Pathways of Professional Identity Development: A Grounded Theory of Female School Principals

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Abstract

This paper examines a female school principal's perceptions of professional identity development. Recently education management has undergone the process of managerial transformation whereas new requirements and standards have been raised for school principals. Managerial transformations have been influenced by political, economic and cultural factors that (re)shaped school principals' professional identities. These social identity changes are especially important in the shift of managerial paradigms that evoke challenges in social identification processes. Two major approaches to professional identity include a feminist standpoint and a social construction approach. The former claims that females are underrepresented as leaders in most facets of work life due to gender role stereotypes, prejudices and unequal power distribution. The latter subscribes to the notion that person's identities are multiple and fluid due to their cultural, historic, and social situatedness. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the pathways of female school principals' professional identity development. The main research question of this study was how professional identity development is described by female school principals. The study focuses on two in-depth interviews with experienced school principals. The constructivist grounded theory methodology has been applied for the research. Comparative analysis allowed to generate analytic units ranging from small to large and from micro (individual), and meso (organizational) to macro (regional, national or worldwide) levels in disclosing professional identity development process. Fifteen themes comprised the results of the interview research unfolding the essential phenomenon of professional identity development.

Keywords: female school principals, education management, professional identity, grounded theory.

Introduction

Professional identity is one of the most important aspects denoting social identity that specifies the notion of individual's positioning of oneself and within a selected professional field. The importance of professional identity in contemporary society is emphasized through prevailing discourse. Despite of being widely researched the concept of professional identity still is highly debated among different representatives of philosophical paradigms (Sutherland & Markauskaite, 2012; Tsakissiris, 2016).

In scientific discourse the relation with profession is usually defined through classical division into pure professions (Greenwood, 1957) or by applying the wider attitude of hybrid approach (Kearny & Sinha, 1988). The first approach rejects the notion of profession outside traditional professional occupational fields, thus emerging new professions are not considered to be professions due to lack of substantive strength and institutional control (Noordegraaf, 2007). The so-called *purified* professions such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc., are characterized by wide range of specialization, complexity and codification, whereas the rest are considered to be occupations. The opposite view is stated by hybrid approach that foregrounds non-fixed meaning of a profession promoting the renewal of professional field. Hendrikx and van Gestel (2017) present a simplified definition of profession that includes relationship of individual with and within the social group doing the same job.

It could be noticed that definition of teacher's, or pedagogue's, profession has undergone controversy and has been termed as craft (Edmond & Hayler, 2013), service provider (Hampton, Wolf, Albisson, & McQuilty, 2009), occupation (Adams,

2010), profession (Whiteman, Scribner, & Crow, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2016) or quasi-profession (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fincham, 2012). In accordance with the subject of this research – female school principals – two main attitudes can be observed. The first reflects classical viewpoint that distinguishes managerial positions as occupations due to lack of substantive and institutional control and absence of codification (Mintzberg, 2004). The second approach, that I follow in this paper, claims the relative state of profession in time and space, thus managers, as well as school principals, cannot be considered as qualified specialist excluding the notion of being professionals. In order to avoid questioning whether managing a school, that is being a school principal, is considered to be a profession I refer to *the European Classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations* that subsumes school principalship into the category of professions.

Saaruka (2017) raises the question of conceptualizing professional identity of a school principal by considering dimensions for defining this construct whereas one more question emerges if professional identity of a school principal is one-dimensional. In the response, Crow, Day, and Møller (2017) claim two dimensions compiling school principals' professional identity: individual and collective. It is important to mention Ritaco and Bolivar (2018) insights that professional identification of a school principal might be constituted of several professional lines such as a manager vs a teacher. Furthermore, Robertson (2016) maintains the idea that situational roles are implied as a professional identity, that is a transition from school principal into teacher and vice versa. Zabalza and Cerdeirina (2012) draw a distinction between being, acting and feeling a school principal.

Initially professional identity construction depends on many factors. In this paper I rely on Murakami and Törnsen (2017) who amplify the factor of gender and arising negative stereotypes in relation to females in managerial positions as well as school management. What is more, Metiu and Obodaru (2008) claim that males and females have different approach to the process of socialization whereas females internalize predominant stereotypes due to unequal power disposition concerning masculine dominant managerial fields. This suggests applying Butler's (1990, 2010) theory of performativity in disclosing the pathways of female school principals' professional identity construction.

Research purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the pathways of female school principals' professional identity development.

Research question

The main research question for of this study was how professional identity development is described by female school principals.

Methodology

This grounded theory study, viewed from a feminist standpoint, social construction approach and symbolic interactionist perspective, used interview data collecting method and essential grounded theory methods to answer the research question. Symbolic interactionism is founded on the belief that people's understanding of the world is developed through interactions – that people are actors responding to their environment (Charon, 2010). Thus, learning about female school principals' professional identity construction requires interactions between school principals, teachers, community and representatives of authorities. Feminist standpoint claims three principles to the research: (1) knowledge is socially situated; (2) marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized; (3) focus on power relations (Harding, 1987). Social construction assumes that people *construct*, create, make, invent their understandings of the world and the meanings they give to encounters with others, or various products they or others create, moreover, it claims that they do this *jointly*, in coordination with others, rather than individually (Berger & Lukmann, 1966).

Institutional ethics approval was received, and purposive sample of female school principals were invited to participate initially.

The research task has been accomplished by application of the constructivist Grounded theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 1990, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2014) as the methodology and the method for the study. The focus of CGT is to determine how the actors respond to different conditions and the consequences of their actions (Charmaz, 2000). Thus, the purpose of CGT is to develop a theoretical explanation for a process or an action through the process of constant comparison. The

theoretical explanation is grounded in and generated from the qualitative data that has been produced by the participants. As Charmaz (2006, 2014) highlights, a theory goes beyond a set of findings in that it offers an explanation about phenomena. In the case of this research, the aim was to explain female school principals' professional identity development grounding that explanation on the actual experience and understanding of research participants.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two participants – female school principals – one is a former school principal who managed school for twenty years, the other is currently being a principal for five years. The interviews were conducted during the meetings with school principals in their working and leisure environments, they were recorded and transcribed. The length of the interviews varied from 15 minutes to one hour. The interview questions invited the interviewees to reflect on and describe their first encounters of becoming a school principal and discuss challenges they faced.

In CGT data collection and analysis are interrelated processes: the analysis starts with the first bits of data and directs the next steps in data collection. In this research, the first bits of data were collected through observations in the working environment. These observations guided the interviews and informed the formation of interview questions. As the interviews were being completed, they were first listened to again and transcribed, after which the transcripts were read through repeatedly. This initial process allowed the researcher to immerse in the data, become more familiar with it by identifying initial points of interest. This stage was followed by the process of coding, which involves identifying concepts in the data. The coding procedures described by Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2014) were applied to follow the analysis: (1) initial coding was applied to the close data analysis, whereas all details are important including word-by-word coding, line-by-line coding, incident-by-incident coding; (2) focused coding enabled researcher to synthesize and explain larger segments of data; (3) axial coding related categories with subcategories, this involved creation of the model of phenomenon defining reasons, context, strategies, interfering factors, results that allow to identify the core phenomenon; (4) theoretical coding emphasized the guidance reconsidering the codes selected during the focused coding.

Limitation of the study

This is a research study grounded on CGT of tracing two female school principals. The small sample size might be seen as a limitation to research of the quantitative nature. However, the purpose of the study was not to generalize the findings. Rather, this research aims to evoke the problem of social power relations and gender positionality in masculine dominated managerial field and to provide a better understanding of female school principals' professional identity constructional pathways. Due to the limited available contact time with participants, the study was only conducted within a short period of time.

Findings

After applying axis coding there were distinguished fifteen categories comprising of fifty-eight subcategories. The categories were divided into groups defining the core phenomenon by creating a model. The model of phenomenon is composed by the following components: reasons, context, strategies, interfering factors, results, and the core phenomenon that is described in the paper through the mentioned components disclosing the impact they make on the core phenomenon.

The core phenomenon

The core phenomenon is defined as a concept (or word) that unites the codes and is the result of the research object that interests researcher (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017). After conducting the axis coding professional (self)development was identified as the core phenomenon. The research showed that professional development refers on permanent learning by ranking the priorities – what are the goals of this process, how they are related to vision of performance and what are the ways of achieving them in the systematic way. Moreover, professional identity development in masculine predominant area is followed by stereotypes of women incapability in performing so called male tasks. Thus, in successful process of professional identity development female school principals have to withstand the mentioned presuppositions by finding the pathways of showing professionalism not gender.

Context

The context expresses distinctive conditions, their positionality and place (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017). The axis coding distinguished the categories of requirements on quality with subcategories of education, qualifications and other requirements for school principals. Contextual factors comprise diversion consisting of two categories: teacher becoming

a school principal and balancing defining the functions of school principals', behavior influenced by unstable economic and demographic situations.　It could be claimed that requirements and demand for high qualifications and standards, competences of school principals and balancing between performing the functions of school principals in trying to satisfy the expectations of school community and the society comprise the contextual situation of a school principals' working environment that impel to search for tools to combine the requirements and expectations of others.　Furthermore, one more contextual situation could be determined as the process of becoming a school principal delineating the setting such as work experience in teaching and other significant circumstances of becoming a school principal.　The mentioned contextual situations influence relation with the core phenomenon.

Reasons

Reasons comprise a set of events that ascribe the qualities of the core phenomenon (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017).　In the analysis process there were distinguished three categories that were attributed to reasons influencing and forming the process of professional development.　The first is motivation that is related to having a vision and striving to accomplish the goals. Motivation refers to present and state what influences future prospects and is based on values, commitment, and aspirations.　The other category embraces the feeling of security that defines the choice of strategies for professional identity construction.　The feeling of security usually operates with the components of organizational fragmentation, reduced clarity of roles that might lead to confusion and competition.　Therefore, female school principals face underestimation in individual ability and unrealistic expectations of performance that result in balancing in between self-confidence while fulfilling the needs of others.　The category of discontent is related to enhancement of motivation as disinclination for status quo impels to seek for perfection and professional growth.　Thus, this strive can be linked to adoption of appropriate strategies for further professional development.

Strategies

Strategies are influenced and constructed through reasons that shape the core phenomenon (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017).　As previously mentioned, choice of strategies contributes to revelation of the core phenomenon that is selection of effective tools in construction of professional development.　The need for perfection and demand of lifelong learning constitute the category of resolution.　The inevitability of lifelong learning in knowledge-oriented societies implies that school principals have different objectives and characteristics regarding their needs for continuing learning that leads to professional growth. Becoming a leader of a school requires not only to strive for professional growth but no less important is maintenance of professionalism and professional identity.　It is worth mentioning that in masculine predominant managerial fields such as educational institutions management to maintain female school principals' professional identity is extremely challenging due to prevailing stereotypes of hard management.　Thus, acquiring expedient strategies for professional identity construction may lead to maintaining a desirable identity.

Results

Results or consequences are defined by strategies or methods applied in a certain context (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017).　At the core concept of consequences is the category of satisfaction that could be defined as a result of applied strategies through which school principals influence themselves toward higher levels of performance and effectiveness.　Furthermore, self-empowerment is related to participative management and self-determination.　Self-empowerment leads to the feeling of satisfaction with work and results in an active, not passive approach to work that causes to strive toward and feel capable to shaping roles at work and adapt to work contexts in developing professional identity.

Interfering factors

Interfering factors are related to context and consequences (Žydžiūnaitė, 2017).　Interference of various factors shape the ways female school principals construct their professional identity. There have been excluded four categories as interfering factors in professional identity construction. The first is identified as fairness or incertitude after entering the position of a school principal.　It is based on the dynamic capabilities of complex adaptive systems and focuses on the strategies and behaviours that foster organizational, subunit, team, group or individual creativity, learning and adaptivity that are woven with interdependent relationships that create informal emergent constraints and complexity within the process of professional identity development.　The mentioned factors might result in distrust that asserts mainly in over-control of public authorities.　During the conducted interview school principals emphasized the mechanism of control which is oriented to punishment procedures and penalizing not to support or to provide assistance. The third category is ostracism that was

observed on the site of women. According to Zimmer (1988) the concept of tokenism is widely used to explain many difficulties women face as they enter traditionally male occupations. Through observations and interviews with female school principals I identified the consequences of being the few among the many that included not only women's treatment by other women, but also women's behavioral responses to the differential treatment they received. This heightened visibility creates overwhelming pressure to perform successfully and obtaining obstacles for further professional identity development. As a result, the category of adaptability emerges that creates unwillingness or hesitation for improvement and learning. Considering all the factors that interfere the processes of female school principals' professional identity development two subsequent constructional pathways can be observed. The first, resignation with discrimination, alienation, and ostracism by adopting the performative (Butler, 1990, 2010) professional identity that satisfies the needs of others but contravenes the authentic personal identification. The other one speaks about determined personalities ready to construct strong professional identity by resisting to predominant stereotypes.

Conclusions

Professional identity of female school principals' is the multilayered concept, which is related to roles and context of the school and education management traditions as well as its organizational structure and values. In the process of professional identity development, it is essential to perceive, understand and define the own role, obligations and vision to school, community and society. As data analysis and coding procedures showed the core phenomenon of professional identity development to be (self)development that mainly refer on permanent learning by ranking the priorities and defining the goals to be achieved. Furthermore, as one of the main interfering factors in professional identity development gender was identified. It was noticed that female school principals face tokenism phenomenon that creates obstacles for further professional identity development. Consequently, it can be stated that female school principals' professional identification is related with its performance in and for others. Thus, making the process entwined and contrasting with the roles of a school principal, whereas an essential factor in developing professional identity becomes ownership of the work and personal commitment to one's values and beliefs engaging with the role performance at school.

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