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Becoming teacher leaders in Israel: a meaning-making model

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ABSTRACT

Consensus is growing that teacher leadership benefits teaching quality and student performance. Despite the recognition that teacher leadership contributes to teachers' professional development, little is known about how it is developed and how teachers experience the transition to the teacher-leader role. This study explores the internal mechanisms underlying the transition to and formation of teachers' professional identity as teacher leaders. It is based on 60 interviews: 41 teachers who were selected to participate in a leadership training programme, 10 principals and 19 teacher-leaders' colleagues. The findings led to a model with four central components: (1) Overall professional identity; (2) The experience of 'being chosen'; (3) An internal meaning-making process; and (4) External forces.

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Teaching is generally perceived as a flat profession, meaning one lacking substantial trajectories or opportunities for growth and leadership for those who are successful in it (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). Although most teachers acquire knowledge, experience and skills throughout their career, their major responsibilities often remain limited to the classroom alone. Furthermore, the traditional markers of career development in other professions, such as decision-making authority, a change of status or a pay rise, are rare (Fiarman, Johnson, Munger, Papay, & Qazilbash, 2009). The perceived lack of alternative development options and professional growth for teachers has been found to be associated with boredom and decreased professional satisfaction (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Margolis & Deuel, 2009). In the hierarchical structure of schools today, the principal is often the leader of the school and perceived as the main decision-maker (e.g. Pugalee, Frykholm, & Shaka, 2001). Yet, it has been increasingly recognised that teachers can also serve as educational leaders in their schools (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) as they are in a key position to influence the creation and implementation of successful educational practices (Michaeli & Sommer, 2014). In accordance with these assertions, teacher leadership has become an important component in school improvement and advancement (Criswell & Rushton, 2013), reflecting a growing recognition of its key role in motivating bottom-up collaborative learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) through the facilitation of knowledge sharing and professional development in teachers' learning communities (Flores, 2007). This study

examined teachers' perceptions of and experiences during their transition to the professional identity of teacher leaders. By focusing on the participants as they began to formulate their identities as teacher leaders, the study was able to identify the central processes that characterise the transformation of their identity as a teacher to the new identity as a teacher leader.

Teacher leadership

The notion of teacher leadership has been studied and developed mainly in the United States, Canada and Australia and emphasises the need to redistribute power and authority in schools (Muijs & Harris, 2006). In Israel, where this study was conducted, this represents a rather new phenomenon in the educational system, and a result of a recent initiative by the Ministry of Education, which sought to introduce a shift in teachers' professional development towards collegial engagement in school learning communities – one that would be spearheaded by leading teachers. This move, in turn, provided a unique opportunity for closely exploring the transitional experience of becoming a leading teacher. Furthermore, and in terms of power distribution, Israel is considered as exhibiting a small cultural power distance, scoring 13 on the Power Distance Index (PDI; Hofstede, 2013) survey that encompassed 56 countries and regions. In this respect, it also provides an interesting arena for exploring changes in the construction of professional identity such as to challenge the existing power distribution and traditional hierarchical structure characterised by such authoritarian figures as school principals. Evidence confirms that teacher leadership is a significant internal catalyst for school improvement and progress (Hipkins, 2001), contributing to enduring and positive processes of change (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Despite the large number of approaches and definitions of teacher leadership currently (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996), York-Barr and Duke's (2004) integrative conceptual framework reflects their common elements: 'the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement' (pp. 287–288). In terms of the distributed leadership theory, which has been suggested as a framework for thinking about teacher leadership as one which involves all members of the school community, not just the principal (Spillane, 2005), attention is drawn to 'collective responsibility and collaborative working' (Frost & Harris, 2003, p. 480).

The leadership practice is thus viewed as the product of routine and daily interactions between teachers, principals, school staff, students and the broader community (Spillane, 2013), highlighting the importance of social networks for teachers. The significance of relationships to the function of teacher leaders (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015) is further reflected in recent descriptions as engagement 'in the daily work by modeling new instructional practices, collaborating with colleagues to improve student learning, and fostering a generally more productive school culture' (Bond, 2011, p. 287). These conceptions convey an important challenge implicit in this professional opportunity for teacher leaders to influence their communities. Given that they are both teachers and leaders, they are required to lead their colleagues and to be valued by them (Bottery, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The informal component of the role of

influencing their colleagues is not based on their formal position or authority, but rather on personal, interpersonal elements and may even occur unintentionally (Cortez-Ford, 2008). This may introduce further pressure and expectations to the duties and responsibilities already carried by the teachers (Bottery, 2004). Nevertheless, a formal shift in their job definitions influences their social-professional relations within the school and may even have negative repercussions, as other school members may perceive them differently as the leading teachers step out of the 'teachers zone' (Struyve, Meredith, & Gielen, 2014). This highlights the importance of addressing the component of such identity shift as an important component in programmes of teachers' education (e.g. Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and in particular how teachers themselves experience and make sense of it within changing contexts, while taking into account the effects of such a context on the shaping of and changes in a teacher's identity (e.g. Smagorinsky, Moore, Cook, Jackson & Fry, 2004).

Regardless of the skills learned in the teacher leadership development programmes (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2002; Gul, 2016), teacher leaders may find it difficult to implement these skills when they return to their school, depending on its environment and culture (Snoek & Volman, 2014). Successful application requires conditions such as professional trust (Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Louis, 2008), minimal role ambiguity (Cortez-Ford, 2008), support from administrators (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Harris, 2013) and perceived autonomy (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007). These imply the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how teachers experience the transition to the new role of teacher leader and the challenges accompanying it. Carroll and Levy (2010), for instance, show that leadership development can be seen as identity construction that enhances a sense of agency. Yet, although teachers' professional identity is recognised as an essential component of teacher leadership, it has received relatively scant attention (e.g. Cortez-Ford, 2008). More specifically, the psychological aspect of how teacher identity develops has received limited scholarly attention, as Rodgers and Scott (2008) indicated: 'left largely unexplored by this literature, however, is the black box of how teachers should go about making the psychological shift from being authored by these forces to authoring their own stories, and how teacher educators might facilitate this process' (p. 733). The present study aims at filling this gap by exploring the experience of change in teachers' identity in the critical liminal phase in the process of 'becoming' teacher leaders, reflecting a transitional state from a previous status into a space of 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1981) through their own perspective. In addition, this study approaches the processes of leading teachers' identity formation from the relatively novel point of view of the teachers' principals and colleagues.

Professional identity development

Professional identity has a significant effect on relationships, performance, work engagement, satisfaction and career choices (Gul, 2016). It is commonly viewed as a developmental process, which unfolds over the years and integrates internal (Slay & Smith, 2011; Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001) and external-contextual factors (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013). Specifically, teachers' professional identity is based on their experiences in school, role construct and school culture (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006).

Yet, it is also influenced by their knowledge of their selves (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994), that is, their personal life events and experiences (Acker, 1999). Both of these affect teachers' satisfaction, commitment and motivation, as well as self-identification as teachers (e.g. Woods, Jeffrey, Troman, & Boyle, 1997).

In the process of formulating a professional identity, a lack of consistency between the identity attributed to an individual teacher by others and the identity that the teacher claims on his or her own may trigger a professional identity crisis. This relates to the manner in which individuals make meaning of their experiences. According to the meaning-making model, perceived discrepancies between appraised meaning of a particular situation and global meaning (i.e. general orienting systems of beliefs and goals) create distress, which generates meaning-making efforts to reduce it (Park, 2013). Thus, the experience of a discrepancy in professional identity may, in turn, lead to a process of reconstruction, a change in the work environment or a modification of organisational structures. It may even affect perceptions with regard to education and teaching (Bolívar & Domingo, 2006).

As the construction of professional identity is responsive to contextual influences such as school culture, teacher-principal and teacher-colleagues relationships may either impede or facilitate teacher leadership (e.g. York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Moreover, teacher leadership may cause role ambiguity since not all parties perceive the leadership role and its responsibilities in a similar manner (Lashway, 1998). Such potential challenges may be intensified when a teacher is promoted to a leadership role. For example, when leadership was granted to teachers rather than gradually earned, these roles were viewed as less legitimate, which may hinder receiving respect from their colleagues and impede teacher collaboration and distributed leadership (Riordan, 2003). This illuminates the need for a better understanding of how teachers come to see themselves as teacher leaders.

In sum, teacher leadership has been recognised as a fruitful area of educational research over the past three decades (Crowther et al., 2002; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2002). However, most of the research to date has been mainly devoted to exploring the qualifications, development and impacts of teacher leadership (Smylie & Mayrowetz, 2009). This study aimed to expand the scope of the research by shedding more light on the internal mechanisms underlying the transition to and formation of the professional identity of teacher leaders. Thus this study addresses the unique liminal phase or the period of transition, in which teachers' identity as leading teachers has been shaped, and the teachers move to the threshold of new experiences and possibilities, and also possible challenges.

Focusing on the experience of such liminal phase where 'the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply but are, as it were, suspended' (Turner, 1981; p. 161) enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of teacher leaders' identity formation. More specifically, this study asks: How do teachers perceive this potential professional identity shift as they evolve from teachers into teacher leaders?

Method

The present study aimed to explore how teachers who had just been chosen to take part in a new programme for teacher leaders in Israel experience this initial stage of transition in their professional identity from a traditional teacher to a teacher leader.

Thus, the study utilised a bottom-up, open-ended qualitative approach. The primary interest of a qualitative design is grasping how individuals ascribe meaning to or interpret a given experience or phenomenon (e.g. Hodge, 2001; Merriam, 1998). In so doing, this study follows calls advocating the application of naturalistic inquiry in the evaluation of a teacher education programme (Aksamit, Hall, & Ryan, 1990).

Participants

As the idea of teacher leadership is rather new in the Israeli education system, the participants chosen for the present study were all of the teachers who took part in the first round of a teacher leadership programme in order to explore how the transition in their professional identity from a traditional teacher to a teacher leader role is experienced by them. As the focus of the present study was the exploration of the experience of such an initial transition phase, where the participants strive to make sense of the new situation, negotiate shifting conceptions of teaching and leadership, and construct their new identity as teacher leaders, the interviews were conducted with teachers several weeks following their selection to the programme. Also, interviewing the teachers' principals and colleagues allowed a broader perspective to be gained on how such an initial stage of transition is manifested, played out and perceived.

The sample included a total of 41 teachers (seven men and 34 women) from 10 different public schools in Israel: six elementary schools and four high schools. The schools represent different geographical regions in Israel (from north to south) and include six Jewish schools ($n = 28$), three schools from the Arab sector ($n = 9$) and one from the Bedouin sector ($n = 4$). Each teacher agreed to participate in this research voluntarily. The teachers were recruited to participate in a nationwide teacher leadership development programme by their principals: each principal selected two to six teachers based on a few general characteristics (commitment and involvement in the school, openness to learning, and desire and ability to influence the school environment). Participants ranged in age from 26 to 60 ($M = 42.03$, $SD = 7.8$). Most participants were experienced teachers with 16.98 years of experience in the profession on average ($SD = 7.41$). Most of the teachers (70.7%) hold a bachelor's degree (BA) and 29.3% hold a master's degree (MA).

In order to broaden the perspective regarding the phenomenon explored, a multi-source approach was employed. The use of multi-source or triangulation enables the generation of a more complete, holistic and contextual portrait of the phenomenon under study (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2002), and also the ability to ensure validation (Schwandt, 2007). Gathering data from different data sources facilitates deeper understanding of a phenomenon by clarifying its meaning through an exploration from the different ways it is seen (Denzin, 1989; Flick, 1992). In the present study, this approach was employed through semi-structured interviews, which were also carried out with the principals and selected colleagues of the teachers at each of the schools. Overall, 10 principals and 19 colleagues were interviewed from the various schools. Each of the principals chose approximately two colleagues to be interviewed based on a few criteria: seniority of at least four years at the school; involvement in school life; not part of the school's management team; and not chosen to participate in the teacher leaders' programme. These colleagues were chosen due to their familiarity with the school's

culture and community, so exploring their perceptions regarding the new function of teacher leadership in their schools enriched and deepened the understandings gained from the study.

The teacher leaders programme

The Israeli Ministry of Education designed this initiative to develop teacher leadership in a formal, nationwide move. This initiative aimed to cultivate a middle layer of leadership in schools, by teachers and for teachers, in order to change learning cultures in Israel. This middle layer of leadership is expected to facilitate ongoing professional development of their colleagues in schools to enable improvement in teaching and learning practices based on their wisdom of practice (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As part of this initiative to promote teacher leadership, a two-year training programme was developed for teachers of first to twelfth grade from all parts of the country.

The programme included regional group meetings, personal guidance meetings and several large-scale national seminars. In terms of content, the programme focused on three main areas: (a) cultivation of educational-pedagogical conceptualisations to enable teachers to lead collaborative pedagogical discourse; (b) cultivation of the teachers' leadership, self-efficacy and confidence to motivate colleagues and change processes in their schools; and (c) creation of organisational structures, routines and rituals at schools in order to establish and support changes in learning and teaching cultures.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted at a place and time of the participants' choosing; each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. The interviews were conducted at an initial stage, when teachers had just been selected for or were just beginning the training programme, and thus constituted an initial exposure to reflective exploration of their new role as teacher leaders. Prior to the beginning of each interview, the participants were given a detailed explanation of the research and their rights. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The analysis of the interview transcripts followed a four-step process. First, in order to get an overall sense of the teachers' attitudes and perceptions, each transcript was read independently and separately from beginning to end. Second, meaning units (i.e. a significant statement that characterised each interview) were identified by line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006) to identify the manner in which each participant experiences the phenomenon under study by asking: 'Which processes and meanings are expressed in each line, sentence and paragraph? How, when and why are they expressed?' and so on. This process of 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) enabled identification of patterns and determination of the meaning units as they appear in the text. Third, major themes were gathered into categories, within and between interviews. These categories enabled comparison between the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and a broader understanding of teachers' internal and external processes. The final step included a holistic examination of themes and their interrelations, to gain a broad understanding of the participants' experiences.

During the data collection and analysis, researchers constantly addressed the issues of credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following Shenton (2004), site triangulation was achieved by interviewing teachers from a number of schools, of varied characteristics, as well as through the perspectives of other related figures such as principals and colleagues. The research team conducted numerous debriefing sessions during the period of collection and analysis, before and after each of the aforementioned steps. Coding, thematic and categorical analysis were conducted in parallel segments and the information was circulated and discussed among the researchers, ensuring scrutiny. This procedure enabled a close reading of the phenomenology of the participants' experience, thus certifying confirmability.

Findings

Interviewing the participants in the initial stage of being chosen to become teacher leaders enabled us to gain understanding regarding their subjective experience and its meaning as part of such a potential change in their professional identity. The analysis yielded four central themes, which comprise the participants' experience of 'being chosen:' (1) Overall professional identity, which refers to the participants' global or overall comprehension of what it means to be a teacher. This includes both self-perception of the teaching profession and socially constructed perceptions regarding the teaching profession that were derived from their socialisation and exposure to cultural habitus. (2) 'Being chosen', which refers to the experience of being externally singled out or 'marked' as a potential teacher leader, a new and ambiguous role. This appeared to challenge and destabilise the participants' existing overall professional teaching identity and led to the following two components, which are both dynamic processes. (3) Meaning-making, which refers to the participants' internal process of evaluation of the new reality they are facing. This process involved three interrelated ingredients: (a) motivation, (b) perceived availability of personal resources, and (c) the exposure of core personal orientation, which we have termed 'first nature' (i.e. 'teacher' vs. 'leader'). (4) External forces, which refers to interactions with principals' and colleagues' expectations and responses to the new situation.

Overall, the first component provides the context of the teachers' professional identity, which the status of 'being chosen' (second component) pervades, while the last two components focus on the participants' attempts to cope with the new and ambiguous circumstances, both internally and externally, in an ongoing manner. Together, these components form a dynamic model of how a transition to the role of teacher leader unfolds and is experienced (see Figure 1). It is important to note, though, that while the process is presented here in a linear form, as each component is built upon its predecessor, in practice they appear to occur simultaneously.

Overall professional identity

The interface between the socially and the self-constructed understanding of the teaching profession comprises participants' overall professional identity. This image merges the teachers' self-perceptions regarding their role of a teacher with how it has been perceived by others. The latter includes but is not limited to their family and friends,

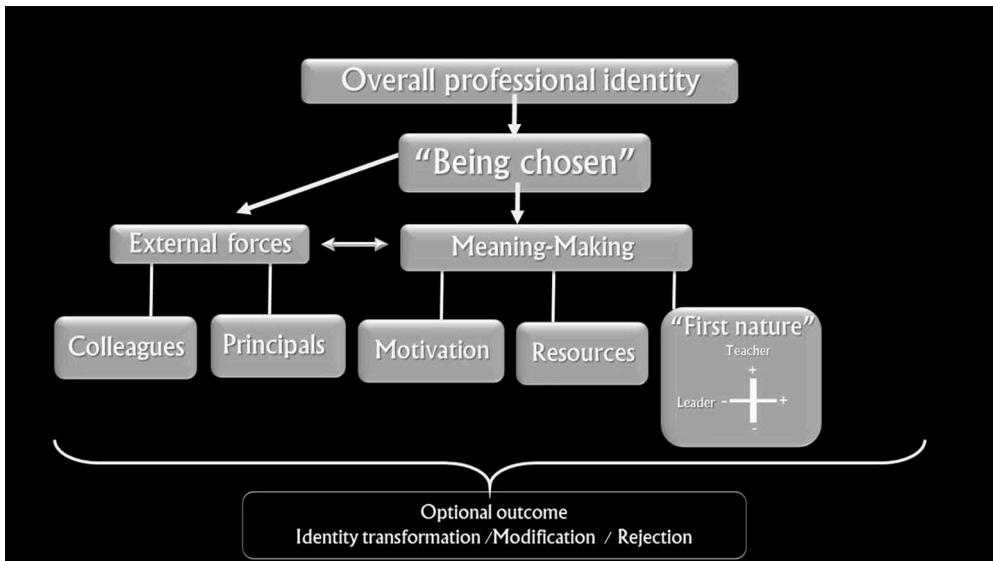


Figure 1. Becoming leading teachers: a meaning-making model.

communities, the education system as a whole, the media, social and cultural norms, values and expectations. According to the participants, the profession suffers from low social prestige and appreciation in the general surrounding society. They frequently expressed their wish that ‘the teaching profession would be valued by people for the hard work that is being done’ (Doreen; all names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants). The profession’s low prestige and status adds to the teachers’ sense of being overwhelmed with chores involving paperwork or bureaucracy, which are not always relevant to their role: ‘you get blown away by all sorts of reports you need to fill out ... a flood of paperwork that consumes time and energy’ (Keren). Similarly, Judith reported: ‘I feel I am spending hours and hours on paperwork, time that otherwise could have been used to improve my teaching skills.’

Another prominent feature of the teaching profession refers to its perceived boundaries, which are seen as confining and as primarily oriented towards measurable achievements. Dana, for example, expressed her concern that ‘[the system] wants to see the grades at the end of the year ... eventually everything is measured by grades’. Thus, as students’ evaluation and measurement are constantly at play, the teachers must serve as knowledge-providers, which is often not in alignment with the teachers’ aspirations and beliefs. Keren, for example, explained, ‘what the system actually wants from the pupils is to learn the theoretical knowledge... I believe that what needs to be promoted is more of a meaningful, values education.’ The participants also related to the setting in which the teaching takes place, the conventional classroom, which appears to be in tension with what was repeatedly described by the participants as ‘breaking down the walls’. Shiran explained it as her desire to ‘take them [the students] out of this classroom, this fixed position of [being confined by] four walls day after day... I want to take them outside, to really show them all that is out there.’ Taken together, the overall perceived professional identity of what it means to be a teacher that emerges from the participants’ accounts highlights a few

central ingredients: the rather low prestige the teachers believe society assigns to their role, alongside demanding bureaucratic chores and perceived image of knowledge-provider within the rather fixed setting of the traditional classroom. These appear to produce tension with the participants' desire to influence in a broader manner through education on values and reflect the background in which the participants construct their professional identity development.

Being chosen

The participants' selection for a teacher leaders' programme by their principals was accompanied by ambiguity, given the novelty of this function in the educational system and the uncertainty regarding what this new and unfamiliar role would entail. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe what they believe a teacher leader is. Adi attempted to do so:

... [breathing] ... ummm... I don't know ... to be like someone that is ... that is willing to give of himself, but also know, I mean, someone that also ummm ... is knowledgeable... Someone who is also willing to share, someone that has knowledge and is willing to share...

The pauses and difficulty in finding the words to define teacher leadership may testify to the challenge in addressing the full meaning of the new anticipated role. Despite the sparse information, the word 'leader' appeared to arouse implicit assumptions. Whereas typical school hierarchy is top-down (principal-teacher-pupil), the title evoked images portraying potential movement to more horizontal structures of leading their peers, through 'teamwork and the ability to lead something new' (Vivian). The participants understood their new role as teacher leaders as differing significantly from their generally perceived professional identity, which was described earlier. In line with this, being chosen led to the dismantling of existing perspectives and triggered significant ripples, uprooting the teachers from their comfort zones and casting them into the ambiguity of the new and unknown. Such a change in existing order involved new external expectations and responses from their peers and principals. This change also set in motion an internal process of meaning-making and reorganisation.

Meaning-making process

In response to the challenge of being chosen, the participants' internal efforts to meet the new conditions involved an appraisal of the meaning of their new role in comparison with their motivation to perform it, as well as of the presence or absence of available resources. Interestingly, this internal dialogue also underscored the participants' self-perception with regard to their 'first nature', traced to their deeply rooted personal orientations. Overall, this theme includes three interrelated ingredients: (a) motivation, (b) perceived availability of personal resources, and (c) the exposure of core personal orientation, or 'first nature' (i.e. 'teacher' vs. 'leader').

Motivation

Reflecting on the new role offered to them, the participants voiced their motivation to commit to the new role as corresponding with their personal motivation to contribute

to the greater good. This mostly related to dedication ('I am the last one to leave the school in the evening... I come here on my free time and on my days off' [Rebecca]) and passion to contribute to the school ('I come here with a smile and with so much passion' [Dorit]). The school was repeatedly described as a 'second home': 'this is my home, the second one. I am invested here as much as I am invested in my own private home' (Lee). The word 'love' was mentioned repeatedly and demonstrated the participants' strong sense of belonging, such as 'school for me is my whole world' (Yael). Such an emotional connection to the school as an organisation and community was reflected in the strong motivation to contribute to it and influence its environment positively, for example: 'I imagine myself influencing my work environment, my school team and, further, my community' (Aden), and 'to contribute to the system is like making the desert bloom, to renovate, to have a vision and fulfil it in practice' (Dina). Overall, as part of the participants' personal evaluation of their new role, questions emerge with regard to their motivation and incentives to undertake the new and ambiguous role. The motivations that participants voiced appear to align with their discontent with the current status of the teaching profession (as expressed in the overall professional identity section above) and their desire for greater influence on their surrounding environment.

Availability of resources

Alongside the exploration of personal motivations, the participants also voiced an examination of the personal resources available. The investment of time, for example, was frequently mentioned as a required resource for optimal functioning as a teacher leader: 'In my regular teaching work it already feels like I am taking time away from my family... I want to do it [be a teacher leader], but it is difficult with all the workload, to suddenly have more tasks' (Reut). Similarly, Gal explained that such a role 'requires commitment and effort, it requires time. It will come at the expense of my free time and time with my kids ... [but on the other hand] I want to open up, learn new things'. These instances imply the tension experienced between the desire to have time available for family and leisure on the one hand and the anticipated benefits of the new role on the other hand. The resource of time was frequently related in the participants' accounts to support. In sum, as part of the participants' attempt to make sense of the new reality at hand, motivation and the availability of resources were explored and pondered to evaluate personal willingness, capability and emotional availability to take on new commitments involved with the new role.

First nature

The analysis of the interviews enabled us to identify another component of the participants' internal meaning-making process, which refers to their deeply rooted personal orientations or inclinations, which we termed 'first nature'. It is important to note, however, that this should not be understood as a binary phenomenon which assumes a zero sum, but rather a nuanced continuum. Furthermore, combinations of these inclinations may also be an option as they can be associated with more than a single orientation.

Leader

Some teachers described themselves as natural leaders, a characteristic that does not require external ratification and can even be traced to an early age. For example, Hagit explained: 'the title [of a teacher leader] is not what turns me into a leader. ... I was already like that before. ... I always felt like I was leading teams.' Aden also voiced a rather similar experience: 'I lead my own household and at school I constantly initiate a number of social projects without being asked to ... [this] is what makes a leader, his motivation, his initiatives and his abilities.' Dorit described her story of being 'the leader type' through her experiences as a scout-guide, head of the student council at her school and her strong desire to lead the next generation. Others reflected on their innate communication skills, portraying them as clear and sharp, thus placing them in a solid leading position as they 'can reach out if there are problems with fellow teachers, for example, I know how to search for a way to reach out and lead ... this is who I am' (Lilach).

Teacher

Another dominant orientation that emerged leans towards being a teacher, which was presented as a lifelong orientation. Several participants recounted early experiences playing the role of teachers as children, such as Orna who noted, 'as a kid, I always was pretending to be a teacher, teaching my friends and siblings. It's like this profession is a part of me.' A dominant theme in this orientation was that being a teacher is ever-present, and rather than a job, it is who they are, 'twenty-four hours a day' (Vivian). For some, it is such a dominant characteristic of their personality, to the point of 'talking to my daughter with my teacher tone' (Michal), and being recognised as teachers in their social circles through their 'voice, intonation and teacher-like expressions' (Liron). Such phrases surfaced when the participants attempt to make sense of the new circumstances, indicating that across time and contexts these interviewees hold a basic orientation to be a teacher.

To conclude, being chosen to become teacher leaders triggered questions such as 'why me?', which the participants had to answer for themselves as well as for others. Such internal dialogue involved attempts to make sense through evaluation, processing and examination of personal motivation, resources, capabilities and challenges, as well as how the new role and commitments correspond to more basic orientations and tendencies. These may reflect the participants' tendency to seek secure bases or stable foundations to grasp in the face of challenging and ambiguous circumstances and thus reduce uncertainty. It is important to note, however, that each of the components described (i.e. motivation, resources and first nature) does not stand alone but, rather, interacts with the others. The interplay between them appears to enable the participants to restore a sense of coherence and balance. These internal processes do not occur in a vacuum, but also are constantly influenced by external forces shaped by the participants' interactions with their surroundings.

External forces

The participants perceived the new role as involving taking on a more dominant position and possibly changing their work relations with their colleagues. This raised concerns that were common to many participants: 'How am I going to do it? If I say

one thing, what will they say? Will they accept it or not? If not, will that affect our relationship?’ (Roslana). The participants specifically referred to concerns and worries related to their peers, such as hurting colleagues due to their performance of the role:

It touches a personal weakness of mine, to do things that may hurt others ... and in this new role, there may be a pressure to succeed, to do things differently than I used to before, and it's not easy. I worry, because I can't harm or hurt others in the process. (Rafik)

Others expressed specific concerns around criticism:

Honestly, I have concerns that not all the teachers [her colleagues] will see my feedback [following formal observations of them] in a positive manner ... not all of them will be able to accept my presence in a non-threatening way. They should approach it as constructive feedback, but they may see it as criticism. (Rona)

These concerns appear to add tension to the general sense of ambiguity around the new role:

I don't exactly know how to actually do it, it is all very blurry and unclear ... do I have the tools to manage this role? I mean, if I'll say X, or behave Z, what will they say? How will they react? (Lea)

The need for their colleagues' support and approval was notable throughout the participants' accounts.

In a complementary manner, interviews with the participants' principals revealed how the new situation was perceived from the other end. The principals learned about the training programme through an email, a bulletin or a seminar, and were only partly informed about its contents. Nonetheless, the scarcity of available information did not prevent them from setting high expectations for their future teacher leaders. For example, Nur, a principal, shared her expectation that her teacher leaders would 'lead the school's team. They [teacher leaders] cannot just come to class to teach and then go home. They are in a different position now.' Dalia, another principal, said: 'currently I am the only engine that pulls all the teachers behind me, and I want to see a change ... that they [teacher leaders] will come and tell me, "we want to do this, let's do that".' The principals also voiced the expectation that the teacher leaders would commit to the new role and the responsibilities it entails:

I don't see how someone who is not committed, loyal enough to the system can be fit as a teacher leader ... when someone takes such a role, he or she becomes a representative, it's a managerial role. They need to represent the system and lead, which is not easy as they are also teachers who experience day-to-day challenges. (Lia)

Thus, in the eyes of the principals, teacher leaders are expected to be both teachers and leaders, to work with their peers and students, and to take an active leadership role, in a semi-managerial manner.

It is significant that not only the participants were conscious of the new role's ambiguity, but also their colleagues. While some principals shared the available information with their staff, informing them about their colleagues' participation in the programme, others made no clear announcement. Such ambiguity often led to obvious indications of jealousy of the teachers that were chosen coupled with a tense atmosphere at school. Ella explained it by saying, 'If there is a new programme at school,

everyone should know about it ... such a secret leads to quarrels, a competition among teachers, and to jealousy'. Diana was explicitly angry at the teacher leaders and her principal:

They [teacher leaders] don't talk about it ... maybe because they feel uncomfortable about it, ashamed because they were chosen to be in this programme at the expense of others ... others need to participate too. You know what? I wanted to punch the principal for choosing these two teachers to be in the programme.

Hanin, another colleague, articulated her desire to develop professionally and be selected for the programme as well: 'It is important for me to be professional too, that I will be a strong teacher, as an educator, a coordinator, that I will be knowledgeable. It's an opportunity.'

Hence, with little to no information on the programme, a blend of envy and a sense of injustice appeared to accompany the chosen teacher leaders' experience and was expressed in various responses from their colleagues such as rivalry, contempt, resistance or underestimation of the new role, suggesting that the new role is not really that different from existing roles already filled by other teachers. Marina, a colleague, claimed: 'I can point at many teachers in our school that lead projects and different programmes. ... Frankly, each of us leads ... you can say that all of our teachers here are teacher leaders.' The rather pervasive opposition expressed by the participants' colleagues, coupled with their principals' high expectations, appears to affect the future teacher leaders. In other words, the participants were not only challenged with their own personal uncertainty and doubts, but were also compelled to take new expectations into consideration and to face resistance as they step out of existing patterns. Formerly equal to their peers, they were now challenged to define the meaning of their new role and thus redefine their position in the school hierarchy.

In summary, the findings of the present study highlight the complex experience of the future teacher leaders. The participants' overall professional identity, comprising beliefs, goals and a subjective sense of meaning, was shaken, triggering a need for re-evaluation. The ambiguity of the new role spurred a search for comprehensibility to restore a sense of internal meaning to their evolving professional identity. The internal meaning-making process, a synergic evaluation of their motivation, available resources and first nature, took place simultaneously in the face of challenging external forces. Taken together, the 'meaning-made' of these constantly evolving processes may yield a variety of outcomes with regard to the likelihood of change in the participants' professional identity and the way they react. These outcomes may range from the rejection of new elements and opportunities involved with the new role to transformation by adjustment and modification of the self to the new situation. In between these extremes, participants could adopt some elements, while rejecting others. Whichever change in professional identity may occur for each of the participants, it is likely to be manifested both internally, within the self at the level of being, and externally, as the level of doing and behaving in the face of external reality and interpersonal relations.

Discussion

Educational leadership research and application has been on the rise around the world (Bottery, 2004). For the most part, literature in the field of teacher leadership has remained largely focused on exploring the definitions, characteristics, training, roles,

conditions and effects of teacher leadership (Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016; Smylie & Mayrowetz, 2009), creating a need to deepen understanding of the processes through which teacher leadership develops (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The present study extends previous research in the field by focusing on teacher leaders' professional identity development and thus joins efforts exploring teachers' professional identity, an emerging research area that has been on the rise during the last two decades (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). More specifically, this study focuses on the unique phase of the transition from dedicated teachers into a new position of 'teacher leaders', who can facilitate professional development and instructional improvement of their colleagues. This study also presents a four-component model of meaning-making that may serve as a conceptual framework for better understanding of the processes underlying the experience of professional identity transition and reconstruction among future teacher leaders. In what follows, the model will be discussed in terms of the dialectic between internal and external forces that emerge and interact as part of the participants' meaning-making process.

Processes of meaning-making in the construction of new professional identity

In accordance with Kerby's (1991) suggestion that professional identity constitutes an enduring process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences, the present study, based mainly on the experiences of teachers, attests to the dynamic nature of evolving professional identity of teacher leaders. The participants' overall professional identity, which was largely informed by contextual and cultural perceptions that the broader society maintains of what it means to be a teacher, was challenged when they were faced with the experience of being chosen to undertake a new, ambiguous, leadership role. Such a critical transitional phase in the process of 'becoming' teacher leaders, a space of 'betwixt and between', is characterised by lack of clarity, disorientation and ambiguity (Turner, 1981). This entails a process of sense-making to better cope with changing circumstances and challenges, as people strive to make meaning of what happens in their environments (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1963). Essentially, meaning-making is considered the process through which individuals construe or 'make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships and the self' (Ignelzi, 2000, p. 5). Literature on stress-related growth and coping with adversity, crisis and trauma commonly describe the concept of meaning-making as an attempt to orient intrapsychic efforts to minimise disparities between people's experiences and their global meaning system or basic assumptions (Park, 2013). The present study suggests that a rather similar process of meaning-making may be triggered by a positive event as well, such as that of being chosen for a leadership role. Both negative and positive triggers may be perceived as unknown, ambiguous and sometimes unexpected incidents, to which the individual is required to adjust and cope. These triggers thus bear the potential to challenge the overall perceptual meaning that a person has about his or her life, self and profession. Furthermore, in line with previous studies showing the importance of making sense of potential organisational change for employees (van den Heuvel et al., 2009; Weber & Manning, 2001) in general, the present study considers the theoretical perspective of meaning-making as a useful framework to extend the understanding of the experience of transition into a new professional identity as teacher leaders. The internal processes involved endeavours to make sense of this through exploration of personal motivation, evaluating

available resources, capabilities and more fundamental orientations and tendencies. These processes were accompanied by external forces, which include principals' and colleagues' expectations and responses.

Internal processes of meaning-making

Three internal interrelated ingredients of such meaning-making processes emerged from the interviews: the teachers' perceived motivations, availability of personal resources, and first-nature or core personal orientation. Evidence from past meta-analytic literature reviews suggests that motivation is an important source of behaviour (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000). While there are individual differences in motivation from teacher to teacher, the literature identifies three main motivation categories for choosing the profession of teaching: intrinsic (i.e. intellectual fulfilment and enjoyment of teaching), extrinsic (i.e. working with children/adolescents) and altruistic (i.e. making a social contribution, perceived teaching effectiveness) (Watt et al., 2012). Although all three types of motivations were evident in the present findings, it appears that the interviewees' dominant focus is oriented towards altruistic motivation. This is in line with previous studies indicating that intrinsic and altruistic motives such as the drive to assist in the formation, development and in making a positive difference in the lives of children have been significant in choosing teaching as a career in western countries (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Hayes, 1990; O'Brien & Schillaci, 2002; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Sinclair, Towndrow, Koh, & Soon, 2008). In the present study such motivation was manifested in the teachers' passion to influence others and leave their mark on the school community and to act as agents of change. In a way, such motivation sustains their striving to rise to leadership positions despite the perceived demands and challenges. Further research is needed in order to explore whether the altruistic motives reflect a cultural tendency or a more general or universal phenomenon of a common aspect of teacher leaders' identity. This may be an important resource for teacher leaders for maintaining their commitment to the new leadership role, in particular in the face of its ambiguous and demanding nature. The findings also shed light on an intriguing component of the meaning-making process: the exposure of first nature. As neither the teacher nor the leader orientation identified reflects a zero-sum phenomenon, it may represent an important consideration of a basic tendency, which comes to light through the process of meaning-making. Building on Little's (2014) distinction of personality traits between 'first (bio) and second (socio) natures' (p. 52), the exposure of basic orientations as part of the teachers' internal dialogue may convey their efforts to make sense of the new role ahead and to accommodate it to their first, core or customary inclination (i.e. being identified as a teacher or a leader) in a coherent and consistent manner.

External forces in the shaping of the evolving identity of teacher leader

As the present findings demonstrate, the internal process of meaning-making does not occur in a vacuum; it is constantly influenced and shaped by external forces, in this case the teachers' peers and principals. Such a dialectical process between the internal and external may have significant implications for understanding the dynamics between the environment surrounding the teacher leaders, which affects not only their own motivation and potential function, but also future satisfaction and intention to remain in or leave their current job (Snoek & Volman, 2014). Thus, along with personal consolidation and change processes that the individual

teacher is undergoing, it appears vital to take into account the full range of forces operating and influencing the teacher leaders' professional identity development and the way they fluctuate and unfold. This accords with recent studies asserting that socio-organisational factors and structures may foster or hinder the development of teacher leadership (Lieberman, 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). These refer in particular to environmental characteristics of schools such as trust, respect and collaboration (Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) as well as formal support from the principal (e.g. Mangin, 2007).

The present findings thus reinforce previous claims regarding the challenging nature of the teachers' leadership role, specifically due to hostility, envy and resistance from their colleagues (Fiarman et al., 2009). Additionally, Murphy (2007) shows how schools are still characterised by deeply rooted norms, such as privacy and autonomy, which define the teaching profession and allow teachers to fulfil their teaching duties in their own way. Another shared norm is that of egalitarianism, the social-professional relations in schools which rely on the idea that all teachers are peers, based on their equal position in the school. The introduction of teacher leaders in schools may challenge the norms of privacy, autonomy and especially egalitarianism in terms of 'the chosen' teachers versus the rest.

Some studies suggest that teachers recently promoted to pedagogical leadership roles face opposition or refusal to cooperate from their colleagues, who question the justification and legitimacy of their role. Peers ask: 'What makes them better than all of us?' and 'What gives him the right to order me around?' Many teacher leaders feel frustrated when their efforts to transform themselves are dismissed (Donaldson et al., 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). They tend to 'cling to an us-against-them mentality' (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015, p. 78) and avoid appearing as experts due to concerns that it may harm relationships with their colleagues (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). It seems that the formal 'chosen' leaders have to invest more efforts than potential informal leaders in engaging with their peers. Thus, as this role is essentially characterised by informal vertical, rather than formal horizontal, ongoing interaction with colleagues and administration, it requires an enhanced capability to handle relational tensions and complexities.

Along with these challenges, the present findings suggest that, to a large extent, the resistance teacher leaders experience stems from the ambiguousness regarding their promotion to teacher leaders, particularly due to the lack of a deep understanding of the standards, expectations and regulations that made them suitable for this (Fiarman et al., 2009). High levels of ambiguity have often been reported to yield negative outcomes at both the psychological level (e.g. job satisfaction, tension and commitment) and the behavioural level (performance and turnover) (e.g. Celik, 2013). In the present study, all of the 60 interviewees without exception raised the issue of ambiguity. This signifies an important feature of the present sample. Whereas teacher leadership has received considerable attention in the United States and other countries such as Canada and Australia (e.g. Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), in Israel it is a rather new role with relatively unknown characteristics and structure which require ongoing efforts to make sense of. However, rather than paralysing or constraining, such ambiguity appeared to carry with it positive opportunities as well. Unlike other roles within the educational system in which structure, responsibilities and demands are relatively known (such as disciplinary coordinator or administrator), the freedom to create and shape the new role according to individual values, interests and ideals emerged as fostering, rather than hindering, personal expression and efficacy. Thus, although their

selection for the programme was accompanied by ambiguity both in structure and content that was intensified by the role's novelty and their colleagues' expectations, they essentially experienced this very open-ended flexibility as enabling them to dare to dream creatively and shape their own unique leadership role. This highlights the importance of facilitating proper leadership preparation (Harris, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001) to clarify tasks and structure to potential teacher leaders as well as their colleagues on the one hand, yet leaving the role flexible and open enough to enable personal connection and the development of the role by the prospective teacher leaders.

Overall, the teacher leaders meaning-making model proposed in this article, based on a phenomenological analysis of the participants' lived experiences, may serve as a conceptual organising framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between internal and external forces underlying the process through which teachers move from a certain professional identity to that of a teacher leader. The participants' overall professional identity was challenged when faced with the experience of being chosen to undertake a new leadership role. The ambiguity of the new role, coupled with concerns regarding the unknown and colleagues' expectations, yielded an ambivalent stance among the teachers towards their selection. This triggered meaning-making efforts to adjust and process the discrepancies between the new, unknown situation and their overall meaning systems and basic assumptions related to the teaching profession and opportunities embedded in a leadership position.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

In accordance with the phenomenological view, this study sought to portray the essence and core meanings of the participants' shared experiences (Patton, 2002). However, the richness and multidimensionality of the teachers leaders' professional development may also benefit from an exploration of teachers' distinct rather than common experiences, such as individual differences in the lived experiences of individuals, socio-cultural differences (for instance, Jewish and Arabic school teachers; socio-economic backgrounds) or types of environment (i.e. elementary school vs. high schools, special education, etc.). These may contribute to better understanding the potential meaning-making processes as well as their mechanisms. Furthermore, as the participants in this study were chosen by the principals, it is possible that this had an impact on the participants' self-perception and the way in which they perceive the role of teacher leadership. Future research will aim to explore the professional identity of teachers who were chosen via other methods. It would also be interesting to further investigate whether the directions indicated in the present study are relevant to informal leaders in the school arena, specifically on the socio-professional level.

Employing a multilevel longitudinal perspective to gain a deeper understanding of how the teacher leaders' professional identity takes shape and crystallises during and following training and in-service, while considering both individual and organisational factors, is also worth exploring. Specifically, to gain a deeper understanding of the dialectic process suggested in the present study, it is suggested that future research focus on analysis of specific clusters or groups of interviews conducted with teacher leaders, principals and colleagues from the same school to consider how they relate to each other.

To conclude, the proposed teacher leaders meaning-making model suggests that acknowledging potential challenges and ambivalence involved in the transition to a

new leadership role – and addressing the internal processes of personal motivation, available resources, capabilities and more fundamental orientations and tendencies – may enable better understanding and mapping of the facilitating conditions that may cultivate (i.e. identity transformation or modification) or hinder (i.e. rejection, anxiety or concerns) the formation of teacher leader professional identity. As such, the model has ramifications for furthering study and practice in the areas of leadership development, teacher leadership and professional identity. Attentiveness to under-the-surface processes and perceptions that accompany external forces of principals' and colleagues' expectations and responses may enable researchers, practitioners and policy-makers alike to reduce paralysing or threatening ambiguity and concentrate efforts to facilitate a healthy and growth-oriented expansion in teachers' professional identity and investment of time and energy in the new role.

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