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### An Exploratory Study on Principals' Conceptions about Their Role as School Leaders

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## **An Exploratory Study on Principals’ Conceptions about Their Role as School Leaders**

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*This inquiry, by means of the case study method, explored how principals’ conceptions about their role as school leader contribute to a better understanding of their leadership behavior and how this is related to school climate. The results indicated that differences of how principals conceive their leadership role are related, indirectly through their leadership practices (i.e., initiating structure and supportive leadership), to the school climate (unity in vision, collegial relations, collaboration, innovativeness). We distinguished three types of school leader profiles: (1) the “people-minded profile” with a strong emphasis on educational leadership and the mentoring role as a school leader and with the necessary skills to implement a shared vision; (2) the “administrative-minded profile” with the focus on administration and the coordinating leadership role, lacking a vision and feeling unable to develop a vision; and (3) the “moderate-minded profile” with an emphasis on educational leadership but having difficulty to involve all teachers in the school’s vision. Drawing on three prototypical cases we discuss in depth that these types of principals work under different school climate conditions.*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as a simple recipe for successful school leadership. Nevertheless, a large bulk of research has tried to answer the question: "What makes a school leader successful?" Since the 1980s, 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 1980s, 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 1990s, 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 leadership studies researchers quantified and described effective leadership with the purpose of applying that knowledge to increase the effectiveness of other school leaders. The hope for finding such an effective school leader model, however, has 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. In the 1980s Bossert et al. (1982) already suggested an alternative approach that considers leadership as having an indirect influence through the way it has an impact on school climate. Several studies have analyzed the indirect effects (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003). They have indicated that educational leadership is related to school organization and school climate (Krüger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007). However, little is known about how educational leaders influence school climate. Due to its exclusive focus on behavioral action, this type of research has left unanswered the query why school leaders act the way they do. In most studies the principals' vision has an important impact on their behavior. Still, little is known about the way cognitive and behavioral aspects of principals are related. Cognitive processes are important to understand how school leaders can make a difference. Through interaction with others, these cognitive structures result in making sense of one's social context, which in turn operates as a guiding framework for

present and future leadership behavior (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Weick, 1995). As such we believe that insight into principal's thinking processes will advance our understanding of how and why they take action.

## ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND ROLE PRIORITIES, LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR, AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

Research into the principal's thinking processes 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 mainly focused on principals' thinking about practical problems and how to solve them, and summarized findings on how expertise is developed and on how novices and experts display their knowledge in a school setting (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992, 1995; Stager & Leithwood, 1989). More recent studies (Wassink, Slegers, & Imants, 2003; Krüger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007) have analyzed the impact of the principals' vision and tacit knowledge on their activities. These activities can play a salient role in shaping the school climate. In Table 1 a schematic representation of the interaction between cognitive processes, leadership behavior, and school climate is shown.

The way principals conceive their roles is influenced by their expertise on leadership and their beliefs on what is central in their leader role. Therefore, it is important to identify what principal's consider as their priority. This is not evident because principals are faced with conflicting roles. Many studies have distinguished administration and management from educational leadership (Leithwood & Duke, 1998). Administrative and managerial tasks refer to organizational control, budgeting, managing input, implementing

**TABLE 1** Interacting Variables of Principals and School Climate.

Principal's thinking process	Principal's leadership behavior	Teacher's perception of school climate
- Principal role conceptions: administration and educational leadership	- Expertise - Leadership practice - Time management	- Goal orientedness - Participation - Formal and informal collaboration
- Leader role conceptions: Coordinator, strategic leader, mentor, innovator	- Teacher's perception of leadership behavior	- Innovation

regulations, and ensuring that rules and regulations are respected. The focus of educational leadership is on teaching, learning, school improvement, and improved student outcome. Although certain studies treated management and leadership as distinct and competing concepts, other studies regarded leadership and management as complementary. This position is supported by evidence from close analysis of the actual activities of school leaders (e.g., Davies, 1987). Principals are faced with both administrative and educational leadership tasks. It is important to know what their vision is on the combination of both tasks and how they consider what has priority in these tasks (Krüger, Witziers, & Slegers, 2007).

Several authors have attempted to define leadership in terms of a portfolio of roles (Mintzberg, 1973; Yukl, 1981). Robert Quinn and his colleagues have formulated a framework of leadership that addresses issues of competing roles and paradox (Dension, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; Quinn, 1984). They used the competing-values model of organizational effectiveness (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) to present eight roles in a circular pattern, based on the two underlying dimensions of stability versus flexibility and internal versus external focus, identified by the effectiveness model. The model assumes that a traditional view of the two ends of the continuum as incompatible is characteristic of a lower level of leadership development and the ability to reconcile these extremes is characteristic of a higher level of development. Witziers et al. (2003) have suggested Quinn's model as an interesting approach for further research on educational leadership and its relation with context and school climate. They gave three reasons for the use of this model in future research. First, the model has been used fruitfully to distinguish different school cultures with different consequences for student outcomes (Maslowski, 2001). According to Witziers et al. (2003), the framework assumes an association between particular leadership values and behaviors on the one hand and the existence of a specific school culture on the other. Second, the model focuses on the relationship between values and behaviors. In this respect, the model fits clearly with our research objective: the framework does not ". . . only pay attention to behaviors but also to *why* principals act as they do . . ." (Witziers et al., 2003, p. 416). A third advantage of the model is the possible use of multiple outcomes. Educational leadership studies have often been criticized for concentrating only on cognitive student outcomes. Witziers et al. indicated that Quinn's ". . . framework meets this objection because it implies that the organization's innovative capacity, teachers' working conditions, and smooth internal organizational functioning are also worthwhile outcomes of leadership behavior" (2003, p. 416).

The competing values framework comprises four quadrants that describe four broad domains of valued outcomes (see Table 2). The quadrants are derived from four major schools of study of organizational effectiveness. Each quadrant groups several leadership roles.

**TABLE 2** Quinn's Leadership Roles According to the Competing Values Model.

School of study	Dimensions	Leadership role
Human relations approach	Internal focus and flexibility orientation	Mentor and facilitator
Internal process approach	Internal focus and control orientation	Coordinator and monitor
Open systems approach	External focus and flexible orientation	Innovator and broker
Rational goal approach	External focus and control orientation	Director and producer

Principals' conception about these different roles can help us understand how they think about leadership.

The explicit and tacit knowledge of principals shapes their role conceptions as school leaders and their vision. Role conceptions, in turn, direct actions, strategies, and routine behaviors. An important element in effective leadership behavior is the way in which leaders act as a role model toward the team members (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Representation of the vision in the school leaders' behavior is decisive for the impact of their leadership. Theoretical models of transformational (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999) and instructional (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) leadership provide many different leadership actions that have an impact on the school organization. In all of these models it is clear that school leaders must provide direction and support for their team members. At the same time they also must set standards, raise high expectations, and clarify what is expected of the teachers. Leaders must facilitate and be flexible on the one hand, but they must provide structure and monitor performance on the other hand (Hoy & Tarter, 1997).

Overall, the 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 able to create and maintain conditions necessary for the building of professional learning communities within schools (Barker, 2001; Fernandez, 2000; Flores, 2004). Several dimensions have been identified as characteristics of effective and strong school climates (Devos, Verhoeven, Stassen, & Warmoes, 2004; Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Maslowski, 2001; Staessens, 1990; Valentine et al., 2006). The first dimension, *goal orientedness*, reflects the extent to which the school vision is clearly formulated and shared by the school members. The second dimension, *participative decision making*, reflects the extent to which teachers participate in school decision-making processes, and are responsible for their actions. The third dimension, *innovativeness*, reflects the extent to which school members adapt to change, and have an open attitude toward educational innovations. Finally, *cooperation between teachers* reflects the formal and informal relationships between teachers.

This inquiry explored how the conceptions and the beliefs of principals about their role as a school leader shaped their behavior and the school climate in which they work. In doing so, we first measured the school climate of 46 primary schools and the leadership behavior of the principal. Second, we selected three principals of these schools for in-depth case studies: one principal from a school with a strong climate and high scores on all the climate dimensions, one principal from a school with a weak climate, and one school leader from a school with an average climate. Third, we explored whether differences exist between the three principals based upon what they think has priority in their role as effective school leaders. We also examined the relation between the principals' role conceptions and their leadership behavior. Eventually, we compared these results with the role conceptions of the other principals in the sample.

## METHOD

### Population

A sample of 56 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, Bouckenooghe, Engels, Hotton, & Aelterman, 2007). A stratified random sample was drawn from the Flemish Primary School Database, containing all 2,310 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 with respect to: (1) school system, (2) province, (3) school type, (4) gender principal, and (5) age principal.

### Data Collection Methods and Data Analysis

#### QUESTIONNAIRE AND DATA ANALYSIS

Since school climate is defined 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 climate by measuring teachers' perceptions. The response rate of teachers was very good, yielding a 75 % response rate (700/934) with an average response of 15 teachers per school. 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). All scales have a five-point Likert format with anchors ranging between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The six-item scale developed by Staessens (1990) was used to measure goal orientedness (e.g.,

Not all teachers share a similar opinion on what is important for the school) and yielded excellent internal consistency (cronbach alpha = 0.80). 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 = 0.74). The seven-item "adaptation-innovation scale" (Maslowski, 2001) was included to determine the level of innovativeness (e.g., the teachers at our school are positive toward educational changes). Because the reliability was low we caution against drawing inferences based on this scale (cronbach alpha = 0.54). Finally, "cooperation between teachers" incorporates two dimensions: formal relations 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 relied on a seven-item scale developed by Staessens (1990) (e.g., I inform my colleagues on how I handle a specific problem). The internal reliability of both scales was 0.81 and 0.66 respectively.

As a proxy for principal leadership behavior we asked the teaching staff to answer 11 items measuring two dimensions of leadership behavior. 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 = 0.89 for "supportive principal behavior"; cronbach alpha = 0.77 for "initiating structure behavior").

Analysis of the quantitative data collected by means of this survey remained purely descriptive (averaged scale sum scores, means, and standard deviations), since these data were used for case study purposes. The school climate dimensions were treated 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 climate dimensions exceeded the recommended 0.7 (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

#### SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW AND DATA ANALYSIS

Semistructured interviews were conducted with the principal of all 46 schools. This was a focused interview, meaning that there was an interview scheme to



guide the researcher through the interview. An advantage of these kinds of interviews is that they allow more focus but also probing and additional questions when an interesting issue is raised 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. We also used Quinn's leadership role model to stimulate the principals to reflect about their views on their roles and the way they believe a principal must act. In one of the questions in the interview the principals were asked to reflect on four descriptions of leadership roles in line with the four quadrants of Quinn's model and to indicate which role they preferred the most and which they preferred the least (Appendix). For this question we reduced the eight leadership roles of Quinn (see Table 2) to four roles per quadrant (mentor, coordinator, innovator, and director) in order to facilitate the principals' reflection about which role they preferred. The description of each role combined elements of the original eight roles defined by Quinn.

We did not mention the label of the roles during the interview to prevent interviewees from being influenced by this label. We formulated each role in a positive way to prevent biased responses. This procedure was pre-tested with five principals to see whether the interviewees found it feasible to answer and whether they gave discriminating answers. Although the principals found this was a challenging task because all roles seemed relevant to them, they all could indicate which role they preferred and which role they considered the least important. They also used the question to elaborate on their leadership roles. Moreover, the interviewees gave different answers, so the role descriptions proved to have a discriminating value.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The 46 semistructured interviews yielded some rich descriptions of principals' cognitions and perceptions of their jobs. An inductive approach was used in two phases: (1) a vertical analysis according to which each of the respondents' interviews was analyzed separately, and (2) a comparative, horizontal analysis to look for common patterns and differences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To warrant the reliability and trustworthiness of the analysis, five interviews were randomly chosen and coded separately by two trained coders. This procedure yielded an acceptable interrater reliability (0.90).

#### THE CASE STUDY METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

In order to explore how and under which conditions (i.e., 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 p. 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., semistructured 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 pure 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 used the scores on the school climate dimensions to select a principal with a strong climate, a principal with a weak climate, and a principal working in a moderate school climate. We limited our description to three prototypical cases for this article. Cross-case analysis was used to develop conceptual insights (Eisenhardt, 1989). Initially, the three prototypical cases of principals were compared to identify differences and similarities in their thinking process, leading to the refinement of each case. In order to prevent premature and false conclusions based on these three cases we compared our cases with the type of principals working in the top five of the 46 schools with extremely strong and weak school climates.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Typology of Principals Based Upon Self-Reflection About Their Role as School Leaders

Based on the results of the school climate variables we selected three principals for an extensive case study. Apart from the school climate results, we also controlled for school size and principal tenure for the selection of the three cases. We selected schools of a similar size, lead by principals with minimum five years of tenure. Our cross-case analysis resulted in three profiles of principals with different role conceptions: (1) Case A, the people-minded principal with the strong school climate; (2) Case B, the administrative-minded principal in the school with the weak climate; and (3) Case C, the moderate-minded principal with the average 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 3 displays the values for school climate and leadership behavior for cases 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.

Before turning to the description of the three cases, we briefly provide a contextual background by introducing the principals and the school settings. This background information is followed by an in-depth description

**TABLE 3** Positioning of Cases A, B, and C Against Total Sample of Principals on School Climate Dimensions and Leadership Behavior.

	Score	Ranking in total sample	Total average (SD), <i>N</i> = 46	Minimum score	Maximum score
Case A people-minded principal					
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
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
Case B administrative-minded principal					
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
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
Case C moderate-minded principal					
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
Supportive leadership	3.81	32/46	4.02 (0.43)	3.12	4.81
Intiating structure leadership	3.94	20/46	3.89 (0.41)	3.02	4.61

of how these principals with diverse cognitive profiles operate in different school climates. In other words, we will have a look at how school leaders' cognitions are related with their leadership behavior and with their school climate. Finally, we conclude with a cross-case comparison of our findings.

## Context

Case A. Principal A, aged 53, had a people-minded profile with 34 years of educational experience, six years as a principal of a medium-sized primary school (approximately 250 students). In his current function he was released from any teaching load.

The school was a public school established in a small town and divided between two locations. One location (X) was in the outskirts of town, whereas the second location (Y) was in the town's center. The composition of the school population differed significantly for both locations. In location X there were markedly more students from well-off parents, whereas location Y counted more children from underprivileged families. Since his appointment as principal in 1999 the number of students had increased significantly.

Case B. The administrative minded principal was 41 years-old with 21 years of working experience, of which six were as principal. As was the case for the other principals, this principal did not have any teaching activities. The school in which the principal was employed was a medium-sized Catholic school situated in one of the satellite villages of a larger town. Over the past few years, there had been a significant inflow of pupils from families with a lower SES background.

Case C. The "moderate minded principal," also 53 years of age, had 34 years of educational experience, of which 17 were as school principal. She had no teaching assignments. The school (with 310 students) was located in a rural area and the majority of students were from low SES families with diverse cultural origins.

### Thinking Process: Role Conceptions

#### Case A: The People-Minded Principal

In the mind of the people-centered principal, educational policy and interactions with teachers and students dominated. He attached much importance to development and implementation of an educational vision. For instance, the principal in case A was imbued with the necessity of educational matters and also clearly communicated the importance he attached 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.*

During the interview the principal stated that he did not like his administrative role. Although he realized this was also part of his job, he preferred the role of educational leader.

At first, like all principals, the principal in case A found it difficult to answer which of the four roles of the Quinn model he preferred the most and which role he preferred the least. Eventually, he indicated that he preferred the role of mentor and the role of innovator.

*I am very attracted to the (mentor) role: coaching, motivating, always be ready . . . I consider team work as very important. But I am also charmed by the innovation role . . . We must also be very critical towards innovation. Not innovation because of the innovation, but we must innovate on a regularly basis.*

#### Case B: The Administrative-Minded Principle

Contrary to the previous case, the administrative-minded principal did not have a preference for her educational leadership role.

*To be honest, I don't resent this kind of work. On the contrary, I enjoy doing paperwork and accounting.*

She considered the development of a well-structured, smoothly organized school as her main priority.

*My main duty is that everything is well organized. Otherwise people cannot perform their work properly.*

Faced with the question about Quinn's four leadership roles, the administrative-minded principal stated that she recognized herself partly in all four roles. After reflecting some time on the different roles, she indicated that the innovator role fitted her least of all.

*I will also try to innovate and try to be creative, but how do you interpret being creative? I don't think I am that kind of type. I don't have a problem with that but my main role is to do administrative tasks and I will delegate that (innovations).*

Eventually, the principal in Case B indicated the coordinator role and the mentor role as her preferred roles.

#### Case C: The Moderate-Minded Principal

The third profile could be called a "remainder" category and was labeled the moderate-minded principal. From the interview we inferred that the principal was very concerned with the image of the school. The principal recognized herself best in the role of director.

She preferred the coordinator role least of all. She also indicated that she did not think that administration was the task with the highest priority. She did not like administration, but she recognized that it was an important part of the job.

The cognitions held by these three types of principals about their role as a school leader were strikingly different. Especially, the people-minded and the administrative-minded principals had different role conceptions. At first, all three principals found it difficult to choose between the four leadership roles of Quinn's model. This is not surprising since all roles are, one way or the other, relevant for every school leader. But after some reflection, the three principals could indicate one or two preferred roles and one role they preferred the least. Also, they could explain their preference and this helped to clarify their different perspectives on school leadership. In case B, the administrative-minded principal disliked innovation. She did not formulate it bluntly but from her interpretation of the different

roles we clearly learned that she believed she must first of all keep things running and organized, and she considered innovation as a threat to a smooth organization. On the other hand, the people-minded principal believed his role as a mentor was of major importance and, in combination with the focus on innovation, he considered involving teachers in the school's educational policy as one of the principal's main tasks. Like the people-minded principal, the moderate-minded principal disliked administration. However, she considered mentoring and innovation a lower priority than in Case C and indicated the director's role as the most important.

### Leadership Behavior

We used different methods to analyze the leadership behavior of the three principals. We used reflections of the principals about their expertise, their daily practices, and time management on the one hand. We also examined their behavior as perceived by the teachers in the schools on the other hand. We used the results of the questionnaire administered to the teachers on their supportive leadership behavior and their structure initiating behavior.

#### EXPERTISE

We have found that the three principals had a different view about their expertise. The people-minded principal considered himself as a strong leader:

*I don't think the job is very difficult. I enjoy doing it. . . . When I consider the number of phone calls I get from colleagues . . . they often phone me when they experience problems.*

The school in Case A had a clear vision in which experiential learning of students is at the core of teaching and learning. The principal had no difficulty in involving his team in the implementation of long-term school goals. According to the principal, it is important to translate the educational project into the daily practices of teachers and to refer in these daily practices to the school's core values. This was in contrast with the school of the administrative-minded principal, where an explicit school vision was absent. The principal did not succeed in creating a collective sense of unity in vision.

*I wouldn't say I am a leader . . . I don't think I am a real leader . . . Keep the business running is the most important thing in my job.*

Getting her team behind the same vision was experienced as an extremely difficult task. She described it as a work of much endurance. The time

invested into transferring the school objectives onto the team did not pay off enough. In consequence, she did not put much effort into it.

The moderate-minded principal attached more importance to the development of a vision, but the principal found it difficult to reach a strong consensus among the teachers with regard to the vision-mission of the school. The principal acknowledged the difficulty.

*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.*

#### LEADERSHIP PRACTICE AND TIME MANAGEMENT

The role conceptions of the three principals were reflected in their time schedule. The people-minded principal spent a lot of time at being present in the classrooms.

*I frequently visit classes. I often enter a lesson for ten 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? The answer is affirmative, 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.*

Also noteworthy is that the principal considered pedagogical tasks as a major priority:

*I should spend most of my time at providing emotional and pedagogical support to children. That is crucial. If I can postpone administration, I will. If I am able to finish my administrative tasks after 4 p.m. then I consider my day to be a success.*

Contrary to the people-minded principal, the administrative-minded principal did not put energy into visiting classrooms. Although her workload was comparable to that of the principal in Case A, she stated that she did not find enough time for that.

*I rarely do classroom visits, except when a teacher is new. But in general, I do not, because I simply lack time!*

However, when we look at the way she plans her tasks, we see a different set of priorities than of the principal in Case A.

*Many days from 9.00 a.m. until noon, I am doing administrative work.  
To be honest, I don't resent this kind of work.*

It is clear that the principal in Case B did not postpone administrative work until after school hours.

The moderate-minded principal indicated that she spent most of her time in meetings, organization, and planning. She preferred to invest more time in pedagogical tasks and contacts with teachers and parents, but she had not enough time for that. Remarkable was that this principal believed that ten-minute visits in classrooms are useless. She believed a principal should be able to spend half a day or a whole day in the same classroom. Contrary to this, the principal of school A thought ten-minute visits in the classrooms are important to translate the school vision in daily practice.

*I visit classes very often without putting pressure on the teachers.*

By visiting classes very frequently for short periods, the principal of school A monitored the implementation of the school goals without performing a directive supervisory role. This approach can be effective to clarify what is expected of teachers in a concrete way while at the same time supporting teachers and creating a climate of trust and security.

### Perception of Teachers

The frequent interactions of the principal in school A with his teachers, combined with an attitude of trust and caring, can be a possible explanation for the high score of principal A on supportive behavior and on initiating structure (see Table 3). Teachers perceived the daily interactions and frequent classroom visits of principal A as an important support. At the same time, they knew what was expected of them. We learned from principal A's role conception that he put educational leadership before administration and that he preferred the mentor and innovator role of Quinn's model above the director's role and the role of coordinator. We learned that this combination of roles is very important to understand the expertise of the school leader. The importance this principal put on daily contacts with teachers and the will to innovate made this principal invest in coaching his teachers more than the principals in the other cases.

Although the moderate-minded principal considered the director's role (developing a school vision) as her most important role in the Quinn model, she experienced more difficulty in implementing this vision because she found it not easy to involve her team members in this vision. When we look at her daily practices she stated that she did not find the time to visit classrooms. She considered these visits as only worthwhile when they lasted for half a day or a whole day. She did not succeed in



implementing her vision as well as principal A because she was not so much focused on her mentoring and innovator role. This might explain her moderate score on both her supportive leadership behavior and her initiating structure behavior. This is in line with the study of Barnett and McCormick (2002), who found that the influence of vision may be overestimated and that leadership in schools is mainly characterized by relationships with individuals. According to this study, it is through these relationships that a leader is able to encourage teachers to apply their expertise and efforts toward shared purpose. Barnett and McCormick (2002) found that individual concern was the most crucial leadership behavior in these relationships.

The score on both leadership behavior variables of the administrative-minded principal was one of the lowest of the whole sample. We believe this was not a coincidence when we look at this principal's role conceptions. The administrative-minded principal, who did not consider herself as a leader, saw administration as an important role in her job and put the coordinating role of the Quinn model as her prior role. This view on planning, organization, and control was reflected in the absence of an explicit school vision and a feeling of being unable to involve team members in this vision. Moreover, the principal did not invest in classroom visits and stated that she had not enough time for contacts with teachers, parents, and pupils. For the teachers this principal was not there to provide feedback, to help them, or to clarify what was expected from them.

### School Climate

The differences between the three principals in their role conceptions, expertise, and leadership behavior were reflected in the different school climates of the three principals. In Case A the people-minded principal was working in a strong and moving school climate characterized by a strong unity in vision, a strong involvement of team members in decision making, and strong professional and nonprofessional ties among the teachers. The importance that the principal attached to change and innovation (see previous quote) was also confirmed by the high score on the climate dimension "innovation and change orientation."

Case B with the administrative-minded principal had a weak climate. The principal's preoccupation with administration and her preference for the coordinator role in Quinn's model explains why she invested mainly in resource allocation, organization, and paperwork. The administrative-minded principal failed to transfer her beliefs and expectations to the teaching staff. The school climate lacked a collective sense of unity in vision. Also, participation in the school is low and teachers considered the collaboration with colleagues as limited. Finally, knowing that the major concern of the principal was administration and an emphasis on stability, it is not

unexpected that the school received one of the lowest scores on innovation orientation.

The moderate minded principal (Case C) was working in a school with an average score on the school climate dimensions. She was less preoccupied with administration than the administrative-minded principal, but she did not have the same priority on the mentor role and the innovator role as the principal in Case A. She tried to develop a vision (and indicated this as her prior leadership role), but she believed she did not have the time to visit classrooms regularly, and she did not invest as much time in daily interactions with teachers and students as principal A. This can explain why goal orientedness in the school was only average. From our analyses, it seemed that the relationships between the teaching staff were formal rather than informal. An important remark with regard to the formal relationships, however, is that the professional collaboration among teachers was not always optimal (average score on formal relationships). The same goes for participation in the school's policy.

### Confirmation of the Case Studies

To strengthen the transferability of our findings about the principal's role conceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), leadership behavior, and school climate, we selected the top five schools of our sample of 46 schools of which the scores on the school climate dimensions were one standard deviation above or below the mean. The five schools with high scores for all the school culture dimensions were compared on the principal's role conceptions and leadership behavior, with the five opposites representing the weak cultures.

Looking at the profiles of principals of strong moving climates, we noticed the absence of administrative-minded principals. They all gave priority to their task of educational leader. Moreover, they succeeded in devoting sufficient time to the development of educational policy and to communication and consultation with teachers and students. It is striking that these principals found themselves capable of performing their task as educational leader. As to the roles of the Quinn model, the five school leaders identified themselves with the role of mentor (the principal of Case A ranked the mentor role and the innovator role first). This is an important observation. They all believe that coaching and supporting their staff is their most significant role, and they put this role before the director role, in which the development of a vision is central. It seems that these school leaders have a vision, and are able to implement a shared vision supported by their staff, considering the high score on goal orientedness and participation as school climate dimensions. However, they believe that the mentor role is crucial in their leadership role. The most essential skills in the implementation of a vision is not having the vision (director role) but

support and communication with the teachers (mentor role). It is through their support of teachers and their caring attitude that they are able to involve teachers in their vision. This is clearly illustrated in our three case studies, where the people-minded principal believed investing in emotional support was essential. Also, he was the only principal who visited classes frequently and for short periods. Whereas the moderate-minded principal also believed this is important, she did not find a strategy to visit classes. Also, she did not invest as much time as principal A in relationships with the teachers.

In the case of weak cultures we observed that none of the school leaders had a people-minded profile. Three of them indicated that they preferred the coordinator role or the role of director. One of them preferred the mentor role in Quinn's model, but he considered administrative tasks prior to educational leadership. Only one principal preferred the mentor role in Quinn's model and put the educational leadership role first. However, here we found a discrepancy between what this principal said was his main leadership role (coaching of people) and what he actually did with his time. Although he attempted to create the impression that he attached importance to people and educational matters, he clearly stated during the interview that he devoted most of his time to administrative matters. This was also the case with the other four principals with the lowest school climate score. In the interviews it became clear that the main reason for the lack of time invested in educational policy and relations with teachers was that they did not consider this as a priority or because they did not possess the necessary social skills in general and the skill to translate school goals in a concrete way in particular. Hence, they experienced great difficulty in involving all teachers in the school vision. As one administrative-minded principal indicated:

*It is hard to involve teachers in school-level matters. As long as things are classroom related, it works. But for a number of things, like vision and long-term thinking, it is very difficult to get teachers committed. . . . Most of the time they ask: what does that imply for us?*

In contrast, a people-minded principal testified:

*. . . Is that (developing a vision) difficult? No, because on every occasion, you have to ask yourself: is this feasible, is it realistic? If we commit ourselves to do something, we should take things seriously, not just put a decision on paper, like "we believe social skills are important" and then do nothing about it. No, let us provide several methods, let us schedule a number of project weeks in the yearly planning, let us ask a number of people to go to a training course, let us look for teachers who are prepared to be a project coordinator.*

People-minded principals feel more capable of developing a shared vision. They are close to their staff, they develop a climate of trust, and they are able to translate an abstract idea into concrete projects that are meaningful to the teachers. In consultation with their teachers they decide how a vision is implemented. Administrative-minded principals lack the skills to act in such a way. Therefore, they are reluctant to go into classrooms and to consult with teachers. They also indicated they have difficulty giving teachers instructional support. Although some of them indicated that coaching teachers is a priority, they devoted most of their time to administration and organizing.

### 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. We attempted to contribute to the knowledge about why principals act the way they do. Although our findings are exploratory, they indicate that principals, who work in strong-moving climates or environments that stimulate professional learning are in general strong leaders (supportive leadership and initiating structure) and attach much importance to the mentor role in Quinn's model. They also prefer their role as educational leader above their role as administrator. The opposite pole of these people-minded school leaders are the administrative-minded principals, who consider administration, organization, and the implementation of rules and regulations as more important than their educational leadership role and/or they consider the mentor role not as their most important leadership role. While they indicate both the educational leadership role and the mentor role as most important, administrative-minded principals do not succeed in translating this role concept into daily practice. They just lack the skills to support their staff effectively. Those principals are more likely to have a negative impact on the school climate because they do not foster daily interactions with teachers, providing structure and support.

Several important lessons for recruitment and professional development can be drawn from these findings. Evidence from the study supports the contention that principals' leadership role cognitions are an important determinant of their leadership practices (Leithwood, 1995) and school climate. In recruiting principals 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 pay attention in the selection of school leaders in the way they consider educational leadership compared to administration as priorities and in the way they

conceive the mentoring and innovator role compared to the role of coordinator and director. Above all, they must probe how these school leaders think they can develop a concrete vision and how they believe they can translate this vision into stepping stones for the teachers' daily practice. Furthermore, these qualities in the educational and professional development programs for principals should be emphasized.

The conclusion that what principals think determines what they do could be considered simplistic reductionism. Drawing on the analogy of the trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), it could be suggested that the conceptions of school leaders about their leadership role evokes corresponding behavior only when the environment or school climate triggers these conceptions. To put it differently, the relationship between profiles (people minded, moderate minded, and administrative minded) and leadership behavior (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 value of further investigating this hypothesis. For instance, we noticed that in the case of schools with a strong climate none of their principals had an administrative-minded profile. In addition, schools with weak climates did not have principals who were people minded. This suggests that so called "strong climates" trigger cognitions 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, managing school development and change, and sustaining schools as communities of learners (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Day, Hall, & Whitaker, 1998), but also undergoes the effect of school climate because of the fact he is immersed in it. 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 (cognitions–leadership role behavior–school climate), an extra arrow could be added from school climate, moderating the relationship between beliefs and leadership role.

An alternative design, to provide information on the exact directions that exist between the principal and the school climate, 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.

Despite the weaknesses of our study, this article has contributed to the cognitive perspective of school leadership by introducing three ways of distinguishing 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 precursor of their actions. In addition, 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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## APPENDIX: THE FOUR LEADERSHIP ROLES ACCORDING TO QUINN'S COMPETING VALUES MODEL

### Leadership role 1 (coordinator role: internal focus and stability)

Organizing, planning, controlling, coordinating, and evaluating are prior to me. My attention mainly goes to the management of the school. In the first place I am focused on what goes on in my school. I believe stability, control, and security in my school are of major importance and I feel responsible for that. I continuously try to imply rules and regulations. My aim is to keep the school up and running.

### Leadership role 2 (director role: external focus and stability)

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.

### Leadership role 3 (mentor role: internal focus and flexibility)

Coaching and motivating of my staff are central in my actions as a leader. I am always ready to support people where necessary. When I have to take decisions, I involve my teachers. I think it is important that they are aware of what goes on in the school and know why certain decisions are made. I believe flexibility is of major importance. I believe teamwork is essential.

### Leadership role 4 (innovator role: external focus and flexibility)

Innovation and creativity are characteristic for me as a school leader. When I implement change and innovation I am prepared to take risks. Existing rules must be challenged regularly by new ideas. I mainly think about the school's future and I think it is important to go along with your time.