the emotions associated with the use of such behaviors. This component includes declarative behavioral intentions and procedural knowledge of these action possibilities, including specific cognitive and behavioral strategies and the self-regulation of cognition, behavior, emotion, and motivation (Fishbein & &Ajzen, 2011). Perceived action possibilities exclude those actions that one perceives as inappropriate, inefficient, or impossible for them to perform in the role.

Method

This qualitative study used interview methodology and content analysis to investigate the question, “What is the role identity of instructional leaders?” These methods, which are most appropriate when existing literature or theory on the topic under discussion is limited (Taylor et al., 2016), were selected for this study to enable the collection of detailed textual descriptions, as well as in-depth understanding, of principals’ beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions. The following sections describe this study’s sample, data collection, and analytical strategies.

Participants

The current study was conducted within the Israeli school system, which serves about 1.6 million students (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), and is similar in many ways to that of the United States (BenDavid-Hadar, 2016). The key role of Israeli school principals as pronounced by Capstones, the institution that is in charge of school principals’ professional development in Israel, is to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve teaching and curriculum (Capstones – The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2008).

The sampling for this study was both opportunity-based and purposive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were recommended by colleagues and students of the author. Therefore, it was an opportunity-based sampling. Eight participants recruited other participants from their acquaintances,
making it also a snowball sampling. However, a purposive sampling technique also was utilized in this study, where the purpose was for the sample to resemble the larger body of Israeli principals. The principals recommended for participation in the study were included only if their participation matched the characteristics of the larger population in terms of sex, age, years of experience, education, and school level (elementary, middle, high), school community’s socioeconomic status, and school district (Capstones – The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2012). Thus, the study involved 37 principals, 12 males and 25 females. These principals had 11 to 32 years of educational experience ($M = 20.41, SD = 5.89$), which included 3 to 21 years of experience as principals ($M = 9.46, SD = 5.34$). Most of the principals ($n = 32$) held a master’s degree, with four principals holding only a bachelor’s degree and one principal holding a Ph.D. Participants were principals of elementary schools ($n = 18$), middle schools ($n = 3$), and high schools ($n = 16$). They were working in all seven Israeli school districts.

The selection of study participants was not based on their reputations as effective instructional leaders. Having a representative sample of principals, instructional leadership behaviors were identified among the principals who participated in the study.

**Data collection**

Data collection did not begin with focusing on the role identity of instructional leaders. The original goal of this study was broader: to explore how instructional leadership operates among Israeli principals. Utilizing data collected to explore the role identity of instructional leaders was an idea that came up during the data analysis process described below.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer developed and used an “interview guide” (i.e., list of questions and topics needing to be covered) that enabled “the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). The interviewer did not strictly follow a formalized list of questions. Open-ended questions were used, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee. As school principals, most of the interviewees were verbal and spoke fluently, so the interviews proved to be like conversations, or even monologues, rather than a straightforward question and answer format. The appropriate number of interviews is a common question when designing a qualitative study. In this study, the answer was “interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113), striving to achieve saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

The interview sought to identify perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of instructional leaders. However, it intentionally avoided mention of the term “instructional leadership” to prevent priming interviewees from framing their discussions in this light. Thus, the interview included questions such as:

- As a principal, what are your priorities in your work, and how were they determined?
- If you could, what would you omit from your work as a principal?
- Who is responsible for improving teaching practices in your school, and why?
- As a principal, how do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention – and why?

To establish rapport, the protocol was intentionally designed to be general at first before probing into more sensitive questions. This strategy allowed participants to view the exchange as a conversation, rather than an interview, which resulted in interviews that were longer and produced thick, rich descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For ethical reasons, all participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they could leave the study at any point (no one left). They were assured of confidentiality (pseudo-names were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent, based on an understanding of the research aim.
Interviews, which generally lasted one hour, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were also conducted, as appropriate, to clarify questions that arose during a review of interview transcripts.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis was theory-driven, as it was based on a-priori codes (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), including a two-step coding process. First, we sought out the relevant utterances that might represent instructional leadership, based on the previously mentioned Hallinger and Murphy (1985) conceptual framework of instructional leadership, which included three dimensions: (a) defining the school mission; (b) managing the instructional program; and (c) developing a positive school learning climate.

Upon completion of this step, the study was divided into several sub-studies, because data collected could answer several research questions concerning the implementation of instructional leadership among Israeli principals. These questions were discussed separately and published elsewhere (Author, 2018, 2019b, 2019a). A rereading of interviewees’ responses suggested that they might be indicative of the role identity of instructional leaders. Therefore, among other research branches, the data was analyzed in this direction as described below.

At the second step, the utterances identified at the previous stage were examined to see if they reflected the role identity of instructional leaders. This stage was based on Kaplan and Garner (2017) four components of role identity: (a) ontological and epistemological beliefs; (b) purpose and goals; (c) self-perceptions and self-definitions; and (d) perceived action possibilities.

The next stage was theorizing, aiming to transcend the findings toward a conceptual construct. While the coding process allowed to get up from the diversity of data to the shapes of the data, the sorts of things represented, the theorizing stage allowed to get up to more general, higher-level, and more abstract constructs. Charmaz (2006) figuratively explained it thus: “Coding generates the bones of your analysis; theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (p. 45).

To endorse and solidify data analysis, a member check (Koelsch, 2013) was conducted: The findings of this study were sent to participants along with a request that they comment on them. This strategy aimed to reduce the chance of incorrect interpretation of data. During the member check procedure, 14 out of 46 interviewees (30.43%) provided feedback on the findings, which was used to understand the data more accurately.

As in any qualitative exploration, attention was paid to how the researcher’s background and personal experience might affect data analysis. As the importance of reflective journals in qualitative research has been recognized (Ortlipp, 2008), and to ensure critical thinking, the researcher wrote a personal reflective research log throughout the study. Opportunities for scrutiny of this study by peers (e.g., at conferences) were utilized to gain feedback. Allowing peers to challenge the study’s arguments enabled the researcher to reexamine his assumptions.

**Findings**

Qualitative data analysis revealed the components of instructional leaders’ role identity, which are based on Kaplan and Garner (2017) framework: (a) ontological and epistemological beliefs; (b) purpose and goals; (c) self-perceptions and self-definitions; and (d) perceived action possibilities. These components are presented next.

**Ontological and epistemological beliefs**

The most prominent belief, which instructional leaders expressed during interviews conducted for this study, was that the quality of instruction is the most significant element of teacher work. Instructional leaders also attributed importance to other elements of teacher work, such as personal qualities (e.g.,
the tendency to be kind and warm toward students) or classroom management (e.g., the ability to keep students organized, attentive, and on task); However, they put the quality of instruction first.

For instructional leaders who participated in this study, the quality of instruction is comprised of both teacher quality and quality of teaching. Regarding teacher quality, study participants mentioned various elements. For example, they mentioned openness to adopting new practices, as said Sharon, a middle school principal with six years of experience: “I expect teachers to try new things in the classroom”. They also mentioned commitment and dedication to student learning, as explained Karen, an elementary school principal with five years of experience: “Teachers should be concerned with the academic development of their students.” In addition, they mentioned; and an ongoing professional learning, as noted Douglas, an elementary school principal with nine years of experience: “Would you go to a doctor who hasn’t been updated for many years? The same goes for a teacher.” Regarding the quality of teaching, study participants were much less specific. Donna, an elementary school principal with four years of experience, said that good teaching “is doing whatever it takes to ensure that your students learn and know the material being taught.” Paul, an elementary school principal with six years of experience, explained: “Not all good teachers do it the same way. Each teacher has her own way of quality teaching.” Importantly, study participants believed that the quality of instruction was not only dependent on their teachers, but also their leadership. They considered themselves responsible for leading their teachers to quality teaching, through processes such as shaping a vision of quality teaching, driving curriculum building, and creating a professional learning community.

**Purpose and goals**

Instructional leaders who participated in this study assumed that the critical job of a school principal is to make curriculum and instruction better in order to improve students’ learning and increase their accomplishments. Of course, they did not ignore a wide range of additional principalship roles, such as keeping students safe, budgeting, and facilities maintenance. Managerial tasks such as ordering supplies and creating bus schedules were their everyday tasks. However, they prioritized their duty to promote best practices in teaching and learning, aspiring to spend a considerable part of their available time on coordinating and monitoring instruction. As Jennifer, a high school principal with 17 years of experience, said: “I don’t just oversee the day-to-day functions of my school and deal with unruly students. I lead the school and its staff to achieve high standards of teaching and learning.”

Study participants reasoned in several ways why principals should treat the improvement of teaching and learning as more important than other tasks. Bruce, a principal of a middle school with 12 years of experience, mentioned the outcomes based accountability environment: “The contemporary era of national achievement tests is based on a belief that what matters most is academic results. That’s why I, as a principal, put it in the first place.” Gary, a middle school principal with 4 years of experience, established his priorities on the fact that the core business of schooling is providing students with knowledge and academic skills; “The principal should be busy with the main purpose of the school, which is expanding and deepening the knowledge base of students across various subjects and developing learning skills.” Interestingly, Joseph, a high school principal with 12 years of experience, used a social justice logic. He sought to create a learning climate that provides equal opportunities and treatment for all students, without any discrimination or favoritism whatsoever. Moreover, he wanted to ensure “the future assignment of the graduates of the school to the academic and social fields that fit their talents and aspirations, regardless of their family background, social status, or financial situation”.

**Self-perceptions and self-definitions**

Participants’ utterances revealed that the central capability, which they considered as enabling them to fulfill their instructional leadership role, was instructional expertise. They attributed this expertise mainly to their broad experience. Brenda, an elementary school principal with 14 years of experience...
as a principal, emphasized her experience as a teacher: “I was not born a school principal. I have been a teacher for many years and taught many subjects in many age groups. Thus, I have a say in how we should teach.” Danny, an elementary school principal with three years of experience, gave particular importance to his experience as an instructional coordinator: “I supported teachers in acquiring the skills and application of best practices for all students. It’s not new to me.”

Another source of instructional expertise, mentioned by study participants, was ongoing learning. Instructional leaders who participated in this study made sure to keep up to date with new curricula, new standards, and new textbooks. They gained up-to-date knowledge not only through attending professional development sessions they are committed to, but also through a self-motivated pursuit of instructional knowledge from websites, books, and peer networking.

Study participants’ instructional expertise allowed them to fill various instructional leadership roles. For example, Diane, a high school principal who took office nine years ago, utilized her instructional expertise to engage in supervision: “I know very well what a good lesson is and how it looks. So I often sit in classrooms and help teachers think about their teaching.” Carl, a high school principal with 7 years of experience, relied on her experience to instill social justice perspective in teaching and learning: “I have extensive experience in culturally-responsive teaching, so I share with my teachers my knowledge of how to create a learning climate that provides equal treatment for all students, without any discrimination or favoritism whatsoever.” Interestingly, working with teacher leaders to enact instructional leadership was not often mentioned by study participants, suggesting that these principals worked independently more than collaboratively. This finding requires further research.

**Perceived action possibilities**

Principals who participated in this study believed that a wide range of activities to improve instruction were available to them. Among other things, they were able to organize teachers’ schedules to include opportunities to improve teaching quality, as said Marilyn, a middle school principal with nine years of experience: “I give teachers time to work together in a collaborative effort. This collaboration allows new or struggling teachers to gain valuable insight and advice and at the same time, allows experienced teachers to share best practices and success stories.” They could give teachers advice on effective lesson management, as said Tammy, an elementary school principal with four years of experience: “I have productive conversations with teachers that provide growth-producing feedback.” They could facilitate meaningful professional development, as said William, who has nine years of experience as an elementary school principal: “When I improve the quality of professional development I have a real impact on classroom instruction.” They also could make decisions influencing teaching quality, such as textbooks to be used, achievement mappings to be made, and teaching methods to be implemented. Study participants described some constraints, such as teacher shortage and teacher tenure policy, on their ability to hire, evaluate, or dismiss teachers. However, study participants did not see these constraints as completely eliminating their ability to improve teaching. In general, they felt that many tools for enhancing the quality of instruction were at their disposal.

Interestingly, study participants felt they could improve instruction not only due to action possibilities but also their own capability of producing instructional change. Gloria, an elementary school principal with 16 years of experience, said: “I know to deeply engage others in the change process I want to lead”. James, a middle school principal with 21 years of experience, similarly claimed: “I know how to build a broad coalition ready to change practice and perceptions for significant, sustainable change.”

**Discussion**

The current qualitative research explored the role identity of instructional leaders, based on the four components of role identity identified by Kaplan and Garner (2017). The first component of role
identity, ontological and epistemological beliefs, was manifested in instructional leaders’ belief that the quality of instruction is the most crucial constituent of teachers’ work. This belief is consistent with research findings, which show that the quality of instruction is the strongest correlates of student academic results (Stronge, 2018). Measures of teacher preparation and certification are by far the most significant predictor of student achievement, both before and after controlling for student socio-economic status (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school-related factor, like student grouping patterns or curricular programs (Blazar, 2015).

The second component of role identity, purpose and goals, was manifested in instructional leaders’ belief that the major goal of a school principal is to improve teaching and learning for all students. Study participants embraced the essence of instructional leadership, which views a deep involvement in teaching and learning as the principal’s key responsibility (Author, 2019b). From the instructional leadership perspective, principals should overcome the multiple pressures that push them away from curriculum, instruction, and the classroom, aligning the strategies and activities of the school with its academic mission (Glickman et al., 2017).

The third component of role identity, self-perceptions and self-definitions, was manifested in instructional leaders’ belief that the main capability that allowed them to play their instructional leadership role was instructional proficiency. As aforementioned, researchers claimed that to enact instructional leadership, principals need pedagogical knowledge (Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Steele et al., 2015). In this context, Spillane and Louis (2002) claimed that “Without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well – content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, content-specific pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge and knowledge of learners – school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development” (p. 97).

The fourth component of role identity, perceived action possibilities, was manifested in instructional leaders’ belief that various activities to improve teaching and learning were available to them. Researchers have mentioned some constraints regarding the ability of school principals to enact instructional leadership, such as a lack of uninterrupted blocks of time to work on instructional matters (Camburn et al., 2010; Goldring et al., 2015) and a fear that instructional leadership could damage principal-teacher relationships (Author, 2019a). However, the findings of this study indicate that principals felt that they had a range of options to engage directly in teaching and learning.

Main elements and areas of instructional leaders’ role identity

The four components of instructional leaders’ role identity found in this study may be seen as reflecting two salient elements – attribution of importance and sense of competence, related to two areas – instruction and instructional leadership. The first component of instructional leaders’ role identity, ontological and epistemological beliefs – a belief that teaching quality is the most critical component of teacher work, reflects attribution of importance to instruction. The second component of instructional leaders’ role identity, purpose and goals – a belief that the primary goal of school principals is to improve teaching and learning, reflects attribution of importance to instructional leadership. The third component of instructional leaders’ role identity, self-perceptions and self-definitions – a belief of instructional leaders that their teaching expertise enabled them to demonstrate instructional leadership, reflects a sense of competence related to instruction. The fourth component of instructional leaders’ role identity, perceived action possibilities – a belief that a wide variety of activities to better teachers’ practices were at their disposal, reflects a sense of competence related to instructional leadership.

This structure of instructional leaders’ role identity is illustrated in Figure 1. The four ellipses represent the components of instructional leaders’ role identity: ontological and epistemological beliefs; purpose and goals; self-perceptions and self-definitions; and perceived action possibilities. The two columns represent the two elements of instructional leaders’ role identity – attribution of importance...
and sense of competence. The two rows represent the two areas of these two elements – instruction and instructional leadership. Thus, each of the four components of instructional leaders’ role identity falls under one of the elements in one area.

Attribution of importance as a salient element of the instructional leader’s role identity implies that being an instructional leader is largely a matter of priorities. Instructional leaders are principals who prioritize the core business of schools, instruction. Enhancing teaching and learning is at the top of their to-do list (Glickman et al., 2017). Instructional leaders give utmost importance to student learning and academic results, while everything else is of lesser importance (Murphy et al., 2016). They demonstrate diminished managerial and political priorities in favor of increased instructional and student learning priorities (Bush & Glover, 2014). At the same time, a sense of competence as a salient element of the instructional leader’s role identity implies that principals’ self-efficacy, which is a personal conclusion about one’s abilities to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1997), also occupies a central place in being an instructional leader. Self-efficacy determines principals’ effort and persistence concerning the instructional goals they set as well as specific instructional tasks and affects the attitudes and performance of their followers (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

**Study implications and limitations**

This study holds both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study has identified the structure of instructional leaders’ role identity. Inasmuch as the existing literature has not dealt with this topic, the current study expands the available knowledge about instructional leadership. Practically, the structure of instructional leaders’ role identity identified in this study may enable
better development of instructional leaders. Principals may develop their instructional leadership role identity in various stages of their educational careers, such as preparation programs, mentoring programs provided to beginning principals, and professional development as principals. It seemed advisable to help principals develop the role identity of instructional leaders according to the structure found in the present study.

Moreover, although this study has been conducted among principals, instructional leadership as an organizational function extends beyond the sole position of the principal. Thus, developing the role identity of an instructional leader is relevant to mid-level school leaders, such as year heads, heads of departments, and instruction coordinators. These leaders, who are responsible for implementing instructional leadership in practice, have the potential to develop the role identity of instructional leaders following the structure found in this study. Besides, the selection of the right candidates for school leadership positions renders a significant impact on schools’ performance. Thus, well-defined screening and assessment processes to select real instructional leaders are crucial for building and sustaining successful schools. Looking for the structure of instructional leaders’ role identity found in this study may allow a more accurate instructional leaders’ selection process, increasing the likelihood that the most effective candidates are appointed to these senior leadership positions.

Compared with prior research, this study provides novel data on the role identity of instructional leaders. However, it has several limitations. First, the data were collected within a particular context, thereby requiring further study to test for cross-cultural validity. Study replication in various sociocultural contexts would be advisable to generalize the findings to broader populations and to substantiate their inter-contextual and international validity. Second, as with any self-reporting, the current methodology offered little control over the possibility that respondents may provide socially desirable responses. Further research using techniques such as direct observation could complement principals’ self-reporting with more objective data on their instructional leadership practices. Interviewing various stakeholders about principals’ instructional leadership may also complement principals’ self-reporting. Third, future research would do well to explore differences between principals in instructional leaders’ role identity. Differences according to participants’ characteristics (e.g., gender, experience, and education) were not found to be significant in this study. However, insofar as we know that such differences affect the application of instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 2016), differences between principals in the role identity of instructional leaders might be detected in a study using a larger number of participants. Fourth, additional research is needed to explore how instructional leaders’ role identity help to overcome the challenges to enacting instructional leadership. Conclusive findings on this question could make a strong contribution to the literature.

More broadly, additional research is needed to explore if different role identities have any effects on instruction and/or learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies, including repeated data collection among the same principals at different points in time during their career, would also be useful in revealing the developmental process of instructional leaders’ role identity.

In conclusion, this study inquired into the role identity of instructional leaders. The starting point was Kaplan and Garner (2017) four components of role identity: ontological and epistemological beliefs, purpose and goals, self-perceptions and self-definitions, and perceived action possibilities. Qualitative data analysis identified two major elements in the instructional leader’s role identity – attribution of importance and sense of competence, related to two areas – instruction and instructional leadership. Attribution of importance as a major element suggests that the enactment of instructional leadership reflects mainly the principal’s priorities, to wit, a key feature of instructional leadership is attribution of importance to an ongoing and deep involvement in improving teaching and learning for all students. In addition, a sense of competence as a major element suggests that principals’ belief in their instructional capabilities plays a key role in the enactment of instructional leadership. This study sheds a necessary light on a lesser-known aspect of instructional leadership, which may be used as a conceptual framework underpinning principal preparation programs, mentoring of novice principals, and professional development of actual principals.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


