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**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON PRINCIPALS' CONCEPTIONS ABOUT  
THEIR ROLE AS SCHOOL LEADERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This inquiry, by means of the case study method, explored how the conceptions of principals about their role of school leader contribute to a better understanding of their behavior and the impact on school climate. The results showed that differences of how principals conceive their role as a leader affect indirectly through their leadership practices (i.e. initiating structure and supportive leadership), the unity in vision, collegial relations, collaboration, innovativeness and satisfaction of teachers. Based on a content analysis of interviews with 46 Belgian school leaders we distinguished three profiles: (1) the 'people minded profile' with an emphasis on people, educational matters and thus on creating a professional teaching community; (2) the 'administrative minded profile' with the focus on paperwork and the implementation of formal procedures and rules; and (3) the 'moderate minded profile' with no explicit preference for people, educational or administrative matters. Drawing on three prototypical cases we described in depth that these types of principals often work under different school climate conditions. We relied on semi-structured interviews to gather data on principals' thoughts about their role as school leaders. Also, survey questionnaires were administered among 700 teachers in 46 schools to assess several features of school climate (i.e. goal orientedness, participation, formal and informal relationships, innovativeness), satisfaction of teachers, and leadership role behavior (i.e. initiating structure and supportive leadership behavior).

## INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as a simple recipe for successful school leadership. Nevertheless a large bulk of research tried to answer the question: “What makes a school leader effective and successful?” In an attempt to provide such an answer, a pioneering inquiry on effective school leadership (Edmonds, 1979) concluded that school performance is not only a function of school level variables but is also affected by the person of the principal and more specifically the skills and capabilities this person possesses to operate as a strong educational leader.

Since the 1980’s, the majority of literature on educational administration involved making an inventory of the characteristics of successful school principals. Behavioral descriptions were made to distinguish between the actions of more and less effective principals (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger, Leithwood & Murphy, 1993; Sweeney, 1982). The two foremost cited models in this stream of research are instructional and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 1999). From the early to the late eighties, literature was dominated by instructional leadership. This body of research defined effective leadership as *strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction from the principal* (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Since the 1990’s, researchers shifted their attention to transformational leadership (Bass, 1997; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Rather than emphasizing the necessity for direct control, supervision and instruction, *transformational leadership seeks to build the organization’s capacity to select its purposes and to support the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning* (Hallinger, 2003).

In those school leadership studies researchers quantified and described effective leadership with the intent of using this knowledge to advance the effectiveness of other school leaders. The hope for discovering such an effective school leader model, however, dampened with the findings of several meta analyses (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Witziers, Bosker & Krüger, 2003). These studies revealed that the immediate effects of educational leadership on school performance were marginal, contributing to the mystification of what defines a successful and effective school leader in terms of behavior.

In addition, the quest to discover the behaviors of effective leaders has suffered from serious conceptual and measurement limitations. Because of its exclusive focus on behaviors, this type of research has left unanswered the question why school leaders engage in these behavioral roles. To put it differently, principals' beliefs about their job helps to gain insight in their behavior under different working conditions (i.e. school climate). Those involved in developing programs for the improvement of principals' school leader skills have acknowledged the need for such information. Such knowledge will advance our understanding of how and why principals take action, a prerequisite to effective training program development (Hallinger, Leithwood & Murphy, 1993). Building further on this idea the main purpose of this inquiry involves an exploration into the conceptions of the principal about his role as a school leader. In sum, this study will add a missing piece to the crucial question why administrators act the way they do.

### **COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

Research into the principal's beliefs, motives, and intentions about his role as a principal is a defining characteristic of the cognitive perspective on educational administration. According to Leithwood (1995, p. 115) the cognitive perspective has the potential to make several contributions to the study and practice of school leadership. It contributes to our understanding of the knowledge base required to exercise effective leadership and helps refine the meaning of effective leadership. So far, literature on the cognitive perspective of educational administration has focused on principals' thinking about practical problems and how to solve them, and summarized findings on how expertise is developed, and how novices and experts display their knowledge in a school setting (Hallinger, Leithwood, Murphy, 1993; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992, 1995; Stager & Leithwood, 1989). In short, prior and current research has attempted to describe the problem solving and decision making processes and as such yielded some new interesting insights on effective school leadership. Although both problem solving and decision making are daily tasks the principal has to deal with, they do not cover the entire role of school leaders. These tasks (i.e. problem solving and decision making) are in fact the products of a more general internal cognitive process, which incorporates their conceptions or beliefs about what is priority in their role as school leaders.

Building further on the 'Theory of Reasoned Action' (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and the models introduced by Leithwood (1995) and ten Bruggencate et al. (2005) we assume that what principals think, operates as strong determinant of what they do. To put it differently, leadership practices ensue from the leaders' general internal cognitive processes (i.e. beliefs about what is priority, central in their role as leaders) (Gioia, 1986). Furthermore we assume that these mindsets and leadership practices also contribute to an effective work context defined in terms of a strong and moving school climate and satisfied teaching staff. In the next paragraph we elaborate more on the concept of school climate.

### **SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS**

'What determines school effectiveness?' is a question raised by many educational researchers (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer & Wisenbaker, 1979; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston & Smith, 1979; Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). Several scholars concluded that effective schools have some features in common. For instance an important finding is that school climate plays a significant role in enhancing school effectiveness (Heck and Marcoulides, 1996; Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Sammons et al., 1995). Sergiovanni (2006) suggested that a healthy school climate and the well-being of teachers can lead to enhanced commitment and performance that are beyond expectations. Likewise Rozenholtz (1989) demonstrated that in learning-enriched schools or professional school climates, teachers held a sustained view of their learning, and their work was responsive and focused upon student motivation. Conversely, in learning impoverished schools, in which there was no common purpose for teaching, were less effective school climates than moving ones, where teachers learned from one another and saw teaching as a collective enterprise. In addition, a recent study has demonstrated the relevance of a strong school climate in shaping teachers' satisfaction (Devos, Bouckenoghe, Engels, Hotten & Aeltermann, 2007).

Overall, literature suggests that school leaders have a key role in developing strong and effective school climates. Effective leaders are committed, able to motivate staff and students, and to create and maintain conditions necessary for the building of professional learning communities within schools (Barker, 2001; Fernandez, 2000; Flores, 2004).

Literature distinguishes four dimensions that have been identified as characteristics of effective and strong school climates (Devos et al., 2004; Hoy and Tarter, 1997; Maslowski, 2001; Staessens, 1990; Valentine et al., 2006). The first dimension *goal orientedness* reflects to what extent the school vision is clearly formulated and shared by the school members. The second dimension *participative decision-making* reflects to what extent teachers participate in the decision-making process at school, and are responsible for their actions. The third dimension *innovativeness* reflects to what extent school members adapt them to change, and have an open attitude towards educational innovations. The fourth dimension *cooperation between teachers* reflects the formal and informal relationships between teachers.

To conclude this inquiry adds an extra dimension to the traditional studies on effective leadership by examining how the conceptions and the beliefs principals have about their role as a school leader determines their behavior and shapes the school climate in which they work. In doing so, we first explored whether differences exist between principals based upon what they think is a priority in their role as effective school leaders. Secondly, by means of case studies we examined in which climates these different types of principals work, providing a first exploratory indication of how the cognitive preference of principals is associated with strong and weak school climates.

## **METHOD**

### **Population**

A sample of fifty-six primary school principals were asked to participate in the second part of a large scale follow-up study on principal's well-being and functioning in the Flemish school setting (Devos et al., 2007). A stratified random sample was drawn from the Flemish Primary School Database, containing all 2310 primary school principals. In total 46 school leaders agreed to participate, yielding a good representation of the current situation of primary school principals in Flanders. Table I shows our sample is a good representation of the population with respect to five variables: (1) school system; (2) province; (3) school type; (4) gender principal; and (5) age principal.

### **Data collection methods and data analysis**

#### Semi-structured interview and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school leader. This type of interview is a focused interview, meaning that there is an interview scheme to guide the researcher through the interview. In consequence, an advantage of these kinds of interviews is that they allow more focus but also probing and additional questions when an interesting issue is brought forward by the interviewee. An interview protocol encouraged the principals to talk openly about tasks they thought were important in their role as school leaders and deserved primary attention. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The 46 semi-structured interviews yielded some rich data involving elaborate descriptions of principals' cognitions and perceptions' of their jobs. In the process of analyzing these qualitative data, an inductive approach was used. The process of analyses was undertaken according to two phases: (1) a vertical analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) according to which each of the respondents' interviews was analyzed separately, and (2) a comparative, horizontal analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to look for common patterns and differences. Following this procedure we were able to distinguish three types of principals according to how they think about their role as a school leader. To warrant the reliability and trustworthiness of the content analysis, five interviews were randomly chosen and coded separately by two trained coders using a coding list. This procedure entailed an acceptable interrater reliability measure (.90).

#### Questionnaire and data analysis

Since school climate is considered as the meanings, values and attitudes of those working in a school context, as well as the ways in which these are conveyed and understood within a community of teachers (Day, 1999; Hargreaves, 1992; Maslowski, 2001), we gathered data on school culture by measuring teachers' perceptions (N = 700).



Based upon existing instruments we selected items for goal orientedness, participative decision making, innovativeness, and the cooperation between teachers (i.e. formal relationships and intimate behavior). The items of these scales have a five-point Likert format with anchors ranging between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). We used the six-item scale developed by Staessens (1990) to measure goal orientedness. This scale measures how strongly the school vision and mission is shared among its members (e.g. Not all teachers share a similar opinion on what is important for the school) and yielded excellent internal consistency (cronbach alpha = .80). We relied on a three-item scale (Devos et al., 2007) to assess participation in decision-making (e.g. In our school the principal involves the teaching staff in the school's policy development). The internal reliability of this scale was good (cronbach alpha = .74). The seven-item 'adaptation-innovation scale' (Maslowski, 2001) was included to measure the level of innovativeness (e.g. The teachers at our school are positive toward educational changes). Because the reliability was low we caution for drawing inferences based on this scale (cronbach alpha = .54). The literature on the culture dimension 'cooperation between teachers' identifies two dimensions: formal relations between teachers and informal relations between teachers. The three-item scale introduced by Hoy and Tarter (1997) was used to determine the informal relations (e.g. Teachers meet frequently on an informal basis outside the regular school hours). For formal relations we selected the items of a seven-item scale used by Staessens (1990) (e.g. I inform my colleagues on how I handle a specific problem). The internal reliability of both scales were respectively .81 and .66.

Apart from the school climate scales, we also measured the degree of teacher satisfaction. This scale is based on Dinham and Scott (1998) and is comprised of nine items (e.g. I am satisfied about my job as a teacher). Item analyses showed that this scale has good internal reliability (cronbach alpha = .81).

In order to assess principal leadership behavior we asked the teachers to answer 11 items measuring two leadership roles. Hoy and Tarter (1997) called the first scale (7 items) 'supportive principal behavior'. This scale strongly reflects the empowering, supportive role of the transformational leader aimed at the involvement and participation of the teaching staff (e.g. The principal gives positive feedback to his teachers).

The second scale 'initiating structure' (four items) is a more directive leadership style with clear time-based and focused goals in order to get the organization moving in the desired direction (e.g. The principal formulates transparent goals for performance). Both scales had good internal reliabilities (cronbach alpha = .89 for 'supportive principal behavior'; cronbach alpha = .77 for 'initiating structure behavior').

The analysis of these quantitative data remained purely descriptive (averaged scale sum scores, means and standard deviations), since these data were used for case study purposes. The school culture dimensions were considered as shared constructs (Hofmann, 2002, Klein & Kozlowski, 2000), meaning that they were measured at the individual level but aggregated to the organization level. Common practice to check whether aggregation is allowed is through the calculation of Lindell's  $r_{wg}$ . In our case, aggregation was justified since the values for all culture dimensions exceeded .7 (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

#### The case study method and data analysis

In order to explore the phenomenon of how and under which conditions (leadership roles and school climate) principals with a certain cognitive profile (i.e. beliefs about role as leader) operate, we employed the case study method. Patton (1990: 54) asserts that this method 'becomes particularly useful when one needs to understand some special people, a particular problem, or unique situation in great depth.' Furthermore a variety of data collection procedures (i.e. semi-structured interviews and questionnaire) are often used to examine the phenomenon in depth. Our design was a multiple case study design.

We relied on critical case sampling, because the goal of this inquiry was exploration and description rather than hypothesis testing (Tashakorri & Teddlie, 1998). For this exploratory purpose it makes sense to choose cases that are prototypical or polar types in which the phenomenon of interest is transparently observable. We limited our description to three prototypical cases for this paper, because the presentation of all 46 cases would overwhelm the reader and result in data asphyxiation. Cross-case analysis was used to develop conceptual insights (Eisenhardt, 1989). Initially, the three prototypical cases of principals were compared to identify differences and communalities in each dimension of school climate, leading to the refinement of each particular case.

In order to prevent the reader from reaching premature and false conclusions based on these three cases we followed the replication logic suggested by Yin (1984). A key to good cross-case comparison is reconsidering the found tendencies by looking at the data in a divergent way. Accordingly, we examined the data in the opposite direction and selected cases based on high and low overall scores for the culture dimensions. To put it differently, we first selected the top five of schools with extremely strong and weak school climates and afterwards compared the type of principals working in those schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Typology of principals based upon the self-reflection about their important role as school leaders

Vertical and horizontal analyses of the 46 cases distinguished three recurring profiles: (1) the people minded principal; (2) the administrative minded principal; and (3) the moderate minded principal. In the following we describe three typical cases of principals. Case A is a people minded principal, case B a moderate minded principal and case C an administrative minded principal.

In the mind of the people centered principal, educational policy and interactions with teachers and students predominated. This profile attaches much importance to development and implementation of new pedagogical projects. For instance, the principal in 'case A' is imbued with the necessity of educational matters and also clearly communicates the importance he attaches to it:

*“The foremost, I said to my colleagues is that I expect from you to support the school’s vision and integrate the values of our pedagogical project into your teaching.”*

Besides the importance assigned to educational matters, the people minded principal considers coaching and supporting the professional development of his team as priorities. In addition, this principal is convinced that taking on a supportive leadership role contributes strongly to a positive and strong school culture.

To put it differently, this people minded principal finds the empowering and motivating role of transformational leadership essential for stimulating involvement and participation in his school. Several scholars also advanced that transformational leadership has a significant impact on teacher collaboration, motivation and positive attitudes toward schools (Ingram, 1997; Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood, Tomlinson & Genge, 1996, Youssef, 2000), yielding extraordinarily beneficial results (Sergiovanni, 1990). In alignment with the people minded profile, the principal of case A spends most of his time on educational policy and empowerment of colleagues. Furthermore, he always addresses these matters first, before dealing with administrative matters.

According to our second profile - the administrative minded profile - the principal believes that an effective school leader is concerned with rules and regulations from the central office. Development of a school vision and educational policy on a long term base, is no priority for this principal. In other words, this type loves bureaucracy and accordingly attaches great significance to applying formal procedures and rules. Planning, organizing meetings, and paperwork are key words that perfectly match this profile. Contrary to the people minded profile, the role conception of this principal is strongly focused on non-people related matters rather than people oriented issues. This is nicely illustrated in case C. According to that principal, interaction and contacts with the teachers is inherent to the job, but does not really appear on his priority list. Furthermore this principal confirms she enjoys spending much time and effort into paperwork. In addition, this principal thinks that effective principals should also put more effort into administration rather than putting most of their time into working on educational policies and projects.

The third profile could be called a remainder category and was labeled the moderate minded principal. This principal does not conform to the people minded profile nor administrative minded profile. This type does not have an explicit cognitive preference for educational, administrative or people oriented matters. Furthermore, contrary to the people minded profile, the moderate minded principal does not take on a particular leadership role. In case B, this principal scores moderately on the supportive and initiating structure role. And just as it befits the moderate minded principal, this case has no set of explicit priorities to function effectively. In other words, she is equally concerned with people oriented issues, as well as administrative tasks and pedagogical matters.

The beliefs and thoughts these three types of principals hold about what is important in their role to be an effective school leader is closely related to what Devos, Van den Broeck and Vanderheyden (1998) described as three crucial tasks of principals. These three large categories involve regulation, educational matters and people management. According to Devos et al. (1998) principals can have a different profile depending on how much time they spend on these tasks. To put it differently, the profiles we discerned based upon principals' beliefs show some overlap with those behavioral categories. This observation supports our expectations, as we assumed that what people think strongly determines their actions and practices (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Gioia, 1986; Leithwood, 1995; ten Bruggencate et al., 2005). In more general terms and adopting concepts from cognitive psychology, people have a certain mental model, script or cognitive scheme that defines their individual knowledge of effective functioning for a particular situation in non-symbolic, operative terms (Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960; Schrank & Abelson, 1977). In short, forms of action (i.e. leadership role) are coded in the *principal's* brain (Taylor, 1995).

To conclude, in our sample we classified 10 principals with a people minded profile, 8 principals with an administrative minded profile and 28 principals with a moderate minded profile. If we could place these profiles on a single continuum with the principals who have a strong cognitive preference for people and educational related matters at one end versus the principals who are strongly concerned with administrative and non-people related matters at the other end, and those with no explicit cognitive preference in-between, our sample would approximate a normal distribution.

### **Types of principals and school climate: three cases**

Before turning to the description of the three cases, it is imperative to briefly introduce the principals and the school settings in which they operate. This background information is followed by an in-depth description of how these principals with different cognitive profiles operate in different school climates. In other words we will have a look at how school leaders' cognitions are related with a strong school climate. Finally, we conclude with a cross-case comparison of our findings.

### *Background information*

Case A. The principal with a people minded profile is aged 53, and has 34 years of working experience in an educational setting. He is already six years principal of a medium sized primary school (approximately 250 pupils) and has a bachelor degree in educational sciences. Furthermore important to note is that in his current function he is released from any classroom teaching obligations. The teaching staff, in total 20 people, is mainly female teachers.

The school is a public school established in a small town and has two departments. One department (X) is situated in the outskirts of town, whereas the second department (Y) is resided in the town's centre. The composition of the school population differs significantly for both departments. In department X there are markedly more students from well off parents, whereas department Y counts more children from underprivileged families. Since his appointment as a principal in 1999 the number of students has increased significantly.

Case B. The 'moderate minded principal' is also 53 years of age, has a bachelor degree in educational sciences and has 34 years of educational experience, of which 17 years tenure as a school principal. At the time being she has a full-time assignment as principal. To put it differently, she is not burdened with teaching assignments. The school counts more than 300 students and has approximately 50 teachers.

The school is resided in a rural area and has one large department. The majority of students descend from low SES families with diverse cultural origins.

Case C. In the case of the administrative minded principal, our choice was a 41 year old principal with 21 years of working experience. As for case A, she has six years of principal experience. Because the school is large enough (more than 450 pupils and about 30 teachers), she does not have to do any teaching activities. In other words, she can fully concentrate on her job as a principal. The teaching staff mainly consists of female teachers (25 in total).

The school in which the principal is employed is a catholic school and is situated in one of the satellite villages of a larger town. Over the past few years, there has been a significant inflow of pupils from families with a lower SES background.

*Case A: The people minded principal, leadership and school climate*

For each of the three cases, we positioned the profiles along several school climate dimensions and leadership dimensions. The scores on these dimensions were compared and ranked against the total sample of 46 schools that participated in this inquiry.

Table II displays the values for case A, B and C. All values are scores on a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1 and 5. The scores presented are group averages based upon individual responses of the teachers in each school separately.

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Insert Table II About Here

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According to the team of our people minded principal, he is said to be a strong leader (high scores on supportive and initiating structure leadership behavior). The principal has the skills and abilities to support, to motivate and facilitate behavior, but concurrently is the keeper of rules and engagements, somebody who introduces the necessary structures and finally takes decisions. To put it differently, the principal is able to take on an initiating structure and supportive leadership role (Hallinger, 2003).

*“I feel especially attracted to the role of coaching and motivating people. Therefore, I always tell my people: ‘there is no such thing as stupid questions’. If you have doubts don’t be afraid to ask for explanation [...] They (teachers) are always involved in decision making. We feel there is a need for staff meetings, at least twice a month. Furthermore I highly value teamwork, and attach great significance to innovation and creativity. This is a necessary condition if you want to evaluate and reconsider current rules. I think [...] the school has done an excellent job in becoming process oriented rather than being outcome oriented.”*

The ‘initiating structure behavior’ is nicely illustrated by the following quote.

*“I frequently visit classes. I often enter a lesson for 10 minutes and then try to observe whether our teachers implement the school’s mission and pedagogical procedures. To give you an example, we have developed a method how to teach the conjugation of verbs, open and closed syllables [...] Should we (principals) do this kind of work? Yes, I think we should, because if different teachers start to use different methods in successive grades, this might cause confusion for weaker students. So, it is my task to coordinate that.”*

Besides strong leadership, the people minded principal is working in a strong and moving school climate characterized by a strong unity in vision, a strong involvement of the team in decision-making, and strong professional and non-professional ties among the teachers.

The principal also underscores the homogeneous school climate. The vision of the school is predicated on pedagogical values and is supported by the whole team. Furthermore, teachers are on good terms with their principal and perceive the working climate as healthy. We infer from Table II that of all participating schools to this inquiry, the teaching staff of case A report very high levels of satisfaction.

The importance that the principal attaches to change and innovation (see previous quote) is also confirmed by the high score on the climate dimension ‘innovation and change orientation’. In other words, this school culture strongly reflects what Hargreaves (1992, 1994) refers to as a collaborative culture. In such a culture, working relationships are spontaneous, voluntary, evolutionary and development-oriented.

Finally, an important condition for becoming a strong moving climate involves the participation in decision making. A team that is actively involved in the process of decision making will show less resistance towards the vision that needs to be implemented. To put it differently, participation in decision making creates a sense of psychological ownership (Evers, 1990), a feeling of control and responsibility over the decisions, which stimulates a sound matrix for building a strong innovative culture and learning organization. The team confirms the presence of a strong participative climate.



These findings support Yousef's (2000) conclusions. He found that when leaders are perceived as consultative or participative, employees feel more committed to the organization, show a stronger acceptance of the organization's goals and values, the willingness to invest effort on behalf of the organization and the importance attached to keeping up membership in the organization.

*Case B: The moderate minded principal, leadership role and school climate*

Looking at Table II reveals that in terms of initiating structure and supportive leadership behaviour the moderate minded principal is not especially a strong leader when compared to the other principals (N = 46) that were screened for this study. From the interview we inferred that the principal is very concerned with the image of the school. The principal recognizes herself best in a strategic-instructive leadership role.

*Developing a school vision, translating that vision into objectives, and the formulation of expectations are central in the way I lead my school. Also negotiation has an important role. [...] I attach great importance to stability and therefore I feel responsible to establish a strong school with an explicit profile. The personal objective I postulate is that the school makes a good impression in the community."*

From our analyses, it seems that the relationships between the teaching staff are formal rather than informal. An important remark with regard to the formal relationships, however, is that the professional collaboration among teachers is not always optimal (average score on formal relationships). Although principals are also involved in the decision making process, the relative position of the school is average. A closer look at the decision making process in the school shows that teachers are involved when it concerns educational and practical matters, but less in decisions with a human resource related content. Furthermore, the principal himself only attaches limited importance to participation in decision making.

Not scoring particularly high or low on participation in decision making might help explain why the level of goal orientation is average in comparison to all schools.

When people feel they are not involved enough in decision making, they might lack a feeling of psychological ownership and therefore also be more reluctant towards individual decisions of the principal. To put it differently, there is no strong consensus among the teachers with regard to the vision-mission of the school. The principal is aware of that and acknowledges the difficulty to develop a homogeneous school climate.

*“When you want to implement a certain pedagogical approach, you are often confronted with resistance, because the new approach often requires another teaching style. Furthermore, some teaching styles don’t always fit the person of the teacher. As such it is my duty to motivate them to accept the change, but I often fail in doing so.”*

This reluctance to new teaching approaches also explains why the teachers are not especially innovation and change oriented in comparison to their colleagues in other schools.

To conclude, we observed that the satisfaction of teachers was good to average.

*Case C: The administrative minded principal, leadership role and school climate*

The data in Table II show the absence of strong leadership (see scores supportive and initiating structure leadership behavior). This principal in comparison to his colleagues scores low on initiating structure and supportive leadership. Contrary to the people minded principal, this principal doesn’t take time to visit classrooms.

*“I rarely do classroom visits, except when a teacher is new. But in generally, I do not, because I simply do not have time for that!”*

This principal spends most of his time on administration and organizing meeting.

*“Each day from 8.30 a.m. until noon, I am doing purely administrative work. To be honest, I don’t resent this kind of work. On the contrary, I enjoy doing paperwork and accounting. My main duty is that everything is well organized. Otherwise people cannot perform their work properly.”*

The lack of a participative school culture in combination with the weak leadership style, help explain the lower score on goal orientation. To put it differently, we can speak of a rather heterogeneous school climate in school C. The administrative minded principal fails to transfer her beliefs and expectations onto the teaching staff. She does not succeed in creating a collective sense of unity in vision. In addition we noticed a lack of a clearly defined pedagogical project. The principal’s major concern is ‘keep on running the school’, without developing a school policy. Although the principal confirms there is a school policy it remains a paper based version. The absence of an explicit school vision and school policy also indicates the weak leadership skills of this principal. In consequence it is not surprising when the principal has difficulties to describe his leadership role.

*“I wouldn’t say I am a leader [...] I don’t think I am a real leadership figure. [...] Keep the business running is the most important thing in my job.”*

Getting her team behind the same vision, is experienced as an extremely difficult task. She describes it as a work of much endurance. The time invested into transferring the school objectives onto the team does not pay off enough. In consequence, she doesn’t put much effort into it.

In alignment with the observations made, is the limited satisfaction of the team compared to the total sample of schools. The lack of principal support could be compensated by strong formal and informal relationships among the teachers. However, this is not evident, since the principal does not stimulate these relationships. In comparison to most schools, we noticed a lack of professional collaboration and social contacts among team members.

In other words, there is no real cohesion between the teachers of this school. Gaziel and Weiss (1990) also claimed that teachers' participation, based on a strong voice in decisions and policies, was a characteristic of professional orientation, and fostered better working relations among staff members. In short, to our observation the culture in school C reflects individualism (Hargreaves, 1992; 1994), a school climate that is characterized by teachers working isolated in their classrooms.

Finally, knowing that the major concern of the principal is administration and emphasis on stability, it is not unexpected that the school gets one of the lowest scores on innovation orientation.

*Cross-case comparison: weak versus strong school climates*

In comparing the three cases discussed above, some significant differences appeared with respect to school climate and leadership style.

The leadership skills are an important point of difference that distinguish the people minded, moderate minded and administrative minded principals. In terms of leadership style, the people minded and moderate minded principal are stronger leaders than the administrative minded principal. The former principals formulate explicit objectives and succeed in shaping consensus with regard to the school's vision and mission. More in particular, the people minded principal does not only support the school vision, he also gives direction and shapes this vision. In contrast, you have the administrative minded principal who has no explicit school vision and policy. As such, it is no surprise that the goal orientation of the teaching staff is very low for the administrative minded principal. On the other side of the continuum, we situate the people minded principal. The school climate for the latter principal is characterized by a homogeneous climate and strongly shared vision. Another important difference is that in the case of the administrative minded principal, teachers complain about the limited involvement in decision making, whereas in the case of the people minded principal 'participation in decision making' received high scores. Of the three cases discussed, the people minded principal gets the highest score on supportive leadership followed by the moderate minded principal and administrative centered principal. In summary, the dynamic and strong leadership style of the people minded principal shapes a strong and collective sense of vision and unity, and contributes to the establishment of a strong forward moving culture. On the contrary, the weak leadership skills of the administrative minded principal do not stimulate a strong collective sense of homogeneity among the team members.

Finally, besides the observation of variations in school climate between the three profiles, we want to stress that work climate in the case of the people minded principal is healthier than for the two other cases. In other words, the satisfaction of the teachers in the case of the people minded principal is the highest of the three cases. Previous research has found that supportive leadership appears to be generally important to teachers' well-being. Some noted that principal support to be associated with job satisfaction (Blasé, Dedrick & Strathe, 1986; Bogler, 2005) and lower stress levels (Blasé et al., 1986; Fimian, 1986).

To strengthen the transferability of our findings about the principal's profile (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), leadership role behavior, and school climate, we selected the top five schools of which the scores on the school culture dimensions were one standard deviation above or below the mean. The five schools with extremely high scores for all the school culture dimensions were compared on the principal's profile and leadership behavior with the five opposites reflecting weak cultures.

Looking at the profiles of principals of strong moving climates, we noticed the absence of administrative minded principals. Within these extremely positive school climates, two principals had a people minded profile and three a moderate minded profile. In addition, the five school leaders identified themselves with the roles of coach and innovator.

In the case of weak cultures we observed that none of the school leaders had a people minded profile. In general these cases were coded administrative or moderate minded principals. One important thing these school leaders had in common was the discrepancy between their leadership role and what they actually did with their time. Although they attempted to create the impression that they attach importance to people and educational matters, they are mainly concerned with administrative matters and also devote most of their time to that. One could argue that this focus on paperwork and organization by administrative principals was invoked by external causes, such as the lack of resources for administrative assistance. However this is not the case because these five principals were not less satisfied about these resources in comparison to the high scoring cases.

## **LIMITATIONS, SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Our primary purpose in this study was to advance our understanding of effective leadership practices and the impact on school climate through the analysis of principals' conceptions about their leadership role. In other words we attempted to fill the void in literature on why principals' act the way they do. Although our findings are exploratory, they indicate that principals' who attach much importance to people and the pedagogical project are in general strong leaders (initiating structure and supportive leadership), who work in strong – moving cultures or environments that stimulate professional learning. The opposite pole of these people minded school leaders are the administrative minded profiles who conceive paperwork and the implementation of rules and regulations as the culmination of effective leadership. The latter are often weak leaders since creating unity in vision and support are no priorities to them. Furthermore our results suggest and confirm that this lack of supportive/initiating structure leadership influences the commitment to vision and change, collaboration, relationships among teachers, the satisfaction of teachers (Bogler, 2002; 2005; Bogler & Somech, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Youssef, 2000). In other words, those principals are more likely to have a negative impact on the school climate because they do not foster shared goals, values and professional growth. Due to the qualitative and exploratory character of the research design we want to advance carefulness when drawing conclusions about the causal relationship between profiles and the fostering of a strong or weak school culture. Although uncertainty exists about the causality of this relationship, some important lessons for recruitment and professional development are to be drawn from these findings. Evidence from the study supports the contention that principals' conceptions are an important determinant of their leadership practices (Leithwood, 1995) and school climate. Apart from recruiting principals' who are competent in planning, organizing, and implementation of regulations, it is important to assess how they conceive their role as leaders. In order, to improve the chances of developing and sustaining strong - moving school climates, school boards should select school leaders that consider educational and people matters as priorities. Furthermore, in the educational and professional development programs for principals, these competencies should be emphasized besides the traditional skills of a typical administrator.

The conclusion what principals think determines what they do could be accused of simplistic reductionism. In other words, principals' leadership behavior results from an internal cognitive process independent of its context. The effect of external factors on leadership behavior would be marginal, indicating this process is not contingent on context. Drawing on the analogy of the trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), however, it could be suggested that the conceptions of school leaders about their leadership role evoke corresponding behavior only when the environment or school climate triggers these conceptions. To put it differently, the relationship of profiles (people minded, moderate minded, and administrative minded) with leadership roles (instructive and supportive leadership behavior) may differ depending on the context (strong versus weak cultures) in which these leadership styles can be conceived as viable profile-relevant responses. Although this study was not designed to test this assumption, there are some indications that underscore the necessity to further investigate this hypothesis. For instance, we noticed that in the case of a strong school climate (high scores on goal orientedness, participation in decision making, innovativeness, cooperation between teachers) and high satisfaction among teachers, none of the principals had an administrative minded profile. In addition, for the weak or stuck climates, we did not identify people minded profiles. In short, this suggests that so called 'strong climates' trigger conceptions with a focus on people and educational matters, whereas weak climates do not trigger such conceptions. This implies that the principal does not only fulfill a key role in shaping the school climate by stimulating participation, promoting involvement and managing school development, change, and sustaining schools as communities of learners (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Day, Hall & Whitaker, 1998), but also undergoes its effect because of the fact he is immersed into that climate. The collective sense of values, habits, and assumed way of doing things are likely to affect and shape the principal's own beliefs and role conceptions (Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, instead of thinking in terms of a simple linear causal chain model (beliefs – leadership role behavior – school climate), an extra arrow could be added from school culture moderating the relationship between beliefs and leadership role.

Although literature suggests the key role of the principal in developing and maintaining strong moving school climates (Barker, 2001; Day, Hall & Whitaker, 1998; Leithwood et al., 1999; Fernandez, 2000), we have to be careful in making such inferences.

After all, a weakness of our design is that our data were gathered at one point in time, and as such is a serious validity threat to causal inferences based upon these data. In this respect our inquiry provides a snapshot of the relationships between principals' cognitions, actions and school climate. To put it differently, our data fail to provide information on the exact directions and dynamic relationships that exist between these concepts. The simple answer on how to solve this would be the longitudinal comparative case study method (Pettigrew, 1990). This method gives the opportunity to examine the whole phenomenon in its context. Thus, there is the scope to reveal the multiple sources and loops of causation and connectivity so crucial in identifying and explaining patterns in the complex phenomenon we explored. Despite the fact that our inquiry did not uncover the exact nature and direction of the relationships between principal's conceptions, behavior and school culture, it provides a first important indication that the three concepts are strongly related and also underpins the need for further research on this topic.

Another important remark of this study involves the indirect measurement of school effectiveness. Based upon the idea that a professional stimulating environment is an indicator for high student performance, we assumed that strong – moving school climate provided a good assessment for school effectiveness. Despite this indirect measurement character of school effectiveness, there is strong evidence advancing that the presence of such a climate is important in determining students' motivation and performance (Rosenholtz, 1989), supporting our measurement decision. Nevertheless and also mentioned above, is that the cross sectional character of our data only gives a picture of the climate measured at one point in time not telling us more about how school climate has actually evolved over time.

To conclude, despite the weaknesses of our study, this paper has contributed to the cognitive perspective of school leadership by introducing three distinguishing ways of how principals conceive their role as school leaders, and how these role conceptions are closely related to their actions, suggesting that what principals' think is an important determinant of their actions. In addition, by means of case studies we explored whether these types of principals work in different kinds of school environments (i.e. school climate). In doing so, we added an alternative way of looking at school effectiveness and leadership.



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**TABLE I****Sample characteristics**

	<b><u>STUDY SAMPLE (N = 46)</u></b>	<b><u>POPULATION (N = 2310)</u></b>
<b>School system</b>		
1. State schools	20%	15%
2. Official subsidized schools	26%	22%
3. Freely subsidized schools	54%	63%
<b>Province</b>		
1. Antwerpen	26%	26%
2. Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest	4%	5%
3. Limburg	15%	13%
4. Oost-Vlaanderen	24%	22%
5. Vlaams-Brabant	11%	15%
6. West-Vlaanderen	20%	19%
<b>School type</b>		
1. Nursery schools (NS)	7%	7%
2. Primary schools (PS)	7%	8%
3. NS + PS	86%	85%
<b>Gender principal</b>		
1. Male	61%	57%
2. Female	39%	43%
<b>Age principal</b>		
< 35 years	2%	3%
35 – 49 years	46%	42%
>= 50 years	52%	55%



**TABLE II**

**Positioning of case A, B and C against total sample of principals on school climate dimensions, well-being and satisfaction team**

	Score	Ranking in total sample	Total average (SD), N = 46	Minimum score	Maximum score
<b>Case A people minded principal</b>					
Goal orientedness	4.72	1/46	3.70(0.47)	2.57	4.72
Formal relationship	4.47	4/46	3.80(0.35)	2.97	4.66
Informal relationship	4.19	3/46	3.38(0.45)	2.63	4.42
Participative decision making	4.50	2/46	3.78(0.42)	2.95	4.75
Innovation and change orientation	4.51	2/46	3.90(0.35)	2.88	4.58
Satisfaction teachers	4.62	1/46	4.23(0.21)	3.77	4.62
Supportive leadership	4.69	3/46	4.02(0.43)	3.12	4.81
Initiating structure leadership	4.52	3/46	3.89(0.41)	3.02	4.61
<b>Case B moderate minded principal</b>					
Goal orientedness	3.56	30/46	3.70(0.47)	2.57	4.72
Formal relationship	3.92	15/46	3.80(0.35)	2.97	4.66
Informal relationship	3.24	27/46	3.38(0.45)	2.63	4.42
Participative decision making	3.56	32/46	3.78(0.42)	2.95	4.75
Innovation and change orientation	4.08	14/46	3.90(0.35)	2.88	4.58
Satisfaction teachers	4.42	9/46	4.23(0.21)	3.77	4.62
Supportive leadership	3.81	32/46	4.02(0.43)	3.12	4.81
Initiating structure leadership	3.94	20/46	3.89(0.41)	3.02	4.61
<b>Case C administrative minded principal</b>					
Goal orientedness	2.57	44/46	3.70(0.47)	2.57	4.72
Formal relationship	3.03	43/46	3.80(0.35)	2.97	4.66
Informal relationship	3.03	35/46	3.38(0.45)	2.63	4.42
Participative decision making	2.95	44/46	3.78(0.42)	2.95	4.75
Innovation and change orientation	3.30	43/46	3.90(0.35)	2.88	4.58
Satisfaction teachers	4.07	37/46	4.23(0.21)	3.77	4.62
Supportive leadership	3.12	44/46	4.02(0.43)	3.12	4.81
Initiating structure leadership	3.43	38/46	3.89(0.41)	3.02	4.61