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## Construction of self as a principal: Meanings gleaned from narratives of novice school principals

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It is assumed that individuals' cognitions of who they are in a particular social structure influence their behaviour in that space. Likewise, school principals' cognition of who they are in schools as social structures influences how they behave as leaders. In this article, we use the role identity theory as a framework to analyse novice principals' narratives of lived experiences to understand how they construct themselves as principals in schools and how these constructions influence their execution of leadership. Positioned within the interpretivist paradigm, we adopted the narrative inquiry methodology to engage with the lived experiences of 3 purposively selected novice principals from the Pinetown district in KwaZulu-Natal. The narrative interview was employed to generate field texts, which were subsequently analysed using 2 methods: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. From our analysis of field texts, 4 themes explaining how the participating novice principals construct themselves as school principals were identified; these themes are: a leader as a learner, re-establishing oneself as a leader, spanning boundaries, and leading to inspire. From these themes, we conclude that a principal's conception of self is dynamic and is a blend of multiple meanings generated prior to becoming a principal and meanings generated during the principalship tenure.

**Keywords:** identity salience; lived experiences; narrative inquiry; novice principal; role identity

### Introduction and Background

In this article, we address novice principals' cognitions of selves as school leaders in the principalship role and the influence of such constructions on exercising leadership. We start with the belief that individuals' cognitions of who they are in a particular social structure influence their behaviour in that space (Stryker, 1968). Likewise, school principals' cognitions of who they are in schools influence the way they behave therein. Research on educational leadership and management has shown school principals as essential figures in school leadership and as one of the key resources for the success of schools (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2018; Bush, 2013; Grobler & Conley, 2013; Maringe, Masinire & Nkambule, 2015; Ng & Szeto, 2016). This emphasis on the importance of principals does not, in any way, seek to undermine the reality that a principal may not lead a school effectively alone (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). Instead, we support the notion of leadership as an expansive phenomenon, which acknowledges the importance of other stakeholders in the leadership of schools (Naicker, Grant & Pillay, 2016). Although apprehending leadership as expansive is ideal, the creation of an environment that allows for such leadership largely depends on principals whom Hallinger and Murphy (1985) perceive as culture builders in schools. A school principal may or may not create a culture that allows for open participation and involvement of other stakeholders within the school (Bhengu & Myende, 2016). Either way, school principals remain one of the key resources for the success of schools, hence the continual exploration of the nature of their leadership.

The above assertions imply that there is a mammoth task placed on school principals. In support of this view, Mestry and Singh (2007) assert that principals are expected to be educational leaders who can foster staff development, parent involvement, community support and student growth, and succeed with major changes and expectations. Considering this mammoth task, one wonders how principals who have recently took on the principalship position, hereafter referred to as novice principals, cope and make meaning of their leadership role. Being a novice principal in the South African context comes with multiple challenges. The first challenge is a lack of formal training to prepare principals to understand and be able to undertake their role (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011).

The second challenge is working with diverse stakeholders with multiple and sometimes competing demands (Myende & Maifala, 2020); for instance, school governing bodies (SGBs) constitute an important stakeholder in schools but they sometimes lack the capacity to perform their role (Mestry, 2018). This may complicate the work of novice principals who themselves are trying to find their feet. The third challenge relates to contextual realities of South African schools; novice principals are expected to operate in schools that are challenged by among others, a lack of basic educational infrastructure, limited resources, large classrooms,

social ills, and an increased accountability over results (Myende & Maifala, 2020).

In this article, we focus on novice school principals with the aim of understanding their constructions of selves as principals and how these constructions influence the way they lead in their respective schools. The main research puzzle (known as a research question in other methodologies) that propelled the inquiry is: what meanings do novice school principals construct of themselves as principals, and how do these meanings influence their execution of leadership?

The article is divided into five related sections. Firstly, we present the introduction and background to the study. Secondly, the literature on leadership and identity is discussed. In addition, the theoretical framework underpinning the study, which is constituted by the role identity theory, is discussed. Thirdly, we discuss the narrative inquiry methodology, which we used to conduct this study. Fourthly, the findings, together with their discussion, are presented. Finally, we conclude the article by articulating lessons drawn from the participating novice principals' cognitions of themselves as leaders in schools and the influence of these cognitions on the leadership they exercise.

#### Leadership and Identity

The two broad concepts underpinning this inquiry are leadership and identity. Leadership is a complex and contested concept, although there are key similarities in different definitions. Leadership has been viewed as an ethical relationship of influence over people directed towards attaining the organisational vision (Bush, 2003; Christie, 2010). This ethical influence over people is perceived to be informed by the vision and communication thereof (Bush, 2008). Similarly, Gardner (2013:17) identifies leadership as "the process of persuasion or example by which an individual or a team induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers." From Gardner's point of view, there are four significant leadership tasks, namely, goal setting, communication, relating effectively with people, and motivation (Gardner, 1990, 2013). There is general agreement that leadership is a relationship within which an individual or team influences or persuades constituents to achieve the desired outcome. In this article, we view novice principals as leaders whose critical role is to exercise leadership that is designed to foster effectiveness in schools.

The concept of identity has been explored extensively within and outside the education fraternity. Stryker (1968:559) believes that people move between and operate in different social structures, and as they do this, they project a particular identity in different social structures. As a result, he conceptualises identity as "to join with some and depart from others, to enter and leave

social relations at once." Gee (2001) echoes similar sentiments and conceives identity as how a person is recognised in a given context. He maintains that people hold multiple identities since they operate in multiple contexts (Gee, 2001). The above conceptions of identity show that an individual's identity is not straightforward but is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon.

Existing accounts of identity consider multiple factors, both internal and external to an individual, to understand who the individual is at a given time and place. For example, Gee (2001) proposes four categories of identity. These include nature-identity, institution-identity, discourse-identity, and affinity-identity (Gee, 2001). Nature-identity refers to the kind of person an individual is, based on characteristics recognised by them and others, which are derived from nature; an individual has no control over this identity. Disability is one example. Institution-identity is an identity given to an individual by a particular institution or authorities; being a principal is an example. Discourse-identity is a person's identity ascribed by other people based on how a particular individual does things, for example, a charismatic person. Lastly, affinity-identity is who a person is based on his or her allegiance, access to and participation in specific practices of an affinity group (these are people who share little besides their interest of the group), for example, religious groups, soccer fans, and so on (Gee, 2001). Although these categories provide a sensible notion of identity, understanding identity remains complex as individuals can hold identities across all categories (Gee, 2001). Similar is Rodgers and Scott (2008)'s notion that identity is a dynamic and fluid phenomenon that is influenced by a range of factors, both internal and external to an individual. In this way, identity is constructed and reconstructed from time to time (Moorosi, 2014; Moorosi & Grant, 2018; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Multiple factors contribute to an individual's identity. McGough (2003) opines that an individual's childhood impression about teachers and schooling influences who they are likely to become as professional principals. He further argues that beyond the childhood impression, dynamics like connections and context shape what principals become as leaders. This is in line with Crow, Day and Møller's (2017) view that one's professional, social, and personal identities are not independent of each other. Instead, individual's professional identity is a product of the interaction between social and personal identities. Adding to this notion is Blose (2022) whose study explored the influence of personal identities on leadership. Blose (2022) found that personal identities were entangled in leaders' professional identities; for this reason, the author views leadership practices as a product of the interaction between these two identities. This interaction is further elucidated by

Mpungose (2010) who explains that once principals enter the role of principalship, their social interaction with staff in formal and informal contexts is one of the factors that build the principals' self-concepts, which subsequently influence their leadership styles. Another important aspect that emerges as a determiner of individuals' leadership identity is their training before and during their principalship. For example, Cruz-González, Segovia and Rodriguez (2019), in their systematic review of literature, found that many studies regard training as one of the factors that help principals to build a successful professional identity, expand their perspectives, and consolidate their self-confidence.

From above discussion it emerges that a principal's identity is constructed from multiple factors, and such constructions influence the way in which leadership is viewed and applied by principals. Although we acknowledge the above studies, we are cognisant of the fact that most are international. South Africa presents multiple unique experiences for principals from which one is likely to draw lessons for leadership. In this article we explore leadership and identity; we hone in on how novice principals construct themselves as principals of schools. The role identity theory, which we discuss in the subsequent section, was adopted to guide our engagement with the participating novice principals' experiences.

#### Theoretical Framework

It was pertinent to adopt a theory of identity to frame our understanding as we engaged with people's identities in the inquiry reported herein. Hence, role identity theory was adopted. Role identity theory originated with Stryker (1968), however, over the years, many scholars have contributed to its development. Stryker (1968:559) views identity as "intrinsically associated with all the joinings and departures of social life." For the last mentioned scholar, society is a complex, differentiated, but organised phenomenon. Since people operate in various societies, they, therefore, are reflections of societies (Stryker, 1968). Adding to this conception, McCall and Simmons (1978) conceptualise identity as a character and a role that an individual devises for him/herself as an occupant of a particular social position; it is an imaginative view of oneself as an occupant of a particular position. Role identity is further viewed by Hogg, Terry and White (1995:256) as "self-conceptions, self-referent cognitions, or self-definitions that people apply to themselves as a consequence of the structural role position they occupy and through a process of labelling or self-definition as a member of a particular social category."

Stryker (1968) posits that individuals have distinct components of self for each of the role positions they occupy in society (role identities). These include, among others, familial roles

(daughter, son, mother and husband among others), occupational roles (doctor, teacher, salesman and engineer among others) and political roles (political party delegate and party leader among others). The concept role is dissected by Hogg et al. (1995) who delve deeper into the term. These scholars view a role as a set of expectations prescribing behaviour that is considered appropriate by others. For that reason, the satisfactory enactment of roles confirms, validates and also enhances self-esteem, whereas poor performance may produce doubts about one's self-worth and may even produce symptoms of psychological distress (Hogg et al., 1995).

To understand the impact of role identities on social behaviour, two notions must be taken into account, namely, identity salience and commitment (Hogg et al., 1995; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1968). The common understanding of identity salience is that individuals' role identities are arranged hierarchically in the self-conception according to the probability that they will form the basis of action (Hogg et al., 1995; McCall & Simmons, 1978). This suggests that an individual's identities are ranked according to their status; the identity that is likely to influence an individual's action is placed at the apex, while the identity that is less likely to influence an individual's action is placed at the bottom. Identities positioned higher in the hierarchy are tied more closely to behaviour, and are more self-defining than those near the bottom (McCall & Simmons, 1978). In terms of commitment, this is the degree to which an individual's relationships with particular others are dependent on being a given kind of person. The assumption is that a particular identity's salience is determined by a person's commitment to that role (Hogg et al., 1995).

The role identity theory informed our understanding of identity in three ways; firstly, as identity is multifaceted, we perceived novice principals as individuals possessing unique sets of roles in terms of familial, political, and occupational role categories (Stryker, 1968). However, being a principal is a common occupational role among the participants, as a result, they were viewed from this aspect in this inquiry. Secondly, since the theory suggests that roles are always in connection with other roles, being a novice principal was perceived as a role that is in connection with complementary roles (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). The complementary roles in a school may include school management team members, teachers, learners, parents and SGB members. Thirdly, the theory maintains that individuals construct their own identity salience; equally, we understood the participating novice principals' behaviour as a non-homogeneous exercise (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1968). The above pointers

played a pivotal role in framing our examination of novice principals' narratives to understand their constructions of selves as school principals and the influences thereof on their exercise of leadership within the principalship role.

### Methodology

In this inquiry, we positioned ourselves within the interpretivist paradigm in order to engage with the lived experiences of novice school principals. Through the interpretive worldview, we were able to interact with novice school principals with the aim of understanding their real-world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1998). To this end, we took a stance that multiple realities exist; thus, we acknowledge that people's experiences are subjective due to their subjective interaction with and interpretations of the world they live in (Dodge, Ospina & Foldy, 2005). In keeping with the interpretivist positionality, we gained a deeper understanding of the participating novice principals' lived experiences by paying attention to their subjective interpretations of who they are in relation to their work and their experiences of their work (Creswell, 2008).

The qualitative research methodology known as the narrative inquiry, was adopted. We inquired into the experiences of the three selected novice school principals, intimately, and over a period of time (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). The participating principals were purposively selected on the basis that they had served as principals for a period between 2 to 5 years and were willing to narrate their stories of lived experiences as school principals. The participants were selected from three successful schools (two secondary schools and a combined school) in the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal. Successful schools in the context of South Africa are measured through National Senior Certificate (NSC) results; the schools in which this inquiry was conducted were performing above 60%. These schools were only the location of the study; their success was not a unit of analysis. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used herein to refer to the participants. The three participating novice principals are referred to as Mr Phewa, Mr Chili and Mr Ndaba. Caine, Estafan and Clandinin (2013) assert that stories are the only way to understand and make meaning of people's experiences. As a result, we adopted a narrative view of experience to understand the experiences of the participating principals (Clandinin, 2006). The data were generated through the narrative interview, which is an unstructured type of interview that allows a participant to choose a story to tell their experience and freely relay the story in their own words (Clandinin, 2013; Olive, 2014).

Following data generation, the data were analysed using two analysis methods, namely, narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. In

terms of narrative analysis, participants' stories (data) were examined, and plots that captured important aspects of their lived experiences were identified. This process resulted in coherent and retrospective re-storied narratives that capture important facets of the participants' lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). The re-storied narratives of the participating novice principals are not included in this article; however, reasonable extractions from these narratives are injected into the presentation of the findings. Regarding the second method of analysis (analysis of narratives), the re-storied narratives were further analysed. At this stage, the participants' re-storied narratives were closely examined and particular instances emerged from the narratives; these particular instances were subsequently used as themes through which the findings were presented (Polkinghorne, 1995).

### Findings: Meanings Constructed by Novice Principals of Their Role

When the narratives of Mr Phewa, Mr Chili and Mr Ndaba were analysed, four meanings were deduced, namely, a leader as a learner, re-establishing oneself as a leader, spanning boundaries, and leading to inspire. These meanings are comprehensively discussed separately below.

#### A Leader as a Learner

A teaching qualification and teaching experience are the only formal requirements for school principals in South Africa (Bush et al., 2011). Arguing against this practice, Bush (2010) maintains that principals are better leaders following specific training. In this study, we found novice principals preparing themselves for leadership roles through accumulating knowledge and skills. A common practice among these novice principals was furthering their studies. Mr Phewa explained his learning journey:

*... I then pursued a Bachelor of Education (Honours) at the same university, which I completed in 1997. I pursued a Master of Education degree, specialising in educational leadership, management, and policy that I completed in 2009....Due to various daily leadership challenges, I decided to be a lifelong learner. I believe in acquiring skills, knowledge, and information by reading books, manuals, and research. I continuously try to develop myself. I read a lot. I watch informative shows on television. I attend various workshops and seminars.*

Mr Chili also explained the route that he took in furthering his studies: "*... I further completed an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) at one of the local Universities majoring in Mathematical Literacy in 2007. Following this, I enrolled for Bachelor of Education (Honours), specialising in Educational Leadership and Management in 2018.*"

Mr Ndaba also furthered his studies and is continuing with studies. He explained as follows:

*... I graduated with Bachelor of Education in the year 2000. I then studied for the Bachelor of Education (Honours) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), which I finished in 2016. I am currently pursuing a Master of Education degree, specialising in Educational Management.*

The commitment of the participating novice principals to their professional growth was evident from the different courses that they took following their initial teaching qualification. All took at least one degree specialising in educational leadership and management, suggesting they were conscious of the need to understand the dynamics of leadership and management, and they further continued to maximise their knowledge and skills. Mosoge (2008), arguing for professional development, maintains that development and training are a vehicle that can take a person from one level of performance to a higher level.

This desire for learning made us recognise the necessity for the preparation of candidates for principalship. Bush et al. (2011) see a growing realisation that principalship is a specialist occupation requiring specific preparation of incumbents. In support of this assertion, Avolio and Gardner (2005) claim that the preparedness of a leader for a leadership role does not only benefit leaders in terms of understanding leadership and management dynamics but impacts greatly on the success of a school.

From the perspective of role identity theory, the principalship may be viewed as an occupational role (Stryker, 1968) with a set of expectations prescribing the behaviour of incumbents (Hogg et al., 1995). To live up to these expectations and also to enhance self-esteem, novice principals need to satisfactorily enact the role (Hogg et al., 1995). It is essential for novice principals as new incumbents in the principalship role to construct their role identity, which consists of “self-conceptions, self-referent cognitions, and the self-definition” (Hogg et al., 1995:256). Mr Phewa, Mr Chili and Mr Ndaba’s commitment towards skills and knowledge accumulation displayed an attempt towards constructing the leader role identity. Cruz-González et al. (2019) maintain that one’s embarkment on training does not only enhance their conceptual understanding of leadership, but their professional identity is also enhanced. This leads to approaching leadership aspects such as decision-making differently and, more often, successfully.

#### Re-establishing Oneself as a Leader

From the social identity perspective, Hogg (2001) argues that leadership is not a structural property or an intrinsic or emergent property of psychological in-group membership; instead, he views leadership as a product of an individual’s information processing. Leaders may emerge, maintain their

position, be effective, and so forth, based on their individual social cognitive processes (Hogg, 2001). Mr Phewa, Mr Chili and Mr Ndaba had different constructions of who they were and how to be school principals in their schools. Upon occupying the principalship role, these leaders realised a necessity to alter their behaviour as they felt that there was a certain way in which a principal should behave.

For instance, Mr Phewa had to suppress his unionist identity so that he was not seen to be associating more with a particular group in the school than another.

*I got rid of my SADTU [South African Democratic Teachers Union] regalia after I realised that it is not proper for me to be seen in SADTU regalia while at work. I want teachers to see me as a principal, not a unionist. I did this because I wanted all teachers to feel welcome here at my school and I want to be a unifying figure.*

Again, Mr Chili needed to alter his social and friendly self so that he could be respected by his followers. He explained:

*I used to think we can always sit down and talk like gents during breaks, and only when the bell rings then we go back to our duties. But it does not work like that. If you are a principal, you must just take the role of a principal at all times. Being a principal has reshaped me a lot. One major thing that I needed to adjust on, was the fact that I was very much of a ‘social giant.’ I was very flexible. I liked joking with everyone about everything all the time. I was a people’s person, but when I assumed this duty, I have learnt that it is not all the people that you can joke with. You may think that you are joking with someone, and they decide to capitalise on that joke. Hence, one has learnt to be well behaved and strict.*

For Mr Ndaba, being a principal meant creating leaders. This novice principal believed that he should not be the only leader in the school, but he needed to make more leaders for his school to be successful. He explained:

*Sometimes you must take a step back and let your followers walk before you. See how well they implement your teachings with you by their side or at the back. Sometimes you need to capacitate the people under your leadership so that they can also be able to lead when you eventually hand over the baton. You do that by giving them the practice while you are still there and available to mentor and guide them. Real leaders create other leaders so that there will be growth in the school. As a principal, you must always seek to develop people. I acknowledge that it is not an easy task, but it takes an effort.*

The above extracts show the negotiation between novice principals and their new roles. Although Mr Phewa, Mr Ndaba and Mr Chili held dissimilar conceptions of principalship, the altering of behaviour was common among the three of them. This suggests that principalship, as a critical leadership role in a school (Hallinger, 2010), calls for dispositional changes from candidates. In

altering their behaviour, these novice principals also adjusted to their respective contexts. Leadership scholarship has strongly foregrounded leaders' negotiation with context to discern context-relevant behaviour (Blose, 2018; Bredeson, Klar & Johansson, 2011; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). The altering of behaviour in this study seems to be a tactic that principals adopted to appear accommodative and to derive respect from a diverse constituency in their schools. Such behavioural shifts by these novice principals reflects features of role identity theory, specifically identity salience. The narratives of Mr Phewa, Mr Ndaba and Chili show the principalship role taking a top position in these leaders' identity salience hierarchy. In this way, their behaviour is primarily informed by the principalship role (Hogg et al., 1995).

#### Spanning Boundaries

Spanning the boundaries as a leader and sharing power with followers is deemed critical to organisational innovativeness and effectiveness (Gómez & Rosen, 2001). The participating novice principals appeared to be aware that there was more to be gained from collaboration. They brought other stakeholders on board to lead with them, and were not afraid to solicit assistance when needed. They opened their arms to harness expertise from other stakeholders within and outside the school.

Mr Phewa explained how he drew on networking with other principals and senior managers.

*... another strategy that is working for me or for us to overcome challenges is the involvement of other stakeholders like the parents, teachers, and SGB members. I also had to network with principals from other neighbouring schools that are performing very well. Apart from this, it is also essential to consult seniors. For example, we are fortunate to have abahloli (circuit managers), who have an open-door policy and are willing to assist at any time.*

Mr Chili valued stakeholders, and he believed that a positive relationship may be fostered when all stakeholders were involved in decision-making, including parents and children; he explained:

*I believe that sometimes I must lead from behind. I must involve all other stakeholders in decision-making. As a principal now, it is important to create a positive relationship between all the stakeholders, especially the parents and the community at large. They should be involved in the learning of their children.*

Mr Ndaba also valued collaboration with other stakeholders, explaining that their diverse abilities and ideas helped shape the workplace. Mr Ndaba noted the challenge that he had to overcome as a novice principal to bring stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and understandings to work together. He said:

*I cannot do this alone. I invite other stakeholders to be part of the game. Different people with different abilities bring into the workplace an advantage in terms of ideas, creativity, and innovation. It is not easy to get people from different contextual backgrounds, including church doctrines and cultural perspectives to work together, however, I am trying.*

From the above excerpts, we see that the participating novice principals invited stakeholders to participate in the operation of their schools and reached out to external networks to solicit expertise. For these principals, collaboration and breaking positional leadership boundaries to solicit assistance formed part of the character they were constructing for themselves as occupants of the principalship role (McCall & Simmons, 1978). While this approach may be perceived as important for novice principals, it should surely be an approach adopted by all school principals, regardless of tenure. Hallinger (2011) similarly argues that a school principal can only achieve success through the co-operation of others. This also shows the interdependent nature of leadership as Fletcher and Käufer (2003) assert that the success of a school is a product of numerous acts of collaboration. The practice of spanning the boundaries seems to be in line with the idea that one's professional identity is formed through interactions between social and personal identity (Crow et al., 2017).

#### Leading to Inspire

Leadership is viewed by Bush (2003) as an ethical relationship of influence. One way in which Mr Phewa, Mr Chili and Mr Ndaba exerted influence was through modelling the behaviour they expected from their followers. These leaders held a belief that teachers would conduct themselves appropriately if they set an example. Mr Phewa's narrative made a clear distinction between an ordinary teacher and a principal; he elaborated:

*To be a principal is very much different from any other post level within a school. ... As a principal, everyone at school is looking up to you. I am now very disciplined because I believe that a manager that lacks discipline is doomed to fail in his/her endeavours.*

Again, Mr Chili similarly believed in inspiring teachers and learners by setting himself as an example. He explained:

*I believe that as a Principal I must inspire greatness in my learners and the staff. Leadership is about inspiring, motivating, and encouraging the people you are leading all the time. I believe that it is important to be exemplary. I try to be honest all the time to my people. Because if you are dishonest, people will lose trust in you.*

Mr Ndaba echoed a similar sentiment when he spoke of leading from the front to show direction to his teachers and learners and also to motivate them to follow suit. He declared as follows:

*Before you ask or expect others to do something, start by showing them how it is done. If I say to my teachers, I want a file done this way, I show them my file. In essence, what I am saying is that as a leader you must lead by example. In most cases you must lead from the front, show the teachers and learners the way. You cannot preach about punctuality but as a principal you are never punctual. When you are a leader, the people are more likely to replicate what you do and not what you say.*

The participating novice principals projected themselves as examples in their respective schools with a mutual intention to inspire teachers and learners to behave likewise. This finding resonates with Blose and Naicker (2018) who found leaders inspiring followers by constructing professional identities for themselves for the followers to emulate. Bass and Avolio (1993) also assert that leaders play a significant role in inspiring through the character they project. Mr Phewa, Mr Ndaba, and Mr Chili's practice of projecting a particular behaviour to teachers with an intention to elicit a reciprocal behaviour showed commitment to the principalship role. In role identity theory, the notion of commitment refers to the degree to which an individual's relationships to particular others are dependent on being a given kind of a person (Hogg et al., 1995).

### Conclusion

To conclude this article, we return to the research puzzle – what meanings do novice school principals construct of themselves as principals, and how do these meanings influence their execution of leadership?

We have identified and presented four meanings that contribute to novice principals' interpretation and understanding of their role. These meanings are: a leader as a learner, re-establishing oneself as a leader, spanning boundaries, and also leading to inspire. We further examined these meanings, and three lessons verbalising novice principals' constructions of what it means to be a school principal were deduced. Firstly, we learnt that novice principals require some amount of knowledge and skills when they embarked on this role in schools. Apart from the formal professional requirements, greater knowledge around issues of and approaches to leadership would have helped these candidates. The participating novice principals took their professional development upon themselves as they all have at least one relevant postgraduate qualification. This is commendable; however, we may not know whether other novice principals do the same. If they do not, their knowledge and skills deficiencies are likely to have a bearing on their role cognition and leadership exercise.

Secondly, we learnt that novice principals strove to present a particular bearing in schools. The

principals altered their behaviour to project themselves as leaders to teachers and learners; they also modelled behaviour that they expected from teachers in their schools. We conclude that school principals are challenged to be beacons of unity in schools and are charged with creating an inclusive environment. Additionally, we conclude that the principalship role is significant in schools, and candidates appointed to this role undergo some negotiations in developing cognition of self in the role. For example, one of the participating novice principals had to suppress his staunch union identity upon his appointment. From this action, we learn that principals' identity construction may also be influenced by how they want to be perceived in schools.

Thirdly, we learnt that novice principals recognised other stakeholders inside and outside the schools. These principals initiated a collaboration with teachers, parents, and also external resources. We like to believe that these novice principals were not behaving in this way due to the anxiety resulting from being new in the role. The leadership they exercised was important because it made every stakeholder feel valued, and as part of the team; in this way, they were likely to perform effectively.

We make one recommendation. Little is done to prepare candidates for principalship in South Africa, even though its importance is recognised. Seeing the desire for learning displayed by the participants in this inquiry and the view that training and acquiring new skills shaped principals' leadership positively, we recommend that candidates for principalship or novice principals should be exposed to different training and development opportunities to become more effective in the role. These can include courses, workshops, seminars, and so on. We foresee such activities stimulating their constructions of who they are as leaders, thereby impacting on behaviour. This is important given that South Africa has been criticised for not ensuring that principals are people with specialised knowledge.

While we make this recommendation, we note initiatives by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Firstly, between 2007 and 2009, the DBE piloted an ACE: School Leadership, which mainly targeted aspiring principals. Considering that the research on this programme reveals positive findings (Bush et al., 2011), it (or any other similar programme) could be considered as one of the avenues to develop novice principals' professional identity. Secondly, in 2015, the Department gazetted the Policy on the South African Standards for Principalship. Although this policy provides a clear role description for school principals (DBE, Republic of South Africa, 2015), how the envisaged professional identity of school principals may be developed remains vague. Thirdly, the Department recently initiated a Diploma in School Leadership,

which is designed to equip current and aspiring school principals with the knowledge and competencies to manage and lead schools effectively. This programme is not yet offered in all provinces and by all universities; however, its full implementation will significantly contribute to the development of principals' professional identity.

In closing, we acknowledge that this was a small-scale qualitative inquiry that examined only three novice principals' experiences to understand their construction of themselves as principals in schools. Given that the study was of limited scope, its findings may not reflect the views of all novice principals in South Africa. For this reason, the findings may not be generalised directly. However, it is important to state that this inquiry shows some indications concerning novice principals' socialisation and professional identity development. Thus, a need to explore, using other methods, the novice principals' identity constructions and how these constructions influence principals' leadership in South African schools is acknowledged.

#### Authors' Contributions

SSN provided data for manuscript writing and collaborated with other authors in presenting the findings. SB led the writing process; he wrote the abstract, theoretical framework, and methodology components of the manuscript. In addition, he collaborated with other authors in presenting the findings. BN wrote the introduction and collaborated with other authors in presenting the findings. PEM wrote the literature review, and collaborated with other authors on the presentation of the findings; also, he led the writing of the discussion and conclusion. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

#### Notes

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