

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

**LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: AN EXPLORATORY EMBEDDED
MULTIPLE CASE-STUDY OF HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS IN TWO SCHOOLS IN
KAZAKHSTAN**

by

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THESIS

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been submitted for the award of any other course or degree at NU or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. This thesis is the result of my own independent work, except where otherwise stated, and the views expressed here are my own.

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Date: 19.06.2024

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ABSTRACT

Educational systems around the world are focused on enhancing the quality and equity in education. Kazakhstan, with aspirations to rank among the 30 most developed economies by 2050, recognizes the role of education in developing competitive human capital for economic growth. Thus, the nation initiated rapid educational changes aimed at improving the teaching and learning quality and standards in schools. Despite ongoing decentralization efforts, the Kazakhstani education system remains centralized and bureaucratic due to the legacy of the Soviet era, which is still present in teachers' memories and professional beliefs, and internal structures of the school system including school administration, leadership and management.

While traditionally, school leadership has been solely associated with school principal, there has been a shift towards more distributed forms of leadership. Middle leaders, particularly heads of departments (HoDs), are well placed in between the policy and practice and teachers and senior leaders. They can play a pivotal role in enacting leadership within schools. Their leadership potential to impact the improvement of teaching and learning practices, contribute to the overall school improvement, and negotiate and interpret school reforms has been increasingly recognized worldwide.

To enact this leadership role, one needs to develop their leadership identity which provides a motive to be the leader and practice leadership. In other words, to be the leader and act as a leader, one needs to internalize the role, to be recognized as a leader by others, and to be collectively endorsed in a wider organizational and societal context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) through a myriad of experiences, relationships and interactions. In Kazakhstan's context, HoDs understanding, experiences and practices of their leadership role is unclear, as well as how they become leaders and what enables them to practice leadership is worth exploring. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate how HoDs construct their

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

leadership identity and what experiences, relationships and interactions become either catalysts or barriers to the construction of HoDs' leadership identity. This is an embedded multiple case study of six HoDs in two state schools. Semi-structured interviews with HoDs, senior leaders, local educational authorities and teachers, document analysis, and non-participant observations of staff meetings were used as data collection methods for this study.

The findings revealed that HoD's mediate contexts and multiple roles. Their role is increasingly recognized by the school leaders and local educational authorities; however, they are still perceived as teachers rather than positional leaders within the organizational structure. By exploring middle leaders' identity construction, this study contributes to the current understanding of middle leadership in contexts with centralized educational systems, paternalistic cultures, and top-down approaches to leadership and management. The study also offers insights and recommendations to the policymakers, local educational authorities, school leaders, and HoDs about the process of leadership development and middle leadership in particular.

Keywords: heads of department, leadership identity construction, middle leaders

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration of Originality	
Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables.....	x
List of Figures.....	xi
List of Appendices.....	xii
List of Abbreviations.....	xiii
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Rationale for Undertaking this Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Kazakhstani Context.....	4
School Leadership Structures.....	8
Middle Leadership in Different Leadership Models.....	9
Problem Statement.....	11
Purpose of Study.....	13
Research Questions.....	13
Significance and Contributions.....	13
Outline of the Thesis.....	14
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	16
Leadership and Management.....	16
Leading from the Middle.....	18
Effective Leadership Practices.....	22

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Leading from the Middle in Different Leadership Models.....	26
Leadership Role and Leadership Identity.....	28
Catalysts and Barriers to Leadership Identity Construction.....	31
Middle Leadership and Heads of Departments' Role.....	33
Theoretical Approach.....	36
Summary.....	39
Chapter 3 Methodology.....	41
Philosophical Underpinnings.....	43
Researcher Positionality.....	45
Research Design.....	46
Research Sample.....	48
Methods of Data Collection.....	56
Data Collection Process.....	58
Methods of Data Analysis and Synthesis.....	67
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	69
Ethical Considerations.....	71
Summary.....	75
Chapter 4 Findings.....	77
Leading School Case.....	81
School Departmental Context.....	81
Understanding, Experiences and Practices of HoDs' Leadership Role in the Leading School.....	88
Within-Case Analysis of the Leading School to Research Question 1.....	107
Non-leading School Case.....	108

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

School and Departmental Context.....	108
Understanding, Experiences and Practices of HoDs’ Leadership Role in the Non-leading School.....	113
Within-Case Analysis of the Non-Leading School to Research Question 1.....	125
Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives of HoDs’ Leadership Role in the Leading School....	126
Within-Case Analysis of the Leading School to Research Question 2.....	136
Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives of HoDs’ Leadership Role in the Non-leading School.....	138
Within-Case Analysis of the Non-leading School to Research Question 2.....	145
Findings from Individual Cases of Leadership.....	146
L-CoUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	147
L-EIUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	150
L-NonUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	157
NL-CoUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	161
NL-EI-UNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	165
NL-NonUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction.....	167
Cross-Case Analysis between the Leading and Non-leading Schools.....	169
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	172
HoDs’ Conceptualization of Leadership.....	173
Mediating Contexts and Multiple Roles.....	176
Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives of HoDs’ Leadership Role.....	177
Translating Policies and Implementing Reform.....	178
Representing and Advocating.....	179
Managing Talents and Human Resources.....	180

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Catalysts and Barriers of Leadership Identity Construction.....	181
Individual Internalization.....	181
Teacher versus Leader Identity.....	181
Impact of Self-belief as a Leader.....	183
Leader Self-efficacy as a Catalyst to Identity Construction.....	184
The Role of Leadership Development.....	186
Relational Recognition.....	189
The Need for a Role Model and a Mentor.....	189
Identity Grants from Senior Leaders and Colleagues.....	192
Relational Trust.....	194
Developing Leadership Identity in Teacher Leader Groups.....	197
Assumptions about Age and Experience.....	198
Tensions between Accountability and Collegiality.....	200
Collective Endorsement.....	201
Advisory Role.....	201
The Role of Organizational Structures.....	201
Time and Space Allocation as a Form of Organizational Control.....	202
Financial Implications on Leadership Identity.....	204
Societal Cultures' Impact on HoD's Identity.....	207
Summary.....	208
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	211
Major Findings.....	211
Conceptualization of Leadership and HoDs' Leadership Practices.....	211
HoD's Role and Position within the Organizational Structure.....	213

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Leading School Status.....	214
View of HoDs' by Senior Leaders, LEA, and Teachers.....	215
Catalysts and Barriers to HoDs Identity as Leaders.....	218
Contribution and Implications.....	223
Limitations of the Study.....	226
Recommendations for Further Research.....	228
Concluding Remarks.....	229
References.....	230
Appendices.....	263

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 School Organizational Structure (Adapted from De Nobile, 2018)

Table 2 Common Formal Middle Leadership Positions in Schools (De Nobile, 2018).

Table 3 Departmental Characteristics

Table 4 Overall Number of Participants

Table 5 Characteristics of Participants

Table 6 Data Collection Methods

Table 7 Data Collected through Non-participant Observations

Table 8 Alignment of Collected Data to Research Questions

Table 9 Profiles of Heads of Departments by School

Table 10 Departmental Context of the Leading School

Table 11 Departmental Context of the Non-Leading School

Table 12 Teacher Participants' Characteristics in the Leading School

Table 13 Teacher Participants' Characteristics in the Non-Leading School

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 School Organizational Structure

Figure 2 Position of Heads of Departments in the School Hierarchy

Figure 3 Embedded Multiple Case Study

Figure 4 Sample Semi-structured Interview Questions

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview Protocol for Heads of Departments – Round 1

Appendix 2 Interview Protocol for Heads of Departments – Round 2

Appendix 3 Interview Protocol for Teachers

Appendix 4 Interview Protocol for Senior Leaders

Appendix 5 Interview Protocol for LEA Official

Appendix 6 Non-participant Observation Protocol

Appendix 7 Informed Consent Form for Heads of Departments

Appendix 8 Invitation Letter to the School Principal

Appendix 9 Informed Consent Form for Teachers

Appendix 10 Informed Consent Form for Local Educational Authority Official

Appendix 11 LEA Approval to Conduct this Study

Appendix 12 CITI Training

Appendix 13 Ethics Approval

Appendix 14 Teaching Categories

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CoE	Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) Center of Excellence
Cambridge FoE	University of Cambridge Faculty of Education
LEA	Local Education Authority
MES RK	Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan
NCTPD Orleu	National Centre for Teacher Professional Development Orleu
NIS	Autonomous Educational Organization “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools”
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SPED	State Program for Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan
State Standard	State Compulsory Standard for Secondary Education
UNT	Unified National Test

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of how heads of departments (HoDs) in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan construct their leadership identity, what experiences, relationships and interactions the HoDs encounter in their middle leader role contribute to the construction of their leadership identity. HoDs, in the context of Kazakhstani secondary schools, are positional leaders, being placed in the middle between the senior leadership (principals and vice-principals) and teachers. They are both leaders and followers; leaders to teachers in their respective departments, and followers to the senior leadership such as principals and deputy principals. How they perceive themselves as leaders is dependent on how others see their role, and what experiences, relationships and interactions they have while leading from the middle (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The purpose of this embedded multiple case studies is to explore how heads of departments understand, experience, and practice their leadership role; how others such as senior leaders, teachers and local educational authorities view HoD's leadership role; and to understand what factors become catalysts and barriers to the HoD's leadership identity construction. This thesis includes the following chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

Rationale for Undertaking this Study

This study on how middle leaders such as HoDs in Kazakhstani schools construct their leadership identity developed from the mixture of my professional experience and interest. I worked as a deputy principal for external affairs in one Nazarbayev Intellectual School (AEO NIS), where I was also a practicing English language teacher. One of the projects I led was school improvement through international accreditation with the Council of International

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Schools. This school improvement project involved strategic planning, and analysis of school operations against seven standards: guiding statements, teaching and learning, faculty and professional development, student well-being, operational systems, school culture and governance. To analyze each sector, we created teams which included faculty and support staff, senior leaders, and technical specialists. All HoDs were involved in the teaching, learning standards where they needed to assess written and taught curriculum, and understand how their curriculum is vertically (within the subject), and horizontally (across the subjects) aligned. I could witness how HoDs who initially were more involved in their departments only, over time began to take the leadership role as curriculum leaders, and could see their contribution to the school improvement and international accreditation. Senior leaders reviewed their perception of the HoDs' role, began to delegate more leadership opportunities and to uncover their leadership potential. However, among the HoDs were also those unwilling to take the ownership over this new leadership role. This happened mostly due to overloaded schedules, lack of confidence in their capacity to lead, or lack of clarity in their new functions and associated workload. This professional experience provoked my research interest to explore why and how some individuals take on leadership roles and some do not, what factors impact their belief in themselves as leaders that motivates them to practice leadership.

Background

Educational systems around the world are working on improving the quality and equity in education for enhancing students' learning outcomes (OECD, 2014). Effective school leadership is considered second after teaching and learning to impact students' learning outcomes (Brown, et al., 2000; Fleming, 2000; Harris & Jones, 2017; Highfield, 2012; Koh, 2018). It can have a strong positive impact on student learning through the improvement of school and classroom conditions, better organization of teaching and learning (Wahlstrom et al., 2010), establishing

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

clear goals and expectations (Harris, 1998), and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson, 2007). School leadership has been largely associated with the principal as the lone leader of the school (Hallinger, 2011), however, over the past decades there has been a shift towards more distributed forms of leadership, such as shared, collaborative, and teacher leadership (Qanay & Frost, 2022).

Middle leadership is the important layer between the senior leader and teachers, which is usually referred to as ‘king-pins’, ‘the engine room’, ‘the hub of the school’ (Earley, 1998, p. 158), ‘liaison’ (Paranosic & Riveros, 2017) and a ‘buffer’ (Busher, 2005) between the top and the bottom of leadership hierarchy in schools. HoDs as middle leaders are considered more influential in improving classroom teaching practices and students’ learning due to their close proximity to teachers and classrooms (Leask & Terrel, 2014) and their responsibility for relatively smaller groups of people (Hannay & Denby, 1994).

In the context of Kazakhstan, these roles and responsibilities take on additional significance. Reflecting global trends, Kazakhstan aspires to rank among the 30 most developed economies by 2050 and recognizes the critical role of education in fostering competitive human capital for economic growth. To achieve this, the nation has initiated rapid educational reforms, including the transition to 12-year schooling, a renewed curriculum, criteria-based assessment, per capita funding, inclusive education, and multilingual education (MES, 2010). These rapid changes substantiated the need for developing leadership capacity within schools (OECD, 2014; Kanayeva, 2019).

National professional development programs aimed at developing teachers’ instructional and leadership practices were introduced across the country (Wilson, 2017), thus providing teachers and school leaders with more opportunities for leadership and expectations to translate best practices to other schools (Yakavets, 2017). However, to what extent the role of HoDs has

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

been changing is unclear, as mostly senior leaders and teachers are positioned as agents of current educational changes both in the literature and policy documents.

Intensive school reforms, COVID-19 pandemic and the quest to secure students' learning outcomes are the challenges education systems in Kazakhstan are currently encountering and need to respond to. Despite the given circumstances, policies continue to be implemented, as well as school strategic plans continue to be realized. Being placed in between the policy and practice, HoDs are in the good position to interpret school's strategic goals into short-term operational goals, to communicate them to their departments, and to interpret and negotiate policies for further enactment (Brundrett, 2004). Their position allows them to facilitate the process of school reforms within their subject department by establishing effective professional learning (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018), setting clear goals and expectations (Harris, 1998), applying the insider's knowledge of the internal context (De Nobile, 2018). However, despite increasing research interest and wider practice of more shared and distributed forms of leadership, HoDs' leadership potential, and leadership role have been undoubtedly undervalued (Siskin, 1994), and, therefore, underutilized (Leithwood, 2016; Weller, 2001).

The current study focuses on the role of heads of department as a middle leadership cadre. To unpack their place within current transformation and structural changes taking place, it is pertinent discussing the system of Kazakhstani secondary education and school middle leadership in particular.

Kazakhstani Context

School education in Kazakhstan was formed under the rule of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), was owned and controlled by the State, and offered free education. School education in independent Kazakhstan continued to offer free education according to the State Curriculum Standard. The school network is comprised predominantly of comprehensive K-12

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

schools, gymnasium, and lyceums; selective schools for gifted and talented students such as Daryn, Bilim-Innovation lyceums; autonomous schools such as school within the network of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools; and ungraded schools with mixed forms (Bridges & Sagintayeva, 2014).

Since Kazakhstan received its independence in 1991, school education has been going through continuous reforms combining its Soviet legacy and adoption of international best practices in education (Silova & Niyozov, 2020; Tajik & Yesselbayev, 2024). The system remained centralized and was managed by local educational authorities (city and regional) and the Ministry of Education (OECD, 2014). The New State General Educational Standard, which was adopted in 2002 through 2010, regulates education (Yakovets & Dzhadrina, 2014). Current reforms are mandated by the government's initiative to enter the world's 30 most competitive economies, the 'Kazakhstan 2030' and 'Kazakhstan 2050' strategies (Nazarbayev, 2015). Guided by these strategic documents, the State Program for Education Development for 2011-2020 frames reforms in Kazakhstani education (Fimyar et al., 2014). This policy document (MES, 2010) emphasizes the role of education in the development of competitive human capital for economic growth. However, it also identifies and admits problem areas such as poor school infrastructure, feminization of the teaching profession, ungraded schools and increased number of students with special needs. External evaluation of the national secondary education system also revealed an overloaded and outdated curriculum, limited preparedness of graduates to enter and cope with the academic workload of higher education, and lack of vocational skills and qualifications of graduates for entry-level positions (OECD, 2014). Moreover, the system has been criticized for its lack of student-centered teaching and learning methodologies and assessment practices that do not support students' progress and achievement (Yakovets, 2014).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Obviously, significant reforms and changes were needed to tackle these issues in secondary education in its way towards the development of human capital and sustainable economic growth.

Secondary education reforms are national-scale initiatives that take place across different areas of the education sector, including the content of the curriculum, new assessment approaches, language policy, per capita funding, and inclusive education (Turmukhambetova & Makoelle, 2024). The Ministry of Education mandates these reforms, and the local educational authorities are responsible for their delivery (Qanay & Frost, 2022), thus placing schools to operate within the system which remains “centralized and bureaucratic” despite continuing process towards the decentralization of education (Yakavets et al., 2015, p. 347). ‘Soviet’ is still present not only in teachers’ memories and professional beliefs (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016) but in the internal structures of the school system including school administration, leadership and management (Yakavets et al., 2015).

Renewed curriculum and assessment have been major reforms taking place since 2015, and focused on a transition away from knowledge-based curriculum towards functional literacy, development of problem-solving and critical thinking; and from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy. To support these reforms National In-Service Professional Development Institute, and newly established professional development organizations such as NIS Center of Excellence and Orleu, offered extensive in-service training in innovative pedagogy and school leadership (Yakavets et al., 2015). For example, the leadership program for teachers focused on facilitation of teachers’ agency, knowledge transfer, school-based learning and collaboration (Wilson, 2017).

It is assumed that facilitation of non-positional leadership could potentially increase teachers’ ownership of the reforms (Kanayeva, 2019) as teachers had to learn how to lead these initiatives (Yakavets et al., 2015). Leadership as practice rather than position underpins the in-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

service professional development program for teachers and school leaders. Within the school, leadership practices are based on collaborative group work, coaching and mentoring of colleagues, organization of lesson study and action research (Wilson, 2017), teachers also learned to establish and plan school networking through extended networks with other schools (Ayubayeva, 2018). Leadership programs for school leaders involved training in distributed forms of leadership, and strategic and school development planning. Upon completion of the professional development program, teachers, senior and middle leaders receive increased remuneration and certain leadership expectations to cascade skills and knowledge to other colleagues (Turner et al., 2014). For example, leadership opportunities for schools extend through the project of ‘leading schools’ (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023). Local educational authorities identify effective schools and delegate responsibility to transfer their best practices in instruction, leadership, and teacher research to other schools in the region. This leading schools’ project is practiced across all regions in Kazakhstan, the number of leading schools grew from 683 in 2015 to 1850 in 2022 (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023), in Astana city since 2016, the number of leading schools increased from 14 to 30 in 2021.

National-scale professional development allowed schools to review their collaborative practices and availability of leadership opportunities for teachers. TALIS 2018 report (OECD, 2020, p. 5) states that 93% of teachers say that they “work in a collaborative school culture characterized by mutual support”, which is higher than the OECD average (81%), and 86% of teachers have opportunities to participate in school decision making (OECD average 77%). However, only 17% of principals say that teachers in their schools have “significant responsibility for the majority of the tasks related to school policies, curriculum and instruction” which is 25% lower than the OECD average (2020, p. 3). Therefore, based on these findings it is interesting to determine to what extent teachers and school leaders negotiate opportunities to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

exercise leadership and participate in school development activities, as quality teaching, students' learning.

School Leadership Structures

As it is evident from previous sections, leadership can be exercised by both positional and non-positional leaders. Positional leaders are those who take or are assigned to take the leadership role in the school, such as school principals; non-positional leaders are those who practice leadership, but do not hold a certain formal position in the school leadership hierarchy, such as teachers. What the previous section does not mention is other leaders in the school, such as middle leaders, those between the senior leaders and teachers. Internationally, examples of middle leaders include heads of subject departments, curriculum coordinators, head of house, year coordinators and others. Existing leadership positions within school organizational structures across the world are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

School Organizational Structure (Adapted from De Nobile, 2018)

Senior leaders	Middle leaders	Teachers/Teacher assistant
Principal/Headteacher Deputy Principal/Assistant Head	Head of Department Year Coordinator Head of House Subject Coordinator Stage Coordinator Curriculum Coordinator Primary Coordinator	Math Teacher ESL Teacher Physics Teacher Social Science Teacher Science Teacher Biology/Chemistry Teacher, etc

Until recently, school leadership has been associated predominantly with senior leaders. However, in school systems with more collaborative, distributed, and shared forms of leadership, middle leadership is acknowledged and their potential is utilized. In the literature, middle leadership is defined as another layer of leadership between the senior leaders and the teachers (Bush, 2016; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). De Nobile (2018) defines middle leadership as “teachers

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

(and some non-teachers) who have, or assume, responsibility for the maintenance, development of improvement of some aspect of school organization including student welfare, curriculum area(s), policy, teacher development and various other activities, often through teams or committees” (p. 398). In this study, the middle leader position is referred only to the heads of department for the following reason. Heads of department (HoDs) are the focus of this research, as positional middle leadership in Kazakhstani schools is represented by this position only.

Middle Leadership in Different Leadership Models

Internationally HoDs and other middle leaders occupy different places within school leadership structure, which is primarily dependent on the leadership model exercised at school. A brief discussion of the place of middle leadership within various existing leadership models will provide a better understanding of where this role fits in. A more extended discussion is presented in the literature review section.

School leadership has been traditionally associated with the senior leader, i.e., principal-centered. Therefore, some existing leadership models are centered on the principal as the key leader of the organization. For example, instructional leadership is a strong, directive, and top-down model of instructional improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Transformational leadership is a model of influencing and stimulating the organization through commitment and capacity building (Bush & Glover, 2014) and is, however, also associated with the principal.

There is also a tendency towards leadership models where the power, authority, and responsibilities are shared and distributed among other personnel in the organization (Leithwood, 2001; Spillane, 2005). These models are based on leadership for learning (Bush, 2011) and include, shared leadership, and teacher leadership (Harris, 2004) which recognize middle leaders as an essential part of the organization and acknowledge their potential for departmental and school effectiveness, and therefore, students’ learning outcomes (Harris & Jones, 2017). In these

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

latter leadership models, leadership is seen not as a position occupied by an individual (the principal) but a practice which is engaged by a variety of stakeholders including vice-principals, department heads, subject coordinators, and teachers (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Therefore, the principal is no longer considered the sole leader of the school (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013); instead, the leadership of the HoD is considered key and important for students to succeed. Their role in negotiating and interpreting the school reform (Brundrett, 2004), whether small- or large-scale, especially in turbulent and changing environments, is increasingly emphasized (Bush, 2011; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Harris, 2000; Harris & Jones, 2017).

The school system in Kazakhstan is centralized and bureaucratic and school leadership is predominantly associated with positional leaders such as the principal. Current reforms place high expectations on principals as major agents of change in their schools alongside higher levels of autonomy which are also new to them (OECD, 2014). For example, the introduction of per capita funding implies increased financial and performance accountabilities (Kasa & Mhamed, 2023). Therefore, the school leaders lead and manage their schools in the climate of top-down decision-making and control of the local educational authorities and the Ministry of Education (Bridges & Sagintayeva, 2014). Moreover, research suggests that the school context in Kazakhstan is shaped by traditional Kazakhstani cultural values such as collectivism and expecting guidance from the superior (Hofstede et al., 2010), paternalistic culture (Yakavets, 2016) and the Soviet legacy (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016). It can, therefore, be concluded that school leadership models in Kazakhstani schools are predominantly principal-centered and top-down. Nevertheless, in light of current reforms middle leaders such as the HoDs and teachers are supported with opportunities to exercise leadership inside and outside the schools, and national scale professional development. There has been a significant paradigm shift and role change in the way teachers teach (Goodman et al., 2023) and leaders lead (Yakavets et al., 2015). The

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has also affected how schools are led, thus urging the schools to transition towards more distributed forms of leadership (Azorin, 2020) where middle leaders such as HoDs can become the key connecting link between the teachers and the senior leaders. Therefore, better understanding of how heads of departments become leaders and take on their leadership role to implement the reforms, to secure quality learning and better outcomes will shed light on how to maximize the potential this middle leadership role can have.

Problem Statement

Over the past years, educational systems around the world have been on a quest to enhance students' learning outcomes (OECD, 2014). Internationally, middle leaders' role in impacting teaching and learning has received greater interest in research, policy and practice (Bennet et al., 2007, Busher & Harris, 1999; De Nobile, 2018; Grootenboer, 2018; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2023). This interest is founded on the premise that heads of departments, being positional middle leaders, are more influential in improving classroom teaching practices and students' learning because they are closest to teachers and classrooms (Highfield, 2012; Leask & Terrel, 2014). They interpret the school's long-term strategic goals into short-term operational goals, communicate them within their departments, interpret and negotiate policies for further enactment (Brundrett, 2004). Heads of departments play a pivotal middle leader role, and this is increasingly recognized (Gurr, 2023; Harris, 2020b; Lipscombe et al., 2023). However, how heads of departments and others in the organization see their leadership role is related to whether they take on leadership opportunities; i.e., their identity influences their practices (Busher, 2005; Collier et al., 2002; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Due to COVID-19 and school closures, how schools are led had to change overnight (Bush, 2021; Harris, 2020a). This 'crisis', however, created more opportunities for distributed forms of leadership and increased

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

recognition of the middle leaders' role (Azorin, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020).

How others see the role influences one's leadership identity construction. DeRue and Ashford (2010) explain this process as an interplay of mutual claims and grants of leadership, which can be verbal and non-verbal, direct or indirect. For example, senior leaders' perception or policy formulation of HoDs' leadership role would be either an act of granting leadership or not granting it. In policy documents, Kazakhstani heads of departments' functions are predominantly managerial which include compliance and accountability with formal policies, day-to-day routine activities; their role is advisory, and decisions are subject to senior leader's approval (MES, 2019). HoD are teachers who take on additional role of departmental leadership and management. Their perceptions of themselves as leaders influences their leadership identity construction and motive to act as leaders (Crow et al., 2017). A recent large-scale study shows that only a few teachers in their schools participate and take significant responsibility over tasks related to policies, curriculum, and instruction (OECD, 2020). Teachers may not be ready or not willing to exercise leadership (Yakavets et al., 2015). Therefore, this study aims to explore how in the context of educational reforms and the COVID-19 pandemic, HoDs understand, experience and practice their leadership role; how HoD's view of their leadership role by themselves and others (senior leaders, teachers, local educational authorities) has changed if at all, and what experiences, relationships and interactions become either catalysts or barriers to the construction of HoDs' leadership identity.

Moreover, most of the existing research is dominated by the European and North American perspectives (De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023), and not much is known about how heads of departments' leadership identity is constructed in hierarchical and paternalistic societal culture with a continuing 'Soviet' legacy such as that in Kazakhstan.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Purpose of Study

This study aims to use qualitative embedded multiple case-study design to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities through experiences, relationships and interaction with senior leaders and teachers, engagement with a wider organizational context such as school context and local educational authorities. To address this purpose, the following overarching and sub-questions will guide this study.

Research Questions

What experiences, relationships, and interactions contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

1. How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?
2. How do others (senior leaders, teachers and local educational authorities) view HoDs' middle leadership role?
3. What are the catalysts and barriers of the HoDs' leadership identity construction process?

Significance and Contributions

This study contributes to the school leadership literature and middle leadership in particular in the following ways. Firstly, it explores and builds on existing but undertheorized literature on middle leadership (De Nobile, 2018). It provides an empirically grounded account of how the currently underrecognized HoDs' leadership role in Kazakhstani secondary schools is perceived by the heads of departments themselves and others. Currently, empirical and theoretical literature in middle leadership is dominated by the Western perspectives and contexts, and research on the Eurasian context is limited. This study aims to close this gap by providing an account of middle leadership in a societal culture which is characterized by a Soviet legacy

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

(Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016; Tajik & Yesselbayev, 2024), hierarchical structures (Qanay & Courtney, 2024), and power dominance of senior leaders (Yakavets, 2016). This study suggests policy implications to recognize heads of departments' leadership role, suggestions for role definition and leadership development programs, and leadership capacity development (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Finally, this study generates theoretical and conceptual understanding of middle leadership in the school context of Kazakhstan by thoroughly exploring leadership identity construction across the three levels outlined by DeRue & Ashford (2010): individual internalization, relational recognition, collective endorsement. Unlike other studies that generally concentrate on just one level. This multilevel analysis provides a more comprehensive account of leadership identity construction of middle leaders in the educational contexts.

Outline of the Thesis

This dissertation consists of six chapters, including an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion. The present chapter serves as the introduction providing the background, contextual information, defines the purpose of the study, explains the rationale for undertaking this research, research questions, highlighting the significance and contributions of the study.

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of both empirical and theoretical literature. Within this chapter, I examine relevant studies and present the theoretical framework underpinning this research.

Chapter 3 presents the philosophical underpinnings such as ontological, epistemological, methodological stances and the research design of the study. The chapter discusses the rationale

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

to employ the embedded multiple-case study as a research design, methods of data collection, the process of data analysis, selection of research sites, recruitment of participants.

Chapter 4 reveals the findings and major themes supported with empirical evidence collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation in two case-study schools.

Chapter 5 examines the synthesis and discussion of the major findings in relation to existing research.

Chapter 6 presents a summary of the major findings in respect to the overarching and sub-questions that guided this study. It also includes the implications for theory, policy and practice, recommendations for research, and limitations.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews existing theoretical and empirical literature in educational leadership and management, defines leadership within this study, problematizes middle leadership within different leadership models, explains the difference between leadership identity and leadership roles, and discusses leadership identity construction process.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management in education are two concepts that are used together, at times, interchangeably. However, there is a fine line between these two. Although there is little consensus on the definition of leadership (Koh, 2018), in organizational leadership literature, it is defined as synonymous with holding a position in a hierarchy of organizational structure, i.e., positional leadership. Leadership is also defined as a certain behavior or practice through which an individual influences other to follow (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006) through a shared vision and a common purpose of any member of the school community, not only the principal (Leithwood et al., 2006; Yukl, 2002). For example, the distributed leadership model suggests that senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, students, and parents can be leaders and can equally contribute to the development of the organization (Spillane, 2005), thus sharing collective responsibility for students' learning (Harris, 2014).

Management is focused on effective and efficient implementation of routine day-to-day tasks and achievement of goals (Tajik & Wali, 2020, p. 3), primarily through operational issues, establishment of systems, and adhering to accountability requirements (Day & Sammons, 2013).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

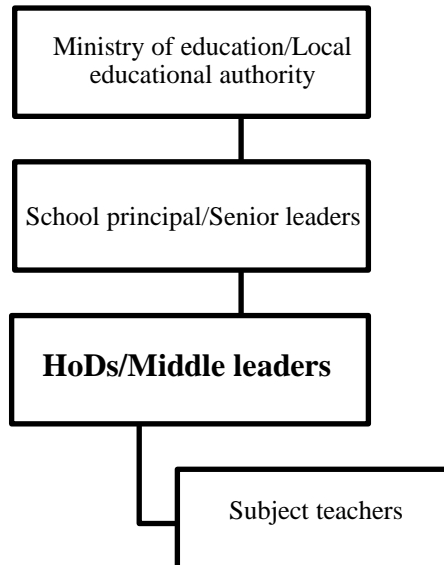
Empirical studies suggest that school leadership and management are second after classroom teaching to ensure better students' learning outcomes (Brown et al., 2000; Bush, 2011; Fleming, 2000; Harris & Jones, 2017; Highfield, 2012; Koh, 2018). Therefore, the impact school leadership and management can make on students' learning outcomes is achieved through shared vision, common purpose, achievement of school aims, and effective managerial practices.

In organizations, leadership and management can be positional and non-positional (De Nobile, 2018). Positional leaders and managers refer to those individuals in the organization who hold a formal position and are prescribed the role to lead and manage. For example, a school principal is the formal leader responsible for strategy and operations, finances, budgeting, instruction, and decision-making. Heads of departments also hold a formal position and responsibility to lead and manage their respective subject departments. Teachers might not hold formal positions, but they may be responsible for academic affairs or pastoral care and, therefore, practice non-positional leadership. In a school context, leadership and management is typically structured as depicted in this organogram in Figure 1. School organizational structure can be defined as hierarchical where senior leaders, including school principal and deputy principals, are on the top, whereas teachers and support staff are on the bottom. However, this is all dependent on the leadership practices and models exercised in the school. In schools where more distributed, shared, participatory forms of leadership prevail, the role of middle leadership and teacher leadership are emphasized and utilized. HoDs play a central communication role between the senior leaders and teachers (De Nobile, 2018), thus playing the role of a bridge and facilitators between policy decisions taken by the senior leadership and implementation of those decisions by teachers.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Figure 1

School Organizational Structure



Leading from the Middle

School leadership has been associated with principal and senior leaders, such as deputy principals or assistant heads. However, in the last two decades, middle management and middle leadership concepts developed and received greater research interest (Busher, 2005; De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023). In school leadership and management literature, the principal is no longer considered the sole leader of the school (Gumus et al., 2016). Instead, middle leaders' growing role in school leadership has been at the center of the discussion, primarily due to middle leaders' potential to generate an effect on school improvement (Harris et al, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023), their role in negotiating and interpreting the school reform (Harris, 2000), and improvement of teaching and learning practices (Leithwood, 2016). Despite the obvious importance of their role in the school, what impact

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

middle leaders can make depends on the definition and expectations of the role (Gurr, 2019) which tend to vary considerably (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

Middle leadership is differentiated into positional and non-positional. Some posts are positional as they are formally placed within the school organizational hierarchy. Across international contexts, positional middle leadership posts vary in scope and expectations of their roles, in some contexts, they are positional, in others – non-positional. Table 2 lists common formal middle leadership positions in schools (De Nobile, 2018).

Table 2

Common Formal Middle Leadership Positions in Schools (De Nobile, 2018)

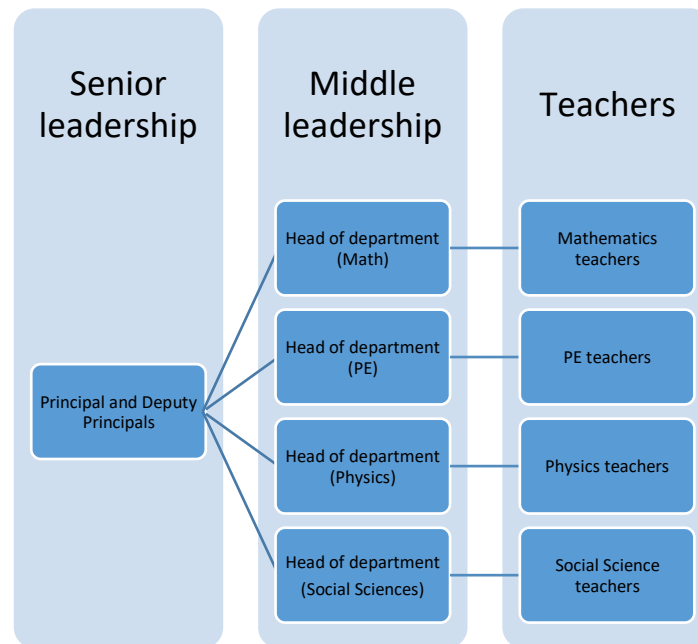
Primary schools	Secondary schools
Assistant Principal	Year Coordinator
Primary Coordinator	Year Advisor
Stage Coordinator	Stage Coordinator
Highly Accomplished Teacher	Subject Coordinator
Religious Education Coordinator	Religious Education Coordinator
ICT Coordinator	Head of Department
Senior Teacher	Head of Faculty
	Head of Year
	Head of House
	Curriculum Coordinator
	Pastoral Care Coordinator

Heads of departments lead and manage their respective subject departments, as shown in Figure 2. A department is a group of teachers within the same subject or closely related subject areas led by a head of department (HoD).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Figure 2

Position of Heads of Departments in the School Hierarchy (examples of math, physical education, physics and social sciences)



There is an agreement that such subject departmental arrangement has a unique potential for school performance (Harris et al., 1995; Sammons et al., 1997; Grootenboer, 2018), and contribution to the school's overall effectiveness (Brown et al., 2000; Dinham, 2007; Harris, 1998) primarily due to the close proximity to teachers and students and daily interaction with them (Weller, 2001). In other words, HoDs are a “direct extension” of the school’s leadership and management (Weller, 2001, p. 74). This position in the middle places HoDs in a better position to improve teaching and learning. Additionally, subject departmental division allows establishing collegiality and professional collaboration (Koh, 2018) within the department, which, in its turn, supports the improvement of teaching and learning.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

However, not all departments can be equally effective (Harris, 2000). Subject departments vary in size, composition, experience, expertise of teachers, and resources (Busher & Harris, 1999). Busher and Harris (1999) identify five departmental types: ‘federal’ department unifying several closely related subject areas; ‘confederate’ department consolidates subjects, which have little in common, small in size but are put together for administrative ease. ‘Unitary’ department represents teachers of one subject area, whereas ‘impacted’ departments also teach one subject area but are small in size, resources, and budget. Finally, ‘diffuse’ departments have “no identifiable base in the school” (p. 310). The reason for some departments’ perceived importance lies in the department’s status as defined by its place in the subject hierarchy (Siskin, 1994). Some subject departments experience competing demands and pressures from senior leaders and the external environment such as increasing accountability for high stake national exams and school reforms (Busher & Harris, 1999), while some subjects tend to be overlooked or perceived as unnecessary.

Empirical studies on middle leadership suggest that leading from the middle “creates coherence, increased efficiency and enhanced performance in a complex system” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020, p. 96), be it at a school level (Highfield, 2012) or whole-system change (Fullan, 2015). The impact effective middle leadership has on students learning outcomes has been extensively argued for and supported with empirical evidence (Dinham, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008). Obviously, HoDs play a pivotal middle leader role. Their effective leadership has a strong and positive impact on overall school performance, school improvement, and implementation of school reforms.

In a similar way, HoDs contribute to the departmental ineffectiveness. Harris (1998) identified characteristics of ineffective departments, the majority of which are related to the role

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

of HoD to lead and manage. These are style of leadership and management, inability to establish effective communication, organizational capacity, management of resources, and monitoring, evaluation, organization of teaching and learning, professional development. Different departmental organizations have implications on the type of leadership, heads of departments adopt to run their teams. Practices of effective middle leadership, enablers, and barriers are discussed in the following section.

Effective Leadership Practices

Heads of departments are indeed in a better position to influence students' learning outcomes. This is achieved through effective leadership practices, which Leithwood (2016) classified into five dimensions. These dimensions include direction setting, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization, improving the instructional program, and securing accountability.

Setting Directions

Effective heads of departments are able to build a shared vision and goals, communicate them to the staff, and create and ensure performance expectations (Leithwood, 2016). The advantage of departmental division and leadership for smaller groups of teachers allows heads of departments to interpret the school's strategic plans into operational short-term plans and effectively communicate them to the teachers in their departments. Leaders of successful departments tend to build a shared vision, create clear expectations, and develop a culture of success (Dinham, 2007). Traditionally, heads of departments were predominantly occupied with "routine administration and crisis management" (Brown & Rutherford, 1998, p. 76), which did not involve strategic thinking. Others argue that school strategic management should not be seen

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“as the exclusive preserve of senior staff” only (Early, 1998, p. 150). Despite the view that heads of departments need to be involved in strategic planning, the degree of involvement is dependent on the “nature of the organization, the management approach of senior staff and the culture of the organization” (Harris, 2000, p. 82). In other words, internal school culture defines the attitudes and responsibilities adhered to the role of department heads (Leithwood, 2016; Lumby & English, 2009). Similarly, middle leaders tend to experience a challenge of seeing their role beyond the department at a school-wide level (Koh, 2018).

Building Relationships and Developing People

This dimension encompasses professional growth, provision of support, establishment of value-laden practices (Leithwood, 2016). Effective HoDs build relationships with the teachers and between the teachers, create and sustain collaboration within the department (Poultney, 2007). In the study of perceptions and reality of the work of department head (Collier et al., 2002), HoDs predominantly name interaction with the staff as the best aspects of their job. These aspects include serving students and staff, team leadership, facilitating success, initiating change, and innovation. The worst aspects of the job are also related to interaction with staff, such as dealing with underperforming staff, competing interests and conflicts within the department, motivating and encouraging staff, and finding time for collaborative planning and joint activities. In a similar study, Aubrey-Hopkins and James (2002) identified working with staff whose performance is less than satisfactory as a challenging aspect of the job. It is “a continual source of frustration, dismay and in some instances anger” (p. 314). HoDs lead a small but diverse group of teachers. Such diverse composition of different abilities, motivations, and priorities (Koh et al., 2011) creates a challenge to move all teachers “at the same speed towards agreed educational goals” (Busher, 2005, p. 144). Despite the challenges that come with working with diverse

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

individuals and their interests, HoDs play a crucial role in creating a positive collaborative environment that fosters professional learning (Bryant et al., 2020).

Developing the Organization

The department is a micro-organization within a wider organization, and its work is directly contributing to the schools' vision and goals (Harris, 2001). This dimension of effective middle leadership implies that HoDs need to build collaborative culture and relationships within and outside the department, allocate resources and align the budget towards educational goals, establish high standards and develop policies (Leithwood, 2016). HoDs need to be competent and skilled to carry out these kinds of tasks; however, departmental effectiveness is not solely dependent on this. De Nobile (2018) stresses principal support as one of the main contributors and enablers of effective middle leadership. Principal support implies empowerment and autonomy granted to HoDs to lead and manage their department, to actively participate in school-wide decision-making (Weller, 2001).

Improvement of Teaching and Learning

Staffing issues, improvement of student learning, buffering staff from distractions from their work fall within the dimension for improvement of teaching and learning (Leithwood, 2016). Student learning is monitored, and improvement programs are in place; HoD helps teachers interpret assessment results and fosters high-quality teaching and learning in the classroom. HoDs play the role of a liaison between the senior leaders and the teachers. Effective heads of departments protect staff from distractions from their work and play the role of an advocate.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Accountability

HoDs secure internal accountability by establishing departmental policies, expectations, clear goals; and external accountability by negotiating and interpreting senior leaders' policies and instructions. HoDs have to become agents of the senior staff and advocates for the teachers in negotiating policies and interests (Busher, 2006).

The role of HoDs, although seems straightforward, is indeed complex. The complexity of their role lies in its duality (Kerry, 2005; Mayers & Zepeda, 2002). HoDs are the leaders of their departments and are, at the same time, led by the senior leadership team of the school. They are both leaders and followers (Kerry, 2005), and it creates a challenge as they experience pressures and conflicting demands arising both from the top and from the bottom (Fullan, 2010). Their role is also ambiguous. They teach full-time, lead the departments, are involved in wide-ranging roles, operations, and activities at a school level. There are also multiple expectations from different stakeholder groups, including educational authorities, parents, teachers, and senior leaders (Koh et al., 2011). These conflicting demands, increasingly changing roles, and subsequent time pressures (Harris, 2000; Leithwood, 2016) result in an identity shift between HoD acting primarily as a teacher or predominantly as a manager and leader of the department (Busher, 2005). Clear and defined role expectations are considered an enabling factor of effective middle leadership (Dinham, 2007; Gurr, 2019; Jarvis, 2008). Schools where HoDs are not overwhelmed with administrative tasks, are supported by the principal and senior leaders, their role is clear and defined, the focus is on pedagogical activities and instructional leadership rather than mere 'educational clerkship' (Farchi & Tubin, 2019, p. 385).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The design of the role, as well as expectations, are influenced by the school context (Cotter, 2011) and the leadership model prevalent in the organization (Bush & Glover, 2014). In the following section, the role and place of middle leaders in different leadership models is discussed.

Leading from the Middle in Different Leadership Models

Organizations and everyone in charge lead in particular ways. Leadership scholars in education identified the most common leadership models and practices (Gumus et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2005). These models include instructional leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and teacher leadership. Different models are centered around particular actors (principals, middle leaders, teachers) or concepts (learning, curriculum). They tend to fade or develop over time in accordance with the reform agenda and trends in education (Hallinger, 2003). This section discusses the concept of leading from the middle and the HoD's role within different leadership models.

School improvement policies and reforms agenda in the late 1980s and onwards were centered around the principal as an instructional leader facilitating and leading improvement of instruction (teaching and learning). Instructional leadership is mostly principal centered model of improvement of instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), which over time developed into leadership for learning (Bush, 2011) or learning-centered leadership. The role of the principal in this model is strong, top-down, and directive, which focuses primarily on instruction, thus creating 'academic press' to better students' learning outcomes. Hallinger (2003) proposes three dimensions of principal's instructional leadership: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school culture. This leadership model has been

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

criticized for giving the principal excessive use of power and authority, considering the principal sole leader, thus diminishing the role of other actors such as teachers and heads of departments (Lambert, 2002). However, in its further development to leadership for learning, the role of middle leaders, and HoDs, in particular, has grown, and their role is seen as key instructional and curriculum leaders (Grootenboer, 2018).

In contrast to other models of leadership, transformational leadership is focused primarily on the process and approach to influencing and stimulating the organization towards school outcomes through commitments and capacity building (Bush & Glover, 2014). This is achieved through the vision, values, and redesign or transformation of the organization (Geijsel et al., 2003) initiated and led by the positional leader such as the principal. When transformational leadership is effectively applied, it has the potential to involve all school community towards shared educational achievements (Bush & Glover, 2014). In this sense, leadership becomes “a product of multiple sources” (Hallinger, 2003), and the role of HoD is obviously essential.

Distributed leadership is a model of leadership, which aims to involve all personnel and is focused on collaboration and cooperation towards improving students’ learning outcomes (Leithwood, 2001). This leadership model is also referred to as shared, collaborative, delegated, or dispersed (Spillane, 2005). “Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures” (Spillane, 2005, p. 146). Therefore, irrespective of holding a formal position, every individual in the organization can contribute towards the defined and shared goals. In distributed leadership, the role of middle leaders and teachers is seen as key. However, the power and control still lie with those leaders with a formal senior position (Grootenboer, 2018).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Teacher leadership is based on the premise that all members can lead (Harris, 2004) and share collective responsibility for students' learning outcomes (Harris, 2014). Teacher leadership is an example of non-positional middle leadership in which teachers primarily teach, hold an informal position, and are responsible for a specific area. Teacher leadership has an impact on a variety of dimensions: impact on teachers themselves, students' learning, the school as an organization, and beyond the school (Frost & Durrant, 2003).

Managerial leadership is oriented at a rational approach to functions, tasks and behaviors through management of day-to-day activities (Tajik, 2023). The source of influence is formal policies and procedures (Leithwood et al., 1999 as cited in Bush & Glover, 2014), therefore efficiency is achieved by following the procedures and clear focus on routine tasks. This is, however, carried out in a top-down manner. The role of HoD within this model is rather technical, both from the perspective of the senior leadership and HOD's themselves.

Leadership Role and Leadership Identity

Previous sections repeatedly mention the concepts of leadership role. To ensure clarity, the differences between the roles and identities should be defined. Ryan (2007) distinguishes one from another by identifying differences such as: roles are determined and static; identities are dynamic and acknowledge human agency. Identity is a self-defining body of knowledge, meanings, and experiences subjective to the individual's views (Ramarajan, 2014) and the roles they enact (Wenger, 1998). The process through which individuals identify themselves with a particular role and define who they are is identity construction (Lanka et al., 2019). Individuals construct and reconstruct multiple identities through interaction in different social contexts (Oyserman et al., 2014) through the enactment of their roles. Leadership identity is "the sub-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365). Leadership identity provides a motive to enact the role (Crow et al., 2017) and seek out leadership opportunities (Day & Harrison, 2007). To enact the role, individuals need to identify themselves with it and internalize the role (Burke & Stets, 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

The leadership role is defined by the context, culture, and organization, whereas leadership identity is dynamic and is socially constructed. Heads of departments play multiple, sometimes contrasting roles, as subject teachers, leaders, and team members. Their position in the hierarchy of school management requires them to associate themselves with these roles (Blandford, 1997), however, to a different extent. In a study of middle leaders' professional identities, Busher (2005) argues that heads of departments see professionalism in teaching as their main priority, and therefore, spend more time preparing for teaching and devoting less to leading their departments. Others, by spending more time and energy on leading the department, therefore, lack time to provide quality teaching. Thus, greater internalization of one role (teaching) over the other (leading) results in actions contributing to that particular role. In relation to leadership and management, HoDs' perception of the role may also differ as just merely implementing the procedures (management) or influencing others (leadership) (Jarvis, 2008). As De Nobile and Ridden (2014) argue, some will be middle managers, and some will be middle leaders regardless of the title. Thus, confirming that individual internalization of the role influences the enactment of the role (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Identity is a relational phenomenon (Bejaard et al., 2004). It is a process of understanding oneself as a kind of person and being reciprocally acknowledged or identified as such in a particular context (Gee, 2001). The nature of middle leadership falls within leader and follower positions, in which individuals play both the roles of a leader and a follower, and therefore,

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

develop appropriate identities. Such situated identities attach meaning and guide the activities individuals do. Individuals employ salient leadership or followership identities according to the contexts or situations, such as in relation to the senior leadership or with departmental colleagues. For example, the HoD holds a formal position, and teachers acknowledge their position as a leader of the team, followers recognize the HoD's leadership and demonstrate this recognition through an array of verbal and non-verbal cues (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) such as subordination, following the shared vision, and support.

Individuals also negotiate identities through self-identification in a wider organizational context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). For example, a HoD in a meeting with senior colleagues may employ a follower identity, whereas in a departmental meeting with subordinate colleagues plays a leader role. Similarly, in a meeting with senior leaders, a HoD might identify themselves as a leader in a distributed leadership school culture, and vice versa. This is explained as that individuals have a leader or follower identity as central more than the other in different contexts, i.e., specific self-schemas are activated and prevail in particular situations (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Bradbury and Gunter (2006) describe this phenomenon as 'dialogic identities,' where individuals negotiate identities through self-identification in the wider organizational context and act accordingly.

The wider organizational context impacts how leadership is conceptualized, and therefore, impacts how and of what nature leadership identities are constructed. In the framework of this research, the wider organizational context includes school culture as a primary context within which individuals operate and the societal culture in which individuals socialize. As well as principals affect the school culture, the school culture, in turn, affects how leadership is exercised by middle leaders (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). For example, in schools where participation and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

collegiality are promoted (Danielson, 2006), middle leaders actively engage and seek out leadership opportunities.

Therefore, the HoDs' individual experiences, relationships with colleagues, senior leaders and teachers in their departments, interactions with the wider organizational context contribute to the construction of their leadership identity. The following section discusses catalysts and barriers to this process.

Catalysts and Barriers to Leadership Identity Construction

Catalysts

Identities are not static, they are dynamic and are constructed and reconstructed through experiences, relationships and interactions with different contexts and roles (Lord & Hall, 2005), and develop over time (Ryan, 2007). Identity is constructed at the individual internalization level where one comes to know who they are; at relational recognition level they come to know who they are based on how others see them; at collective endorsement level they come to know who they are based on how the wider organization context relates to them (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, among these experiences and relationships there are enabling (catalysts) and hindering (barriers) factors to the process of leadership identity construction. They are presented as verbal and non-verbal, direct and indirect reciprocal claims of leadership and grants of leadership.

Catalysts to the leadership identity construction (Lanka et al., 2019) are the experiences, relationships and interactions which help individuals develop their understanding of themselves as leaders, and eventually practice leadership.

Positive and negative role models are identified as a contributing factor to one's understanding of the leader they would or would not like to be (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Ibarra, 1999; Lockwood et al., 2004). Role models also grant or do not grant leadership. For example, authoritarian school principals who position themselves as a sole leader of the organization would

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

not grant leadership to the HoD. This in turn would diminish their role and hinder the leadership identity construction. On the other hand, positive role models do not only model a leadership identity, but also grant leadership by giving opportunities to practice and take ownership for their role (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

Professional development programs in leadership impact how individuals assess, view and internalize their roles (Day & Grice, 2019). Participation in leadership programs helps individuals to change their view of the role. Internal perception of the role constructs the leadership identity and helps them to enact the role accordingly. For example, heads of departments might view their role as a purely managerial, based on routine day-to-day activities whereas after the training they can focus on their role as leading pedagogy and people.

Clear and defined role expectations are considered an enabling factor of effective middle leadership (Dinham, 2007; Gurr, 2019; Jarvis, 2008). Role design of the leadership role determines expectations to be a leader and practice leadership (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Koh, 2018). Schools where HoDs are not overwhelmed with administrative tasks are supported by the principal and senior leaders, their role is clear and defined, the focus is on pedagogical activities and instructional leadership rather than mere 'educational clerkship' (Farchi & Tubin, 2019, p. 385).

Barriers

Barriers to leadership identity construction are the experiences, relationships and interactions which hinder the development of oneself as a leader. Organizational structures can become a constraining factor to this process (Lanka et al., 2019). Organizational structures are shaped by societal culture (Hofstede et al., 2010) and can therefore be power-concentrated or power dispersed, as well as group-oriented and self-oriented (Dimmock & Walker, 2000a). In school cultures where distributed forms of leadership are promoted, HoDs have more

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

opportunities to be granted leadership by senior colleagues or in other words are given opportunities to exercise leadership, and lead school development projects. Similarly, in school cultures where power is concentrated on the school principal, others in the school have limited space and opportunities to become and be leaders. Conflicting demands, increasingly changing roles, and subsequent time pressures (Harris, 2000; Leithwood, 2016) can also result in an identity shift between HoD acting primarily as a teacher or predominantly as a manager and leader of the department (Busher, 2005).

Low self-belief in leadership capacities and abilities or as Lanka et al. (2019) refer to as identity uncertainty is a barrier to leadership identity construction which is evident when an individual even at the leadership position is not willing to take this role or struggles carrying it out.

Middle Leadership and Head of Department's Role

Individuals develop their way of leading the organization through interaction in personal, professional, and policy contexts (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Firstly, personal biographies (Busher, 2002), and individual characteristics (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006) shape their perceptions of themselves as leaders. HoDs' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities and perceptions of themselves as leaders can increase or diminish the effect middle leadership can have on departmental and school effectiveness (Leithwood, 2016). Secondly, HoDs have to mediate in a range of arenas (Busher, 2005). They play multiple, sometimes contrasting roles. They are leaders to their respective departments and followers to the senior leadership of the school, and they are subject teachers and team members. Such interpersonal (Koh, 2018) and relational interaction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) influences the development of leadership identity. Moreover, engagement with national and school policy contexts, acting as agents of school reforms (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017), and wider

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

societal culture (Yakovets, 2016) influence the extent to which individuals utilize or do not utilize their leadership potential and role.

There is an agreement that leadership is affected by the culture in which it is practiced (Dimmock & Walker, 2000a; Bush, 2021; Yakovets, 2016). Organizational culture in schools is a mere representation of a broader societal culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), which changes “gradually over long time periods, if at all” (Dimmock & Walker, 2000a, p. 157). In the organizations where societal culture is characterized by high power distance, top-down directive leadership styles prevail; subordinates expect guidance (Yakovets, 2016). Whereas in individualistic societies, the voices are expressed through ‘I’ rather than ‘we’, individuals tend not to relate to groups/family. For example, the ‘Soviet’ legacy in former USSR states continues to prevail, as it is “not a distant past” (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016, p. 98). The ‘Soviet’ in schools appears through the authority of the state, teacher-centered education (power position of the teacher), a punitive function of assessment and discipline (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016). In Confucian cultures, which also value power distance, the teachers and parents tend not to participate in decision-making, thus favoring directives from the principal (Leithwood et al., 2006; Shengnan & Hallinger, 2021). Therefore, in organizations where middle leaders could be recognized as key players within shared, distributed, collaborative leadership models, the wider societal culture would influence the degree HoDs’ role and potential are utilized (Harris, 2000). In other words, internal school culture and wider societal culture define the attitudes and responsibilities adhered to the HoDs’ role, as merely an administrator within a hierarchical structure of the school or an instructional leader (Leithwood, 2016).

To enact this leadership role, one needs to develop their leadership identity which in turn provides motive to be the leader and practice leadership (Crow et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998). In other words, to be the leader and act as a leader, one needs to internalize the role, to be

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

recognized as a leader by others, and to be collectively endorsed in a wider organizational and societal context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) through a myriad of experiences, relationships and interactions (Lanka et al., 2019). Identity is socially constructed and reconstructed in personal, professional, and policy contexts (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006), it is, therefore, dynamic (Ryan, 2007). For example, relationships with a senior leader can help HoDs succeed or can demotivate them to become the head of the department and take responsibility for policies, curriculum and instruction. In schools where participation and collegiality are promoted (Danielson, 2006), as well as decision-making and risk-taking are encouraged (Muijs & Harris, 2006), middle leadership will succeed and, therefore, contribute to school effectiveness, especially in the times of educational change. Subordinates also could or could not recognize HoDs as leaders. In educational contexts, to be a leader, one needs to gain respect as an effective subject teacher and act as an advocate and support for teachers (Busher, 2005). Being placed in between the senior leaders and teachers, HoDs have to deal effectively with differing and at times conflicting demands and pressures arising from both sides (Busher, 2006). Moreover, recognition of the HoDs' role by local and national educational authorities as reflected in the policy documents, and job descriptions also shape their leadership identity (Jarvis, 2008).

HoDs construct their leadership identities through the process of experiences by being in the middle between the senior leaders and teachers in their respective departments, through relationships and interactions inside the school context and wider societal culture. These activities in turn shape how HoDs' view themselves as leaders and contribute to the construction of their understanding of themselves as leaders and provide a motive to practice their role.

Obviously, COVID-19 pandemic placed school leadership in crisis (Harris, 2020a); schools can no longer be led the way they used to. The role and recognition of middle leaders and heads of departments in particular should and will change. The pandemic affected the school

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

system in Kazakhstan as well, predominantly principal-centered leadership models need to take into account the potential the HoD's position has for school operations in the short- and long-term after the pandemic. Therefore, understanding how HoDs become leaders and how they construct their leadership identity is the focus of this study.

Theoretical Approach

This study aims to explore how Kazakhstani secondary schools' heads of departments construct their leadership identities. There are multiple theories in identity research which help to understand the phenomenon of identity construction, however, specifically for leadership identity research Ibarra et al. (2014) identifies three theories: identity theory, social identity theory, identity work. Each theory focuses on a specific aspect of identity construction; however, these theories do not take into account the reciprocal nature of identity development within follower and leader relationship as of that from the middle, and the impact of societal culture on leadership identity construction. Therefore, leadership identity construction theory by DeRue and Ashford (2010) was used as a lens for interpretation and discussion. In this theory, leadership is conceptualized as dynamic, socially constructed, and relationally practiced. It describes the leadership identity construction process as an interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues of claims and grants through three-dimensional processes of individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. Within these three stages, an individual's identity is socially constructed through internal understanding and perception of oneself as a leader, through relations with other individuals and is reinforced in the wider organizational context.

Leadership identity construction is a dynamic process and happens through a medium of reciprocal claims and grants between the individuals during which they claim leadership and grant leadership, as well as claim followership and grant followership. These claims and grants

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

can be expressed directly and indirectly through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. At the individual internalization dimension, the individuals may claim leadership by describing themselves as being leader-like or possessing certain leadership characteristics. Non-verbally, leadership identity may be expressed by the unwillingness of the individual to take up leadership responsibilities assigned by the senior leaders, thus suggesting that at the individual level, the person does not perceive him/herself as a leader or does not have a motive to enact this leadership role. At the relational recognition dimension, Lanka et al. (2019) suggest these illustrative examples of claims and grants. An example of a direct claim for a leadership identity can be taking the initiative to lead a project. An indirect claim for leadership can be entering the room first or sitting at the head of the table during the meeting. A direct sign of granting leadership is one teammate suggesting another to lead a project or school senior leadership in the official job description of the middle leader specifying the leadership role and responsibilities. An indirect sign of a leadership grant could be asking a teammate to take the lead and decide on behalf of the group solution to a group project.

Relational recognition is the second dimension of identity construction. This theoretical framework explains how middle leaders construct their leadership identities through interaction with their immediate colleagues, such as senior leaders, local educational authorities, and teachers in their departments. Relationships with senior leadership can make middle leaders either succeed or can demotivate. Weller (2001) identified factors constraining heads of departments to utilize their unique leadership potentials, such as lack of line autonomy and opportunities for active participation in school-wide decision-making. These factors are acts of leadership or followership claiming or granting process, through which leadership identity develops. Principals' leadership style affects the school culture and leadership model employed in

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

the school by middle leaders as well (Hoy & Miskel, 2012; Hallinger, 2011). For example, if the principal is supportive of the distributed leadership model, the role of middle leaders, teachers, and other staff members is recognized in decision-making and power distribution. Middle leaders who receive this indirect and direct leadership act accordingly, taking on a leadership role and subsequent initiatives. Thus, this theory helps to explore how middle leaders in this study, construct their leadership identities in relationships and interaction with their senior leaders such as principal, deputy principals, and departmental colleagues such as subject teachers.

The third dimension of leadership identity construction is collective endorsement or recognition within a wider organizational context beyond the relationships and interaction between individuals. The wider organizational context within this study is constituted of the school's culture, i.e., internal organizational processes and external environment influenced by the local, national socio-political, and cultural contexts. The external environment (Earley et al., 1998) as well as the principal's leadership style (Busher & Harris, 1999) have a major influence on the school's culture. In particular, leadership is influenced by the cultural traditions and norms of the society in which it is exercised (Dimmock & Walker, 2000a; Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Yakavets, 2016). For example, when the school principal is democratic and favors a distributed leadership model, middle leaders, and others have more opportunities to be leaders as the school culture provides opportunities for them by establishing conditions for the distribution of leadership, the principal grants leadership to all members of the school.

Similarly, in societies with high power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010), which implies hierarchical structures and power dominance of the leader, the principal is considered a sole leader of the school; opportunities for distributed leadership are limited. Kazakhstani schools operate in the climate of top-down educational policies and increased accountability and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

compliance with rapid reforms. These hierarchical organizational structures shape the leadership exercised at the school, thus limiting the practice of shared leadership (Frost et al., 2014), such as that of from the middle.

Taking into consideration the societal and school cultures of Kazakhstani schools, as well as the middle leadership position of heads of departments, leadership identity construction theory (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) was used to frame the analysis of this research and helped to answer the overarching research questions of what experiences, relationships and interactions contribute to HoDs' leadership identity construction.

Summary

The literature on middle leadership and management in schools has significantly evolved over the past few decades, reflecting an emerging recognition of its critical role in schools. Initial studies by Bennett et al. (2007) from 1988 to 2005 laid the groundwork for understanding the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. The foundational work was further expanded by Harris et al. (2019), who analyzed development of the field from 2003 to 2017, and Lipscombe et al. (2023) who explored the knowledge base to 2020. Although these systematic reviews provide an overview of the literature in middle leadership, empirically-grounded research remains scarce, leaving the field largely under theorized and under researched.

In this literature review, I discussed middle leadership from the perspective of various leadership models (Gumus et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2005). I further explored the middle leaders' role in school effectiveness (Brown et al., 2000; Dinham, 2007), contributions to school improvement and better student learning outcomes (Bush, 2011; Harris, 2014; Highfield, 2012; Koh, 2018). The unique potential of middle leadership to enhance school performance has been highlighted by Grootenboer (2018) and Sammons et al. (1997). Exploring effective leadership

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

practices, as identified by Leithwood (2016) is essential in understanding how middle leaders can navigate these responsibilities successfully. The existing research on middle leadership is largely dominated by the Western perspectives, which often do not account for the unique challenges faced in other educational contexts. Existing studies tend to overlook how middle leadership operates within centralized educational systems, where senior leaders exert significant power, authority and influence.

In Kazakhstan, the literature on school leadership and management is emerging, with contributions from both local and international scholars who explore the conceptualization of school leadership (Nurmukhanova, 2020; Tajik & Yesselbayev, 2024), the societal culture (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016; Yakavets, 2016), the impact of reform (Kambatyrova et al., 2016; Turmukhambetova & Makoelle, 2014), the role of school leaders in crisis management (Durrani et al., 2024). However, existing research predominantly focuses on the perspectives of school senior leaders and teachers. As a result, the experiences and views of the middle leaders remain largely unexplored.

This study addresses this gap in literature by providing an empirically grounded account of HoDs' understanding, experiences and practices in their middle leader role, their development as leaders in the educational context characterized by the top-down approach to leadership and management, power dominance of superiors. To date, little research has addressed the leadership identity construction of middle leaders, especially in schools.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodology that guided this research study is described. It discusses the research questions and the nature and suitability of the qualitative enquiry employed to carry out this study. I discuss my ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this study. I explain my rationale for the selection of research design, sampling process, data collection methods, and data analysis and synthesis process. I also discuss ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, limitations and delimitations.

This qualitative study explored how heads of departments (HoDs) at secondary schools in Kazakhstan construct their leadership identity, in particular what experiences, relationships, and interactions contribute to HoD's leadership identity construction. This study aims to explore this phenomenon at the micro-, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level or at the individual internalization stage (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) this study seeks to explore how HoDs perceive themselves as leaders and how they understand, experience and practice their leadership role. At the meso- level or relational recognition stage, it explores how other stakeholders with whom HoDs interact within their schools such as senior leaders, teachers in their respective subject departments view HoD's leadership role. Students are also considered a stakeholder group with whom HoDs interact on a daily basis as they focus on improvement of student learning outcomes (Harris & Jones, 2017). Despite this, working with staff is the core of middle leadership role (Busher, 2005). Therefore, at the meso-level, the experiences, relationships, and interactions with senior leaders and teachers are explored. The study further seeks to understand how leadership identity is constructed on a macro level at the collective endorsement stage within the school, and by wider organizational context such as local educational authorities, policies, and school

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

context. Although parents are also a part of the school community, in the Kazakhstani school context they predominantly communicate with class teachers rather than heads of departments. Therefore, in this study the perspectives of HoDs themselves, teachers, school senior leaders and the local educational authority were considered.

To understand the phenomenon of HoDs' leadership identity construction in this study I address the following research questions:

Overarching research question:

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

To address the overarching research question, I developed three sub-questions structured within the theoretical framework of leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Sub-questions:

The first sub-question aims to explore the understanding, experiences and practices of HoDs in their leadership roles, and how their leadership identity is individually internalized.

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

The second sub-question investigates the interactions of HoDs with teachers, senior leaders and LEA and how these stakeholders view HoD's leadership role. This inquiry seeks to understand the relational aspects of leadership, highlighting the influence of social interactions and perceptions.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

The third sub-question focuses specifically on identifying the experiences, interactions and relationships that serve as catalysts and barriers in the construction of HoDs's identity, to uncover the key factors that either facilitate or hinder the construction of leadership identity thus answering the overarching research question.

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

Philosophical Underpinnings

The selection of research design is determined by philosophical underpinnings such as ontology and epistemology and is directly linked to the research problem and purpose (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) as well as researcher's positionality (Cohen et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to explore how heads of department (HoDs) in secondary schools of Kazakhstan construct their leadership identity, in particular what experiences, relationships, and interactions contribute to this process. Identity is a process of understanding oneself as a kind of person through a reflexive practice and being reciprocally acknowledged or identified as such in a particular context (Gee, 2001; Brown, 2015). Identity is not fixed or static; it develops over time in social interactions with others, which makes it a relational phenomenon (Bejaard et al., 2004). In the process of identity construction individuals tend to understand who they are based on feedback they receive from others (Lord & Hall, 2005), reflecting on self, experiences and relationships with others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, to explore this phenomenon the research design underpinned by the constructivist paradigm is most appropriate. The reality is

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

socially constructed through interaction between individuals who have different interpretations of a single phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a social setting or activity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), thus constructing multiple realities of their own (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This suggests that within a single school context HoDs might have differing experiences of leadership identity construction due to weight assigned to these specific subject departments as defined by their place in the subject hierarchy (Siskin, 1994). For example, the importance of certain subjects is determined by the amount of time allocated to each subject in the study plans (Araneda et al., 2021) and high-stake examinations for graduation or entrance to university (OECD, 2014). A qualitative research design allows one to understand how heads of department understand, experience, and practice their leadership roles, how they construct their leadership identity based on feedback they receive from senior leaders, teachers and the wider organizational context.

Ontology questions researchers' beliefs about the form and nature of reality or, in other words, what can be known about it. In social constructivism, realities are "multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Heads of departments' perceptions (mental constructions) of themselves as leaders (i.e., their leadership identity) are socially constructed through interactions and relationships with their senior leaders, teachers, and wider organizational context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) thus constructing their individual version of reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Epistemology concerns how we come to know reality and defines the relationship between the researcher and the object (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In the constructivist-interpretive

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

paradigm, the researcher and the object interact, and the findings are subjectively created through the researcher's interpretation of the realities, experiences and meanings as described by the object (Creswell, 2014). These experiences and subjective meanings are socially and historically negotiated, they are formed through interaction with other individuals and the context in which they live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, heads of departments construct their leadership identity while interacting with their colleagues within the school context and experiences of their particular subject departments.

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research is personal and the researcher becomes the instrument of inquiry by bringing their biography, past experience, education, training, skills and competences to data collection and interpretation (Patton, 2015). As mentioned in the introduction chapter, rationale to undertake this study derived from the professional and research interest to understand why and how some heads of departments take and some do not take leadership in the school improvement project I led at my workplace. I was also sympathetic with the significance of their role and underestimated position in the school organizational structure. By undertaking this study, I was passionate to have HoDs' voices heard and shared with those who directly oversee their work on different levels within the school and beyond. Before the study, I reflected on my assumptions and biases that could potentially impact the study throughout different stages of the research: planning, data collection, analysis, writing. I realized that in my attempt to make a positive change to the lives of my participants (Cohen et al., 2018), I can be pro-heads of departments, taking their side and thus being biased towards senior leaders and LEA responses. Having this in mind, I made efforts to continuously question my assumptions and minimize them. To ensure

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

that, I kept a reflective researcher journal which I used for notes and questions in mind during the interviews, observations, while analyzing my data and the write up of the thesis.

Interpretation of individual constructions is refined between and among the researcher and the participants with a single aim to understand and reconstruct existing constructions, in search of personal knowledge (Wellington, 2015). As a researcher, I recognize that my own background, personal, cultural, and historical experiences influence the interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2014), that is how I engaged with the participants in co-construction of their leadership identities. Moreover, certain experiences and interactions contribute as catalysts or barriers to the construction of the leadership identity (Lanka et al., 2019). During the interviews, the participants not only reflected on their experiences but also continued to construct their leadership identity. For example, one participant realized the significance of her leadership role while discussing and analyzing her experiences during the interview.

Research Design

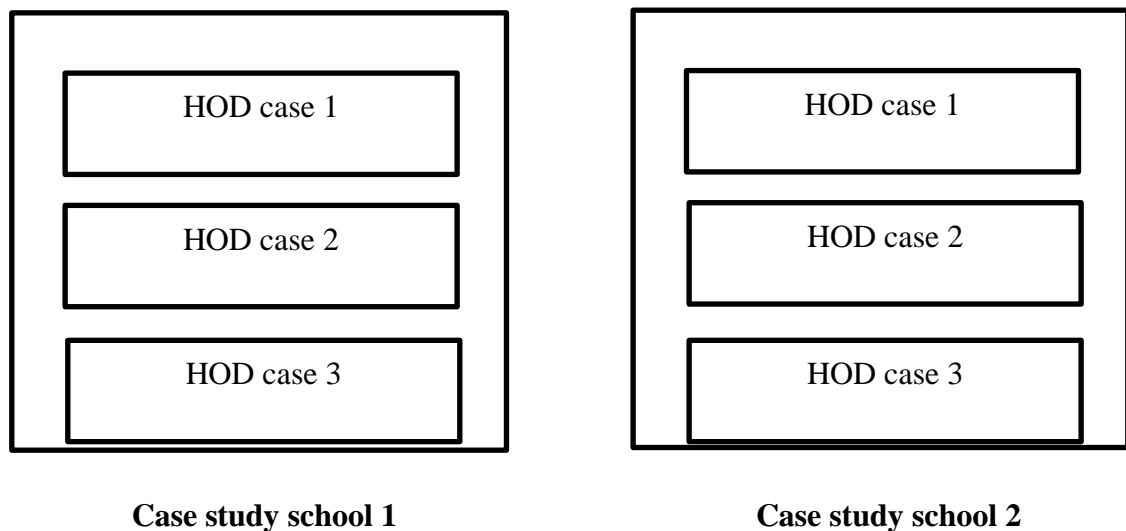
Qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meanings individuals attach to a social or human phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Identity is the meaning ascribed to the self (Gecas, 1982). Leadership identity is an individually constructed phenomenon, which is dynamically developed over time through interpersonal and mutual engagement with others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). To grasp the dynamics and complexity of leadership identity construction, qualitative research is most suitable. In qualitative research, various research methodologies can be employed, such as phenomenology, case study, ethnography, narrative enquiry, hermeneutics, action research, and others (Cohen et al., 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that the unit of analysis determines the selection of the research method.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Therefore, to explore a phenomenon in a bounded system from a context-specific perspective (school), i.e., to portray and interpret the unique process of heads of department's leadership identity construction, I used a case-study approach. Moreover, this is an embedded multiple case-study of three heads of departments within each of two schools (Yin, 2014). This research design is most appropriate to address the research questions as it allows the researcher to collect in-depth data from multiple data sources (HoDs, senior leaders, teachers) (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2014), assuring the individuality of each HoD's case, and gathering holistic view of the phenomena within different school contexts (Cohen et al., 2018).

Figure 3

Embedded Multiple Case Study



The rationale to employ a case study as a research method is based on the premise that the bounded school context and existing school culture (collective endorsement) shape HoDs' leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Social constructivist researchers aim to understand how individuals interact amongst themselves in specific contexts in which they live

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

and work (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), focusing on the reconstruction of multiple voices (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A case study design allows one to understand a micro-level case (individual HoDs' perceptions of their leadership identity) within broader meso- (perceptions of senior leaders and teachers) and macro-(school and wider organizational setting) contextual levels (Chong & Graham, 2013).

The selection of the case study for this particular research is justified by the purpose to understand multiple individual heads of departments' cases within a single school context of two different types of schools within one urban city. The context of research site (secondary schools) with individual school cultures may be shaped by factors such as principal's leadership style (Hoy & Miskel, 2012), societal culture (Dimmock & Walker, 2000b; Miller, 2018; Yakavets, 2016), involvement in school reforms (Frost et al., 2014; Scribner & Crow, 2012), policy context (Braun et al., 2011; Leithwood, 2001). The difference in school context is justified by their involvement in leadership projects such as "leading schools". Leading schools project is a mechanism used to scale professional capacity of teachers and leaders in high performing schools to other schools across the country (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023). Local educational authority identifies a list of leading schools and allocates 4-5 partner schools (in this study labeled as non-leading) for the exchange of professional expertise, best practices in pedagogy, school leadership.

Research Sample

Site Selection

Research sites and participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling strategy. This sampling strategy allows the researcher to select information-rich cases of individuals and contexts for further in-depth investigation of the phenomenon within the selected

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

sites (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2014). There are different types of secondary schools in Kazakhstan (mainstream, private, autonomous, selective schools for gifted and talented, ungraded) (Bridges & Sagintayeva, 2014). I conducted this study in two mainstream schools to explore how heads of departments construct their leadership identity in similar (national curriculum, state policies, type of ownership), but different circumstances (“leading school” project, principal’s leadership style, school context, subject departments). Since the phenomenon under investigation in this study is leadership identity construction, the rationale to select one research site from the pool of leading schools; and one from other mainstream schools is based on the availability of leadership opportunities, training and expectations. The interventions made in these schools might have helped the HoDs reflect, construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their leadership identities. Both research sites are based in Astana, Kazakhstan and were conveniently accessible.

Research Participants

At the research sampling stage, the researchers have to decide the group or individuals whose responses will provide appropriate data to answer research questions, the context, time periods, and issues or artifacts of interest to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). Patton (2002) suggests that the sample size is not critical in qualitative research. Instead, the sample should provide appropriate data for the research, provide credibility and usefulness, and within available resources. As mentioned earlier, this study employed purposeful sampling to select research sites and participants. "Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2015, p. 401). This is an embedded multiple case study design (Yin, 2014), which implies that within the school (case context), there are three cases of heads of departments (embedded units of analysis) from subject areas according to their

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

importance in the subject hierarchy (Bleazby, 2015; Araneda et al., 2021). For this study, HoDs were purposefully selected according to the subject areas of Unified National Test (UNT). UNT is a university entrance examination, based on which the students are issued educational state grants. Their learning outcomes are measured against UNT scores and this test is considered as a school, teacher, and departmental performance indicator (OECD, 2014). HoDs are selected in “Compulsory UNT” subjects (mathematics or history of Kazakhstan), “Elective UNT” (physics, chemistry, biology, geography, world history, Kazakh language, Russian language, English language, and fundamentals of law), “NonUNT” (music, physical education, computer science, arts). Across two schools, there are in total cases of six HoDs as units of analysis.

Table 3

Departmental Characteristics

Subject area	“Leading” school	“Non-leading” school
Compulsory UNT subjects	Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science, Chemistry, Biology	Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science
Elective UNT subjects	English	Social sciences History of Kazakhstan, World history, law, religion studies
Non-UNT subjects	Self-reflection	Physical education

At the research sites I found out that, departmental division is unique in each case study school. For example, departments are organized into science subjects, which include “Compulsory UNT” subject such as Mathematics and other related subjects. Therefore, these departments are multidisciplinary and include both “Compulsory UNT” and “Elective UNT” subjects. In one school, there are 5 subjects under one department, in another 3. This is not

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

critical for the purpose of this study; however, it is worth mentioning this circumstance. In the table below, I provide department composition according to UNT subjects in both case study schools.

There are also 15 additional participants. The rationale to include them is based on the social constructivist approach, which implies that individuals construct the meaning of the phenomenon through experiences and interactions with other persons within the context (Creswell, 2014). According to the theoretical framework guiding this study, apart from individual view of oneself as a leader, HoDs also depend on the received social feedback from their peers both senior and subordinate to them (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, in this study to understand how HoD's leadership role is viewed by others, one senior leader (principal or deputy principal) and two teachers per subject department, as well as one LEA representative, were selected. Exploring additional participants' multiple and varied views allows the researcher to understand and to capture the complexity of the leadership identity construction.

The level of saturation determines the sample's size, ensuring a sufficient number of participants to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, a sample size of twenty-one participants was planned to be appropriate to provide answers to this study's research questions. Overall, 3 primary participants from each school (HoDs as units of analysis) and 15 additional participants were selected. However, in the Leading case study school in the department of Non-UNT subject only one teacher participant agreed to participate. Thus, 14 additional participants took part in this study. Table 4 below presents details about the research participants.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Table 4

Overall Number of Participants

	“Leading” school			“Non-leading” school		
	Compulsory UNT	Elective UNT	Non-UNT	Compulsory UNT	Elective UNT	Non-UNT
HoD	1	1	1	1	1	1
Senior leader		1			1	
Teacher	2	2	1	2	2	2
LEA				1		
Subtotal		9			10	
Total			20			

Recruitment of Participants

The governance of the education system in Kazakhstan is centralized and bureaucratic (Yakavets, 2017) with a strict system of norms and regulations (OECD, 2018). Therefore, to gain access to school, I sought permission to conduct research in mainstream schools from the local educational authority. On behalf of NU Graduate School of Education Dean, the letter explaining the nature, research questions and benefits of this research were sent to the head of Local Educational Authority (LEA) – *Upravleniye obrazovaniya* to request their permission to conduct the study at state mainstream schools. It allows schools to be confident that LEA is aware of this

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

research being conducted. Before granting permission, LEA requested to meet in person and to present my proposed study to the Center for Modernization of Education which is a LEA division that oversees school education and ‘leading’ schools project, in particular. I explained the purpose and sought their support in identifying the list of schools that met the requirements of case selection. After the meeting, I was appointed a LEA representative in charge of “Leading schools” project who gave me access to the official order which included the list of schools labeled as “Leading”, with the scope of work to be a part of the project in 2021-2022 academic year. I shortlisted the schools according to the mixed language of instruction (Kazakh and Russian). I visited their websites, wrote emails to seven school principals and requested a meeting to present my research. Three of them responded positively and arranged a meeting, out of those three schools one agreed to participate in this research as a case study school. For the “Non-leading” school I also referred to the official order and contacted the schools which were labeled as “partner to the leading school”. I contacted six schools (with mixed language of instruction – Kazakh and Russian), the first one to agree to participate was selected as a non-leading case study school. In both case study schools, the principals appointed deputy principals for science and methodology as gate keepers as they are in charge of supervising heads of departments. In our initial meeting with them, I explained that I would also conduct interviews with senior leaders such as school principal and deputy principals and I sought their permission to participate in this study as additional participants. Deputy principals in both case-study schools agreed to participate.

I then asked to meet with heads of departments to present my study and invite them to participate. The meeting with HoDs in the leading school was organized online via Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the meeting with non-leading school HoDs were in person. At

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

these meetings I discussed the purpose of this study, the research design, significance and benefits of this study for them in particular and the educational community in Kazakhstan and internationally. I also discussed the potential risks and ethical considerations in case-study research and strategies I would use to mitigate these risks. I informed the participants that their names and responses would be kept confidential, however, since the research was taking place in the public space, anonymity could not be secured, and the participants were informed of that as well. I also shared my contacts so that volunteers could inform me later if they would like to participate in this research. For those who were not available to attend this meeting, I requested to send an invitation letter through the school mailing list to inform potential primary (HoDs) and additional (teachers, senior leaders) participants. Mailing lists appeared to be not effective as a communication tool. Instead, schools circulate information through WhatsApp chats for teachers, for heads of departments, for senior leaders. Invitation letters were also sent through those chat groups. This was an effective way of recruiting primary participants. All heads of departments contacted me directly to inform of their participation in this study.

As HoDs' permission was gained, I sent invitation letters to teachers in their respective departments also through Whatsapp chat groups. In these letters, I explained the purpose of this study, methodology, significance, potential risks, benefits, and ethical considerations. In some departments teachers asked to make a short presentation about this study via Zoom online and in one department I made a presentation at the end of their departmental meeting. Volunteering teachers contacted me via mobile phone and expressed their intention to participate. Once positive responses were received, I shared a copy of informed consent and scheduled the interviews. A participant from the local educational authority was invited to participate at the stage of requesting permission of access to mainstream schools. There was also a case when a

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

teacher was not enthusiastic about participating in this study due to their busy teaching schedule. HoD asked her to participate as there needed to be two teachers per department as additional participants. I was concerned that this teacher was imposed to participate, so I tried to do my best to clarify the purpose of the research and what benefits of this research would be to explore HoD's role. She then agreed to participate and after the interview shared that she was honored to be a part of this study.

Demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 5 to provide contextual information in regards to the participants gender, education, years of experience, years of experience on HoDs' position, subject area of the HoD within the department, completion of the leadership training.

Table 5

Characteristics of Participants

Subject	Gender	Education	Years of teaching experience	Years of HoD experience	Subject areas within department	Leadership training
Leading school						
Compulsory UNT	Female	Higher	28	5	Maths	No
Elective UNT	Female	Higher	9	3	English	No
Non-UNT	Female	Higher	25	1	Self-reflection	Yes

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Non-Leading School						
Compulsory UNT	Female	Higher	8	2	Maths	No
Elective UNT	Female	Higher	11	3	Social Sciences	No
Non-UNT	Male	Higher	10	1.5	Physical Education	No

Methods of Data Collection

In this section, I outline and provide rationale for the data collection methods used in this study. I also discuss the process of piloting instruments, the interview protocol, and the process of conducting interviews, recording and storage of the data collected. Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection instrument, document analysis and non-participant observations were used as secondary sources of data to explore context of each case study school.

Researchers doing case study acknowledge that within one case, there are many variables affecting it. Therefore, more than one data collection method or/and more than one source of evidence is used (Cohen et al., 2018). Multiple sources and methods used within a case study allow the researcher to triangulate emerging data (Ashley, 2012) and corroborate or challenge evidence from other sources (Yin, 2014). Therefore, in this study data was collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Table 6 presents data collection methods and specific content and focus.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Table 6

Data Collection Methods

Phases	Methods	Participants	Number per school	Content/Focus
Phase 1	Individual face-to-face interviews	HoDs	3	To explore how HoDs understand, experience and practice their leadership role
		Teachers	2	To understand how others view HoD's leadership role
		School principal or Deputy principal	1	
		LEA	1	
Phase 2	Non-participant observations	HoDs practices Senior leaders' leadership style Subject departments, pedagogical councils, staff meetings	4 weeks	To gather contextual information of the case (research site), interpersonal interaction and relationships of HoDs with others
	Document analysis	HoDs' job description, school development plans, subject department's annual plan and reports, other relevant documents	4 weeks	To triangulate the data taken from other sources; to understand HoDs' leadership role within the department and school-wide
Phase 3	Second round of interviews	HoDs	3 per school	To explore catalysts and barriers of HoD's leadership identity construction. To discuss emerging themes in interviews with senior leaders and teachers, LEA, discuss questions raised after the observation and document analysis

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Data Collection Process

Data collection started in October 2021 after the permission from LEA and school principals was granted and continued until June 2022. During this period, schools in Kazakhstan were operating under restricted conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Case study research in its conventional understanding was adapted to the circumstances and reality of the pandemic and regulations. Initially I planned to conduct data collection at the first case study school, followed by the second school. Taking into consideration the uncertainty in possible lift of restricted access to schools for outsiders; I decided to conduct data collection simultaneously in both case study schools. This proved to be a good decision, as in January 2022 there was announced a national state of emergency due to political instability in Kazakhstan. For one-month schools shifted to distance mode of learning, therefore, school-wide and departmental meetings I planned to attend to conduct non-participant observation were canceled. Due to outage of mobile phone and internet connection, interviews were also postponed to a later date.

Sequence of Data Collection Methods

At the first meeting with the senior leaders, I requested documents they would be willing to share and that would shed light on the work of HoDs. As a result, they shared HoDs' job descriptions, and the annual departmental plan for 2021-2022 academic year. Preliminary document analysis was used to guide the first round of interviews with HoDs in discussion of their job functions. Non-participant observation was conducted alongside with interviews, however, was subject to school's permission and unexpected closure due to the pandemic and national state of emergency. The second-round interviews with HoDs were conducted after the preliminary document analysis and non-participant observation data collected.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection. In case studies, interviews are considered as the most important source of evidence (Yin, 2018). Compared to other types of interviews, semi-structured interviews allow extracting rich data in dialogues with participants leaving “much more leeway for following up angles that are deemed important by the interviewee” (Brinkman, 2018, p. 990), and as an interviewer I had an opportunity to focus on the issues which I would consider important to answer research questions of this study. Therefore, to explore how HoDs understand, experience and practice their leadership role and how others view their role, semi-structured interviews with HoDs, senior leaders, teachers, and local education authority representative were conducted. All interviews were individual face to face (online via Zoom and in person), between the participant and the researcher. Data from primary participants was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews; first to collect initial data to answer research question on how HoDs understand, experience and practice their leadership role. After the interviews with additional participants (senior leaders, teachers, LEA), the second round of semi-structured interviews was conducted. Interview questions were based on emerging themes from collected data with additional participants and HoDs were asked to elaborate on these themes. Identity is a dynamic process, relational recognition such as that by senior leaders and teachers in subject departments led by HoDs contributes to the leadership identity construction as a catalyst or a barrier (Lanka et al., 2019). During the second round of interviews, HoDs were asked to elaborate on themes emerging from preliminary analysis of interview data with additional participants, and provided data to answer the third research question to explore the catalysts and barriers of HoD’s leadership identity construction.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Piloting Interviews. Before the data collection, a pilot study was conducted to identify potential issues with the clarity and flow of questions. Practicing myself as an interviewer was a helpful exercise to gain confidence (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) and to understand the process of data collection during semi-structured interviews.

I conducted two pilot interviews with participants who were acting heads of departments in mainstream schools, and one interview with a teacher to pilot interview protocol for additional participants. Pilot interview with one HoD was more than one hour, therefore I decided to delete introductory questions about their conceptualization of leadership that were repetitive. Participants at mainstream schools tend to have busy schedules; therefore, I made sure that interview would not take more than one hour. I also piloted the interview questions with the former colleague of mine, the deputy principal who gave feedback on interview protocol for senior leaders. However, finding a LEA representative to pilot the protocol was a challenging task. Therefore, based on feedback from other pilot studies, I relied on my researcher judgment.

Interview Protocol. The finalized interview protocols (Appendix 1, 3, 4, 5) were used during round one interviews with the heads of departments and additional participants. As there is no predetermined order of sequencing interview questions (Patton, 2002), I developed the protocols beginning with the background and demographic questions to identify participants' characteristics; experience questions to understand the nature of HoD's functions and reality; descriptive and construct-forming questions to explore participants' conceptualization of leadership and leadership role; further questions were structured around the theoretical framework (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) which is used to guide the analysis of this study: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. Round 2 interviews with the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

heads of the departments were also semi-structured and were based on the analysis of the collected data from all participants, preliminary document analysis (Appendix 2).

In qualitative interviews, it is important to minimize researcher predetermined responses (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, I developed open-ended questions to ensure participants express responses in their own words. Once the protocol was drafted, I shared it with the Advisory Committee for content validity and it was also granted ethical approval by the Research Committee (Appendix 14).

Figure 4

Sample Semi-structured Interview Questions

<p>Conceptualization of leadership and leadership role of a HoD</p> <p>How do you understand leadership? Who do you consider a strong leader and why?</p> <p>To what extent do your job responsibilities allow you to practice leadership at the departmental level? In which matters and how is it realized?</p>
<p>Individual internalization</p> <p>Do you consider yourself a leader? If yes, why? If not, why?</p> <p>What would help you think of yourself as a leader and practice leadership in your HoD role?</p>
<p>Relational recognition</p> <p>Can you please share an important experience that had impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?</p> <p>Can you share an important relationship that had impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?</p>

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Do you think there is anyone in the school who thinks of you as a leader? If so, how did you come to the conclusion that this person these people view you as a leader?

Collective endorsement

How does the way school is organized helps you perform your leadership role?

What conditions/improvements can be made at school on behalf of the LEA, Ministry of Education that will help you perform your leadership role effectively?

Conducting Interviews. As all participants were from mixed language (Kazakh and Russian) of instruction schools, at the beginning of each interview I asked about their language preference. Most interviews were conducted in Russian (16 out of 20), four were in Kazakh language. The length of the interviews varied, but did not exceed one hour. In one exceptional case with the HoD who was enthusiastic to share about her role and provided rich, detailed responses to the interview questions the interview lasted more than one hour. To concentrate on the interview and capture as much data as possible (Cohen et al., 2018), I requested permission for audio-recording both during in-person and online interviews. Since the majority of the interviews were via Zoom, audio recorders were unobtrusive and did not constrain the respondents. Collected data was transcribed verbatim by the researcher, checked for accuracy, and were sent to the participants for their verification. Any identifying information was deleted.

According to the research design, there was a second round of interviews with the HoDs only to discuss the themes emerged in interviews with other participants, questions raised after the observation and document analysis, identified gaps to be probed further. Only one HoD (L-NonUNT-HD) could not participate in the second round of interview due to time constraints and lack of availability, however, the data received from the first round was sufficient to substantiate her responses.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Each participant was provided with the informed consent form (sent by email, whatsapp or printed) for them to read and to sign prior to the interview. One participant refused to sign the informed consent form, instead she gave her consent orally which was recorded on the voice recorder together with the interview. I transcribed the audio-recordings in language they were given (Russian language). Interviews conducted in Kazakh language were translated into Russian during transcription as a preferred language for analysis. Selected quotes used to support the findings were translated into English.

Document Analysis

In order to situate the school context, document analysis of national, school policies and internal documents was carried out. Documents are considered viable sources of evidence as they contain exact details, and cover many events and settings (Yin, 2014) and contain information that is accessible and would have otherwise take a lot of time and effort to collect (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Document analysis is used to gain understanding during a systematic procedure of review and evaluation of documents (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis was selected to supplement and corroborate findings emerging in semi-structured interviews and to explore the context in which main participants operate. Based on interview data and preliminary research of the context, I made a list of suggested documents for analysis, presented it to the LEA, senior leaders and heads of departments. The list included school development plan and end-of-year reports of the subject departments, HoDs' job descriptions, for leading schools - any major documentation related to the project, official orders. Document analysis included internal documents provided by the school according to their consideration of availability and confidentiality for sharing with other parties. Thus, I was given access only to the job descriptions of the HoD, annual plan in scientific and methodological work. Order of the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Subject Methodological Unit’, No583, 29 November 2007 (MES, 2007) is available online at database of laws and legal acts. The appendix to the order with schools identified as leading and non-leading was provided by LEA for the purpose of research site selection and further contact. The list of documents used for analysis is provided in Table 7.

Table 7

List of Documents

Document	Leading School	Non-leading School
HoD’s job description	V	V
Annual plan	V	V
Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Subject Methodological Unit’, No583, 29 November 2007.		

To analyze documents, I applied thematic analysis which is a form of a pattern recognition of emerging categories and themes (Saldana, 2013). I was reading, re-reading and reviewing data to identify codes, categories and themes to expand my understanding of the heads of departments’ functions as ascribed in the policy documents and school documents. I used a pre-defined codes which emerged from initial analysis of the interview transcripts. This allowed to integrate the analysis and corroborate data deriving from two data sources (Bowen, 2009).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Non-participant Observation

Additional contextual information was derived from non-participant observation of the natural setting and the social interaction (Cohen et al., 2018) of the HoDs with senior leaders and teachers. This helped to observe the social setting and develop a narrative account (Bryman, 2012) of the relationship and interactions of HoDs and their respective colleagues: senior leaders and teachers. Despite the fact that observation provides immediate contextual information (Yin, 2014), it is difficult to grasp extensively by one researcher only. Therefore, it was important to decide when, where and what to observe (Yin, 2016). The rationale for non-participant observations was based on the nature of leadership identity construction within the process of reciprocal claims and grants of leadership, which can be direct and indirect verbal and non-verbal (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, relationships and interactions contributing to the construction of HoDs' leadership identity. Therefore, non-participant observations took place in staff meetings inside the department, pedagogical council meetings, and staffrooms. I focused on interaction between HoDs and senior leaders, teachers. The purpose of non-participant observation as a data collection method is not to directly observe, but to supplement data emerging from the interviews. To ensure I captured the complexity of interactions between the participants, I kept observation notes to use during the analysis. Multiple repeated school visits were arranged to collect data from different activities. However, due to access restrictions to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic still being in place and low frequency of those meetings (once per term), in both case study schools I managed to attend one pedagogical council meeting, one departmental meeting, observations in the staffroom and the hallway. Overall, in both case study schools I managed to observe meetings in person as listed in the table below. Pedagogical Council is the highest school-wide decision-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

making body. The meeting I attended was a school-wide end-of-academic year meeting, which involved all teaching staff and senior leadership team including principal and deputy principals. This meeting was an hour and a half long. Departmental meetings took place simultaneously for all participating heads of departments; therefore, I managed to attend only one departmental meeting per case study school. If possible, I would have attended all three departments; however, for the purposes of non-participant observation to collect supplemental data on interactions within the school, observation of one department per school was sufficient. Given the circumstances of restricted access to schools and low frequency of these meetings, I did not hope to collect data using non-participant observations as planned. The fact that I managed to attend at least these meetings and supplement interview data with observations I consider as sufficient and successful.

Table 8

Data Collected through Non-participant Observations

	Focus of the observation	Leading school	Non-leading school
Pedagogical Council meeting	HoDs' interaction with senior leaders and principal Principal's leadership style	V	V
Departmental meeting	HoDs' interaction with teachers Teacher-to-teacher interaction	V	V
Staffroom	HoDs' interaction with teachers Teacher-to-teacher interaction	V	V
Hallway	Informal setting	V	V

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

As Cohen et al. (2018) suggest observations may take place in researchers' familiar contexts so that they are aware of what to expect in advance. However, for me, as a researcher, both school contexts as well as pedagogical council and departmental meetings were unfamiliar areas, including meeting agendas and participants' list. Therefore, I approached it as non-structured naturalistic observation of interactions between heads of departments, teachers and senior leaders in their natural social setting. To attend Pedagogical Council meetings, I requested permission from the school principal and heads of departments. The principal informed other participants of my presence and the purpose of my research to observe the heads of departments. To attend departmental meetings, I requested permission from the heads of departments, and introduced myself to the teachers and informed them of the purpose of my presence to observe the HoD conducting the meeting.

The protocol I have used included the observation of the layout of the setting (sitting arrangements), the people (order of taking the lead), the specific actions that heads of departments, senior leaders and teachers were doing while interacting, any critical incidents recorded (Cohen et al., 2018). A sample checklist of non-participant observation recording is presented in Appendix 6. Data obtained from the non-participant observations was compared and interpreted with the research questions and theoretical framework in mind. Using multiple sources of information such as semi-structured individual interviews, document analysis and observations allowed me to triangulate the data and confirm the findings.

Methods of Data Analysis and Synthesis

Qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in nature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It involves consolidation, reduction, and interpretation of the collected responses for

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

further analysis. In this case study research, I developed an analytic strategy based on theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014), compiling a detailed description of the research site and participants, analysis of interview data and documents for themes, patterns and issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although there is no single way of analyzing data in qualitative research, there is a general five-phased cycle of data analysis which includes compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding (Yin, 2016). Data from all data sources were compiled and sorted into a database. After reading each interview transcript, I developed a participant summary to create a profile of each individual participant. This data was then disassembled into smaller fragments, which were assigned preliminary labels or ‘codes’. To ensure accountability and the depth and breadth of findings it is suggested to use more than one coding method (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2005). I began analyzing round one interviews with the heads of departments using descriptive coding (Miles et al., 2014) to develop a list of emerging topics for indexing and categorizing. This list served as a coding book. Codes emerging during the first cycle coding were provisional and were subject to further changes as data analysis progressed. As a second cycle coding, I used In Vivo coding as in this study I “prioritize the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2013, p. 91) to explore how heads of departments construct their leadership identity. Then these fragments were reorganized into common patterns and significant themes. It is suggested that at this stage reassembling and disassembling of data can be repeated multiple times (Yin, 2014). Subsequently reassembled data were ready to be interpreted and situated in the broader research literature. To collate and organize information derived from the document analysis, I developed a document summary form as suggested by Bloomberg & Volpe (2012).

This is an embedded multiple case-study; therefore, data analysis was carried out in two stages – the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. Within –case analysis allows

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

understanding contextual variables of the case, i.e., heads of departments as units of analysis - head of “Compulsory UNT subject”, head of “Elective UNT subject”, head of “Non-UNT subject” within each case. After each case, the analysis was conducted, individual case reports were written for the “Leading school” and “Non-leading school”. The following cross-case analysis allowed to make inferences between the cases, for example, a cross-case analysis of the HoDs of “Compulsory UNT” subjects. Cross-case conclusions were drawn upon the conduct of both case studies. This cross-case analysis was not done for generalizability or transferability to other contexts (Miles et al., 2014), but for deeper understanding and exploration of heads of departments leadership identity construction within one subject area and within the school.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the credibility of findings is dependent on the issues of trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability achieved through prolonged engagement and persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to acknowledge that due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions prolonged engagement was limited. As a researcher, I ensured that collected data was sufficient to the extent possible in the given circumstances. The research design of this embedded multiple case study allows to establish credibility in the following ways. This research aims to understand what experiences, relationships and interactions contribute to HoDs’ leadership identity construction. Although these experiences, perceptions and identity are individual, and therefore, cannot be triangulated; the views of three groups of participants (senior leaders, teachers, and local education authority) were collected to create a holistic view of the heads of departments’ leadership role. Additionally, credibility was achieved by triangulation of data sources and data collection methods. After data collection was completed, the participants were sent interview transcripts for member-checking

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

for accuracy and verification. Deputy principal in the leading school made a minor correction to the title of her position, other participants confirmed the accuracy of the interview transcript.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability were achieved through audit-trail of the methods, procedures, and entries into the research journal on the decisions made throughout the study. The case study was conducted in accordance with the case study protocol and multiple case study procedures. Patton (2015) emphasizes the role of the researcher in ensuring the trustworthiness of the study "intellectual rigor" (p. 706), and ethical considerations throughout the process determine the credibility.

Qualitative research design was selected to understand the nuances of the context, specific situations, and individuals (Yin, 2016), and does not aim to generalize findings. This study of two specific cases of school contexts and six embedded cases of HoDs' leadership identity construction cannot be subject to statistical generalization. However, this study's findings can be subject to analytic generalization (Yin, 2014), first by conceptualizing the findings against theoretical constructs or concepts and applying these concepts to transfer to other similar contexts (Yin, 2016).

Transferability

The transferability of the study was possible for readers to understand through a detailed explanation of the research methodology and sampling procedures, description of school profiles and participants sufficient to make judgments whether the findings of this study can be transferred to other settings and contexts.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

To improve the overall quality of the study and ensure the validity of the findings, I initially sent the transcript to participants and the draft of the report for their review. Yin (2018) suggests to have the participants of the study review the draft report to ensure the construct validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are discussed in relation to securing access to research sites, potential risks, anonymity and confidentiality, and data storage. Prior to proceeding to data collection, ethical approval to conduct this study was secured from NU GSE Research Committee and was received on September 7, 2021 (Appendix 14). I refreshed my CITI training (Appendix 13) and renewed certificate until February 2025. Throughout the study, I made sure that it is carried out in strict compliance with ethical principles of Nazarbayev University.

Research site access was first requested from the local educational authority (Appendix 12), and further from the school principals by inviting them to participate in this study (Appendix 8). Information about the participation in this research was sent directly to schools with individual follow-up meetings explaining the purpose of the research, confidentiality and anonymity issues, contents of the informed consent form, voluntary nature of participation, and benefits of the research. I assumed potential power imbalance when LEA could insist on certain schools' participation, or senior leaders could delegate or suggest certain teachers and HoDs to take part in this study. While selecting the research site, I contacted the schools in the official order provided by the LEA. In recruitment of participants, I made individual meetings and provided information about the study to secure their voluntary participation. This study did not

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

involve any vulnerable population and is considered as no more than minimal risk (Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The participants were informed that their names and responses were kept confidential, however, since the research was taking place in the school, in the public space, anonymity could not be secured, and the participants were informed of that as well. They were also notified that any data analyzed by the researcher would be de-identified to preserve anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data. Participants were also made aware that all efforts, within reason, would be made to keep the information received from them highly confidential to the full extent possible. Information about this study and researcher's contacts were given to heads of departments, teachers, who contacted me directly if they agreed to participate. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Although this was a case study that required the researcher to conduct multiple visits to the research site, due to COVID-19 restrictions, access to schools was limited. All first-round interviews with HoDs and teachers were conducted online via Zoom individually. It allowed to secure participants' confidentiality and privacy. Second round interviews with HoDs were conducted in the school in person during the summer break while the school staff was off-site. As a measure of protecting participants' identity, in the informed consent form I advised not to discuss the participation in this study with anyone in and outside the school. Throughout the study, interview transcripts were kept confidential, de-identified and assigned a combination of letters and numbers according to my logbook.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Potential Risks

Semi-structured interviews with HoDs, their senior colleagues, and teachers might be subject to potential power imbalance and sensitive information disclosure. This was avoided by not asking to share personal impressions or evaluate individuals (Creswell, 2014) either senior or subordinate to them. In non-participant observations, the researcher has greater authority and voice compared to others (Liu & Maitlis, 2010). Therefore, to minimize this, I aimed to develop a collaborative view of the setting triangulated by various level meeting observations: whole school pedagogical council meeting, departmental meeting, observations in the staffroom, hallway. Ethical issues arising in document analysis in this study were minimal as it was done on open public records and documents, which school considered confidential to share with the researcher. These documents include heads of departments' job description, annual plans, national policies regulating HoDs' roles and responsibilities.

Informed Consent

Prior to participating in this study, the participants were informed of the purpose and research design of the study, possible risks and benefits, anonymity and confidentiality, voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw at any time, contact details of the Advisory Committee and NUGSE Research Committee. By signing the informed consent form the participants granted their permission to audio-record the interview to ensure the reliability of the data, and were informed that sections of the transcripts would be published or presented in this thesis and other publications, any identifying information would be changed and codes and pseudonyms would be used for confidentiality reasons (Appendices 7, 8, 9, 10). Communication with participants (agreeing time and sending Zoom links) was conducted through a WhatsApp

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

chat, as well as informed consent forms were sent approximately one-two days before the interview. They also needed to print out the forms, sign them and send back to me. This allowed individual time and space to read the informed consent carefully. The participants were asked in which language they would like to read and sign the forms. Consent forms were available in Kazakh, Russian and English languages. One participant agreed to participate in the study, however, did not agree to sign the consent form for anonymity and confidentiality reasons. She vocally expressed her agreement to participate, which was audio-recorded at the beginning of the interview. If participants had questions, they asked them before the interview started. Generally, the questions were related to the duration of the interview.

Benefits

Heads of departments would benefit from participating in this study by reflecting on their leadership role, identifying the barriers and catalysts towards establishing their leadership identity, and gaining insights into their development as leaders. Senior leaders, especially school principals would benefit from deepening their understanding of the HoD's role and recognizing their potential for school performance in times of school reforms and distance learning. Educational stakeholders such as government officials, local educational authority, professional development centers would benefit from empirically-grounded findings on the minimally existing research on the leadership role of heads of departments as middle leadership cadre in school education, they would also be informed how heads of departments in leading schools experience and benefit from current opportunities for leadership.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Data Storage and Maintenance

After data collection, all identifiable data on interview notes, transcripts, and audio-recordings were eliminated, all the recordings were coded to match the participant; thus, protecting participants' identities and securing anonymity. Data were also backed-up and kept on encrypted and password-protected online drive and memory stick. All data including school documents for analysis, hard copies of observation notes, interviews related information, lists of volunteering participants were kept in a locked file cabinet and password-protected laptop for the period of time required by Nazarbayev University and are available only to me and my research supervisor. Data was stored and protected in strict compliance with ethical principles of NU.

Summary

A qualitative embedded multiple case study was employed to explore the experiences, relationships and interactions that contribute to HoDs leadership identity construction. The sample consisted of six HoDs purposefully selected across two case study schools, representing different contexts in which HoDs operate. To enrich the understanding of HoDs perspectives, and additional sample of 11 teachers, two senior leaders and one representative of LEA were included. Altogether three data collection methods were used and included two rounds of semi-structured interviews with HoDs, one round of semi-structured interviews with other participants, document analysis and non-participant observations.

The research design was meticulously planned to explore the phenomenon under study and to address the research questions. Utilizing two case study schools alongside with three data collection methods was appropriate to gather detailed and context-specific exploration of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

individual HoDs' experiences of leadership identity construction. Certain corrections to the data collection stages were made due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closure.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

In this study, I explored how heads of departments (HoDs) in secondary schools being in the middle leader position construct their leadership identities, which experiences, relationships and interactions become enabling (catalysts) and hindering (barriers) factors to this process. I explored the views and perspectives of HoDs themselves, and how senior leaders and teachers view their leadership role. Guided by the social constructivist paradigm, the findings presented in this chapter highlight the relational nature, the role of social interactions and the context in the leadership identity construction. In this chapter, I present the findings emerging from two case studies of secondary mainstream schools in Astana city, the capital of Kazakhstan. This is an embedded multiple case study of three HoDs within each case study school. Data obtained from two rounds of semi-structured interviews with HoDs, one round of semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, teachers and local educational authority, document analysis and non-participant observations was analyzed to answer research questions of this study. Alignment of collected data with research questions is presented in the following table.

Table 8*Alignment of Collected data to Research Questions*

Overarching research question:		
What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?		
Sub-questions	Methods of data collection	Data
RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?	Semi-structured interviews	Personal biographies Definition of leadership, perceptions of the leadership role Experiences within and beyond school context HoDs role in school reforms Role change in COVID-19

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?	Semi-structured interviews Document analysis Non-participant observation	Definition of leadership, perceptions of HoDs' leadership role HoDs role in school reforms Role change in COVID-19 Departmental and school context (setting) Principal's leadership style
RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?	Semi-structured interviews Document analysis Non-participant observation	Important experiences and interactions impact on leadership identity

Data derived from the semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observations was analyzed through the theoretical framework of Leadership Identity Construction by DeRue and Ashford (2010) and underpinned by the social constructivist paradigm. The findings gathered from the documents and observations are integrated throughout the chapter, providing relevant context and supporting evidence.

The chapter is organized in two main sections, each dedicated to a separate case study school. These schools have common characteristics that make their contexts alike and comparable. Specifically, both schools have the same ownership and organization as state mainstream institutions with a bilingual instructional approach, featuring both Kazakh and Russian languages. Both schools adhere to and implement national curriculum standards, policies and regulations as prescribed by state educational authorities such as the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, local educational authorities (LEA) i.e., Astana city education department and Center for Modernization of Education. Both schools have a longstanding history as an educational institution of more than 40 years. Over this extended period, they developed their own unique culture, values, traditions and practices which became an integral part of their school community. Finally, both schools are situated within one urban city and region, serving the local community with comparable socio-economic status.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Despite many similarities, both schools exist in separate and unique contexts that set them apart in various aspects such as specific school cultures, educational experiences and practices. Each school has its own leadership and organizational structures with distinct approaches to managing the institution, setting goals and making decisions. The leadership style and values of the school leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the overall school culture and climate which can vary between the two schools. The most significant distinction between the two case study schools is their participation in the leading school project, which influences the opportunities for leadership and potential obligations to practice leadership within the school and beyond.

The embedded multiple case study design allows a more comprehensive exploration of leadership dynamics, specifically leadership identity construction not only between two case study schools, but between three cases of heads of departments. Within each school there are HoDs of different subject areas based on the Unified National Test (UNT) subject. The inclusion of three HoDs adds a layer of complexity and richness to this study. Each HoD brings their unique understanding, experiences, practices, expertise, leadership styles which may vary depending on the subject area, the 'power' position of the subject, the availability of human, financial, and technical resources allocated to the department.

Leadership identity construction is a deeply individualized process through which individuals develop and internalize their sense of themselves as leaders. It involves a complex interplay of personal biographies, experiences, social interactions, and self-reflection that shape how one perceives themselves as leaders and, as a result, how they practice leadership. Due to these individual differences, research findings on leadership identity construction are often specific to particular participants. The data was analyzed through the theoretical framework of Leadership Identity Construction by DeRue and Ashford (2010) which includes three levels such

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

as individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement, and therefore will be presented accordingly for each HoD's case as a within-case analysis.

Since all three heads of departments are bound by one school context, a cross-case analysis was conducted between three HoDs within one school case to explore experiences, relationships and interactions that contribute to the construction of their leadership identity. Table 9 presents their profiles specifying their pseudonym used throughout this thesis, their gender, subject area, the number of years in teaching, the HoD's role, and the number of teachers in their respective departments.

In order to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, I developed pseudonyms to refer to each participant. These pseudonyms consist of the following parts: L and NL stand for the leading and non-leading school and identify the case study school. Prefixes with UNT such as CoUNT- compulsory UNT subject, EIUNT - elective UNT subject, NonUNT- not a UNT subject identify the subject area of the department that the HoD leads. The last part of the pseudonym stands for the position of the participant, such as HD - HoD, T - teacher, SL - senior leader, LEA - local educational authority.

Table 9

Profiles of Heads of Departments by School

Pseudonym	Gender	Subject area	Years in teaching	Years in this role	Number of teachers
Leading school					
L-CoUNT-HD	Female	Math, physics, computer science, biology, chemistry	28	5	23
L-EIUNT-HD	Female	English	9	3	16
L-NonUNT-HD	Female	Self-reflection	25.5	1	8

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Non-leading school					
NL-CoUNT-HD	Female	Math, physics, computer science	8	2	12
NL-EIUNT-HD	Female	History	11	3	8
NL-NonUNT-HD	Male	Physical education	10	1,5	9

Within each case study school, the findings are presented in three sections according to research questions: Understanding, experiences and practices of HoD's leadership role; Multiple stakeholder perspectives of HoD's leadership role; Findings from individual cases of leadership identity construction. A within-case analysis to the first and second research questions are presented for each specific school respectively, as well as the cross-case analysis comparing and contrasting to identify common and different perspectives, experiences, practices of HoDs' leadership role. To answer the overarching research questions of what experiences, relationships and interactions contribute to HoDs leadership identity construction is presented as a cross-case analysis based on findings from individual cases.

Leading School Case

School and Departmental Context

This case study school was built in the late 1970s and is one of the first schools in Astana. It is a mainstream school with a mixed language of instruction in Kazakh and Russian languages. In conversation with the senior leader supervising the HoDs' work (LDP), she provided the context and departmental organization within the school. Overall, there are eight subject departments in this case study school. Each department is organized according to the subject area or related subjects. The departments of mathematics, computer science, physics, biology and chemistry make a large one consisting of 23 teachers. The school has the right to decide on how

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

the department is organized and the number of teachers in it. HoDs are supervised and report directly to the deputy principal for science and methodological work and the deputy principal for academic affairs. The academic affairs deputy principal oversees student attainment, learning outcomes, and assessments. The science and methodological work deputy principal is responsible for teacher professional development, innovations, teacher research, and work with gifted and talented students. Within the school senior leadership team, there is also a position of the pastoral care deputy principal who works directly with the classroom teachers' department. Therefore, HoDs do not report to this deputy principal on student related matters.

Non-participant Observation

Non-participant observation notes of pedagogical council meeting reveal a dynamic interaction between HoDs, senior leaders, and teachers reflecting a collaborative and positive school culture. The sitting arrangement (all staff mingling in the audience) during the meeting suggests a culture of openness and accessibility, where hierarchical boundaries are minimized to foster better communication and collaboration among school staff. The principal's role in introducing other senior leaders and HoDs to present indicates a structured yet inclusive approach to leadership. By sitting at the front on a separate desk, the principal maintains a position of authority while still being an active part of the meeting. Meeting agenda included public appreciation for teacher achievements, as well as sharing information about those who need improvement in a positive manner, along with providing recommendations. Altogether this reflects a supportive environment aimed at professional growth rather than punitive measures, schools' culture where leaders at all levels are engaged in fostering a positive environment. The principal rigorously questioned departmental achievements and acted as an instructional leader by providing specific constructive feedback aimed at improvement of teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The departmental meeting agenda included the discussion of teachers' ratings and achievements, confirmed through open and transparent dialogue. The meeting also addressed practical matters such as end-of-term reporting, with the HoD clearly outlining expectations and teachers clarifying requirements. An experienced teacher reported on in-school monitoring of students' notebooks, providing feedback to improve marking practices and align assessment standards, showcasing instructional leadership. Along with the HoD, more experienced teachers also mentor colleagues. The staffroom observation suggests that due to a shortage of classrooms, teachers have access to a well-equipped room where the deputy principal for science and methodological work sits. Teachers frequently enter this room, using the resources and equipment, and utilizing it as a collaborative space.

Document Analysis

The document analysis of HoDs' job descriptions, annual plans, and the regulations guiding their work reveals a comprehensive framework for their roles and responsibilities. In the leading school, job descriptions are developed in alignment with the order No 583 "On subject methodological unit" (subject department) (MES, 2007) and school-based departmental regulations. To qualify for a HoD position, teachers must hold qualifications not lower than teacher-expert, teacher-researcher, or teacher-master (Appendix 15). These qualifications indicate that candidates are subject matter experts, proficient in pedagogy, and capable of demonstrating personal and student achievements. The main functions of HoDs include analyzing performance data, conducting annual planning, diagnosing teachers' professional development needs, and understanding of legal acts and documents. They also support teachers in systematizing and showcasing their best practicing within the school community and beyond.

In addition to these general functions, HoDs provide methodological support, organize

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

subject-specific event and Olympiads, and organize lesson study groups. Leading school project implies that the school established practiced of teacher research to improve teaching and learning through the lesson study. They can, therefore, showcase their experience and professional capacity to other schools (partner/non-leading). Therefore, the job functions of HoDs in leading schools include organization of lesson study groups compared to that of non-leading schools.

The job description emphasizes that HoDs have an advisory role, allowing them to make recommendations to school leadership on teaching hours allocation, classroom supervision bonuses, and performance-related bonuses for teachers. They have the autonomy to decide on the department's leadership and planning approach, aligning with the overall school planning. The annual plan for HoDs includes monthly planning in four key areas: overall management and leadership of the school's methodological work, teacher professional development, improvement of student learning outcomes (especially for gifted and talented students), and showcasing best practices.

Each department has its unique composition, qualitative (experience, expertise, qualifications, age, gender) and quantitative (numbers, subjects) characteristics, I present them in the section below.

Compulsory UNT Department

The department is multidisciplinary and includes 23 teachers of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and computer science which makes it the largest in size in this school. The department includes not only teachers, but the senior leaders such as deputy principals who also teach part-time. The HoD in the leading school in charge of the compulsory UNT subject department was labeled with a pseudonym as L-CoUNT-HD. This pseudonym was used during data analysis and is referred to as such in this chapter. This participant is female and has a 28-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

year of experience as a teacher and five years as a head of this department. The only compulsory-UNT subject in this department is mathematics, others are elective-UNT. Although it was initially planned that this has to be a purely compulsory UNT subject, in reality the departmental organization combines a mixture of subjects. I decided to continue the study in this particular department, as the head of the department is the teacher of mathematics.

The participant has not attended training in leadership and management of the department, mostly training for teachers and teacher leaders, specifically she completed training as a criteria-based assessment specialist under the renewed curriculum and assessment reform. Since then, she has been acting as a trainer to other teachers in her school. L-CoUNT-HD is proud of their strong team of teachers. She stated: “Teachers in our department are experienced with qualifications of teacher-master, among them there are five teachers who make a team of leaders who organize events and engage others. This is a team of professionals and I can rely on them”. Among teachers in this department there are also senior leaders who teach part-time. In this capacity, the HoD has to act as a leader to staff who are superior to her.

Elective UNT Department

This participant is the head of the elective UNT subject department, and is labeled with a pseudonym L-EIUNT-HD. This is an English language department with 16 full-time teachers in it. The HoD is female, and has nine years of teaching experience, and three of them as a head of this department. The participant has not attended leadership training either before or during her employment in this role. It is worth mentioning that this participant is a graduate of this case study school. After finishing her bachelor degree, she returned to school as a teacher and further was promoted to the HoD role. HoD in this department is the most experienced teacher (years of teaching experience and category level) compared to the majority of teachers who are less

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

experienced or are novice teachers. HoD acts as a mentor. There are two tenured teachers, one is a senior leader and one is a former head of this department.

Non-UNT Department

L-NonUNT-HD is an educator with more than 25 years of teaching experience. After completing her teaching internship and her first degree in Kazakh language, she decided to dedicate her entire career to serving the school where she graduated from. She was first a teacher of Kazakh language, however, when the new subject of self-reflection was introduced, eventually she shifted her focus towards teaching solely self-reflection. Self-reflection (*samopoznaniye* in Russian language) is the subject of spiritual and moral education. This program was designed to develop students intellectually and morally by teaching them skills such as self-reflection, self-esteem and self-development. Self-reflection program was initiated by the first lady, the wife of President Nazarbayev, was taught as part of the state education standard from 2001 until 2022. To qualify to teach self-reflection, she obtained a second degree in self-reflection and underwent a comprehensive 340-hour training program to become a tutor in inclusion classes where she could support individual students more effectively. As a prerequisite to teach self-reflection, teachers need to attend only a course on pedagogy of this subject. Among teachers, she was the only one who had an academic degree in teaching self-reflection, therefore, she was appointed as a head of this department. By the time of the interview, she has served in the HoD position for one year already. In terms of leadership development, this participant has completed a yearlong course for novice principals, was in a senior leaders' cadre reserve for mainstream schools. However, due to maternity leave and family priorities she decided to develop as a teacher of self-reflection and an inclusion tutor. She also continues to develop her leadership skills on an individual basis. While being a teacher, she also practiced leadership by organizing subject decades (showcase of best

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

practices), Olympiads for her personal professional growth.

In the department, there are overall eight teachers who teach self-reflection part-time, and at other times they are elementary school teachers or psychologists. Compared to other participants, who report to the deputy principal for academic and deputy principal for scientific and methodological work, this participant due to the nature of this subject directly reports and is supervised by two deputy principals - for scientific and methodological work, and pastoral care. In the next section, I present findings to the first research question in which I aim to explore how HoDs themselves understand, experience and practice their leadership role. Findings to this question help us situate the context, explore the lived experiences of HoDs on this middle leader role.

In the following table I summarized the key information across all HoDs that will substantiate and provide context in regard to leadership dynamics within the department. This is important as in some departments HoDs have to be leaders to their superiors to whom they are generally in follower position within the school organizational structure.

Table 10

Departmental Context of the Leading School

	L-CoUNT-HD	L-EIUNT-HD	L-NonUNT-HD
Department staff composition	Incl. senior leaders	Incl. senior leaders and former HoD	Part-time teachers
Experience	Most experienced, mix of subjects	Most experienced, novice teachers	Most experienced, only teacher with degree
Affiliation	-	Graduate of this school	Graduate of this school
Reporting	Academic and science-methodological work SL	Academic and science-methodological work SL	Science-methodological work SL, pastoral care SL

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

All HoDs are the most experienced subject teachers in their departments, however, in two of them there are also senior leaders who teach some hours alongside their leadership responsibilities. Practicing leadership towards staff members to whom HoDs are typically subordinate add complexity to their role in regard to claiming and granting of leadership. In one department, there is tension with a teacher who used to be an HoD. The participant mentioned that this teacher compares her own experience in this role and does not accept and view the current HoD as her leader. Two participants expressed pride in working in this school, as they are both graduates and feel honored to serve the community. They demonstrated a strong sense of belonging and loyalty. These departmental characteristics are important in understanding HoDs' experiences in their leadership role.

Understanding, Experiences and Practices of HoD's Leadership Role in the Leading School

This section provides insights into the HoDs' individual perspectives of leadership, how they understand, experience and practice their leadership role.

Understanding of Leadership and HoD's Leadership Role

As there are multiple definitions of leadership in the literature, it was important to understand what meaning participants adhere to leadership and how they understand their leadership role. The participants in this case study school have a shared understanding of leadership as envisioning and sharing that vision with the team so others support the leader and follow towards a common goal. To do that, one needs to have strong organizational skills, the ability to initiate changes and a strong team who will support and implement these changes. To illustrate this, the L-CoUNT-HD shared an example of their school principal. "I could not imagine how things in our school could be changed, but she managed to redesign our school, changed the way school operates, and the whole school community shares her vision and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

supports her”. In agreement with her, L-NonUNT-HD stated:

“Strong leader is one who does what he/she preaches. In other words, who leads by example and has a strong authority, so others follow their requests or tasks not because they are afraid, but because they share a common vision and do not want to let their leader down”.

L-EIUNT-HD added the character traits of a strong leader who is a well-educated, continuously self-improving person, who can stand out of the team, organize it and lead by example.

Subject Expertise. The participants also shared their view of the leadership role on the position of the HoD. Both HoDs of the compulsory and elective departments acknowledge the importance of the subject specific expertise. L-CoUNTHD understands her leadership role in the department as possessing subject-specific expertise in the first place to offer professional guidance and support to subject teachers. Subject knowledge is perceived as a requirement to lead the department. This HoD leads a multi-disciplinary department embedding a variety of subjects: math, physics, chemistry, biology and computer science. However, from conversations with her and teachers in the department this does not seem to be a challenge. L-EIUNT-HD believed that to be a HoD and practice this leadership role effectively she needs to have subject matter expertise, be proficient in pedagogy of teaching her subject, and have research and analytical skills. Therefore, being a leader to teachers of other subjects than hers (mathematics) requires additional learning and preparation to support subject-specific and methodological needs.

Organization of Departmental Work. According to L-CoUNT-HD, the HoD also needs to be knowledgeable and experienced in the effective organization of the teacher and learning

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

process, working with documents, and policies. Her leadership role is utilized through establishing collaboration within the team, an age-appropriate communication approach, and motivation. Motivating teachers to be involved in departmental work is the most challenging due to their busy schedules. As L-CoUNT-HD explained:

“Teachers are overloaded with teaching hours, most of them teach in the morning and in the afternoon shifts. To motivate them to engage in departmental activities, or participate in teacher competitions is difficult. I understand that. They only do it if it is related to teacher attestation, because they have to. Otherwise, they are not willing to. Therefore, as a leader I need to plan well, communicate effectively, explain the benefits, motivate the right way, or insist if needed”.

L-NonUNT-HD believes that HoDs need to be responsible and complete tasks and departmental goals in a timely and effective manner. To do that, HoD needs to be able to identify talents, teachers’ individual strengths and to delegate responsibilities accordingly. She stated:

“As HoDs we get assignments to present or to organize events. There are HoDs who do everything at the last minute because they do everything themselves. A responsible HoD would delegate the tasks to the teachers who can do it best, it is impossible to do everything yourself”.

L-EIUNT-HD claimed that her role allows her to practice leadership across different areas within the school context and beyond:

“It is impossible not to practice leadership. Our job functions allow us to be a leader in the school and beyond. For example, we have a chat with the LEA, we receive news, information on competitions, we then pass it to the teachers, do everything on time, observe teachers’ lessons, give feedback. It’s a huge responsibility”.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

She also understands that there are other functions that are managerial and do not require leadership such as to collect reports on time. However, it requires leadership to organize the department, to establish the culture of responsibility and collaboration.

Departmental Effectiveness. HoDs' understanding of their leadership role is closely related to their job functions. Job functions are outlined in the order issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, "On subject methodological unit" No 583 dated 29.11.2007, amended 23.09.2022 (MES, 2007). Based on this overarching document, each school develops an internal job description including functions specific to the HoD's role. Amongst all the job functions listed in the official job description, I inquired about the key areas of HoD's role, which in their views contribute to the departmental effectiveness as an indicator of success.

HoDs understand what is expected of their leadership role based on policy documents, job description, and discussions with the senior leadership team. Although not specified in the job description, student achievements and teacher achievements are considered the main indicators of departmental effectiveness. At the end of year Pedagogical Council meeting which I had an opportunity to observe, the HoDs reported their departmental achievements to the school principal and the whole school community. In practice, departmental effectiveness is achieved through the effective organization of the teaching and learning process. According to L-CoUNT-HD, the role of HoD is to organize and sustain this practice meaningfully and effectively: "If there is a goal to organize an event, I need to allocate tasks to teachers, share responsibilities, explain their scope of work". L-EIUNT-HD understands departmental effectiveness as a well-organized work of the department, appropriate and convenient scheduling of the classes, and allocation of teaching hours. She commented: "It is convenient when teachers work in a one-year group; I organize their schedules so it suits all of us, the school, teachers, and senior leaders". As the leader of the department, the HoD plays a pivotal role in maintaining high standards of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

teaching and student learning. HoDs do so by monitoring teacher performance, their professional development, and practices. L-EIUNT-HD stated: “At the school level I am responsible for all teachers of the English language. If something happens, I have to deal with this situation”.

Student Achievements. Student achievements include student learning outcomes such as “quality of knowledge” which is measured by the percentage of students in the class performing above satisfactory level, i.e., well-performing students; and participation and places taken in subject Olympiads on city, republican, and international levels. According to L-CoUNT-HD, the increase in the quality of knowledge is achieved through the improvement of teachers’ teaching practices. Teacher research through the lesson study helps them explore the opportunities and challenges in a collaborative manner, through peer support and feedback. The L-NonUNT-HD department does not only teach self-reflection, they also work as inclusion tutors with students with disabilities. She, therefore, views graduation and enrollment of 100% of students with disabilities to the colleges in Astana as key indicators of their department’s effectiveness. The main indicator of student success, however, remains the participation in various subject Olympiads, and competitions in the prestigious Kazakhstani organization for gifted and talented students such as “Daryn”.

The Unified National Test (UNT) was used to serve two purposes: an examination to graduate from school and to apply for a university. It was an indicator that measured school, teacher and departmental performance (OECD, 2014). This is supported by L-CoUNT-HD’s comment: “Before, the school was accountable for the UNT scores, and it affected the work of the department, it was a high-stake examination”. However, since the change in assessment in 2017 the school administers only the examination to graduate from school - *Itogovaya attestatsiya*, the students individually applied for the UNT exam. L-CoUNT-HD further explained: “Teachers voluntarily prepared students for the UNT, but it was not organized at the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

departmental level”. L-EIUNT-HD in relation to her subject stated: “UNT does not affect my leadership role of a HoD, but it does so on my role as a classroom teacher”.

Although the UNT is no longer a high-stake examination, subjects such as mathematics, language of instruction (Kazakh or Russian), history of Kazakhstan remain compulsory subjects for the examination to graduate. Students also have an option to choose examination in one elective subject such as physics, chemistry, biology, geography, world history, literature, English, computer science (ME, 2023). Student achievements are directly linked to the teacher individual’s performance and achievements.

Teacher Achievements. Teacher achievements are another indicator of the departmental effectiveness. Besides teaching, they are expected to participate and take places in teacher competitions, produce authored projects, and attend professional development training. L-EIUNT-HD commented: “Teacher achievements are a success criterion of departmental effectiveness”. She continued:

“Authored projects are our weakness. It is difficult to find time to produce creative authored projects in our overloaded teaching schedules. Even finding a spare room to sit and think is a challenge. In the staff room there are always teachers, so focusing on creative work is not easy. Therefore, we do it after work, after finishing all household work late at night. Teachers hope to do it during summer holidays, but we also need to rest”.

HoDs play an important role in facilitating teachers' work in a way they set their priorities, identify objectives, and follow the performance plan. HoDs act as guides helping teachers navigate their professional development, encouraging participation in competitions and projects. Teachers’ performance is measured by the high-stake teacher appraisal which assesses

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

teacher and student achievements. Despite demanding teaching schedules, HoDs needs to ensure that teachers are motivated and supported to achieve the outcomes necessary for their appraisal.

Leading School Status. This case study school has a status as a leading school practicing lesson study and working with partner (non-leading) schools sharing these best practices. For school as a whole, lesson study is considered a best practice to inquire and improve teaching and learning through collaborative teacher research. This project highlights the initiative of the LEA to commit to educational innovation. Leading school status creates these opportunities for teachers as they conduct lesson study throughout the year to improve their teaching practices, analyze it, report findings, present reflections, make presentations at local and national conferences, publish in journals. For example, as L-CoUNT-HD commented:

“Our teachers can participate in annual conferences organized by the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools. In the first conference only one-two teachers participated, in the latest one more than 10 teachers presented their posters and research. They now have a better understanding of the benefits of the lesson study, and, therefore, can share their practices with other teachers in the region”.

HoDs organize lesson studies within the department and monitor progress, providing support. However, the leading status of the school does not directly impact the HoD’s role as the heads of the department. As L-CoUNT-HD stated:

“These are mainly opportunities for me as a teacher, I can consult the lesson study mentor, improve my teaching, publish, present at conferences, seminars. For me as a HoD, it’s more teacher achievements that add to our departmental effectiveness”.

While L-EIUNT-HD is not directly involved in the leading school project, she has engaged in specific research activities concerning the English department. Teachers join together

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

in a lesson study research group, they identify a problem, observe each other's teaching, suggest areas for improvement, thus research their practice and work on its advancement. Additionally, recognizing her research potential, the senior leader assigned a specific task to research how teachers conduct lesson study in the English department. Since the HoD is also studying in a Master's program, she found this opportunity enriching for her as a researcher. As L-EIUNT-HD commented:

“As a HoD I do not have any obligations, but I was involved in the lesson study research in one of the groups as a teacher. Deputy principal told me to conduct research on how teachers conduct their research in my English department”.

L-NonUNT-HD does not also directly participate in the leading school project, she and her department are actively engaged in showcasing their experience on a city and regional level. Sharing best practices within the school and beyond is the requirement of the teacher appraisal across all schools in Kazakhstan. Within the leading school project, schools are expected to establish “methodological cooperation, exchange or education on the “peer-to-peer’ principle” (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023, p. 152). This is not an obligation to practice leadership, but rather to her individual initiative and purposefulness. She elaborated:

“As a HoD I do not participate in this project, nor our teachers are involved in the lesson study. But as you understood our department is actively engaged not only inside the school but also outside”.

This suggests that in order to practice leadership one does not necessarily need to have such opportunities or responsibilities. If you are a proud advocate of your subject, and you believe in it, it is a matter of initiative to practice leadership.

Both student and teacher achievements are challenging to organize and achieve, as teachers lack time to prepare for these due to their overloaded teaching schedules. They lack time

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

and even space to prepare students for Olympiads and prepare themselves for competitions.

Experiences and Practices

Operating within their multiple job functions, it is important to find out their experiences and practices in this role.

Overload and Multiple Tasks. HoDs have a dual role; they are not only responsible for leading the department, but also have teaching responsibilities. This dual role creates significant workload demands and time constraints. As L-CoUNT-HD commented:

“Schools work in two, sometimes three shifts. Preparation for olympiads, competitions is challenging. There is a lack of space and time. Teachers work the whole day, and physically it is impossible to complete all outstanding tasks. Sometimes we have to sacrifice our personal and family time, work on the weekends”.

L-EIUNT-HD also describes her HoD role as time-consuming, involving various responsibilities related to teacher supervision, administrative tasks, decision-making and others. These are multifaceted responsibilities that demand considerable time and effort. The absence of a dedicated workspace within the school premises forces the HoDs to bring their work home, resulting in a buildup of tasks and responsibilities. She commented: “This is a time-consuming work. Since there is no space for us to work at school, I have to take HoD’s work home. It piles up”. Without a designated time and space in the school, HoDs face difficulties finding suitable environment to carry out their duties effectively. The absence of a private and quiet workspace can hinder focus and efficiency. HoDs conduct departmental meetings in classrooms after school hours or in the deputy principal’s office where normally other teachers and HoDs work. In the absence of a workspace at school, HoD take their work home compromising their private and family life to the completion of departmental work. This makes it difficult to disconnect from

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

work and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

For the HoD of the non-UNT subject, the experience is relatively different. Self-reflection is not assessed as compulsory and elective UNT subjects, there is, therefore, less reporting and associated workload. Compared to other subjects, this gives teachers and the HoD more time and flexibility to engage in creative work of the department, producing more achievements. Besides departmental leadership and teaching, L-NonUNT-HD is actively and voluntarily involved in certification and licensing of textbooks on the city and republican level, at the school level she acts as a trade union representative, and a member of the Kazakh language committee. She commented:

“In our subject there is not much workload, very few reports. The most significant events are subject decades, Olympiads. At the beginning of the year, I only have to submit reports on department characteristics (qualitative and quantitative) and end of year reports”

As findings suggest, HoDs have multiple roles and tasks. However, it depends on the nature of the subject, curriculum, assessment, and number of teaching hours. At times HoDs have to compromise their work-life balance and complete departmental work at the expense of their personal and family time.

Financial Remuneration. HoD’s job is not paid, instead in the leading school HoDs are given additional days off during summer holidays. L-CoUNT-HD stated: “We are given days off during summer holidays, but I cannot take them as I need to finish end-of-year analysis and reports”. To compensate for pay, she takes more teaching hours in mathematics, which leaves less time for departmental work. She commented: “This work should be paid. It is difficult to find time to do departmental work. We work in two shifts: in the morning and in the afternoon. It

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

would be great if it was half day teaching, and half day HoD's work". HoDs juggle between multiple roles and tasks, at times favoring teaching as their main job responsibility, and the one they are paid for. HoDs are usually the most experienced teachers with the highest teaching categories such as teacher-researcher, teacher-master. These categories are paid accordingly on a higher pay scale.

Absence of proper financial remuneration affects motivation and attitude to work. HoDs take significant responsibilities and leadership roles without receiving additional financial compensation. The unpaid nature of the position influences the attitude and approach to work, motivation and commitment. It also raises concerns about the fairness of dedicating time and effort to the role at the expense of the personal and family time. In L-EIUNT-HD's quote it is also evident that it is an issue of job satisfaction and eventually job performance. "If only this job was paid, you would just do it. However, since we are not paid for that, the attitude is equal". She suggests that the position of HoD should be made more appealing and competitive by offering additional privileges that can increase motivation to take up the role by more qualified candidates. L-EIUNT-HD does not only teach full-time, leads the department, but also takes on the additional responsibility of being a classroom teacher. "If only HoDs had more privileges. For example, as a teacher I have this role (HoD) and also have to be a classroom teacher. This job could be more attractive for teachers to become HoDs if it gave some privileges, such as no obligation to be a classroom teacher as well".

HoD of the non-UNT subject, on the other hand, is satisfied with the fact that she is given additional days off that she can take as part of the summer holidays and between the terms. She believes it is a great incentive to be in the HoD's position. L-NonUNT-HD commented "Now there is less reporting, we are given additional days off, I think this is great".

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

HoDs have different experiences of their position not being paid but substituted with additional days off. Some HoDs due to being overloaded and excess reporting even during term break time cannot use those days. Lack of proper remuneration for their work affects their motivation and attitude.

Advisory Role. In documents (regulations, job description) and in practice, HoD's role is advisory. HoDs advise the senior leadership team on teacher candidates for professional development courses, teacher attestation, and other matters, which are mostly operational rather than strategic. As L-CoUNT-HD commented: "My suggestions are mainly advisory, to suggest candidates for appraisal, recognition, teacher attestation, etc. The decision-making power lies with the senior leadership team, but with our recommendations". According to the job description, HoD makes suggestions on financial issues such as teaching hours allocation, additional pay for maintaining a classroom, provision of methodological and technical resources for teaching and learning.

L-NonUNT-HD discusses the decision-making practices on a departmental and whole school level and explains the hierarchy between the layers of the organizational structure in terms of decision-making.

"We are all interconnected. The principal gives the task to the deputies, deputy principals gather us, HoDs in their turn transmit this information to teachers. Nobody's skips this hierarchy. Decisions are made at the department level among the teachers and myself, and then I pass it to the senior level".

Despite their role being advisory, HoDs acknowledge that the senior leaders trust and accept their decisions. This is also supported by the LDP participant, the deputy principal overseeing HoDs' work.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Navigating Subject Expertise and Methodological Support in Multi-Disciplinary Departments. HoD of compulsory UNT subjects leads a multi-disciplinary department where teachers of math, physics, chemistry, biology and computer science work together. According to her job description, she provides methodological support to teachers of all subjects, however, to do that she needs to be aware of subject specific pedagogy. Although every subject within the department has a subject leader, she, nevertheless, spends time and effort for additional learning to ensure all teachers can have her support. L-CoUNT-HD commented: “When teachers of other subjects approach me with methodological questions specific to their subjects, I have to find answers, because they expect my support and subject knowledge”. Her concern is consistent with teachers’ responses to the second research question on their view of HoD’s leadership role. Teachers expect HoD to be a subject matter expert and have relevant knowledge about the subject and its pedagogy. This, in turn, creates an additional task for HoD’s overloaded position. Other HoDs who lead single subject departments did not report this kind of issue.

Subject Perception by Others. The so-called subject hierarchy and perceived importance of the subject sometimes leads to misconception about the way the subject is taught, lessons are planned, and other achievements that the department may demonstrate. Despite this, the HoD plays an active role in demonstrating the department's effectiveness, both in terms of student and teacher achievements, thus changing the attitude the school community may have towards the subject. For example, L-NonUNT-HD appeared to be a proud advocate for the subject and promotes self-reflection status both within the school and outside on a city and regional level. Through these practices she showcases how the department actively contributes to the academic growth and overall development of students despite their exceptionalities. As L-NonUNT-HD commented: “There is a perception of our subject as creative (non-academic), but we also participate in all competitions, meetings, celebrations. We spend time planning lessons according

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

to new regulations of the renewed curriculum, there are half-year assessments (non-graded)".

HoDs of compulsory and elective UNT subjects did not mention similar issues.

Balancing Tasks and Responsibilities in HoD Roles. The experience and practice of delegation are essential aspects of HoD's complex role. Delegating tasks and responsibilities helps HoD efficiently manage departmental duties, especially those that require specific skills and competencies. By doing so L-NonUNT-HD balances the strengths of the team members, ensuring the tasks are completed in a timely and effective manner. She commented: "I am not particularly good at ICT skills, so I ask my colleagues to take some responsibilities on departmental documentation, to type, and to make a presentation. Over 25 years nobody said no if I asked". This suggests that there is an established positive and supportive culture and a strong sense of teamwork in the department, therefore she can delegate some of the managerial tasks. L-CoUNT-HD also mentioned the delegation of tasks and teacher leadership as an area she would like to develop to deal with the multiple tasks and responsibilities in the department. Being the HoD of the largest multidisciplinary department, she, nevertheless, believes that her character and personality is not leader-like, but rather of a "good and responsible doer".

It can be concluded that those HoDs who have strong self-belief of themselves as leaders delegate tasks easily, thus focusing on more strategic issues, whereas those who do not, tend to deal with the overloaded nature of the role on their own.

The Role of Analytical Reports in HoD's Leadership and Management. The role of HoDs involves dealing with numerous analytical reports based on quantitative and qualitative data. These reports play a crucial role not only in the effective leadership and management of the department, but also contribute to the whole school's data management. These reports help assess departments' performance, identify areas for improvement in teaching and learning, and make informed decisions. As L-EIUNT-HD states: "There are multiple reports that I need to put

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

together. First, I need to make sure teachers complete them on time, then I analyze them. It all takes time – to collect, to finalize”. This quote explains the nature of the analytical reporting process that HoD encounters. L-CoUNT-HD also commented that there is excessive reporting that she needs to complete in a timely manner. Analysis of student and teacher achievement data takes time, and is usually completed during the break time. She also agrees with L-EIUNT-HD that timely completion is dependent on teachers' responsibility, accuracy of the reports, and time management. Timely submission of reports is a challenge due to teachers' overloaded timetables. Despite this, as a mathematician she enjoys putting numbers together. L-CoUNT-HD shared: “I personally like analytical reports, this is my specialty as a mathematician”.

Challenge Working with People. HoDs lead and manage a diverse group of individuals with different personalities, preferences, values. This diversity can bring a variety of perspectives to the team, but it can also lead to potential conflicts and challenges in communication and understanding. L-ELUNT-HD commented: “There are different people in the department, with different characters, personalities, and preferences. Sometimes there is a room for misunderstanding or miscommunication especially with elderly colleagues who can make mountains out of molehills. Such situations are challenging, but I see them as an area for growth”. Departments' composition varies and presents specific opportunities and challenges. For example, compulsory and elective UNT departments include senior leaders who also have teaching hours. In one (L-CoUNT-HD) department, the challenge is with the senior leaders not being involved in departmental work due to their role, however, they can offer administrative support if needed. In another (L-EIUNT-HD) department, the HoD experienced tensions with the teacher who used to be the former department head. She commented: “As a former HoD she has certain expectations on how the department should be led. Sometimes these expectations were not met, or she did not see me as the current leader and HoD”. These two cases are examples of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

relational recognition when the senior leaders or teachers recognize or underrecognize the leadership of the HoD. In other words, the HoD claims leadership by organizing the departments' work, and the others grant or do not grant leadership. This in turn impacts the leadership identity construction of the HoD.

Leadership Beyond the School (LEA). As one of her functions, L-EIUNT-HD emphasizes the crucial role she plays as the connecting link between the school and LEA. As a representative at the LEA, she serves as the channel for important information transmitting to her departments' teachers. Without this, the teachers would miss updates, opportunities for collaboration that can contribute to their professional growth and overall effectiveness of the department. She commented:

“I play the role of the link between our department and other English departments across the city. I represent our department at the LEA level and transmit information to our teachers. If there was not this link, they would miss a lot of information”.

L-NonUNT-HD perceives her active engagement beyond school not only as a means of transmitting information from the LEA to the school but rather as being involved in activities such as certification of textbooks, licensing, development of lesson plans and sharing best practices. She commented: “At the city level I participate in the teacher group who develop textbooks, certify them, and give licenses. I am often invited to such projects, and I do not refuse. For example, I developed lesson plans for grade 4 and it was acknowledged with a certificate”. She also complimented for an equal approach and direct communication of LEA with HoDs. “There is no division between subjects, we are all equal. Even at the city level, we are engaged in HoDs chats of all schools, with LEA. Now everyone is democratic”.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Curriculum and Assessment Reform. L-CoUNT-HD reflects on changes in her role since the start of the national curriculum and assessment reform. She was a HoD before and during the reform, therefore, she reflects on the way her role has changed. Before the departmental meetings were mainly top-down, informative, and prescriptive. Now she thinks of herself as an instructional leader for her colleagues. The meetings are now organized in a creative way, using coaching techniques, involving everyone, based on discussions and collaborative decision-making. As one of the first teachers who completed training in criteria-based assessment, she acted as a teacher trainer both in the department and across the school. Since the start of the reform, more teachers were taking leadership roles thus facilitating the development of distributed leadership culture and practices in the school. These changes had an impact on how she perceived her role as a HoD. She commented: “I now see more opportunities for self-realization”.

L-NonUNT-HD claimed that since the start of the reform the school culture has changed, it became more open and collaborative compared to her previous experience. She notices the change in the way teachers work together, share responsibility. L-NonUNT-HD commented: “Now teachers work in an open and fair culture. And our subject (self-reflection) resembles these values”. In terms of curriculum and assessment she noticed a slight impact: “I think the reform did not affect us as much as other subjects. There are new regulations, and different approaches to lesson planning. But no end of unit or end of term assessments, or formative assessments as in other subjects”.

Since the start of the reform there has been an important transformation in the HoD and teacher dynamics. LDP commented: “The approaches have changed qualitatively, even among the administration and the ministry. Under the previous system, HoDs had more control function. Now they realize that they need to cooperate with teachers, build equal relationships, collaborate

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

and discuss issues together with teachers”. This change is explained by the need to learn and explore new concepts, approaches, adapt to new realities together, support each other and contribute to collective success.

UNT Impact on the Leadership Role. UNT is an exam that students take at the end of high school to enroll into universities. Those students who choose English language related majors, select this subject as an elective option. Since not many students apply for English language departments, not many graduates select this subject. As a result, UNT exam preparation and results do not impact on the participants role as a HoD, but rather as a classroom teacher. L-EIUNT-HD commented:

“Our subject is elective in the Unified National Test (UNT), not many students choose English as their exam subject. As a HoD it does not affect my role. There are more requirements for me as a classroom teacher. My grade 11 students were graduating this year’.

Subjects considered important for standardized exams tend to receive more attention and resources, often overshadowing others. While it ensures a strong focus on certain skills and knowledge, it may marginalize subjects that are equally valuable for holistic development but are not heavily emphasized in exams. As LDP commented: “For us, administration, the UNT subjects are still important; they are indicators of the school’s performance. Subjects like self-reflection are not assessed and do not affect the quality of knowledge, so we do not consider them so important. On the other hand, they are less overloaded, therefore, they participate in competitions, demonstrate student achievements, actively participate in activities in school and beyond”.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Shift to Distance Learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for schools, necessitating effective and timely communication between the teachers and school senior leadership to navigate in such circumstances. L-EIUNT-HD's quote emphasizes her role during the shift to distance learning. "I am the connecting link between the teachers and senior leadership. Senior leaders would find it difficult to work with all teachers. So, they work with us, and then we work with teachers". Interestingly, L-CoUNT-HD also mentioned that she understands that HoD is the important link between senior leaders and teachers, but overall, the pandemic did not impact her role. "It has just shifted to online mode. I continued to lead the department the way I used to. But because of the pandemic and difficult times, we learned to be strong, care for each other, and work as a team". Being in the middle leader position, HoD bridged the gap, effectively disseminating information such as updates, guidelines, regulations, policy documents. HoDs were also attentive to the teachers' needs and challenges. In other words, there was little change in how they led the department. L-EIUNT-HD recalled:

"I remember this period very well. Nothing much happened actually. At least for a HoD. If I needed to conduct a meeting, I would do it in Zoom. The pandemic started in March, 2020. As a HoD I have already organized the department's work since September, for example – to allocate teaching hours, action plan for that academic year, meeting's agenda. It just all moved online".

L-NonUNT-HD also stated that the shift to distance learning did not affect her role as a HoD besides that teaching and department leadership shifted online. She commented: "My role did not change, we adapted quite quickly, just moved our work to online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams".

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

All three HoDs have similar statements about their role as a HoD during the COVID-19 pandemic and a forced shift to distance learning. Despite the unprecedented challenges, they have effectively transitioned their roles into the online mode. However, they do not acknowledge their role in it both as a middle leader being the connecting link between the senior leaders and the teacher and as the leader of their department in such challenging times. By stating that “it all just moved online” they seem to underestimate their role.

Within-Case Analysis of the Leading School to Research Question 1

In considering the subject-specific reality within departments, it becomes evident that the challenges and opportunities faced by each department are often unique and context-dependent. For the non-UNT subject, the absence of regular and structured assessment provides more opportunities for leadership and creative work in the school. Whereas, compulsory and elective UNT subject HoDs are overloaded with multiple tasks and roles.

In multidisciplinary departments, the role of HoDs carries a unique challenge — they often need additional training in the pedagogy of various subjects beyond their primary subject expertise. Unlike in single-subject departments where subject matter expertise might suffice, teachers within multi-disciplinary departments anticipate not only administrative supervision but also pedagogical guidance across multiple subjects. Understanding this, HoDs need to continuously develop professionally not only methodologically, but in content specific areas as well. Compared to others, such departments also tend to be larger in size which creates additional challenges associated with the size. HoDs provide individual support and track the progress of teachers during the appraisal period. For that they keep records of their accomplishments and qualification, ensure teachers meet the criteria of the teaching category they apply for. Leading a large department presents different challenges compared to leading a smaller one. They should

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

coordinate a greater number of individuals, managing diverse personalities, and ensuring effective communication across the whole department and subject areas.

While the role of a HoD is primarily advisory, the presence of a collaborative culture and respect for HoDs middle leader position allows them to be involved in discussions and make suggestions to senior leaders. From the analysis of experiences and practices, it can be inferred that HoDs' professional voices are heard and appreciated by the school leadership and beyond.

Leading school status does not affect HoD's role, other than as teachers or those involved in lesson study. They have more opportunities to practice teacher research and then share at the city and republican level as part of sharing best practices and experience. However, as a HoD they do not have an obligation or a responsibility to be involved in lesson study.

Non-leading School Case

School and Departmental Context

The school is one of the oldest state schools that opened in the 1960s and has served the local community since then. There are 10 departments organized according to specific subject areas. An exception is multi-disciplinary departments that combine different but related subjects- natural science - geography, chemistry, biology; math sciences - physics, math, and computer science. HoDs collaborate directly with the deputy principal for academic affairs, and also work in conjunction and report to the deputy principal overseeing scientific and methodological work. HoDs do not report to the deputy principal for pastoral care unless they also have the responsibility as a classroom teacher.

Non-participant Observation

For non-participant observation, I participated in the end-of-year pedagogical council meeting discussing the transfer of grade nine students to the next grade (after state examinations), change in assessment policy, new regulations on teacher workload. Two deputy principals (for

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

primary and secondary schools) led the meeting with HoDs and teachers present. Senior leaders meticulously took attendance and made individual phone calls to ensure participation of teachers who were missing or late. Pedagogical council meeting demonstrated a structured yet inclusive interaction between senior leaders, HoDs, and teachers. The placement of HoDs among teachers suggests a non-hierarchical and collaborative interaction. The seating arrangement implies that HoDs are approachable and are together with teachers. The friendly yet instructional tone, coupled with the senior leaders' sympathy towards teachers' concerns about workload and salary adjustments, created a supportive environment. This atmosphere encouraged teachers to freely ask questions.

Departmental meeting took place at the NL-EIUNT-HD's department. The interaction between HoDs and teachers during the meeting showcases positive dynamics aimed at professional growth and students' achievements. The HoD commenced by acknowledging the teachers progress over the year, setting a tone of appreciation and encouragement. This recognition highlights the collaborative effort and teamwork in improving student outcomes. The discussion was centered around teacher appraisal, including plans for professional qualification upgrades and changes to the appraisal period. Teachers actively engage in discussing the new appraisal regulations and seek HoDs' guidance where needed. Experienced teachers sharing their expertise in creating authored programs demonstrate a mentorship culture within the department. The atmosphere during the meeting was notably positive, with equal communication facilitated by the HoD. Teachers seemed to be comfortable offering ideas and sharing experiences, and even when disagreements arose, the HoD managed them skillfully.

There is no common staffroom due to shortage of classrooms, therefore teachers meet in their classrooms. They also have access to the room where deputy principal for science and methodological work sits. This is an equipped room with printers, scanners, this room is also

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

available for teachers to meet if needed. Teachers enter and use the room at their own convenience.

Document Analysis

The document analysis of HoDs' job descriptions, annual plans, and regulations on the departmental leadership in the non-leading school reveals that their functions, based on Order No. 583 "On subject methodological units", are similar to those in leading schools. HoDs are responsible for annual planning and work analysis, diagnosing teacher professional development needs, and staying updated with legal acts and documents. They support teachers in showcasing their experiences, organize subject competitions, Olympiads, conduct lesson observations, and monitor teacher performances. Additionally, they assist with teacher appraisals and coordinate teachers' self-development efforts.

HoDs in the non-leading school also supervise and ensure the alignment of teaching processes with state curriculum standards. Their job descriptions allow them to suggest teacher bonuses for performance, facilitate partnerships with other organizations, and liaise with the local education authority for methodological support. To qualify as a HoD, teachers must hold the highest or first category or the corresponding category according to the current teacher appraisal - teacher expert, teacher-researcher, or teacher-master (Appendix 14) This requirement ensures that HoDs are well-qualified and experienced.

In the following section, I present the unique characteristics of individual departments to understand their context, qualitative and quantitative features.

Compulsory UNT Department

This is a multidisciplinary department consisting of three subject areas: math, physics and computer science. This is the second largest department in the school with 12 teachers altogether.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The only compulsory UNT subject is math, the rest are elective subjects. Despite the fact that this is not a solely compulsory UNT subject department, I decided to continue research in this department, as the HoD teaches math. As in the leading school, both HoDs teach math and lead multidisciplinary departments. NL-CoUNT-HD has more than eight years of teaching experience, she has six years of experience in the school education as a teacher, methodologist and a head of the department. For two years she worked at the college teaching math to students. The participant has a Master's degree in mathematics, and she has not completed training in leadership.

Elective UNT Department

This department is composed of teachers representing social science subjects, such as history of Kazakhstan, world history, fundamentals of law and religious studies. There are eight full-time and part-time teachers in the department. This department was identified as the one with elective subjects for the UNT exam, however, it also includes a compulsory subject - history of Kazakhstan. The HoD is a teacher of both history subjects. Since this is the only HoD among elective subject departments who agreed to participate in this study, I continued to conduct this research with her.

NL-EIUNT-HD has more than 11 years of teaching experience, and three years as a head of this department. She has not attended any leadership training, only national level training for teachers.

Non-UNT Department

The participant from the NonUNT department is the head of the physical education and initial military training department. He oversees a team of 9 male teachers. He has over 10 years

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

of teaching experience and 1.5 years as the head of this department. He also has not attended any leadership training. He is the only male HoD and the department consists of male teachers only.

In the table below I summarized key information across the departments and provide context and characteristics that impact the leadership dynamics in HoDs' experiences, relationship and interactions within the department and beyond.

Table 11

Departmental Context of the Leading School

	NL-CoUNT-HD	NL-EIUNT-HD	NL-NonUNT-HD
Department staff composition	No SLs	No SLs	No SLS, novice teachers, all male teachers
Subjects	Multi-disciplinary (Sciences)	Multi-disciplinary (social sciences)	Single subject
Experience and age	Youngest among all teachers	Youngest among all teachers	Most experienced and the eldest
Supervision	Academic and science-methodological work	Academic and science-methodological work	Academic and science-methodological work

Compared to the leading school, in this research site, none of the departments include senior leaders. This means that HoDs do not face situations when they have to lead their superiors. A notable characteristic of this school is the experience and age of HoDs. The HoDs for compulsory and elective UNT departments are the youngest in terms of age and have fewer years of teaching experience compared to their teachers. In contrast, the non-UNT HoD is the oldest and most experienced leader in the department where half of the staff are novices. These specific characteristics regarding age and experience impact the HoDs individual experiences in leading their departments. Despite being the youngest, their qualifications justify their positions as HoDs. Additionally, two HoDs lead multidisciplinary departments which also influences their experiences related to their subject expertise.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Understanding, Experiences and Practices of HoD's Leadership Role in the Non-leading School

In this section, I present the perspectives of HoDs in the non-leading school regarding their view of leadership, their everyday experiences, and how they apply their leadership roles in practice.

Understanding of Leadership and Leadership Role

HoDs in the non-leading school have a shared understanding of leadership that leading should be with an equal approach to the team rather than from top to down. As NL-EIUNT-HD commented: "Leader is someone who not only leads and gives commands, but who also contributes ideas, initiates and creates a collaborative environment in the department". As an example of a strong leader, she shared a case of the senior leader who was demanding, but just to everyone, with an equal approach to all and who could create the collaboration and teamwork between the colleagues.

NL-CoUNT-HD believes that a leader is a person who can influence others, who others can trust, who possesses strong organizational skills. As an example, to illustrate a strong leader she also shared a case of one of the senior leaders. She recalled: "We had a deputy principal who could resolve any difficult conflict among the teachers, so that everyone involved understood the situation and came to agreement". On the contrary, a weak leader is someone who considers him/herself above others and measures their role by the position they have. To both of these participants a senior leader's practices of leadership are an example of a role model whose style they appreciated. As it emerged from the analysis of experiences and practices, they also led their departments in a collaborative manner. NL-NonUNT-HD understands leadership as a goal oriented and inspiring individual who leads the team towards a shared vision and ensures goals are met. He commented: "Leader is someone who leads the team towards goals". His

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

understanding of leadership is rooted in the nature of the subject he teaches and the department he leads. According to the participant, physical education is a competition-oriented subject, with a specific focus on goals and achievements.

Subject Expertise. A central idea in the understanding of the leadership role as a HoD all three participants share that they need to be subject matter experts in the content and pedagogy to model best practices to their teachers. As NL-EIUNT-HD commented:

“Teachers attend each other’s’ lessons, mine too, student attainment in my classes needs to be high, lessons need to be in compliance with the renewed curriculum. I need to demonstrate myself as a strong teacher, not only a department head’.

NL-NonUNT-HD understands that to carry out his role of a department head effectively, he needs to possess strong subject matter expertise and be profound in the pedagogy of the subject. He stated: “What is important in my job is the knowledge of the subject. It is also important to know how to organize the teaching and learning, planning of departmental work for a year ahead”. NL-CoUNT-HD leads a multi-disciplinary department which requires strong subject knowledge in the subject she teaches, but also the pedagogy of other subjects such as physics and computer science. Besides that, she stressed the need for expertise beyond the subject knowledge, she commented: “In this position, I need to have not only strong subject matter expertise, but also to be knowledgeable in policy documents and curriculum standards”.

There is an agreement among the HoDs that their leadership role is first and foremost the role of the strong subject teacher who can be a role model for the teachers in the department and provide support in understanding and implementation of policy documents, curriculum standards, and effective pedagogy.

Organization of Departmental Work. Organization of departmental work, planning, collecting reports, analysis are essential job functions of the HoD’s role. According to NL-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CoUNT-HD, the selection criteria for a candidate to become a HoD is not only their leadership, but their skills to work with reports and organization of the department. “It happens that the HoD is not selected according to their leadership, in schools HoD is a person who can organize the teachers, collect student and teacher data, analyze it and report it”. NL-EIUNT-HD shared a similar opinion: “If I do not organize my teachers, set and keep deadlines, demonstrate my work and lead by example, the teachers will not do what you ask of them”. NL-NonUNT-HD specifies the organization of teachers in relation to their individual and departmental achievements.

“It is important to organize teachers’ participation in the conferences, seminars, meetings, and delegate work between all teachers evenly. As a HoD, I need to find an individual approach to every teacher, to ensure that tasks I receive from the senior leaders are communicated effectively and completed in a timely manner”.

HoD’s leadership role is also dependent on departmental characteristics. For example, in NL-NonUNT-HD’s department less than a half of teachers are novices with less than a year of teaching experience. Therefore, he identifies the primary goal as to support these teachers, assign a mentor, organize their work and help them adapt to the teaching and learning process. “It’s important to train novice teachers, there are now four of them in my department”.

According to NL-CoUNT-HD, not all work of a department head requires leadership, in certain cases they need to employ their managerial skills. She stated: “I need to be strong in collecting reports, analysis, and statistics to work on student learning outcomes.

Departmental Effectiveness. Organization of departmental work leads to certain results. Similar to leading school participants, HoDs in this school identify teacher and student achievements as key indicators of departmental effectiveness.

Teacher Achievements. In respect to teacher achievements HoDs of compulsory and elective UNT subjects, stress the importance of teacher attestation. As NL-CoUNT-HD stated,

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

her primary responsibility is to oversee and support the professional development of teachers. This includes monitoring their progress, ensuring they complete their attestation requirements on time, and keeping records of their training and achievements. She also informs them about available opportunities for training and competitions, encouraging their participation. Additionally, she facilitates the development of authored course programs and electives to enhance the quality of the department's curricular offerings. She stated:

“My main function is to monitor teachers’ professional development, trainings, to make sure they go through attestation in a timely manner. To do that I need to keep records, monitor their progress and inform them of opportunities for training, competitions for them to participate, make sure they develop authored course programs, electives”.

The progression of teachers from one teaching category to the other is considered an indicator of departmental effectiveness, improvement of teachers’ professionalism. The role of the HoD is to ensure all teachers meet the requirements of teacher attestation. To do that, teachers need to have completed certain trainings, have records of student learning outcomes and achievements. Teachers also need to demonstrate their best practices by sharing them with colleagues within the school and beyond. They can participate in conferences, publish, present at seminars. NL-EIUNT-HD mentioned systematization of teacher experience as a requirement for attestation. By systematization she means sharing experience through publications, presentations in conferences, seminars at the local, regional, national and if possible international level. As a department leader she encourages teachers to participate and provides information about these opportunities as communicated from the senior leaders and the LEA. NL-NonUNT-HD does not mention teacher achievements as one of the indicators, he identifies students’ achievements in sport competitions as teachers’ achievements as well.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Student Achievements. Another success criteria of the departmental effectiveness are student achievements, such as subject Olympiads, places in city level, national, international competitions. This requires a detailed approach to student data tracking and monitoring of their preparation progress. NL-CoUNT-HD commented:

“Our effectiveness is judged by the number of achievements we have, teacher and student achievements. I need to know all potential Olympiad participants in our subject areas, collect student data, and need to know them in person”.

Student participation and results are expected in regional (oblast), republican, and if possible, international Olympiads, competitions. NL-EIUNT-HD shared that students' achievements are a key indicator of her department's performance. She organizes the process of student preparation for Olympiads, competitions, ensuring the continuity of teacher and student work from grade to grade, identification and selection of students, allocation of teachers, planning, preparation time. NL-EIUNT-HD commented: “We have a chat of all HoDs, we need to inform teachers in a timely manner, to make sure they all are aware of the deadlines, timelines, registration requirements”. The nature of physical education (NonUNT subject) and the absence of assessment as in other subjects have an impact on how the departmental effectiveness is measured there. NL-NonNT-HD commented:

“Since our subject is not assessed, our primary results are achievements of students and teachers at sport competitions and tournaments. My main goal is to demonstrate our school at regional and city level competitions”.

These achievements also require a planned approach. He continued: “We develop a one-year action plan, conduct meetings, discuss upcoming tournaments, and make arrangements”.

Quality of knowledge is another indicator of student learning outcomes, which is calculated in percentage of students with above satisfactory level grades. According to the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

participant, the quality of knowledge cannot be measured or compared between the subjects. NL-CoUNT-HD argued: “One cannot compare the quality of knowledge in math and languages, for example. It is qualitatively different; the math as a subject is more difficult”. NL-EIUNT-HD stressed the importance of a unified approach to grading of end of unit and end of term tests to ensure all students are graded accordingly: “We conduct moderation of student works marked by teachers to ensure there are no violations”.

Experiences and Practices

The analysis of the experiences among HoDs in the non-leading school have revealed common and slightly different findings compared to their colleagues in the leading school.

Managing Overload and Prioritizing Responsibilities. The workload can be quite challenging and unpredictable. The job involves various tasks that may arise periodically, not spread even throughout the week. There are periods of multiple responsibilities within a limited time frame allowance for completion. The workload is intensified by the teaching hours load. NL-CoUNT-HD commented: “HoD’s workload is not even, we do not do it every day, but sometimes there are multiple tasks in a short time to complete in addition to regular teaching hours”. Unlike regular teaching hours, which follow a fixed schedule, the tasks of a HoD may arise unexpectedly or coincide. This could include activities such as managing departmental reports, organizing meetings, coordinating with senior leaders, attending professional development workshops, and addressing teacher-related issues.

NL-CoUNT-HD continued to explain that she is overloaded with many responsibilities, so she focuses more on teaching and less on other initiatives. This heavy workload leaves her with little time and energy for additional departmental tasks. While teaching brings her comfort and fulfillment, it also means missing out on potential improvements and professional development opportunities for the department. Her ability to lead and innovate may be affected

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by this overwhelming workload. She commented: “Our department is calm, not very proactive or maybe it is a burnout or overloaded teaching schedule. We have ideas, but we are also tired. Therefore, we focus on teaching rather than other matters”.

Additionally, this participant faces the challenge of juggling both departmental work and teaching responsibilities. As a result, she finds herself prioritizing teaching tasks over departmental duties, which impacts her identity development as a teacher rather than a leader. The HoD acknowledges that reducing her teaching workload would help her to be more effective in her leadership position. She would have the opportunity to focus more on leading the department. She stated: “If in this position there was less workload, less teaching hours and other commitments, I could spend more time on leading the department. I would feel more of myself as a leader if this position had a high status in the organizational structure”.

Similar to experiences of the NonUNT subject HoD in the leading school, lack of exams and assessments impact the way the HoD and the physical education teachers approach teaching and learning. Without the pressure of preparing students for exams, their focus shifts more towards providing a well-rounded and enjoyable physical education experience for students. As NL-NonUNT-HD commented:

“This is a non-UNT department, students do not take this exam, unless they choose to. There are only a few who take. There is no assessment as in other subjects, only pass or fail. Therefore, in our subject it is important to teach lessons well, plan and make sure students benefit from our lessons”.

Recognition and Financial Remuneration. Recently, there has been a positive change in the HoD's job as they are now given 2 hours of paid time per week to fulfill their responsibilities. In the past, the role was unpaid thus making the job a volunteering position. This change serves as an encouraging gesture from the school administration, indicating that they recognize and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

value the role of HoDs. This change has instilled a sense of appreciation and worthiness in the HoD, reinforcing the belief that their role is recognized and valued within the school community.

NL-CoUNT-HD commented:

“Since this year as a means of encouragement, HoDs get two-hour payment to do this job. Before it was not paid, we basically volunteered to be a HoD. It is a good change. I feel that the school values our role, and this is all they can do from their part”.

In fact, the HoD role takes more than two hours per week. This is already perceived as a sign of appreciation of their work. Other HoDs did not mention this recent change. NL-EIUNT-HD shares her request that this role is paid as that of the senior leaders and that the role has a status. NL-EIUNT-HD stated: “In the organizational structure, there are senior leader positions such as deputy principal for academic affairs, pastoral care, etc. But there is no position as a HoD. In the accounting department, there is no position as a HoD. We are all teachers”. Interestingly, NL-NonUNT-HD, similar to the colleague in the leading school L-NonUNT-HD, does not raise an issue of the payment.

Advisory Role. The role of a HoD in this school is advisory, particularly when it comes to state reforms and school-level changes. HoDs are responsible for ensuring that their departments align with the requirements of state-mandated reforms and curriculum updates. They play a critical role in implementing these changes and guiding their subject area teachers on how to adapt their teaching practices accordingly. NL-CoUNT-HD commented:

“In state reforms, we follow what is required. At the school level we are engaged in discussion of new changes, school matters. However, our role is not decision-making, it is advisory”.

Drawing from their expertise and understanding of their subject area, HoDs offer valuable insights and recommendations that contribute to the decision-making process within their

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

department. While their input is highly regarded and informs the decision-making process, ultimate decisions are usually made by the school senior leadership. NL-EIUNT-HD clarified on what kind of issues they make decisions within the department: “At the departmental level, we can decide which teachers participate in certain projects, competitions. Twice a year there are free of charge courses. We can collectively decide who to delegate”. Although the role is advisory, and they merely make suggestions to the senior leaders, they acknowledge that their views are heard and, in most cases, supported.

Navigating Age Dynamics. Both HoDs of compulsory and elective UNT identify themselves as one of the young HoDs compared to other HoDs. According to them it creates a challenge in perceiving them as leaders by the teachers in their departments. They claim that as a line manager and leader they are limited in the way they approach the elderly colleagues, especially while critiquing and commenting on their performance. Compared to other HoD participants, NL-CoUNT-HD and NL-EIUNT-HD are the only participants who mention their young age as an inhibiting factor. NL-CoUNT-HD stated:

“Colleagues do not tend to follow a young leader. They think one cannot comment on their work, even a department head. In other departments, it is different, because their HoDs have authority, and it is their older age. It is in our mentality”.

Age-related perceptions, attitudes and behaviors can vary across cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010). In Kazakhstan’s culture, older individuals may be highly respected and regarded as authority compared to younger ones. Age dynamics within leadership can also be influenced by factors such as organizational culture, professional norms, hierarchical structures. While acknowledging this cultural and organizational context, HoDs adopt an approach that considers the age of their colleagues, particularly those over 40 or nearing retirement. NL-CoUNT-HD continued: “I need to be more loyal, and empathetic, with due respect to their age and authority.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Not as demanding as I can be with younger teachers”. Another young HoD, NL-EIUNT-HD, also states that she prefers to negotiate in private with older colleagues, not in public or in departmental chats:

“I ensure all teachers complete their tasks on-time; however, I monitor the completion, send reminders, then approach directly, not in public. This is especially important with elderly teachers. They are very sensitive”.

NL-EIUNT-HD faces additional challenges due to her younger age and less teaching experience compared to other teachers. Teachers in this case study school also expect HoDs to have strong subject expertise and pedagogy. These expectations are compounded by perceptions of age and experience, adding further complexity to her role. She is aware that teachers expect their HoD to have strong subject knowledge and pedagogy. Therefore, she is open to colleagues’ feedback and critique in improvement of her teaching, organization of departmental work. She commented:

“To meet teachers’ expectations, I need to work hard to ensure my lessons are well planned, in accordance with the renewed curriculum and best practices. I need to demonstrate leadership in teaching as well as a HoD”.

These quotes demonstrate that HoDs of younger age experience challenges in leading more elderly colleagues, and need to work hard to ensure they become role models in subject knowledge and pedagogy as others expect.

Leadership Hierarchy. Compulsory and elective UNT HoDs share similar experiences in the leadership hierarchy of their position. HoDs are mostly related to teachers rather than leaders. NL-EIUNT-HD elaborated: “There is an agreement that teachers first complete the tasks sent by the senior leaders, then classroom teachers and then mine”. This practice identifies the hierarchy of her role as a HoD compared to senior leaders and classroom teachers as perceived by

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

teachers. Knowing that she plans her tasks and deadlines accordingly, she continued: “I tend to balance the deadlines for teachers. For example, at the end of the year if senior leaders’ deadline is the 31st of December, then I will schedule it for the 4th of January”. NL-CoUNT-HD also shared her experience:

“Teachers tend to complete senior leaders’ tasks on time, without any arguments.

However, when it comes to my tasks, sometimes they can be left behind. They know that I am just a teacher as themselves”.

Despite their leadership roles, HoDs retain a connection to teaching, potentially leading their peers to view them primarily through the lens of a teacher rather than a leader. This dynamic can impact the HoDs' ability to enact significant changes, make authoritative decisions, or gain respect associated with leadership roles.

Curriculum and Assessment Reform. According to NL-CoUNT-HD she joined the department after the renewed curriculum and assessment reform was implemented, therefore she did not experience this change in her role. However, with this change there are new functions such as moderation of assessment that ensure equal approaches to assessment and fairness in grading were introduced. Her role as a HoD is to organize this process, following the guidelines and regulations, ensuring moderation is conducted regularly and in an appropriate manner. She stated: “Curriculum reform assumed new regulations such as moderation of assessment.

Although it concerns teachers, as a HoD I need to organize this process”.

New regulations and methods that were introduced as part of the school reform, required not only appropriate organization, but also a paradigm shift in thinking and practices. Moderation of assessment is a collegial practice of ensuring quality and fairness of grading, a shift away from teacher-centered approach where the teachers used to subjectively decide on grading. Moderation implies a learner-centered approach where each students’ work is marked in alignment with the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

rubric, and the grading is just and fair across the whole school. Therefore, the HoDs do not only organize the process, they also educate and explain the reasons and purpose behind.

UNT Impact on the Leadership Role. The responsibility for the UNT has shifted away from the subject teachers and schools and is now solely on the students themselves. Schools are no longer rated based on UNT results. The responsibility is on the students to perform well in the exam as it directly impacts their chances of being admitted to universities. However, the results of the UNT still remain an important indicator of the effectiveness of teachers' work and the overall quality of education in the school. Teachers continue to play a vital role in preparing them for the exam. The HoD and other subject teachers are instrumental in equipping students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support to succeed in the UNT. NL-EIUNT-HD commented:

“UNT now is not even the subject teacher’s responsibility. Schools are no longer rated on the UNT results, instead it is now the responsibility of the student. It is in their interests to pass the exam well in order to enroll in the university. However, it remains as an important indicator, the results of teachers’ work”.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Shift to Distance Learning. During the shift to distance learning, the HoDs acknowledged that their role did not change significantly, but it did present some unique challenges. As NL-EIUNT-HD commented she adapted quickly to the new digital environment and continued to fulfill her responsibilities effectively: “It was difficult because we did not see each other, it all moved online. Communication was difficult, but our work did not become less or more. Just as it was before”. NL-NonUNT-HD shared that the most challenging was to conduct physical education lessons online. Leading the department through online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom was not difficult. He noted: “Working with teachers during the pandemic was different, but not difficult”. NL-CoUNT-HD was not at her position at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, she could not comment. It can be

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

concluded that the departmental work of the HoDs was already well-established, planned and executed in order, therefore, as they state that “it is just moved online”. Despite the unprecedented challenges that schools around the world had to face, there is an agreement among the leading school HoDs as well that there has been little disruption to their work as department heads.

Within-case Analysis of the Non-leading School to Research Question 1

In the non-leading school HoDs conceptualize leadership as a collegial process rather than a top-down hierarchy. They share a vision of sharing along their team, fostering an environment where every member’s contribution is valued. This collaborative approach resembles the school ethos and leadership style practiced by the senior leaders of the school. To some of the participants, the senior leaders act as the role model whose leadership practices they aspire to adopt.

A central theme in their leadership role is the importance of being a subject matter expert in both content and pedagogy, which enables them to model best practices thus claiming their leadership as department heads. The criteria for selecting HoDs include not only leadership abilities but skills in managing reports, organizing departmental activities, analytical skills.

HoDs in the non-leading school face significant workload challenges, with tasks that arise unexpectedly and that are not evenly distributed throughout the week. Multi-disciplinary departments experience excess teaching hours due to shortage of teachers, therefore, they prefer to focus on teaching rather than other activities. On the other hand, the absence of assessment in NonUNT subjects allows these HoDs to engage more in departmental leadership, individual work with novice teachers, focus of teacher and student achievements.

The role of HoDs is primarily advisory, especially in regards to state reforms and school-level changes. However, they play an important role in implementing these changes and guiding

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

the teachers in adapting their teaching and assessment practices accordingly. Since the implementation of the renewed curriculum and assessment reform their role has been increasingly recognized by the schools and the local educational authority, resulting in close links with the senior leaders and officials.

Financial remuneration, however, remains a subject to school's decision and is paid from the bonus fund as it suggests on the HoD's job description, currently they are given two hours per week for departmental work. With the shift to the per capita funding the schools will have more autonomy over the payment scheme.

In the next section, I present the findings to the second research question exploring the views of those with whom HoDs interact directly on the daily basis, with teachers, senior leaders and the local educational authority representative

Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives of HoD's Leadership Role

These findings derived from the semi-structured interviews with two teachers in each HoD's department, their supervising senior leader and the representative of the LEA (local educational authority). The rationale to conduct interviews with these categories of participants is based on the theoretical framework used to guide the analysis of this study by DeRue and Ashford (2010).

Heads of departments occupy the middle level position between the teachers and the senior leaders. In alignment with the theoretical framework used in this study, it is necessary to explore the perspectives of those with whom HoDs interact on a daily basis. Individuals construct their leadership identity while interacting and building relationships with their leaders and followers. For this purpose, I interviewed the participants in the senior leadership role who oversee the work of the HoDs and two teachers per department. To understand how HoDs role is

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

collectively endorsed and perceived, I interviewed the representative from the local educational authority.

Leading School Case

In the following section, I present the views of five teachers who agreed to participate in this study (two in L-CoUNT-HD, two in L-EIUNT-HD, and one in L-NonUNT-HD). I also present the views of the senior leader, more specifically a deputy principal for scientific and methodological work. The pseudonyms were assigned accordingly L- leading school, CoUNT, EIUNT, NonUNT - subject, T1, T2, DP, LEA for the position of the participant. Teacher pseudonyms are presented in the table below.

Table 12

Teacher Participants' Characteristics in the Leading School

Pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	Years of experience in this department	Subject area
L-CoUNT-T1	30	16	physics
L-CoUNT-T2	16	3	biology
L-EIUNT-T1	8	2	English
L-EIUNT-T2	2	2	English
L-NonUNT-T1	41	part-time	self-reflection

Understanding of Leadership and Leadership Role

According to the participants' views, there is an agreement among teachers that leadership is the ability to organize the team and inspire others with a vision so that others can follow. For some, leadership is based on the authority, weight of the leader, such as subject knowledge and expertise, as well as people skills to manage the team effectively. For the senior leader, leadership is about having a vision, inspiring and motivating others with innovative ideas, and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

ultimately, earning their followership. Effective leaders can articulate their vision clearly, inspire others to share in that vision, and motivate them to work passionately toward common goals.

LDP commented: “Leader is a person who can inspire, motivate ideas so that others follow”.

HoD’s leadership role is primarily seen in role modeling teacher professional development and motivating teachers to showcase their best practices. She continued:

“If teachers do not see a leader that can inspire, their main focus is only lessons and routine. A true HoD can motivate them to share their best practices with others, present to a wider professional community, and develop an authored course”.

To do so, HoDs themselves need to be highly competent in subject matter expertise, pedagogy and have an ability to lead and inspire teams. Since HoDs are selected from a pool of teachers with teacher-master and teacher-researcher professional categories, their role is to create teacher learning communities, facilitate teaching practice research. LDP commented: “Their role is to create a group of teachers and lead them towards authored projects, teacher research, lesson study. HoDs combine this in their leadership role”. These projects are regarded as an advanced approach to teacher professional development and achievements subsequently leading to improved practice. HoDs, themselves, need to demonstrate continuous professional growth and model this practice to other teachers in the department.

Teachers’ understanding of the leadership and HoD’s role are supportive to the senior leader’s view. L-CoUNT-T1 stated: “Leader is a person who has authority among people, who can organize them, so that they will follow”. L-NonUNT-T1 conceptualizes leadership in a similar way: “Leader is someone who has authority and recognition based on his/her achievements, experience, who can communicate their ideas well and has the ability to build teams”. Teachers in the elective UNT department consider a leader as a person who is equal to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

others, who sets direction and supports one's progression plan towards professionalism. L-

EIUNT-T1 commented: "Leader is one who does not position himself/herself above others. It is the one who sets direction, supports my professional progression".

Teachers' perspectives on HoD's leadership role is to possess strong subject knowledge, extensive experience as a teacher and share the experience and model best practices to others. L-NonUNT-T1 commented: "HoD must have strong subject knowledge, experience as a teacher who has achievements, demonstrates their knowledge and can share it with others". Teachers at the non-UNT department expect their HoD to be open-minded and employ a just, fair and equal approach to all in the department. L-NonUNT-T1 continued: "She needs to be open-minded and communicative, who can be equal to all". There needs to be collective decision-making where everyone's voice and perspectives are heard and considered. She also stated that the main role of the HoD is to transmit information from LEA and senior leaders in a timely and effective manner. The participant from the elective UNT department also stressed the importance of timely and available information about student competitions. L -EIUNT-T2 commented "Teachers expect that HoD informs all teachers equally, with no particular preference". Departmental effectiveness is measured by student and teacher achievements. These two are interconnected. Student achievement is also considered a teacher's achievement, which affects their improved teaching category in attestation and increased salary. Students' achievements are not only their learning outcomes, but participation and places received in subject Olympiads. HoDs distribute and communicate information within the department.

A novice teacher in the elective UNT department, for example, views HoD's leadership role in the provision of support in understanding how school operates, clear and effective communication about what is expected of them. L-EIUNT-T2 noted: "Sometimes leaders cannot

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

communicate well. For example, information about contests, professional competitions is sent in chunks, I cannot understand the requirements, or timelines. We need to clarify and ask again”.

HoDs' Multiple Roles

There are multiple roles in which colleagues see their HoD. In this section, I present a collective view of teachers, senior leaders and the LEA representative.

HoD as a Visionary Leader. One of the roles in which teachers see the HoD is to envision career growth and professional development for teachers. HoD does not only identify talents or make sure teachers participate in professional contests and courses, but also envisions a career journey for teachers, and develops an individual development trajectory for them. Teacher achievements is one of the criteria of departmental effectiveness. The teachers see the HoD as a motivator, playing a crucial role in inspiring and guiding them. HoD leads by example demonstrating the milestones other teachers can also achieve. L-NonUNT-HD with her active position to showcase her experience inside the school and on a city level, she motivates the teachers to also actively participate as professional educators. She shares her vision of departmental work, effectiveness, sets small steps and manageable tasks for her teachers so that they can take actions and have their own achievements. Each teacher's achievements contribute to the overall success of the department. L-NonUNT-HD translates this vision and motivation very well. L-NonUNT-T1 suggested: “The HoD should inspire teachers, share her vision and perspective, communicate effectively, so that others support her plans and act accordingly”. Novice teachers expect their HoDs support them throughout their professional journey towards teacher attestation growing from one category to another. Despite the fact that each novice teacher is assigned a mentor, teachers rely on their HoD to help construct the professional development plan. L-EIUNT-T2 noted:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“I have just started my professional career, I joined this school only two years ago, therefore, I am considered a novice teacher. I did not know much about where to aim and how to progress as a teacher. I have a mentor; however, I also rely on the HoD for support and their expertise”.

In order to ensure teachers are engaged and strive for personal success, the HoD needs to motivate them. According to one teacher, HoD’s are sometimes under pressure to ensure that teachers participate in contests, attend professional development courses, and successfully pass teacher attestation. So HoD needs to motivate teachers to have personal accomplishments, to envision and project benefits and career growth for them. L-EIUNT-T2 commented:

“They (senior leaders) can demand that teachers participate in projects and courses, but not all teachers want to or they are overloaded with teaching. In this case, the HoD also needs to demand or ask well, make sure teachers submit reports on time, complete their tasks, and needs to remind them”.

HoD as a Talent Manager and Facilitator. HoDs act as a communication bridge between the teachers and senior leaders. They receive instructions and tasks for the department to complete. Tasks vary between suggesting teachers for professional competitions to organizing an event at school. The HoD possesses a deep understanding of each teacher’s capabilities, knowledge and skills within the department. This knowledge allows the HoD to make informed decisions regarding task allocations, ensuring that the right teachers are assigned to specific responsibilities that match their expertise. Teachers have their vision of HoD’s role and, therefore, have their expectations. Teachers expect their work to be well organized and monitored. L-CoUNT-T2 commented:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“For me personally it is important to know the scope of work, deadlines, kinds of reports, regular updates from the HoD, timelines of teacher training and competitions. Our HoD transmits this information to teachers in a timely manner, communicates well. Our department is quite effective, I think”.

Another teacher shared that the HoD knows best of each teachers’ potential and talents that can be further developed. L-CoUNT-T1 noted: “There are novice and experienced teachers. HoD knows the potential of each teacher, who can be a mentor, who can take on an additional role, responsibility. She supports the teacher's individual development plan”. The participant from the elective UNT department (L-EIUNT-T1) also stated:

“Our HoD is the link between ourselves and senior leaders. Senior leaders give their instructions, projects, responsibilities, she knows every teacher in our department, their capabilities, knowledge, skills. She can allocate a teacher to a particular responsibility”.

HoDs’ role as a human resource or even a talent manager is pivotal for departmental effectiveness and alignment with school goals. By understanding teachers’ capabilities, the HoD plays an important role in optimizing task allocation and supporting professional development.

HoD as a Departmental Data Analyst. As it was mentioned in the previous section, HoDs are often tasked with gathering data on student outcomes, teacher performance and achievements. They engage in in-depth analysis to identify trends, strengths, weaknesses, and areas in need of improvement. This analytical work extends beyond routine reporting; it involves drawing meaningful insights, making recommendations. While senior leaders oversee the school as a whole, HoDs play a crucial role in collecting, synthesizing, and presenting detailed department-specific data. L-CoUNT-T2 commented:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“Throughout the academic year, HoD collects qualitative and quantitative data on teachers, student learning outcomes, conducts analysis, and submits reports to the senior leaders, LEA. This is a time and energy consuming process”.

She continued by arguing that the role became more analytic since the start of the curriculum and assessment reform.

“Now they do not only submit termly reports on student learning outcomes, but do it throughout the term after each summative assessment. In my subject (biology) I conduct three summative assessments for a unit, and one for a term. As a teacher I conduct the analysis within my subject, as a HoD she conducts them all across different subjects in our department. That is a lot of analytical work”

Their contribution as both supporters and extenders of senior leadership is clearly acknowledged by the deputy principal in this school. LDP noted:

“Based on their analytical work, together with HoDs we (senior leaders) identify problems such as low student attainment or quality of knowledge, can find out which teachers need support in terms of professional development, in pedagogy. There are 140 teachers in this school, and I cannot work with all of them. HoDs work with a small group of teachers and can individually identify issues and report to us for collaborative problem-solving”.

LDP continued reflecting on the role of HoDs in student and teacher data analysis and reporting:

“Although the minister initiated less paper work or reporting, there are still local educational authorities such as the local educational department, Center for Modernization of Education (CME), “Astana Daryny” agency for gifted and talented

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

students of Astana. They all require particular reporting, data. Without the HoD I would not be able to do it myself’.

HoD as a Teacher Advocate. L-NonUNT-T1 views the HoD as an advocate for their needs and concerns. She ensures their voices are heard and interests are represented. She empowers the trusting relationship within the department by establishing a safe and nurturing environment. She is open and approachable; she is one of them. She commented:

“First of all, the HoD is the deputy principal’s representative among us. Teachers do not approach deputy principals in the first instance if there is a problem. I will first approach the HoD. She is one of us, we can discuss freely and in an open manner. The deputy principal is in a higher position. She then approaches senior leaders and advocates for our needs and concerns”.

This suggests that although they view the HoD as their supervising leaders, they still perceive her as one of the teachers, and are, therefore, more comfortable sharing their concerns and seeking advice.

Concerns and problems may arise within the department as well. Teachers suggested that sometimes HoD needs to play the role of a mediator. Within this capacity, they serve as a bridge between teachers in the department. L-CoUNT-T1 noted: “There can be disagreements in opinions between teachers in our department, our HoD plays a role of a mediator, resolves conflicts”. Another participant also stressed the importance of understanding different individuals' perspectives. L-CoUNT-T2 argued: “Subject knowledge is important, but in her role, she also needs to be a psychologist, as she deals with many students and teachers, and needs to be tolerant to ideas, opinions, and nuances”. HoDs lead single and multi-disciplinary departments, composed of individuals with different personal and professional backgrounds, nationalities, age,

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

gender, expertise, positions. Therefore, according to teachers, they need to be aware of conflict resolution strategies, have effective communication skills, and have empathetic understanding.

HoD as a Connecting Link. Being in the middle leader position between the teachers and the senior leaders, HoDs play the role of the connecting link. This role involves communicating and translating the broader strategic goals of the school leadership to the department, while also representing the needs, achievements and concerns of teachers back to the senior leaders. L-CoUNT-T1 commented:

“The HoDs are the connecting link between the school administration and us. Senior leaders develop and approve their plans, our HoD develops departmental plan, conducts analysis of the previous year, he/she knows the potential and skills of every teacher, plans and milestones towards attestation. At the national education conference (August conference) they receive updates and changes in curriculum and assessment, number of hours, i.e., key information for the following year. We in turn submit all necessary information on summative assessments, our attestation. She, then, conducts analysis and reports this information to the school administration. This is a difficult, but important role”.

By serving as a connecting link HoDs ensure that departmental objectives are aligned with the overall school objectives and policies. They interpret and disseminate important curriculum updates and policy changes. This ensures that teachers are well-informed and can adjust their practices accordingly.

HoD as a Policy Translator. Teachers also expect support in understanding policy documents, regulations. HoDs need to be able to interpret complex policy documents into clear actionable guidelines for teachers to implement in their practice, and make sure it is in

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

compliance with the state standards and regulations. In other words, teachers view HoD as a policy translator, who interprets curriculum changes, assessment regulations, professional standards making them accessible and relevant to teachers. This role requires a deep understanding of both the policies and practical realities of classroom teaching. L-CoUNT-T1 commented:

“At the beginning of the year we received curriculum and pedagogy guidelines from the Ministry of Education. The first to read this document is our HoD. She reads and explains so that we all understand. She translates it to a well-understood language”.

The teacher from the elective UNT department stressed the importance of the HoD as a policy and document translator in professional competitions, the process of the attestation. The HoD helps them understand the requirements, timelines, guidelines, and necessary documentation. L-EIUNT-T1 noted: “I think she plays a key role transmitting official information to us. She helps us clarify the requirement and thus ensures that we are well aware and prepared”. Thus, HoDs not only facilitate the smooth adaptation to new policies and changes, but also empowers teachers to feel more confident and competent in their roles.

Within-Case Analysis of the Leading School to Research Question 2

HoDs wear many hats, balancing the dual responsibilities of leading the department and being actively involved in teaching. Juggling departmental tasks, overseeing teaching and student learning, supporting teacher professional development, representing their voices at the school and LEA level are just part of the HoD’s role. Diverse perspectives of teachers, senior leaders, LEA help collectively shape the view of the HoD's leadership role and provide better understanding of the impact and overall contribution the middle leader position can make. Complementing the document analysis of HoDs’s job description, these perspectives demonstrate the complexity of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

HoDs' role and that their responsibilities extend far beyond the functions outlined in the document.

The role of HoDs is viewed through a multifaceted lens, highlighting both their leadership and management capacities. HoDs are seen as instrumental in implementing and sustaining the school's vision and goals. Their leadership role is perceived as working collegially towards shared objectives and working closely with their teams, thus emphasizing the importance of shared vision and collective responsibility.

Teachers within the school see HoDs as advocates who represent their interests and voices at the senior leaders' level. They are viewed as peers who understand the challenges and aspirations of teachers, mediating effectively during disagreements and fostering a collaborative and supportive environment in the department. As the teacher appraisal plays an important role for teacher achievements and departmental effectiveness, teachers view HoDs' role as a leader who can picture the career trajectory for teachers, who leading by example can motivate and inspire with their own achievements. HoDs are seen as integral in translating and communicating school goals and policies to teachers, ensuring better understanding and correct completion of tasks. This is especially relevant to teacher appraisal where policies, regulations related to professional competitions, conferences, teacher training are understood correctly and are communicated to teachers.

The analytical aspects of the HoD's role have become increasingly important due to the renewed curriculum and assessment reform. HoDs are now required to engage deeply with student data using it to inform teaching and learning practices, and improvement of student learning outcomes. HoD's ability of handling data and translating it into actionable and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

manageable steps is highly valued, as it directly impacts the quality of student learning and teachers' practices.

Non-Leading School Case

Multiple perspectives of teachers, senior leaders of the non-leading school case are presented in this section. Overall, six teachers agreed to participate in this study, two per each department. I also present the views of the senior leader, in this school the deputy principal for scientific and methodological work oversees HoDs. Participants' characteristics and assigned pseudonyms are presented in the Table 13. The pseudonyms were assigned accordingly NL-leading school, CoUNT, EIUNT, NonUNT - subject, T1, T2, DP, LEA for the position of the participant.

Table 13

Teacher Participants' Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	Years of experience in this department	Subject area
NL-CoUNT-T1	5	5	math
NL-CoUNT-T2	5	4 months	computer science
NL-EIUNT-T1	36	3	world history and history of Kazakhstan
NL-EIUNT-T2	21	2	entrepreneurship and business
NL-NonUNT-T1	4	1	physical education
NL-NonUNT-T2	19	8	physical education

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Understanding of Leadership and Leadership Role

Teachers' perspectives of leadership in this school share similar views as colleagues from the leading school. These perspectives center around the belief that leadership is not merely about exercising authority and control, but rather about guiding and empowering individuals to collaborate towards a shared vision. NL-NonUNT-T1 commented: “Leaders work with a group or a team, lead it towards a goal”. NL-NonUNT-T2 agreed “Leadership is to organize a group of people to whom the leader envisions and persuades the direction to go to”. According to teachers, leadership, however, is not only a vision, it also implies to persuade colleagues and ensure they follow and the team moves together toward that vision and goals. NL-EIUNT-T2 noted: “Leader is someone who can persuade others, they listen to his\her opinion, and, eventually, follow that person”. For some teachers, leadership is also about leading by example. This aspect of leadership was shared by most of the participants in the leading school too. NL-EIUNT-T1 commented: “Leadership is the ability to organize a group of people, to lead by example and respect other team members”.

The leadership role of HoDs is highly regarded in terms of subject matter expertise and pedagogy. In teachers' perspectives they are regarded as leaders who possess a deep understanding of their subject and demonstrate proficiency in various teaching methods and approaches. HoDs are seen as valuable resources for their department, providing guidance and support to teachers to enhance their teaching practices. NL-CoUNT-T1 noted: “HoD’s leadership role is in their subject knowledge, teaching methods, approaches, participation in competitions that they can share with us”. Teachers of the compulsory UNT subject stressed the importance of the HoD leadership role as being responsible and well-organized both personally and at the department level. NL-CoUNT-T2 commented:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“Before the previous HoD did not conduct any meetings where we could discuss pedagogy related topics, only general themes. After the current HoD has taken the role, we know the topic in advance, we fully participate in all the meetings and seminars, and are actively engaged. She is responsible, and on my behalf, I do not want to let her down, strive to do everything on time”.

NLDP, being the senior leader with whom HoDs work directly, defines leadership as the ability to inspire and guide others towards a common objective. A true leader not only takes the initiative but also gains the support and commitment of their team. Together, they collaborate to achieve specific goals and come up with solutions to challenging problems. This perspective on leadership emphasizes the essential role of a leader as the catalyst for action, uniting individuals in a shared commitment. She elaborated:

“A leader is a person whom others will follow. The initiative comes from him or her, and it will be supported by the team, together they achieve a certain goal, find a solution to a certain problem”.

This perspective is well aligned to her view of the HoD’s leadership role. HoD’s expertise needs to go beyond the subject matter itself; they should be responsible for guiding and supporting their teachers in various aspects of pedagogy, subject specific teaching methods, and the effective use of ICT. NLDP stated: “HoD should be able to engage everyone in the department, by identifying the teacher’s strengths, talents, and assign a task or role. HoD’ should be able to create an atmosphere of cooperation, mutual understanding and support within the team”.

NLDP’s work with HoDs is aimed at ensuring that each department can succeed and be effective. She argued that in a well-organized department, the allocation of tasks and roles is

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

thoughtfully managed, optimizing the collective capabilities of the teaching team and fostering an environment where every teacher can contribute their best. NLDP continued:

“We expect HoDs ensure effective distribution of tasks and roles to teachers, their workload, allocation of students to Olympiads and competitions. If HoDs do not organize departmental work evenly and effectively, some teachers would be overloaded, and some teachers’ potential would not be utilized”.

HoDs’ Multiple Roles

HoD as a Human Resource Manager. From the interview with NLDP it was evident that she and the HoDs in this school have a structured approach to managing the department. Similar to other non-leading school participants’ perspectives, HoD’s role as a human resource manager is viewed as significant.

Teacher selection. HoDs often participate in screening and interviewing potential teachers, assessing their qualifications, subject expertise, teaching skills, and compatibility with the department's goals and culture. Their insights and recommendations are highly valuable in ensuring that the right individuals are selected to join the teaching team. NLDP commented: “As a rule, teacher selection and hiring are done through HoDs, they identify candidate’s subject knowledge, methodological approaches, experience. If they approve the candidate, we agree with them”.

Teacher professional development. HoDs play a key role in supporting teachers’ professional growth through the process of appraisal (attestation). Beyond just administrative duties, HoDs often take the lead in organizing seminars, workshops, and events where teachers have the opportunity to showcase their professionalism and expertise. NLDP noted:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“Teacher attestation (appraisal) is a crucial stage in teacher professional development. To pass attestation, teachers need to showcase their experience, together we conduct seminars, open lessons, and events where teachers can demonstrate their professionalism. HoD needs to manage the process and ensure that teachers pass their attestation successfully”.

Teacher retention. Besides supporting teachers in their professional growth, HoDs contribute significantly to the retention of novice teachers, helping them establish a strong foundation for their teaching careers. They support them with techniques for classroom management, teaching strategies, helping new teachers build confidence and competence. NLDP proudly shared their experience: “The fact that novice teachers have adapted well to school work and continue to stay in the profession is HoDs’ achievement. As leaders they did their job well”.

Teacher recognition. HoDs are responsible for closely monitoring and tracking the accomplishments and performance of their teachers. Their involvement ensures that recognition and financial incentives are granted based on objective assessment and a clear understanding of each teacher's contributions to the department's overall achievements. NLDP confirmed: “Recognition of teacher achievement and offering financial rewards is done with the agreement and justification of the HoD as they track teacher achievements, record their rating”.

HoD as a Teacher Advocate. Similar to views of teachers in the leading school, colleagues also view the HoD as an advocate. Although HoD takes a supervising role, teachers, nevertheless, continue to perceive them as a peer but with a superior role. Therefore, they expect her to act as an advocate in situations where senior leaders are also involved. NL-CoUNT-T1 comments:

“HoD is a teacher, one of us, a competent HoD knows at which level we teach, what kind of problems we solve (in math subjects). When observing our lessons senior leaders may

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

compare the pedagogy of our subject with others, and therefore, make a conclusion that is irrelevant. In such situations, we expect our HoD to act as an advocate to explain our practices from the perspectives of the subject”.

As a liaison between the teachers and the school leadership, the HoD takes on the responsibility of representing the interests of the department and its staff. When teachers encounter challenges or have innovative ideas, they can approach the HoD with their concerns. The HoD, in turn, ensures that they are accurately communicated to the senior leaders. By doing so, the HoD serves as a liaison between the two parties allowing the school leadership to make informed decisions that address the specific needs of the department. NL-ELUNT-T1 elaborated: “There is a hierarchy or organizational subordination that we implicitly follow. We first communicate our needs, requests, and problems through the HoD”.

HoD as a Critical Friend. Before significant events such as seminars or open lessons, the HoD takes on the role of a thoughtful observer, carefully reviewing the lesson plans and preparations of the teachers. By doing so, the HoD provides constructive feedback and suggestions to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the upcoming sessions, acts as a critical friend by closely monitoring the teaching process, making notes of strengths and areas for improvement. The HoD organizes methodological discussions, creating a safe space for teachers to reflect on their practices, share insights, and learn from one another's experiences. NL-CoUNT-T2 noted: ‘Before important seminars, open lessons our HoD looks through the plans, monitors the preparations, organizes after event methodological discussion. I feel comfortable and more confident after her feedback. She acts as a critical friend”.

HoD as a Coordinator. The capacity in which teachers view their HoD is that of a facilitator or coordinator. Teachers expect their HoD to play a proactive role in coordinating and managing various aspects of their work, including organizing tasks, setting deadlines, and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

providing timely reminders to ensure that everything runs smoothly and efficiently. In this capacity, the HoD serves as a support system for the teachers, helping them stay on top of their commitments and ensuring that departmental tasks are completed in a timely manner. Support as a way of helping, and keeping deadlines, updating, encouraging. This facilitative approach fosters a sense of teamwork and accountability. NL-CoUNT-T2 stated: “I expect the HoD to organize my work, say what I need to do, remind me about the deadlines, keep me organized”.

Some teachers view the HoD as a troubleshooter who can identify and address issues or challenges that arise within the department or among colleagues. Rather than waiting for problems to escalate, she takes the initiative to find timely and suitable solutions. For that she needs to be proactive, resourceful and competent to solve complex issues. NL-EIUNT-T1 suggested: “We expect that HoDs can solve problems on our behalf. She should be very competent to solve a problem or complete a task without our interference. The HoD should know us so well, our strengths, potential, our answers”. This is an interesting view of the role that did not arise in the leading school. Nevertheless, it is worth including as a finding that teachers expect from their HoD. In this specific response, the participant discussed a situation when teachers are requested to submit information or complete a task urgently, if they happen to be at the lessons or absent, they would expect the HoD to do that on their behalf.

HoD as a Connecting Link. Within the school, the HoD plays a key role in relaying important information from the senior leaders to the teachers. They communicate decisions, policies, and initiatives from the school leadership to the departmental staff, ensuring that everyone is on the same page and aligned with the school's goals and vision. Additionally, the HoD collects feedback and insights from teachers and conveys them to the senior leaders, providing valuable input for decision-making and continuous improvement. NL-ELUNT-T1 commented: “Our HoD plays a role of a link between the senior leaders and teachers. At the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

methodological council meeting where only HoDs and senior leaders participate, they are given tasks, and information which they transmit to us”. She continued:

“There is a city level group of HoDs, where opportunities about different contests are shared. By practicing her leadership our HoD ensures our teachers participate there. If she does not communicate information in a timely manner, we will be left behind.

Participation of teachers at the school level and higher levels depends on our HoD’s leadership to the extent she is aware of the teacher strengths, talented, available resources”.

The significance of HoDs’ role to transmit information to teachers is discussed by the NonUNT subject teachers as well. Although their subject is not assessed, they connect their professional development, teacher and student achievements to the timely flow of information. NL-NonUNT-T2 commented: “We are waiting for the news, updates, information about sports competitions, from LEA. It first arrives at the HoD and then he informs us. We then can plan our work accordingly”. The HoD represents the department and its teachers at higher levels, such as the LEA. They participate in meetings, discussions, and workshops where they share departmental achievements, challenges, and ideas. By doing so, the HoD represents the needs and interests of the department within the broader educational context. NL-EIUNT-T2 shared their experience: “For the first time we participated in the contest “the best subject department” on a city level and received recognition as a certificate. This is a significant achievement”.

Within-Case Analysis of the Non-Leading School to Research Question 2

Teachers and senior leaders in the non-leading school share similar views of the leadership and the HoD’s leadership role. They conceptualize leadership as a process of guiding and empowering individuals towards a shared vision, emphasizing collaboration and team work effort over merely authority and control. Both teachers and senior leaders value leadership that

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

leads by example, with HoDs' leadership role being highly regarded for their subject matter expertise and pedagogy. Relying on their expertise, teachers view their HoDs as peers and leaders who can give constructive feedback and be critical friends. HoDs are viewed as a connecting link between the senior leaders and teachers, their role is significant in transmitting information and representing views of both sides and channeling those in an accurate and timely manner.

Additionally, HoDs play the role of the teacher advocate who represents their voice, interests, needs and concerns to the senior leaders. Senior leaders, in their turn, focus on HoD's role as a human resource manager, relying on HoDs' knowledge and professional judgement in teacher selection, professional development, retention, recognition. HoDs are in close position to the teachers, therefore, they know best of their talents, strengths, they monitor teacher performance, and can therefore, support senior leaders in human resources related aspects.

The findings of the two research questions provide a comprehensive background to understand the environment in which HoDs operate. They suggest the multifaceted nature of HoDs' leadership role, highlighting the complexities and challenges they face daily. Their role does not cover only leadership and management duties, but also supportive and developmental responsibilities. The perspectives of teachers, senior leaders, and the LEA, as presented in the previous sections, provide a context for exploring the individual cases of HoDs and the construction of their leadership identity.

Findings from Individual Cases of Leadership Identity Construction

In this section I explore how HoDs construct their leadership identity and what factors become catalysts and barriers in this process. Leadership identity construction is a dynamic process and happens through a medium of reciprocal claims and grants between the individuals. These claims and grants can be expressed directly and indirectly through verbal and non-verbal means of communication.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

At the individual internalization level, the individual's personal beliefs of themselves as possessing certain leadership characteristics or not leader-like. Relational recognition is the second level of identity construction. Individuals construct their leadership identities through interaction, experiences and relationship with their immediate colleagues, such as senior leaders, local educational authorities, and teachers in their departments. Certain cues, messages, symbols, experiences, relationships with others influence the way individuals see themselves as leaders. Collective endorsement or recognition within a wider organizational context occurs beyond the relationships and interaction between individuals.

The report on each participant is presented in three main themes according to the theoretical framework of leadership identity construction: individual internalization, relational recognition and collective endorsement.

L-CoUNT-HD's Leadership Identity Construction

Individual internalization

Job Role Impact. HoD's official position as a HoD helps her internalize the role and construct her leadership identity compared to teacher identity. As a HoD, her official position holds significant weight in shaping her identity, transitioning from the individual responsibilities of a teacher to the broader leadership responsibilities of a HoD. This shift in accountability is deeply instilled in the day-to-day operations, requiring HoDs to navigate the complexities of departmental leadership and management. L-CoUNT-HD commented: "When you work as a teacher, you are responsible only for yourself. In this role, I feel the responsibility for others, I always keep all nuances in my head".

Low Self-Belief in Oneself as a Leader. The participant claimed that she is not a strong leader, rather a responsible doer. She argued: "I am a responsible doer, I do not think I have strong leadership skills, to be a leader one needs to have certain character traits for that, I do not

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

notice those in myself”. This statement reflects a perception of herself as lacking certain inner qualities or character traits typically associated with strong leadership. By describing herself as a “responsible doer” rather than a leader, she seems to underestimate her leadership potential and emphasizes her ability to execute tasks and diligent approach to responsibilities.

Personal Accomplishment. Although the participant does not believe in herself as a leader, she mentioned that successful organization of significant events gives her an opportunity to practice leadership and thus increases her self-belief. For example, she manages to organize school wide events, such as subject decades of professional development, sharing best practices of her department, she feels personal accomplishment as a HoD. This experience was shared as a contributing factor to her leadership identity. L-CoUNT-HD commented:

“We organized a science quest, gave students engaging tasks, and different forms of individual and group work. As a department we did well organizing this school wide event, teachers were proud of each other, I was proud of the teachers, and myself. This case gave me reassurance that I am capable of organizing big events like this”.

Relational recognition

Colleagues Seeking Advice. Being a middle leader, HoDs are both leaders and followers. They are leaders to the teachers in their departments and followers to senior leaders. L-CoUNT-HD’s leadership identity is constructed in interaction both with senior leaders and teachers. Specifically, she mentioned when they seek her professional advice. “Senior leaders regularly seek my advice as a critical friend. For example, the deputy principal in science-methodological work asks to have a look at the presentation, to suggest feedback. Perhaps she considers me a leader”. Teachers also seek advice and professional expertise. “There are times when I send them policy documents, papers. They do not read, and approach me in the first place. They know they

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

can always rely on me and will get answers to their questions. The same with us and senior leaders. They always respond and clarify”.

Being Within a Group of Teacher Leaders. Since the start of the curriculum and assessment reform, teacher leadership and distributed leadership began to develop in this case study school. The participant regards the school principal as a leader who managed to redesign the way school operates and created an environment for teachers to practice leadership and take initiatives. Thus, there is a group of teacher leaders who represent a cohort of trainers, curriculum and assessment leaders, and L-Co-UNT-HD is one of them. She commented:

“In every school there are teacher leaders, they do not have a position, but they practice leadership. And, the fact that you are a part of this group, community of leaders gives me the feeling of myself as a leader too. We learn a lot from each other, share ideas, give feedback, exchange experience, and this develops me”.

This relationship within a group of teacher leaders was expressed as a contributing factor to HoD’s leadership identity development.

Collective endorsement

Financial Compensation. Pay, or to be more exact, absence of pay for HoD’s position, was identified as a hindering factor. It is repeated throughout the interview, that this job, despite being recognized by the school as an important middle layer, is not recognized as such by the Ministry of Education. Schools individually decide on the motivation for HoDs to do their job, for example, in this school HoDs are given two days per term as days off, however, they can take them only during the summer holidays, which she says she cannot take as there are multiple reports she needs to submit before going on holiday. She noted:

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“This job should be paid. It is time-consuming, I teach in the morning and in the afternoon, and I also need to find time to do HoD’s job. If it was paid, I would be more motivated to do it”.

Due to this job being unpaid, to compensate for their salary, HoDs take more hours teaching. The more they teach, the more they identify as teachers rather than leaders. Therefore, the absence of pay contributes as a barrier to their leadership identity construction from the collective endorsement perspective, as HoDs as a group across schools in Kazakhstan are not paid for their role.

Direct Links with Local Educational Authorities. HoDs have direct connection with the local educational authority (LEA) such as Center for Modernization of Education. There are Whatsapp chats with heads of departments of all schools and supervisors from LEA. Previously, LEA contacted HoDs through their senior leaders in schools, now they do it directly. She commented: “This is more convenient, we send reports directly, submit data”. HoD feels that the LEA recognizes their position and that they are capable of representing their school at the city level.

L-EIUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction

Individual Internalization

Belief in her Organizational Skills. L-EIUNT-HD demonstrates confidence in her ability to effectively organize teams. Her proficiency extends not only to students, but also to her colleagues due to her strong organizational skills. “I think I can organize the work of teachers effectively. I work well not only with students, but with teachers too. So, it suggests that I have strong organizational skills?”. To illustrate this, the HoD shares an example of the department’s progress under her leadership compared to the previous HoD’s work. The previous HoD’s

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

approach led to confusion and inconvenience within the department. However, under current leadership, the department's functioning has significantly improved. According to her, teachers are now performing their roles more effectively, resulting in a more organized and efficient environment. "Compared to how it was before, now it is more organized, teachers are doing their job, senior leaders find it easier to work with the department. Before it was confusing and inconvenient". It should be noted that this example resembles her understanding of leadership which is the ability to organize the teams and lead by example.

Lack of Leadership Training. According to a review of existing leadership training offered by national professional development centers such as Orleu and NIS Center of Excellence, leadership training is unavailable for heads of departments. There is training for the senior leadership team, however it is not available for HoDs or teachers. "I wish there was training for heads of departments specifically, on team management, leadership". This indicates a need for additional skills and knowledge to effectively fulfill her leadership responsibilities. The participant provides this as an example of a catalyst experience that would contribute to her identity as a leader. Another reason for the need in leadership training is the perception it will make in the eyes of the colleagues. Becoming a certified HoD leader will make her colleagues perceive the role and her as a leader more seriously. She noted: "When you are a certified HoD, others in the school have a more serious perception about your job role". This suggests that without certification or specific recognition, the HoD's position might not be fully appreciated or regarded as a proper leader role within the school's organizational structure.

Appointment Based on Competence and Tenure. HoD are selected to this position based on their competences, teaching category, years of experience and other qualification criteria. "I was appointed to this role as the most experienced (tenured) teacher in the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

department”. There are certain qualification criteria to become a HoD. Since the majority of teachers are novice and less qualified to this role, L-ElUNT-HD was appointed by the senior leaders. This fact appears to be both as HoD realizes that she is the most appropriate candidate to the role, her belief in her competencies, qualifications contribute to her identity construction. At the same time, senior leaders recognize her potential to be a HoD and this acts as a grant of leadership which also contributes to her understanding of herself as a leader.

Reflection on HoD’s Job. Leadership identity construction can happen during the reflection on HoD’s job. This process was evident during the interview while the participant was reflecting on her role, experiences, and relationships. Thus, contributing to her identity construction at the individual internalization stage.

“Wow, my role is so important, apparently! When you invited us to participate in this study, I was thinking about the kind of questions you could ask, about leadership, our role. I then understood that we are doing a lot of work, and our role is important”.

Therefore, the more HoDs reflect on their role and its importance, the more they tend to appreciate the hard work they do and the benefits for the school it brings.

Language Barrier. The participant’s limited knowledge of the Kazakh language presents a significant challenge in her role. Being a part of the chat group with other heads of English departments and LEA, she feels excluded and ashamed for not being able to understand, and most importantly she misses information that she needs to communicate to her teachers. She, therefore, misses important updates, events or decisions that impact her subject area. She also has to depend on her colleagues to translate which is time-consuming and also puts her in a disadvantageous situation. This makes her feel embarrassed which affects her confidence as a HoD.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

“I do not speak Kazakh language. I am in the chat group with other HoDs of English departments across all schools in our city and representatives of LEA. All important information is sent in Kazakh, so I miss it. I have to ask colleagues, clarify and ask to translate. The fact that I do not know Kazakh language makes me feel ashamed”.

The role of HoD is viewed primarily as transmitting information between senior leaders and teachers, when the HoD is not able to effectively communicate important information from the higher-level organizations such as LEA due to language barrier affects her perception of herself as a leader.

Personal Accomplishment. The participant takes pride in a noteworthy personal accomplishment achieved by the English department - a city webinar on lesson study. This event is remarkable for the participant because, over the course of nine years, this is the first time the English department showcased its experience on a significant level demonstrating its capability to host an event typically associated with the gymnasium schools. This event also symbolizes the collective achievement of the entire English department.

“One of our accomplishments is that we conducted a city webinar in Lesson Study.

Throughout the nine years that I have worked here, this is the first time when the English the department conducts such a significant event. I think it is an accomplishment.

Nobody expected such an event from a mainstream school. Usually, these kinds of events are organized at gymnasium schools”.

To her, organization of this event is evidence of her as a leader capable of organizing her department, showcasing their experience to other schools in the city, demonstrating her leadership not only within the school but also beyond. To her this is a catalyst experience that

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

contributed to her identity as a leader.

Relational Recognition

Close Link with Senior Leaders. “The closer you are to the administration (senior leadership), the higher responsibility. It motivates to practice leadership, but the fact that it is not paid – demotivates”. HoD understands that this role is a recognition of her potential, competencies, and trust of senior leadership. Also being within an organizational structure of the school, within school leaders gives a feeling of acceptance to the cohort of leaders. At the same time, the fact that her job is not paid decreases the importance of the role as if it is not as important as senior leaders’ roles. So, there is a conflict in her belief if this is a leader role or not.

Colleagues Seeking Advice. Similar to the compulsory UNT HoD, when colleagues seek advice, it appears as a symbol of recognition of HoD as a subject matter expert and subject leader. The consistent seeking advice of teachers not only from the English department, but also from others in English language related matters, shapes how HoD thinks of herself as a leader and how others perceive her in the school community. “Most of the teachers in our school on matters related to English language approach me in the first instance. They seek advice both in subject matter, and approach me as most experienced”. By seeking advice, teachers recognize her as a knowledgeable leader in her subject area and as a respected colleague. Teachers do not only seek information, but also trust her competence and expertise. This recognition contributes to her perception of herself as a competent and influential leader.

Recognition of HoDs’ Role and Leadership Skills. The recognition of HoD’s role and her leadership skills plays a significant role in the development of her identity as a leader. By recognizing her leadership potential and suggesting a career path where she can further develop as an instructional leader in her subject area and beyond, can become a more profound teacher

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

expert, senior leaders demonstrate their support for her current and future professional development. “Senior leaders notice that I demonstrate organizational skills, and therefore support me in my future professional development. To receive a higher teaching category, I need to conduct research at the school level they say”. This recognition from the senior leaders signifies their belief in her leadership potential and acknowledgement of her contributions to the school community. She perceives this act as evidence that not only the teachers perceive her as a leader, but also the senior leaders and the school community.

Tensions with Former HoD. The relationship the participant has with one of the teachers in the department presents a significant challenge. She is a former HoD who now works as a teacher. She is also a tenured teacher with more years of experience both in teaching and leadership. “It was difficult to work with an ex-HoD. She is now a teacher, and she has her expectations of me as HoD. There were conflicts, sometimes I needed to be more flexible, resolve these conflicts”. Leadership identity is constructed when followers grant leadership to their leader and demonstrate this by certain messages and actions. In this specific case, the former HoD, despite transitioning to a teaching role, seems to retain certain expectations and perceptions of the leadership role. As a result, she might not fully grant leadership to the current HoD, leading to tension and conflicts in their interactions.

Low Status and Unpopularity of HoD’s Position. A particular challenge of ‘nobody to choose from’ is a lack of potential candidates willing to take this role. The position is unpopular among the teachers due to various reasons such as excessive responsibilities, reporting, additional workload alongside teaching, absence of pay. Teachers are not willing to apply to become a HoD, despite the fact that it is promoted by the senior leadership. “Senior leaders suggest teachers become a HoD, but nobody agrees. I think very few people know about this role or want to become one”. The low status of the job creates a unique dynamic that affects the pool of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

candidates. On the one hand, the perceived low status leads to a limited competition among teachers. Many teachers overlook this role compared to teaching roles or other leadership roles. On the other hand, this perception may dissuade many to take on this responsibility. Therefore, only a few teachers, strong and capable candidates, who may have vision and courage to become HoDs, such as this participant, become HoDs.

Collective Endorsement

Lack of Recognition from Higher Authorities. HoD understands the crucial role she and other HoDs play in the school, that they are a significant layer between the senior leaders and the teachers, and that without them the job of school administration would be more challenging. She is also aware that the school administration recognizes their role and provides support to the extent they can. She receives multiple signs of that as mentioned in the previous sections. However, she feels there is a lack of recognition and appreciation from higher authorities such as the Ministry of Education. This leads to the feelings of undervaluation and insignificance. The HoD's impression is based on the fact that the job is not paid, which is regulated at the Ministry, not only at the school level. By this she feels that in the wider context their roles are unnoticed or acknowledged. "School administration knows that HoDs ease their job. It would be endless. But I have an impression, that somewhere in the Ministry of Education or in the LEA do not know about us, do not appreciate what this role does". Leadership training is also provided at the national level through professional development agencies and centers. The fact that there is no available training for HoDs, but only to them as teachers signifies the importance or lack of importance placed on them by the Ministry of Education.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

L-NonUNT-HD's Leadership Identity Construction

Individual internalization

Natural Leader. The participant portrays herself as a natural leader, possessing an active personality that enables her to collaborate and communicate well with individuals both in the department and beyond it. "I have an active personality, so I am active in school matters, I can collaborate with any department, any teacher". She continued: "I also was a teacher trade union head, I am a natural leader, I get along well with people, even if they do seek help, I will be there for them". She shares a personal story of her relationships with sisters and brothers. "I come from a family of teachers, out of seven sisters six of us chose a teaching profession. Being the ninth child made me a communicative leader, I get along well with anyone". The participant's strong belief in herself as a leader and her leadership skills is evident in this quote. "My sense of myself as a leader is, was, and will always be there". She continuously stresses this throughout the interview, thus proving that she is a strong leader and her identity at the individual internalization level is well developed. Her leader identity provides motivation for her actions as a responsible HoD, a proud teacher, advocate for her colleagues, and an active educator. Her self-awareness suggests a clear understanding of her strengths, capabilities and the impact she can make as the head of the department.

Belief in Subject. The HoD strongly believes in her subject, despite other people's perceptions of it as non-academic or unimportant. She acknowledges that the subject is not assessed, and the students do not take exams to enroll in the university. However, she is confident that for student well-being and holistic development as an individual, the self-reflection subject is important. "Some may say that our subject is not important, not like other subjects. But we also plan lessons, and spend time and effort to do it well". With this in mind, she is determined to ensure students benefit most from the program, especially in the inclusive classes. "I am usually

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

given correction classes; 100% of students graduate and enroll to the leading colleges in Astana. We give them a start, opportunities despite their diagnoses of cerebral palsy, autism and other mental disabilities. They are doing well after school, some get the scholarship, the parents are thankful for that”.

Capable of Senior Leader Level Functions. The HoD was promoted several times to the senior leadership role, she also was in the national cadre reserve for potential senior leaders in state schools. However, she refused to take the role due to her family priorities, she realized that even at the HoD’s position she has already been doing a similar level of responsibility functions. As she claims, this was a situation when she thought of herself as capable of doing more complex and higher-level roles as a leader. “I was promoted to the senior leadership position, but I did not agree to take that role, however, I know that I was already doing that sort of tasks (senior level) in my HoD’s position”.

Sense of Belonging. Apart from progression to a more senior level position within the school, the participant also had opportunities to quit the job and transfer to another school in a more convenient location. However, being a graduate of this school and having worked here her entire career, she possesses a strong sense of belonging to this school community, that makes her loyal and dedicated to staying and contributing her knowledge, skills, and expertise to this particular organization. “I also had many opportunities to quit this job and transfer to another school. There is a school next to my house. But I do not want to leave. It's my 25th year in this school this year”. Twenty-five years of tenure in one organization is evidence of the established mutual relationship with teachers and senior leaders, a sign of her being regarded as a reliable and experienced figure within the school community.

Relational Recognition

Trust of Senior Leaders. The participant’s experience of feeling more like a leader when

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

entrusted with organizing an important event by senior leadership highlights the significant impact of trust on her leadership identity. This act of delegation and trust from senior leaders affirms her capabilities and reinforces her belief in herself as a leader. It motivates her to excel in fulfilling the assigned responsibility and strengthens her sense of purpose and commitment in her HoD's role. "I feel more of myself as a leader when senior leadership entrusts me with the organization of an important event. I feel as if they trust me, delegate this responsibility and I need to accomplish it in the best possible way". She also emphasizes the relationship she has with the current senior leader supervising HoD's work. "Our current supervising deputy principal values my active personality, and makes the best of my ideas, initiatives, and contributions".

Perception as a Leader as Recognized by Others. The participant strongly believes in herself as a leader is mirrored in perceptions of others in the school, including newly arrived teachers. She expresses complete certainty that her leadership is recognized and respected by all members of the school community. This confidence is reinforced by the consistent positive feedback she receives from her colleagues. "I am 100% sure that everyone in the school, including newly arrived teachers, recognize my leadership and think of me as a leader". The positive feedback and acknowledgement she receives from her peers affirm her position as a leader. She also acknowledges that the position is a demanding job, requiring certain competencies, capabilities, responsibilities. Not everyone might have the necessary combination of skills and qualities to be a successful HoD. "Not everyone can be a HOD, at the same time not everyone would like to be one".

Collective Endorsement

Pride by Others. The participant shared that she has a strong bond with her school. She graduated from this school and has continued to work there for more than two decades. An

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

example of a significant relationship that influenced how she thinks of herself as a leader is when, at important occasions or anniversaries, the community proudly recognizes the loyal graduates who return to work at school. She also serves as an active trade union representative, advocating for the needs and interests of her colleagues. “I am an active trade union member. I am a graduate of this school. Whenever there are anniversaries or important occasions celebrated at school, the school is proud of the graduates who return to work here and serve this community”.

School-wide Leadership. The participant practices leadership at the school-wide committees and activities driven by her strong belief in herself as a leader and an activist motivated to contribute to the school community. Her involvement extends beyond the subject area reflecting the wider community’s recognition of her leadership abilities. She commented:

“To a reasonable extent, I participate in the school's strategic activities. For example, I am a member of two bodies - the Conciliation Committee and the Compliance Committee in regard to the Kazakh language. As part of the first committee, we resolve conflict inside the school among the faculty and staff, and make a decision for the best interest of teachers. In the latter committee, we make sure the design of the classrooms, national symbols, and signs are compliant with the state language law”.

The fact that L-NonUNT-HD has opportunities to practice leadership beyond her subject area signifies that the wider community recognizes her leadership, which reinforces her leadership identity construction.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Non-leading School Case

NL-CoUNT-HD's Leadership Identity Construction

Individual Internalization

HoDs are Just Teachers. This participant has not attended any specific leadership training, and therefore, perceives herself primarily as a teacher rather than a member of the school's leadership team. She claims that the leadership training is not available to her, only training for teachers. "I know there is leadership training for senior leaders, we are not a part of them. We are all just subject teachers; therefore, we attend courses for math teachers". "Although I am a HoD, I do not position myself as a part of school leadership. I am just a teacher". It is interesting how the availability of resources and leadership training may give the HoD an indication of her being a part of the leadership team. The statement that HoDs are just teachers is repeated throughout the interview.

Not a Leader, a Good Doer. This particular HoD seems to view herself more as a diligent "doer" rather than embracing her role as a leader. She may possess strong organizational skills and a commitment to fulfilling tasks efficiently, but her self-perception as primarily a "good doer" might limit her leadership potential and impact. She elaborated:

"I do not consider myself a leader, I am not ambitious or in need of public attention. I am an introvert; I will not show off. But if I am asked to do something, I will. I think it is also my personality, I do not lead the department, I am more a manager. I just do my job organizing teachers and data".

This perception could also impact her interactions with her team. Instead of taking on a leadership role and empowering her colleagues, she might predominantly approach them from a

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

"doer" perspective, providing support and assistance when needed, but not necessarily stepping into a guiding or coaching role.

Age. Age can have a significant impact on how leadership is perceived in the workplace, particularly when young leaders find themselves in positions of authority among older, more experienced colleagues. Age-related biases and stereotypes may lead to a lack of recognition and acceptance of young leaders as competent and capable individuals. Elderly colleagues might have reservations about the leadership abilities of their younger colleagues, perceiving them as inexperienced or lacking the necessary skills to lead effectively. This can create challenges for young leaders in gaining the trust and respect of their older colleagues, hindering their ability to lead with confidence and authority. NL-CoUNT-HD commented:

“Job functions are not limited, however, how HODs practice them depends on their personality. In my case it depends on the age. It is a cultural aspect, our mentality, when the leader is young, others (elderly colleagues) do not listen to you, they think even if you are a leader, they think you cannot make any comments or remarks. In other departments HoDs reality is a bit different, they have authority and are of elder age. In my case there are instances when I cannot influence”.

Experience. The longer she serves as the HoD, the more she finds herself identifying with the role of a leader and eventually practicing leadership in a more evident way. With each passing year, her experience in managing the department, supporting her colleagues, and making critical decisions boost her confidence in her leadership abilities. As she encounters various challenges and successfully navigates through them, she gains a deeper understanding of the impact she can have as a leader. “The more experience I have in this position, the more leadership skills are evident”. As she witnesses the positive outcomes and progress within the department under her guidance, she becomes increasingly connected to her leadership identity.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Relational Recognition

Trust of Colleagues and Senior Leaders. The opportunity for the HoD to conduct a lesson on a national TV was a pivotal moment in her leadership identity construction. Being selected for such a significant task was a testament to the trust and confidence her colleagues and senior leaders had in her teaching abilities and subject matter expertise.

The experience challenged her to step outside her comfort zone and demonstrate her leadership skills in a new and public setting. The positive feedback and praise she received from colleagues and senior leaders further reinforced her leadership identity. They acknowledged her competence, creativity, and ability to represent the school with distinction. She recalled:

“I overcame my fears when I presented a math lesson online on a national channel during the pandemic. My colleagues suggested my candidacy and the senior leaders supported them. They trusted in me and I could not let them down. After this experience, I felt of myself more as a leader and their support was a strong message for me”.

Positive Role Model. The HoD found a valuable role model in a senior leader colleague, who exemplified the kind of leader she aspired to be. This senior leader demonstrated a unique combination of empathy, effective communication, and strategic decision-making. The senior leader's exemplary behavior and leadership qualities served as a model for the HoD, shaping her vision of the leader she aspired to become. The positive influence of this role model enriched her leadership identity, empowering her to create a more supportive and effective environment within the department and beyond. She recalled:

“I had a senior leader working with whom I developed my competences, first of all as a teacher. As a leader I developed during this interaction with her, looking at her and understanding what kind of leader I want to be for my department”.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Colleagues Seeking Advice. The HoD noticed that her colleagues in the school often come to her seeking advice in pedagogy and other matters related to teaching. This has made her realize that others see her as a leader and value her expertise in the field. She also mentioned that she hears positive feedback from others about her leadership and guidance. The fact that teachers trust her advice and seek her input has contributed to her understanding of herself as a leader and boosted her confidence in her role as the HoD. It serves as validation that her efforts and contributions are recognized and appreciated by her colleagues, further reinforcing her identity as a leader in the school community. She commented: “I think there are colleagues in the school who approach me seeking advice in pedagogy, I also hear what others say about me. In a positive way of course”.

Collective Endorsement

Power and Greater Autonomy of Senior Leaders. She recognizes that senior leaders have greater authority and decision-making power, which influences how tasks are completed in the school. Teachers prioritize completing tasks assigned by senior leaders promptly, while the HoD's tasks may not always receive the same level of urgency from the teachers. This distinction in power dynamics highlights the different levels of influence and authority that exist within the school's leadership structure. This signifies that her role is not as powerful and that teachers perceive her as a teacher colleague rather than a member of the leadership team. She noted:

“HoD is just a teacher with additional responsibilities in the department. However, we are not senior leaders with their role and power. Therefore, teachers complete their tasks in a timely manner compared to mine”.

Lack of Leadership Training. The absence of leadership training can have a strong influence on how a person constructs their identity as a leader. When HoD lacks the opportunity to receive proper training and guidance, they may encounter difficulties in fully grasping their

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

leadership role. Additionally, the availability of leadership training for specific categories of employees suggests that the HoD does not belong to the group of leaders. She commented: “I participated in the training for teachers (leveled national courses). Leadership training was for administration only, we are subject teachers, therefore these courses are not for us. There are no leadership courses for heads of departments”.

NL-EIUNT-HD’s Leadership Identity Construction

Experience. As HoDs gain experience in their role, they tend to evolve and develop as leaders. Through the challenges they face, the decisions they make, and the interactions with their team and senior leaders, they gain valuable insights and wisdom that shape their leadership identity. Experience allows HoDs to fine-tune their leadership style, understand the dynamics within the department, and become more adaptable to handling complex situations. She stated: “I am on my way to becoming a leader. I need to practice it; with experience it will come”.

Personal Accomplishment. The organization of a whole school event influenced the way HoD perceived herself as a leader. The positive recognition and appreciation she received from the school community boosted her confidence in her leadership abilities. She began to see herself not just as a teacher but as a leader who could inspire and mobilize others to work together towards a common goal. She recalled: “Annually we organize school wide events, and usually I am fully responsible for that. I need to find the resources, delegate duties, explain the objectives. For me organizing such important events is a sign of a personal accomplishment, that I managed to organize the team and made this happen”.

Relational Recognition.

Positive Role Model/Mentor. A mentor serves as a trusted and experienced guide, offering valuable insights, advice, and encouragement to the HoD. The mentor's role goes beyond providing theoretical knowledge; they offer practical wisdom gained from their own experiences

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

as leaders. She noted: “It would help me, if there was a mentor who modeled how to lead the department effectively”. Mentorship enables the HoD to develop important leadership skills. Through observation and hands-on experience, the HoD learns how to communicate effectively, motivate and inspire their team, and make sound decisions. At present there is no practice of assigning a mentor to HoDs, the participant believed that she would benefit from a role model she could learn to be a better leader for her department.

Colleagues Seeking Advice. Teachers seeking advice and support from their HoD is a sign of the positive and supportive relationship between them. The HoD's approachability and willingness to assist teachers create an environment where teachers feel comfortable seeking help and guidance. When teachers face challenges in their classrooms or need advice on pedagogy, they know they can rely on their HoD. She stated: “We have a positive professional relationship amongst teachers and senior leaders. So, we ask for help and seek advice. I like when teachers approach me and ask for advice”.

Collective Endorsement

Lack of Appreciation for HoD's Role. The lack of appreciation for the HoD's role is evident in the organizational structure of the school. While there are clearly defined positions for deputy principals responsible for academic, research, and pastoral care aspects, the role of HoD is not explicitly specified. This absence of a designated category for HoDs within the organizational hierarchy can lead to feelings of undervaluation and insignificance for those in this position. Despite the additional responsibilities that HoDs take on to lead their departments effectively, they do not receive proper compensation in terms of salary for their role. “There are deputy principals for academic, research, and pastoral care. But there is no category such as HoDs. We get extra days off, but not proper salary for this role. In the accounting office, they do not know HoDs”.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

NL-NonUNT-HD's Leadership Identity Construction

Individual Internalization

Teaching First. For this particular HoD, teaching remains the top priority, and it significantly impacts his leadership identity. While he takes on the responsibilities of the leadership role, he tends to invest more time and energy in teaching, sometimes leaving limited capacity for other leadership tasks. “In the first instance, I am a teacher. I should be fostering students' physical development, educating them and preparing them for participation in sports competitions, engaging them in extra-curricular activities based on sport”.

Natural Leader. The HoD's character naturally exercises leadership qualities, and his background as a former captain of a football team has played a significant role in shaping his leadership style. His experience as a team captain has instilled in him a deep sense of responsibility, teamwork, and the ability to motivate and inspire others. “Since school I was a team captain in volleyball, then I became a teacher. I have been a leader since then. Being a captain helped me train certain leadership traits that I still practice”.

Teacher Collaboration Within the Department. Effective leadership is evident in a HoD's ability to cultivate teamwork and collaboration among teachers. As a HoD who values and promotes teamwork as a sign of effective leadership, he fosters a culture of excellence within the department. Teamwork and collaboration make him motivated as a leader. “I get motivation to be a better leader when I see how our team works together, when we collectively discuss problem, find solutions”.

Student and Teacher Achievements. For the HoD in physical education, the achievements of students and teachers in sports are a source of pride and a strong affirmation of his leadership abilities. Seeing his students excel in various sports competitions and witnessing teachers grow and develop their coaching skills fills him with a sense of accomplishment and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

satisfaction. “In sports achievements are important. For me as a leader students’ and teachers’ achievements are a recognition of my work. When they lose, I understand I need to work more”.

Relational Recognition

Trust of Senior Leaders. The fact that this HoD was selected from a pool of candidates and appointed to this position by the senior leaders is a sign of trust and confidence in his leadership abilities. He commented:

“I think of myself as a leader since the school administration selected and appointed me as a HoD. They trust me with the leadership of the department, organization of their work, achievement of accomplishment in sports”.

Colleagues Seeking Advice. Similar to other participants, teachers seeking advice from the HoD serves as a catalyst in shaping his leadership identity. Particularly, new and inexperienced teachers seek guidance from the HoD to improve their teaching skills in sports and develop effective command voice. The fact that these novice teachers approach the HoD for his expertise and experience brings him a sense of pride and plays a significant role in his leadership identity construction. He commented: “Novice teachers are those who need most help and support. They are new to this profession. Although they studied at the university, they need more practice in the sports hall, as a command voice. When I work with them, share experience, information and see them succeed as a result, makes me feel like a leader”.

Collective Endorsement

The only statement the participant made in relation to collective endorsement is the following. He noted:

“We do not interfere with the senior leaders’ work. Our relationship with school administration is well established, supportive. I develop an annual work plan of the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

department, present to them and they approve. Whatever I receive as a task, is done in an organized and timely manner. But we do not interfere with their work”.

On the one hand, it suggests that there are mutually supportive relationships with the school administration. However, from this statement it can also be inferred that the participant does not belong to the leadership team and school organizational structure by restating that they (HoDs) do not interfere with the senior leaders work.

Cross-Case Analysis between the Leading and Non-leading Schools

The cross-case analysis of HoDs across various departments and schools reveals distinct challenges and opportunities tied to departmental size, composition of subjects, associated workloads for assessed and not assessed subjects. In larger departments, HoDs face difficulties in managing extensive teams and maintaining consistent progress in teacher appraisal. In compulsory and elective UNT subjects, HoDs experience the excess workload due to rigorous assessment system and shortage of teachers. Their role demands analytical work and continuous efforts to ensure teacher and student achievements as criteria of departmental effectiveness.

In contrast, departments not involved in UNT face fewer teaching and assessment-related pressures, thus having more opportunities to practice leadership, innovate, publish, share best practices within the school and beyond.

HoDs play a multifaceted role, balancing the leading of their department and teaching. Their responsibilities extend beyond departmental duties that include overseeing teaching, supporting teacher professional development, and representing their colleagues' needs at both the school and LEA levels. The synthesis of perspectives from teachers, senior leaders, and the LEA uncovers the complexity of the HoD's role, highlighting their significant impact beyond what is

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

outlined in formal job descriptions. In both case study schools, HoDs are perceived as vital bridges, connecting links between the senior leaders and teachers, facilitating effective communication and collaboration. Positioned at the intersection, they advocate for teachers' needs while also managing human resources, balancing the demands and expectations of both groups. Teachers expect HoDs to provide expert guidance and constructive feedback, while senior leaders emphasize their role in human resource management, focusing on recruitment, development, and recognition.

The introduction of the renewed curriculum and assessment reforms had impact on the school cultures shifting from top-down and hierarchical approach to more collaborative, collegial ways of working. This has fostered a culture of collaboration and teacher leadership, with HoDs maintaining close links not only within their schools but with local educational authorities as well. The leading and non-leading status of the school does not have a direct impact on HoDs' leadership role as I assumed at the beginning of this study. HoDs' role is limited to organizing lesson study groups within the department and ensuring teachers participate in sharing best practices activities, conferences. Although the non-leading school used to be a leading one, they continue to practice teacher research through lesson study thus demonstrating the continuity and sustainability of the leading school project.

Financial remuneration for HoDs varies across the schools. Although the current funding system does not explicitly include payment for HoDs, schools individually decide how to recognize their contributions. In the leading school, HoDs receive additional days off, whereas in the non-leading school, HoDs they compensate from the bonus budgets if school leaders decide so. With the shift to per-capita funding the schools will have more opportunities for financial remuneration. Currently, at the Ministry of Education level, HoDs' work lacks recognition and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

adequate payment for their responsibilities. At the school level, HoDs' role remains advisory, however, the school culture and strong relationship with senior leaders ensure that HoDs' voices, suggestions, and recommendations are not only heard, but often acted upon.

Findings from individual cases reveal that many HoDs experience low self-belief in their leadership abilities, often lacking formal leadership professional development opportunities. They feel excluded from the school leadership structure due to unpaid roles and a lack of recognition from the LEA and Ministry of Education levels. Those HoDs who perceive themselves as natural leaders or have strong belief in their organizational and leadership skills tend to practice leadership within the school and beyond through service in committees, trade unions, organization of significant city level events. Two HoDs have strong sense of belonging to the school as they are proud graduates whose service is recognized and valued by peers and school leaders. Personal accomplishments in the form of departmental effectiveness play an important role in HoDs' identity construction as leaders. This catalyst experience helps HoDs in both case study schools become better leaders. HoDs place great importance of relational recognition and trust from both senior leaders and teachers, which significantly shapes their leadership identity. They draw inspiration from role models and significant others, envisioning their possible selves as leaders. The societal culture also has its impact in relation to young and less experienced HoDs and how they are perceived by older colleagues who do not tend to view such HoDs as their supervising leaders. Thus, requiring HoDs to engage in age-appropriate communication and build relationships accordingly.

In the next chapter, these findings will be discussed in relation to existing empirical literature, providing a deeper exploration and understanding of HoDs' roles and leadership identity construction.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings related to the research questions on how heads of departments, as middle leaders, construct their leadership identities—how they understand, experience, and practice their leadership roles. I also explored how their leaders, such as senior leaders and the LEA representative, as well as teachers who are their followers, view their leadership role. Altogether, it helped to understand the catalysts and barriers to the construction of leadership identity, in other words, how they become leaders.

In the discussion chapter, I review the main findings and interpret them in the context of the theoretical and empirical literature on middle leaders and identity development. The purpose of this study was to explore experiences, relationships, and interactions which contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity. The discussion is structured in alignment with the theoretical framework of leadership identity construction theory by DeRue & Ashford (2010) that guided the data analysis. Leadership identity is constructed in the dynamic interaction between leaders, followers and wider context through a myriad of leadership claims and grants. The framework includes three layers: individual internalization, relational recognition and collective endorsement. This multi-dimensional approach helps to explore the complexity behind the process of leadership identity construction, as some factors can be both catalysts and barriers and can have an impact on identity development at three different levels interchangeably.

The discussion chapter consists of three sections, each devoted to the research questions.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

HoDs' Conceptualization of Leadership

Although leadership differs across cultures, there were attempts to develop a common definition of leadership by the leadership research group of 180 researchers across 62 societies in a large-scale study led by House et al. (2002). They define leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members” (p.5). In the school context, Leithwood et al. (2019) explored forty-two methodologically diverse studies and identified the domains of practice and contributions that successful middle leaders (HoDs) make for their departments’ effectiveness. They include setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization to support desired practices, improving the instructional program, securing accountability, and personal leadership resources. In this study, I also started by finding out the common definition or conceptualization of leadership by various parties such as teachers, HoDs themselves, senior leaders, and LEA.

The interview data suggest that there is an agreement in the understanding of leadership between participants at different levels within the school sites and beyond. These parties share a conceptualization of leadership that is similar to House et al. (2002) study and as defined in the international literature (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2019). The participants understand leadership as a collaborative practice where the leader shares the vision, enabling others to strive together towards a common goal. This finding is interesting, as the societal context of Kazakhstan and the education system are identified as paternalistic, with high power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010) and top-down approach (Yakavets, 2016). Such contexts are characterized by hierarchical structures where authority is centralized at the top of the organizations and there is a significant gap in power and status between those in leadership positions and those lower down the hierarchy (Ayubayeva, 2018; Tajik & Yesselbayev, 2024).

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

This discrepancy can be explained by the urban status of schools, since both of them are located in the capital city of Astana. Schools in Astana are more exposed to professional development under the “Center for Modernization of Education” at the local education authority. There have also been changes undertaken in the secondary education of Kazakhstan with the realization of the State Program for the Development of Education for 2011-2020 (MES, 2010). Since the initiation of the renewed curriculum and assessment reform, Kazakhstan has undertaken a national-scale professional development program designed to enhance educational middle and teacher leadership across its schools. The plan to change the instructional practice of 120,000 teachers by 2020 was possible through a large-scale professional development aimed at raising teachers' capacity to lead the change and be sustained during and after the reform is implemented (Wilson, 2017). The program was developed by the NIS Center of Excellence in partnership with the University of Cambridge. The content of the three-leveled courses is focused on introducing leadership for learning at the classroom level, through coaching and mentoring at the collegiate level, and at the advanced level for senior teachers and leaders the intent is on the school development planning. Leadership in this professional development program includes the following roles: having a vision and goals, building a strong team, creating and sustaining a positive school culture, communicating vision, looking after the team, and maintaining the focus on teaching and learning. In their three-year empirical study of leadership and management development among Kazakhstani school leaders, Yakavets argues that school leaders “are increasingly exposed to ideas, theories and events beyond the national borders” (2017, p. 460) through various professional development opportunities, and are integrating traditional practices with Western conceptualization and methods. Analysis of the content of these professional development courses, it can be inferred that this might be the reason that the participants of the study share a similar understanding of leadership. The aim of the leading schools project is to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

accumulate best teaching and learning practices and scale them to the partner (non-leading schools) and the regions (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023), thus using the professional capacity to sustain renewed curriculum and assessment reform across the whole school system.

Participants' shared understanding of leadership could also be explained by their participation in the leading school project as sharing best practices already involves leading teacher research, presenting to colleagues, building professional learning communities, sustaining collaborative environment.

Since the start of the renewed curriculum and assessment reform there has also been a change in HoD's role. Those HoDs who were in this position before and after the reform, shared their experiences and stories how their role, functions and approach changed. Previously characterized by a top-down hierarchy and controls (Yakavets, 2016), leadership and management within the department has evolved towards a more collegial approach and dynamics, prioritizing teamwork and collaborative decision-making and planning. HoDs began to practice coaching and mentoring in their approach to teacher professional development and communication (Ablayeva, 2022). Interesting is the way HoDs enact their leadership. They prefer to lead by example, modeling best practices to others; they strive to improve professionally as subject matter experts and be instructional leaders; and they lead in a collaborative manner. In the educational context of top-down regulations, the HoDs' practices of leadership in their departments are rather horizontal and collegial as they tend to associate themselves more as teachers rather than leaders. As a result, HoDs tend to experience hierarchical challenges of balancing collegiality and accountability (Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Javadi et al., 2017). In the next section, I discuss the experiences and practices of HoDs in their department head position.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Mediating Contexts and Multiple Roles

HoDs occupy a many-sided role, engaging across various levels of responsibility and contexts, bridging the gap between teaching and school leadership and management (De Nobile, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017; Koh, 2018). This includes teaching in the classroom, providing departmental leadership, participating in school-wide activities, and liaising with the local educational authority. Likewise, their colleagues elsewhere, HoDs in Kazakhstan also have a role in which they mediate multiple roles and contexts. They are full-time subject teachers, they lead their departments, moreover, their leadership role extends across the school and beyond. Balancing such diverse middle leader demands is not an easy task (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2023), however, it also presents opportunities for leadership that HoDs employ and enjoy.

Experiences and practices of middle leaders largely depend on school leaders' expectations and the way how HoDs' leadership role is constructed (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Empirical research on middle leaders suggests that they often experience role ambiguity as middle and teacher leadership are still developing and their roles are unclear (Bassett, 2016; Bryant, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023). When the middle leader's role is ambiguously defined, it can lead to confusion and uncertainty in the workplace regarding the scope of work, responsibility, authority, and expectations (Farchi & Tubin, 2019). Moreover, leaders lower down the hierarchy such as those from the middle tend to experience more role ambiguity and are less able to deal with it compared to leaders high up the organizational structure (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2019). Lack of clarity, therefore, may result in inefficiency and consequently departmental ineffectiveness (Farchi & Tubin, 2019).

Within this study, the document analysis of HoDs' job descriptions revealed that they are developed based on the MES order (MES, 2007) and are strictly aligned to the school regulations

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

on organization of methodological departments. The role definition and functions are clearly outlined and documented, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities. This understanding of their role is further corroborated by the data gathered at the interviews with HoDs. Additionally, there is alignment between the expectations of the teachers, senior leaders, and the local educational authority regarding the role of HoDs. Therefore, unlike middle leaders in other contexts, HoDs in Kazakhstan do not experience role ambiguity as they are clearly aware of their functions and expectations. Moreover, HoDs are provided with separate job descriptions laying out their teaching functions and HoD's functions. However, it should be noted that current documents regulating HoD's role lack clarity in regard to the ratio between their teaching and departmental duties. Their position within the organizational structure as middle leaders is not specified, and there is no determination of financial compensation for their role. These factors, in fact, create certain implications on the HoD's identity construction as middle leaders which will be discussed in the section discussing catalysts and barriers of HoD's leadership identity construction.

Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives of HoD's Leadership Role

HoDs occupy an important position within the school leadership structure, serving as a connecting link between the senior leaders and teachers. In this section, the perspectives of various stakeholders including teachers, senior leaders and LEA will be explored to understand the HoDs' role as viewed by key actors with whom they interact, and how they navigate their intermediary position, balancing the expectations and needs of both the senior leadership and teachers. The main themes of how HoDs are viewed are presented as translating policies and implementing reforms, representing and advocating, managing talents and human resources.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Translating Policies and Implementing Reform

In the context of current school reforms, among the multiple actors the role of HoDs as policy translators is important as they “organise, manage, lead, plan, produce, inspire, persuade, and appease, and in doing so they translate policy into practice and make it a collective effort” (Skerritt et al., 2023, p. 580). Teachers view HoDs as the intermediaries who connect the complex policy directives and practical classroom implementation through an iterative process of policy translation (Ball et al., 2012). HoDs recontextualize the abstract policies into meaningful practical implementation of daily practices (Braun et al., 2010), they ‘sell’ policies (Fitzgerald, 2009) so teachers buy in and get involved in implementing new ideas, reforms, initiatives (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005). Middle and senior leaders are in an equally key position to implement school reforms and embed change (Gu et al., 2018), therefore, teachers tend to rely on HoDs to interpret these policies and to guide them. HoDs facilitate the practical implementation of these policies within their departments through integration of these policies and directives into daily practice. Middle leaders not only interpret the policies, their position also allows them to advocate to governments and school stakeholders for certain policy changes (Bryant, 2019). However, in the context of this study, HoDs’ role is limited to translation of policies mandated by the government.

Interaction around the policy translation and enactment of the reform provides HoDs with multiple opportunities to claim leadership. By relying on HoDs to translate policies, the teachers recognize their subject knowledge, expertise, authority and ability to understand and explain complex documents. Therefore, as policy translators, HoDs are perceived as a leader knowledgeable of the policy directives and ways to implement them. By HoDs this role can be considered as an opportunity to claim leadership. However, it will require them to thoroughly read the documents, to fully understand the instructions. As with leading multi-disciplinary

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

departments, to be knowledgeable in different subject areas, HoDs need additional training in pedagogy to be fully subject matter experts as their teachers expect them to be. If necessary, they should seek clarification from the senior leaders ensuring they understand fully in order to report back to teachers. The HoDs did not receive training in leadership and management of their departments, and those in multi-disciplinary may face additional challenges in leading diverse subject areas. To address these limitations, HoDs need to seek guidance thus engaging more often in the leadership claiming and granting process with the senior leaders.

Representing and Advocating

HoDs are uniquely positioned to understand the day-to-day challenges and needs of teachers due to their close proximity to teachers (Leask & Terrel, 2014) and close working relationships. This close connection enables HoDs to accurately identify and raise the specific concerns of teachers (Bennett et al., 2003). Interviews with teachers suggest that in both case study schools teachers tend to view the HoDs as their advocate to the senior leaders. When teachers face issues such as lack of resources, heavy workloads, or the need for professional development, HoDs can gather this information and present it to senior leaders. They act as a “collegial bridge” between the department and the school (Leithwood, 2016, p. 13). Senior leaders, in their turn, understand that HoDs are their extension and only with them and through them they can stay connected to teachers.

HoDs represent teachers within the school leadership hierarchy, adhering to the principles of subordination that is specific to the high-power distance context of Kazakhstan (Hofstede et al., 2010; Yakavets, 2017). By providing a structured and respectful channel for feedback, HoDs act as a connecting link between the senior leaders and teachers. In addition to their advocacy roles, HoDs act as mediators in resolving arguments and conflicts within the department (Brown

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

et al., 2000). Thus, HoDs help maintain a positive and collaborative environment, to foster a supportive atmosphere where teachers feel valued and understood.

Managing Talents and Human Resources

To ensure the effective functioning of the department and the development of teachers, HoDs are perceived slightly differently by teachers compared to senior leaders. Teachers expect HoDs to know them as individuals, their strengths and weaknesses, professional talents, and leadership potential. By recognizing and utilizing individual talents, strengths, areas for growth, HoDs can match opportunities to meet the specific needs of each teacher and build their capacity as teachers (Koh, 2018). Teacher appraisal is a process for teachers to improve performance, teaching practices, and professional learning (Ablayeva, 2022). Through preparation for appraisal, HoDs support and monitor teachers' progress, they meet the criteria, and are well prepared to reach the next milestone in their professional career - a teaching category. For teachers, in particular new ones to teaching, HoDs play the role of a visionary leader, who build the shared vision not only of the departmental goals (Leithwood, 2016), but also build the vision of a personalized professional development trajectory for teachers. Teacher appraisal is a high-stake process not only for the teachers and schools, but for the LEA as well. Interview data with the LEA representative suggests that the focus of HoD's role should be on the teacher appraisal ensuring the quality of their portfolio and adherence to the technical and overall criteria. For senior leaders, HoDs are expected to function as comprehensive human resource managers. This includes selecting teachers, motivating them to stay in the job, and support through professional development and appraisal process. Altogether, what is expected of HoDs is the staff development role through motivating, building capacity and ensuring effective work of every staff member (De Nobile, 2018; Dinham, 2007). Senior leaders trust HoD's professional opinion, therefore, hiring decisions, promotion, and suggestions for recognition are based on HoD's

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

recommendations. Senior leaders benefit from effective middle leaders as they create environment and conditions for influence and change (Ridden & De Nobile, 2014).

Catalysts and Barriers of Leadership Identity Construction

HoDs fulfill various roles across different levels within the school and beyond. In this section, I discuss their experiences, relationship and interactions across these different domains that have an impact on their leadership identity construction. This includes their roles at the classroom level as teachers, at the departmental level as HoDs, at the school level as middle leaders and their interactions beyond the school as liaisons with the LEA. Through examining these different levels within the leadership identity construction framework guiding this study, I uncover the interplay of HoD's experiences, interactions and relationships that contribute to their leadership identity construction.

Individual Internalization

Teacher versus Leader Identity. Individual internalization is a state of identity construction where individuals develop and consolidate their self-concept as a leader or a follower (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). As interview data suggests, in particular situations, HoDs may not develop their leader identity fully due to various reasons. Despite leadership demands, HoDs remain fully committed to their role as subject teachers, they are engaged in teaching on a full-time basis. In many contexts, middle leaders like HoDs find themselves teaching for the majority of their working hours while also assuming formal positional or non-positional leadership roles (De Nobile, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Koh, 2018). It is important to note that schools in Kazakhstan face teacher shortages, particularly due to the high number of students. Consequently, teachers including HoDs may need to work multiple shifts in the mornings and afternoons. This situation is particularly pronounced in subjects such as compulsory and elective UNT, and is slightly different with non-UNT subjects, where there is not

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

the same emphasis on assessment or high-stake examinations. Nevertheless, regardless of the subject area, HoDs view themselves more as teachers and, therefore, prioritize their efforts towards teaching rather than leading. This finding is also consistent with research in other contexts (Busher, 2005; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Javadi et al., 2017) where middle leaders tend to focus more on teaching.

Interview data suggests that HoDs view themselves not just teachers, but teachers with strong subject knowledge and pedagogy. Similarly in other studies, middle leaders primarily identify themselves as teachers above all else (Busher, 2005; Wenner & Campbell, 2018). For HoDs being a proficient subject teacher is essential to providing effective guidance and support to their colleagues. Their professionalism in teaching is perceived as a prerequisite for leading their department. By being so, HoDs can establish themselves as leaders capable of modeling best practices in teaching and learning thereby supporting their teachers methodologically and theoretically. Interviews also suggest that HoDs are expected to demonstrate professionalism during lesson observations, maintain the highest student attainment level, and ensure that lesson planning, teaching methods are aligned to the renewed curriculum standards. While this practice promotes excellence, it also places significant pressure on HoDs to consistently meet these demanding benchmarks. For some HoDs in multidisciplinary departments, this expectation also presents a challenge. While they may be experts in their specific subject areas, guiding colleagues in other subjects requires additional learning and preparation. Following leadership identity construction theory, for individuals to be recognized as leaders, they need to claim leadership. In this case, by demonstrating their subject knowledge. These HoDs lack subject specific expertise and, therefore, require additional effort to claim themselves as subject leaders.

The emphasis on subject expertise may stem from the Professional Standard for Teachers which describes the expectations for teachers in different levels of education spanning from

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

kindergarten to college level. One of the teachers' functions in schools is the transmission of knowledge, belief and requirement that the primary duty of teachers is to transmit knowledge to students. Recent studies on teacher professionalism in Kazakhstan confirm that teachers tend to understand their main function as to transmit subject knowledge to students (Namysova, 2021; Ablayeva, 2022), therefore, they need to possess strong subject expertise. Additionally, eligibility for HoDs position requires years of experience and expertise verified by the highest teaching qualification and category (teacher-expert, researcher, master). Therefore, in order to be selected and appointed as a HoD, one needs to have strong subject knowledge and be proficient as a teacher. At the classroom level, the requirement for strong subject knowledge creates both challenges and opportunities for HoDs leadership identity construction.

Impact of Self-belief as a Leader. HoDs are selected and appointed among teachers based on the assumption that “good teachers make good educational leaders” (Grootenboer et al., 2021 as cited in Grootenboer, 2023, p. 455). Among the participants there is a spectrum of self-belief in their capacity and potential as leaders. There are participants who are confident in their leadership capabilities, and some are even natural born leaders. They tend to embrace their leadership role and demonstrate effectiveness not only within the department, but at the school and city level, participating in projects that are beyond HoDs' and teachers' functions. For example, there is a participant who is voluntarily involved in the certification and licensing of textbooks on the city and republican level, at the school level she acts as a trade union and committee representative. Although these are her personal accomplishments and endeavors, she is also role modeling such practices to the teachers in the department. Based on her strong self-belief in herself as a leader, to a significant extent she internalized her leadership identity and leadership role, and, therefore, is actively practicing leadership.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

There are also participants who have low self-belief in themselves as leaders. They are either those who have limited prior experience in a leadership position or are novice in their HoD's role. They tend to doubt their leadership abilities, and prefer to call themselves diligent doers rather than leaders. Middle leaders with low self-belief in themselves as leaders may question their leadership abilities, adopt the follower position and tend to be demotivated to stay in the HoD's role that demands practice of leadership (Bassett & Shaw, 2018). Self-belief is a predictor of leadership identity development and enactment of leadership as a long-term commitment (Rhodes, 2012). Individuals engage in "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" of their identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1065). HoDs do so in a reflexive practice, while reflecting on their leadership role, through the process of forming their self-belief of themselves as leaders. Through self-narratives individuals revise and reconstruct their identities through meaningful identity work both transitioning to the new role and along the way (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Such self-reflexive stories help individuals internalize their role and self (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005), convey to others who they are, their past and envisioned futures (McAdams & McLean, 2013). One participant mentioned that during the interview and in-between two rounds of interviews she reflected on what she does and how well she does in the HoD's position, thus realizing what an important role they have as middle leaders. Such internal dialogue and reflection on her relationship with the senior leaders and the teachers, her accomplishments in this role contributed to her identity as a leader. Similar findings were drawn from the study of six leaders from different public and private sector organizations sharing their individual stories within the group (Frimann & Hersted, 2016). Individuals self- and co-construct their identities through narratives, reflexive dialogues and stories.

Leader Self-efficacy as a Catalyst to Identity Construction. Development as a leader is rooted in their confidence to execute tasks, navigate challenges, to lead the team (i.e., followers)

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

towards desired goals and outcomes (Hannah et al., 2008). This confidence, also known as self-efficacy, is built upon personal successes (Bandura, 1994; Paglis, 2010). Half of the participants from both schools named personal accomplishment as a contributing factor to their belief of themselves as leaders. Personal accomplishments vary from conducting a city level webinar to a school level showcase of departmental best practices (so called subject decades). To one participant, departmental performance such as teacher and student achievements are a confirmation of their efficacy as a HoD. Interestingly talking of the personal accomplishments, the participants do not mention their individual achievements, but rather specify activities that involve the whole department and demonstrate them as strong leaders who can organize the teachers, allocate resources, delegate appropriately, making best of the human and other resources. Hoyt et al. 's (2003) study explains the reciprocal effect of group performance and leader's self-efficacy. Leader's self-confidence is boosted if the followers work together and achieve the desired outcomes, the same way as a leader's belief in the followers' ability to perform boosts their success. Behavioral responses such as cooperation, support, respect (Wang et al., 2010), verbal positive feedback and words of encouragement expressed by others (Paglis, 2010) contribute to the HoD's self-confidence and self-belief of themselves as leaders.

These achievements not only validate HoD's capabilities but also confirm their leadership within the school context, helping them gain recognition and respect from colleagues, senior leaders and LEA. The fact that HoDs mention personal accomplishments of larger scale suggests the importance of such external verification of their performance as a leader. By demonstrating the departmental performance, HoDs claim leadership, gain recognition of the superiors and followers and thus construct their leadership identity. Relationships and interactions with the superiors and subordinates and their influence of HoD's leadership identity

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

development will be discussed in the next section and will focus on the relational recognition level.

The Role of Leadership Development. Professional development for middle leaders plays a crucial role in equipping them with the necessary leadership knowledge, skills, and experience (De Nobile, 2018; Lanka, 2018). Research on middle leaders suggests that middle leaders may not be well prepared for their role if did not have a prior preparation for the leadership role (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris et al., 2000). Teachers when transitioning to a middle leader role experience the so-called “capability gap” (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019, p. 88) and are in desperate need for professional development and support (Bassett, 2016). Existing training for principals or senior leaders is not specific to the realities of middle leadership (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Alongside with teacher development they also need to have initial training in the theory and practice of leadership and management (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Grootenboer, 2018). If not trained how to lead the department, the schools underutilize the potential of HoD’s position to contribute to the school effectiveness (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Kazakhstani schools have access to various professional development training offered by state and private organizations such as National Academy of Education named after Y. Alтынсарин, Orleu National Professional Development Center, NIS Center of Excellence. Courses need to be licensed and approved by the Ministry of Education. According to TALIS 2018 results, more than 98% of Kazakhstani teachers completed at least one professional development course which is above OECD average (OECD, 2020). Such a high rate was achieved predominantly through the national large-scale teacher development program aimed at developing the instructional practices of teachers while implementing the curriculum and assessment reform in secondary schools of Kazakhstan (Wilson, 2017). According to the Ministry of Education data (MES, 2022), 237 courses are available in topics such as STEAM education, subject-specific pedagogy, functional

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

literacy, inclusive education, content and language-integrated learning, etc. Relevant to leadership, courses such as leadership and management in education, innovational management, and management for inclusive education are offered by the state and private institutions. Despite the availability of a vast amount of existing training opportunities for middle leaders such as HoDs, none of the study participants took part in such leadership training or participated on an individual and private basis, as leadership training is typically offered to the senior leaders and not to them. Therefore, in their responses, they hypothesized what they would benefit from if they had such training. In this section, I discuss how evident and mandatory part of the leader's professional development as leadership training can be both as an enabler and a hindrance to leadership identity construction. As training can be both a source of knowledge, skills, experience and a sign of acceptance and exclusion.

Leadership Training as a Source of Knowledge and Skills. Training for middle leaders serves as a valuable source of knowledge, skills and experience. This argument is widely supported in the research studies (De Nobile, 2018; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009; Bassett & Shaw, 2018) particularly for certain HoDs who are either new to the role or possess less experience compared to their colleagues. Among this study participants, this perspective is often expressed by those who acknowledge the potential benefits they could gain from such training. In their view training acts as a confidence building mechanism providing them with a more solid foundation to manage the challenges and nuances inherent in their leadership roles. The confidence gained through such training is beneficial for their individual professional development as leaders (Moorosi, 2014). Therefore, lack of leadership training opportunities offered to HoDs affects their leadership identity construction. Lack of leadership skills and experience may be a challenge for those shifting to a new role causing “feelings of inadequacy and inauthenticity” (Lanka, 2018, p. 281). HoDs are selected and appointed from the pool of teacher candidates who

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

need to meet certain qualification criteria such as teaching category, years of experience, and leadership potential. However, they also go through the transition period from a teacher to a leadership position, experiencing moments of uncertainty (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). For novice leaders, such leadership programs can serve as an initiation towards the development of their leadership identity (Lumby & English, 2009). Therefore, the provision of leadership training or mentorship can serve as institutional support for HoDs' during the transition period.

Leadership Training as a Certification of HoD's Position. One of the participants proposed that completion of the leadership training organized by the external body with the issuance of the official certificate may serve as a verification of HoD's suitability for their role. According to her, such verification will legitimize her as a leader in teachers' eyes. This legitimacy is particularly emphasized because of the high value placed on certificates within the teacher appraisal system in Kazakhstan (Ayubayeva, 2018; Ablayeva, 2022). They function as a form of recognition and serve as professional qualifications for HoDs in their leadership roles. The certificates, in this case, act as evidence of the HoD's successful completion of external leadership training, implying that they have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill their responsibilities. They also play a role as the marker of competence and suitability for a leadership role in the eyes of both the teachers and senior leaders. Therefore, without such a certificate, HoDs' feel as less like leaders than they potentially may be. Lack of such training acts as a barrier to their identity construction or would be a catalyst for HoD's colleagues to grant them leadership.

Leadership Training as a Sign of Inclusion to the Leadership Team. For some HoDs the availability of leadership training serves as an important indicator of their inclusion within the broader leadership team. This is particularly true for HoDs, whose self-belief in themselves as leaders is low, who doubt their leadership capabilities and skills. They refer to themselves as

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

more teachers, rather than leaders. Although leadership training is not available to all HoDs in both case study schools, the participants tend to interpret it as a sign of being excluded or not included. Leadership programs can be available to some and not available to others; thus, being a factor of inclusion and exclusion (Lumby, 2014), if not hidden or explicit discrimination of who has the opportunity or right to access them (Blackmore et al., 2006). They do not claim that this is done intentionally, however, the public perception of the HoDs as not a part of the leadership team, to them is evident. This implies that collectively, as middle leaders, they are not endorsed by those officials who organize and allocate these courses. This perception, whether accurate or not, has significant implications for the self-perception of HoDs as leaders and potentially can hinder their ability to fully embrace their leadership role.

Relational Recognition

At the relational recognition stage individuals construct their identity based on claims they make and grants they receive in relationships and interactions with others. HoDs hold the middle leader position placed in between the senior leaders such as principal, deputy principals and teachers in their respective departments. In this dual role, they are both leaders and followers. They construct their leadership identity through internalizing direct and non-direct, verbal and non-verbal cues they receive from their colleagues (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In this section, I discuss important experiences, interactions and relationships that HoDs identified as impactful, either positively or negatively, on their perception of themselves as leaders.

The Need for a Role Model and a Mentor. Individuals construct their identity following the example of someone important who they identify as a positive or a negative role model (Ibarra, 1999; Lockwood et al., 2004). They tend to follow their behavior, values, leadership styles, practices (Hill & Wheat, 2017). Through observation, establishing relationships and interaction, individuals look up to the senior leaders or colleagues as sources of inspiration and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

guidance in their leadership identity construction process. These role models become their ideal possible-selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), sources of identity information (Ibarra, 1999) and sources of identity claiming and granting opportunities (Lanka, 2018).

Positive role models are often represented by exemplary senior leaders within an organization, who serve as beacons of effective leadership practices (Morgenroth et al., 2015). By observing the actions and practices of such role models, HoDs learn not only specific skills and techniques, but also broader values and principles that guide their leadership. This is especially relevant for those who are transitioning to the new role and who are in need of more professional or successful leaders as their role models (Hoyt et al., 2012). For one of the novice HoDs, her senior leader colleague played the role of a positive role model. She demonstrated an example of an empathetic, caring leader, who also was an effective communicator, who could build equal relationships both with senior leaders, teachers and support staff. The HoD aspired to practice this kind of leadership style in her department creating a more supportive and caring environment. Female role models in senior leadership positions can serve as greatest sources of inspiration for women by demonstrating potential career growth (Lockwood, 2006). This demonstrates to others, even those at the middle leader position that they too can aspire to reach senior level and perform in a similar capacity in the future (Paglis, 2010). Irrespective of their proximity, role models have the potential to influence the emergence, development and practice of the leadership identity by serving as possible examples (Lanka, 2018). By adopting practices and behaviors from various role models, HoDs can develop a diverse set of leadership approaches. This enables them to adapt their leadership style to certain situations and contexts enhancing their effectiveness as leaders. As discussed in the earlier sections, HoD have multiple roles and mediate contexts in which they need to claim and demonstrate leadership. Most often while interacting with senior leaders and teachers they claim their leadership through acting as

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

subject matter experts, knowledgeable of curriculum standards, pedagogy, policy documents.

Thus, HoDs follow examples of the role models they aspire, and by demonstrating different traits, practices, behaviors claim leadership to others.

Role models can also serve as negative representations of leadership, traits, behaviors that individuals should aim to avoid (Lanka, 2018). By observing and reflecting on these role models, they make informed decisions about their own leadership approach and how they would not like to act and not to be perceived by others. Leadership involves mutual interactions, prompting individuals to consider whether they want to exhibit negative leadership traits and whether such behavior will be reciprocated by their colleagues, granting them leadership in return.

While reflecting on their past leadership experiences and how their HoDs used to lead, individuals may also view what kind of leader they do not want to be or which leadership approach is no longer applicable. For example, one participant with more than 28 years of teaching experience reflected on how HoDs' job role changed under the renewed curriculum and assessment reform, moving away from top-down controlling style of departmental management to collegial and democratic leadership. She realizes that she cannot lead the way her department heads used to do before the reform.

Gibson (2003) suggests that at different stages of their career individuals tend to have varying approaches to selections of their role model. This study participants' stories demonstrate agreement with these findings. Early in the career, individuals look up to positive role models and strive to shape the idealized version of themselves to aspire to. The story of a novice HoD and the senior leader's approach to leadership she aspired to adopt corroborates this idea. During mid-career stages, they tend to refine their identity, reassessing their alignment with the developing professional needs and goals. Since the start of the reform another HoD had to reassess her role and approach. In later career stages, the focus shifts towards enhancing and affirming their self-

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

concept, possibly seeking role models who resonate with their established identity and experiences. Unfortunately, in this study there were not HoDs in their later career stage. However, what is noteworthy is the selection of role models and leadership styles that HoDs consider as more preferable and appropriate to them - empathetic, collegial which is different to the context of top-down high power distance school culture in Kazakhstan.

Mentorship is also a new practice that came together with the renewed curriculum and assessment reform. Teachers across the country underwent a large-scale professional development program that trained teacher leadership and included coaching and mentoring techniques (Kanayeva, 2019; Wilson, 2017). Mentoring of novice teachers was named as a bonding mechanism between the teachers of different age and experience (Ayubayeva, 2018). In identity construction research, mentors are individuals who hold senior positions in organizations and offer guidance and support to novice or staff at lower-level positions (Gibson, 2004). Unlike role models, mentors have a formal or informal long-term commitment to professional development and play an active role in shaping one's identity as a professional and as a leader (Lanka, 2018). One participant in this study also mentioned that they practice mentorship in relation to teachers, however, she would benefit more from a mentor in departmental leadership, in effective organization of departmental work, keeping records, dealing and communicating with teachers. Potentially, the mentorship by a senior leader or a more experienced HoD, would provide not only knowledge, skills and experience in how to lead a department, but also would create multiple opportunities for claiming and granting of leadership (Branson et al., 2016).

Identity Grants from Senior Leaders and Colleagues. Well-developed leadership identity serves as a driving force for individuals to fulfill their leadership roles (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017) and to seek out leadership opportunities (Day & Harrison, 2007). Therefore, individuals who internalized their leadership identity tend to claim leadership more

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

often at the relational recognition level as well. One of the examples is the participant who named herself a natural leader, capable of senior leader level functions, who has a strong sense of belonging to the school and her department. Despite the fact that her subject is not recognized as important, she has her personal belief in it and acts accordingly. She often makes leadership identity claims by demonstrating herself as an effective department leader, active educator position both within the school and beyond. Those individuals who have low self-belief in themselves as leaders are more inclined to expect leadership grants from others, especially senior leaders such as their trust and support.

The significance of identity grants in the construction of leadership identity is highlighted in the recognition and acknowledgment received from colleagues with higher status or roles within an organization. Lanka's research (2018) emphasizes the importance of the source of leadership recognition. In other words, it matters who grants leadership. Recognition by individuals in senior positions or more authority is perceived as more impactful on leadership identity construction. In the context of high-power distance cultures, such as that of Kazakhstan, this finding is also evident in this study. According to HoDs, instances where senior leaders place trust in them and actively seek their professional advice serve as a substantial identity grant. For example, one young HoD who claimed that she is “not a leader, just a good doer” shared a case where she was reassured when the senior leader encouraged her and supported her candidacy to present a math lesson at the national television during the COVID-19 pandemic and shift to distance learning. To her, participation at such an important event was a sign of trust on behalf of her senior leaders.

While transitioning from the teacher role to the leadership position, HoDs claim that they have become closer to senior leaders. According to their job description, HoD's job is closely connected with senior leaders such as deputy principals for academic affairs, science and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

methodological work. HoDs work together on annual planning, school development planning, teacher appraisal, professional development, departmental effectiveness, and many more. In societal cultures with high power distance, those who lead and have authority are distant from those who do not (Hofstede et al., 2010). Teachers and senior leaders used to be on different sides of the power and authority spectrum. However, since being promoted to the HoDs' position, teachers in their individual perception began to take place in the hierarchy of the school's organizational structure. To some participants having direct links with the LEA and their methodologists also was a positive experience, now the HoDs are the connecting link between the school and the LEA, not the senior leaders as it used to be. This shift plays the role of a catalyst in their identity construction as a leader, they feel as recognized and given the authority to represent the school at the city level.

Relational Trust. Relational trust is a significant component in the interactions and relationships of middle leaders both with the senior leaders and the teachers. As 'glue' it binds the school as a professional learning community (Cranston, 2011). In the previous section I discussed how the trust placed by the senior leaders acts as an identity grant to HoDs affirming their roles as leaders. This section explores the relational trust HoDs develop in their interactions with teachers.

The multi-dimensional nature of the relational trust is well researched and explained by Edwards-Groves et al. (2016), and further analyzed deeper by Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer (2021). They identify five dimensions of relational trust: intellectual, interactional, interpersonal, intersubjective, and pragmatic and examine how this dynamic plays out in the school context.

The majority of participants identified situations where their colleagues sought professional advice as a catalyst experience that contributed significantly to their leadership identity. Teachers seeking advice are analyzed through three dimensions of relational trust such

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

as intellectual, interactional and interpersonal as found in the interview data. It has already been widely discussed that teachers view HoDs as subject experts and highly value their professional expertise. Consequently, they seek advice not only on content-related issues, but also on pedagogical strategies and teaching practices. As teachers view their HoDs as subject experts and value their professional expertise, they tend to seek advice not only as content related, but also ask them to be critical friends in pedagogy and teaching. For HoDs to effectively fulfill this role, they need to claim their professionalism and leadership by demonstrating their confidence, professional knowledge, experience, expertise and wisdom. The more HoDs claim their intellectual leadership, the more their colleagues acknowledge and reinforce their leadership by seeking their advice. This is a reciprocal and dynamic process of claims and grants that has an enabling effect on HoDs as leaders and can be referred to as an intellectual dimension of relational trust.

Teachers from other departments can also seek professional advice from HoDs, which serves as evidence to both expertise and willingness to collaborate. For example, English department HoD mentioned that when teachers from other departments seek her advice, it validates her expertise and openness to collaboration. Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer (2021) explain this from the perspective of the interactional dimension of relational trust, where HoDs create safe environments that encourage the exchange of knowledge, expertise, best practices. Another HoD noted that novice teachers often seek his advice recognizing his experience and leadership partly also due to his openness as a HoD.

In their middle leader role, HoDs demonstrate interactional trust not only in their respective departments, but also at the school level and beyond. They play a key role in fostering a climate where everyone feels comfortable expressing ideas, seeking feedback and receiving professional advice. This environment enables collaboration and collegial decision-making. With

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

current school reforms emphasizing professional learning in a collaborative manner, cascading experience from peer to peer (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023), the extent to which the interactional dimension of relational trust is practiced still depends on the school culture and leadership model prevalent in a specific school.

HoDs were often praised for their approachability and that they were comfortable to seek advice from. These HoDs were responsive and genuinely interested in providing support to those who ask for their advice. Their willingness to engage and assist others strengthens their relational trust and reinforces their roles as accessible and supportive leaders. They were responsive and interested in providing such support to those who asked their advice. Such reciprocal dynamic falls within the interpersonal dimension of relational trust.

Intersubjective and pragmatic dimensions of relational trust (Edward-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021) did not emerge in the interview data, however, they were evident in the document analysis and non-participant observations. Intersubjective trust includes creating a public space open for collegiality and cooperation. HoDs in their departments practice lesson study and action research for professional learning and improvement of students' learning outcomes. As department heads, HoDs organize these groups and participate alongside teachers, observe each other's lessons, brainstorm interventions, reflect, and provide constructive feedback. In doing so, they develop a shared language of best practices in teaching, learning, and pedagogy, thereby practicing the intersubjective dimension of relational trust. The pragmatic dimension of relational trust includes the contextual significance of HoDs' practical work. As the data revealed, a key expectation of the HoD's role is their involvement in the rigorous teacher appraisal process. By identifying each teacher's professional development trajectory toward a high teaching category, HoDs support them in preparing and implementing learning plans. They

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

ensure that timelines are met, and that both the teachers' needs and the school's goals are addressed.

Relational trust is multidimensional, it enhances the effectiveness of middle leaders and those they engage with. It not only strengthens leadership practices but also plays an important role in the construction of leadership identity. When teachers and senior leaders recognize and affirm the leadership of HoDs, relational trust becomes a catalyst for this development, solidifying their role within the school community.

Developing Leadership Identity in Teacher Leader Groups. The start of the curriculum and assessment reform also marked the development of teacher leadership in Kazakhstani schools. Professional development courses and training programs have been specifically designed to equip teachers and school leaders with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to practice leadership at the classroom, collegially and at the school-wide level (Wilson, 2017). Schools began to organize professional learning communities and teacher leader groups which serve as platforms for teachers to engage in collective learning through professional dialogue (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), exchange ideas, and collaborate on teacher research practices such as lesson study and action research (Ayubayeva & McLaughlin, 2023; Wilson & Sharimova, 2019). The collaborative nature of teacher leader groups not only develops their leadership skills but also cultivates a sense of ownership and empowerment (Qanay & Frost, 2022). Teachers can learn from one another, share best practices and collectively address challenges they encounter. Within a group of teacher leaders, HoDs are relationally recognized by their peers, some of which are also HoDs, experienced teachers with a high teaching category, experts in subject specific content and pedagogy. Thus, they validate their identity and reinforce their sense of self-worth, self-efficacy through grants of peers. Individuals tend to join groups to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

increase their self-esteem thus reducing uncertainty about themselves as leaders (Cameron & Granger, 2020).

By being in that group, HoD claim their leadership and are reciprocally recognized by colleagues with a similar professional standing, they feel connected with like-minded individuals, fulfilling their need for social belonging (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Hogg et al., 2008). For some HoDs, a sense of belonging to a group of teacher leaders or to a school overall played a significant role in their identity construction. Thus, they also align their individual identity with a collective identity through a common purpose and shared values. The wider organizational context represented by school leaders, LEA endorses them collectively as a teacher leader group. Therefore, in this group teacher leaders do not only claim and grant leadership between peers, but are also recognized as a group. Leadership groups offer a dynamic environment for HoDs to continuously develop their leadership identity through improved feeling of self-belief as a leader, through receiving feedback and shared experiences with peers, and as a recognition as a group of leaders.

If belonging to a group has such a significant effect on one's identity, it raises the question why the participants do not mention a sense of belonging to a group as HoDs or middle leaders. This omission provokes a discussion on whether HoDs actually identify themselves as part of the middle leader group, assuming such a group exists. It could imply that the participants do not see themselves as part of the middle leader group, or that the concept of the middle leaders is not yet established or recognized within the organizational context.

Assumptions about Age and Experience. HoDs of younger age in their interview responses suggested that due to their young age they feel as if they cannot be good leaders to their older colleagues. This can be a hindering factor that creates complexities in HoD and teacher interactions, which in turn impacts HoD's perceptions of how they lead and how others

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

follow. The correlation between age and experience has been researched in the following studies (Daher, 2009; Lowe et al., 2017; Larsson & Björklund, 2020). Young age can be associated with a lack of experience and expertise. In Busher's study (2005), young subject leaders received criticisms from older colleagues for lacking experience, as they considered successful teaching and subject expertise as central to being a leader. Compared to mid-aged and older leaders, younger leaders tend to self-rate themselves lower on leadership-related competencies and results of leadership (Larsson & Björklund, 2020). First-time middle leaders in Basset & Shaw's study (2018) encountered challenges with more experienced colleagues, those who worked in more autonomous systems and were not used to being subordinate. Similarly, in this study, two HoDs of younger age mentioned that their older colleagues initially approached them with a degree of skepticism in relation to their age and ability to manage the department effectively. Teacher participants, in their turn, corroborate this by sharing their stories of how they reacted to newly appointed young HoDs. They acknowledge that as they observed HoDs' actions and leadership style and witnessed effective decision-making, the perceptions shifted from skepticism to acknowledgement of them as leaders. Framing within the leadership identity construction theory, it can be explained that older teachers did not grant leadership at first, however, over time, their experiences and relationships with their leader changed their perception and resulted in the ultimate granting of leadership. With some older colleagues, the HoDs still need to apply age-appropriate communication strategies such as to address older colleagues individually and in person or while monitoring progress and resolving disputes around completion of tasks. Obviously, over time, with more experience communicating with followers of different ages and older colleagues in particular, the leadership identity of the HoDs will also be affected (Ibarra et al, 2010). Over time novice HoDs accumulate more experience that helps to "construct a wider

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

repertoire of scripts on which they can draw” (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016, p. 91), thus demonstrating the followers their capability in departmental leadership.

On the other hand, for older HoDs their age becomes a catalyst to leadership identity construction both at the individual internalization and relational recognition level. In their own perception, they tend to be confident as leaders, and as subject teachers, they have accumulated life wisdom and personal and professional experience. One participant with more than 25 years of experience shared her confidence that she is capable of senior leader-level functions, not only HoD’s role. The teacher in her department, who has twice as many years of experience, shared that she is supportive of the HoDs’ initiatives and tends not to let her down. Another teacher also stressed that older HoDs, compared to young ones, have more power and authority in getting better resources and conditions for their departments. Older teachers tend to grant leadership to their HoDs only if they are middle-aged or older, in other cases, they are hesitant to accept the HoDs, or need to take time to build relationships.

Tensions between Accountability and Collegiality. Being teachers and department heads, HoDs are “sandwiched” in their role and experience tensions between collegiality and accountability (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020, p. 142). They hold accountable for the achievement of departmental goals in student and teacher achievements, student learning outcomes, monitoring performance, and that tasks are completed well and in a timely manner. At the same time, they are also teachers and have to use a collegial approach in organizing the departmental work and negotiating with colleagues (Bassett, 2016).

HoDs face a challenging position due to their dual role. On the one hand they need to claim leadership to ensure departmental goals and outcomes. This involves setting clear goals, sharing vision, monitoring progress, assigning tasks, and sometimes making difficult decisions that may be unpopular and not accepted by the teachers. On the other hand, HoDs are expected to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

be the advocates for their colleagues, supporting them and representing their needs to the senior leaders (Koh, 2018). This collegial role requires building trust, being supportive and approachable (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005). The findings demonstrate that the extent of leadership identity developed for each HoD is individual. These contrasting demands lead HoDs to develop leadership identities lean towards teacher or leader, with those who identify strongly as leaders prioritizing departmental outcomes and accountability, sometimes at the expense of collegiality. Those who identify more as teachers, may focus on advocating for their colleagues, potentially risking the underachievement of departmental goals. Middle leaders, however, tend to identify themselves as teachers and therefore are hesitant to observe, monitor, control their colleagues (Bennett et al., 2007; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; O'Neil, 2000). Teachers in their turn tend to resist if their colleague becomes their leader (Moshel & Berkovich, 2020) which implies that teachers may not grant leadership to their HoDs.

Collective Endorsement

Advisory Role. School leaders in Kazakhstan work in a context and culture that is characterized by Hofstede et al. 's (2010) as the one with high power distance, collectivist and uncertainty avoidant. Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society expect a clear distinction between those in power and those who are not. Individuals tend to accept hierarchical structures without challenging and questioning authority. However, under the current curriculum and assessment reform HoDs noted a shift in their role from a traditional top-down approach to more a collegial style in the way they lead their departments and reach decision-making. Despite this shift, at the broader organizational context of the schools, their role as middle leaders remains advisory. Decisions made within their departments require the approval of senior leaders, reflecting the hierarchical structure inherent in the cultural context. Interestingly, HoDs do not oppose this status quo, they recognize their place in the school

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

leadership hierarchy without questioning. This can be explained by the cultural aspect, as the Kazakhstani context is characterized as uncertainty avoidant, which suggests that individuals are used to hearing orders, following strict rules and avoiding risk (Yakavets, 2017). Moreover, HoDs are not financially compensated for their role, therefore, to what extent they would like to take on additional responsibility is questionable. Thus, while there may be some shift towards a more collaborative approach to leadership within departments, the overall power dynamic within the school continues to reflect the cultural norms of high-power distance.

The Role of Organizational Structures. Organizational structures can play a significant role in leadership identity construction, especially in the case of HoDs in their middle level position. Placed in the school leadership hierarchy as a positional middle leader HoDs have a distinct role to bridge the gap and serve as the connecting link between the senior leaders and teachers. Compared to other non-positional middle leaders or teacher leader roles in the schools, HoD's position is placed within the school leadership hierarchy with a specified job description outlining the scope of HoD's work. Therefore, the position itself and the fact that the HoD occupies this role can act as a leadership grant as it facilitates interpersonal recognition between the HoDs and others. The appointment to this middle leader position makes the HoD a legitimate leader. However, how HoDs themselves perceive their position is specific to individual HoDs. For some the fact that they are HoDs plays a significant role for their identity construction, others believe that their role is not recognized the way it deserves. According to TALIS 2018 90% of school principals consider HoDs as part of the school administration which is significantly higher than the OECD average (52%) (OECD, 2020). The senior leaders and LEA participants confirm that they recognize the role of HoDs and provide organizational and principal support. This organizational support, however, should be more systematic, explicit and verbal (Farchi & Tubin, 2019; Javadi et al, 2017) to act as a grant of leadership for HoDs to translate into individual

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

perception and internalize. Most often people in leadership roles do not have the organizational support or are expected to be leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Time and Space Allocation as a Form of Organizational Control. Leadership identity is constructed through the dynamic relational and social exchange of claims and grants between individuals (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). At the organizational level, these claims and grants can take the form of certain policies, processes, and structures that influence and control the formation of identity (Lanka, 2019). In her study, Lanka found the following forms of organizational control: leadership training, time allocation, job role, leadership title. Interview data and documents suggest that to a certain extent, HoDs experience all these forms and they do influence their leadership identity construction, some as catalysts and some as barriers. Allocation of time and space, however, emerged as one of the most often occurring aspects of HoD's experiences in their role. Although time and space alone cannot act as sources of granting and claiming of leadership, they play the role of the organizational control as a non-verbal cue from the school's organizational structures. Time is essential to effective leadership (Harris & Mujis, 2003) for HoDs to meet with the teachers, discuss curriculum, teaching and learning process, and challenges. Time for departmental leadership has to be separate from teaching (Kanayeva, 2019). For HoDs allocation and amount of time for the departmental work is not specified in the documents regulating HoD's job. By not doing so, the schools imply the importance of teaching over departmental leadership. They may do it unintentionally, however, the HoDs tend to focus more on teaching, prioritizing preparation for lessons over departmental work. Due to overload in teaching hours and not having specific time allocated for departmental work, HoDs bring it home thus compromising their family and personal time. Obviously, these are individual choices and subject to personal time-management skills of HoDs, however, they are directly influenced by the existing organizational norms and policies. Time allocation can

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

have an influence on work-family balance, job satisfaction and even turnover intentions (French et al, 2020), i.e the extent to which HoDs associate themselves as leaders, satisfied with their position and intend to stay on the role and continue their work.

Time allocation is different for the HoDs of Non-UNT subjects as the assessment is informal, there is less reporting and associated workload. For these departments, their time allocation is not specified either, however, the nature of the subject allows more time and opportunities for the HoDs to practice their leadership role. Time allocation is also related to the department size, where HoDs of multi-disciplinary departments were in charge of 23 teachers in comparison to smaller size departments of eight teachers. Teachers and HoDs in case study schools work in two different shifts which complicates their communication and supervision. These complexities provide unique contextual setting and the realities in which HoDs operate. Research of middle leaders suggests that time pressures are common across contexts primarily due to the dual nature of their role as it includes both teaching and administrative/leadership responsibilities (Dinham, 2007; Koh, 2018; Leithwood, 2016). Lack of time, whether allocated or not, becomes a hindering factor to HoD's performance and self-efficacy (Bassett, 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). This suggests that specifying time for departmental leadership if used effectively by schools can serve as a form of organizational control as means of granting leadership to HoDs.

The participants also mention lack of space and facilities as a hindering factor to their work as HoDs. In both case study schools the HoDs do not have a designated space for their departments. They either meet in their classrooms if available after teaching, or share a space in the senior leader's office overseeing research and methodological work, their direct supervising deputy principal. Despite the availability of this shared space, HoDs cannot use it for departmental meetings or routine interactions with teachers. This lack of single common space

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

impacts the effectiveness of HoDs in their role as department heads. Use of space in organizations reflects social arrangements, power relations between the groups, individuals, and expected behaviors (McGregor, 2003). The space management, the way it is allocated and utilized in the organization signals the established and changing priorities (Blanchette, 2012) and, therefore, serves the purpose of organizational control. Framed within the leadership identity construction theory, it can be argued that time and space allocation act as sources of organizational control and can impact the individuals' identity construction as a means of hindering or enabling factor.

Financial Implications on Leadership Identity

Workload Imbalance. The role of HoDs in Kazakhstani schools is characterized by a unique compensation structure. Unlike other leadership positions, HoDs do not receive direct financial remuneration for their duties, instead in one school the compensation is provided in the form of days off during the holidays, and in another school, they are given additional two hours per week to their workload. From conversations with HoDs, it is clear that the absence of financial compensation has a direct impact on their workload. Since HoDs are typically teachers with high teaching categories such as the first, the highest, teacher-expert, teacher-researcher, teacher-master, they are paid more for teaching rather than leading. Therefore, HoDs seek additional teaching hours as a means of financial compensation, given that teaching hours come with higher pay.

These choices have implications for their work-life balance. The increased teaching hours mean that HoDs allocate a significant portion of their working hours to classroom activities. Consequently, this leaves them with limited time to dedicate to their leadership duties within the department. As a result, many HoDs find themselves balancing their teaching commitments with departmental work, at times at the expense of their personal and family time at home. Such time

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

and workload distribution of their teaching and departmental duties impact their leadership identity construction. The participants noted that they are more teachers, rather than leaders. Similar findings appeared in the study of Busher (2005), where middle leaders claimed that they spend two-thirds of their time teaching and it has an impact on their professional identities, they associate themselves more as teachers rather than leaders. This can be explained by the priority of activities they choose - whether to prepare for the lesson or do departmental work, they tend to do the former. Therefore, it can be argued that the disproportionate allocation of time towards teaching, coupled with the absence of financial compensation for the departmental work, shapes their self-perception. Imbalance between high effort and low reward may result in demoralizing work environment, leading to negative perceptions and attitudes towards the job (Van Vegchel et al., 2005).

In essence, the existing financial compensation structure, or lack thereof, had unintended consequences on the role perception and identity construction of HoDs. These stories of most HoDs, predominantly of compulsory and elective UNT subjects, suggest the need to rethink compensation structure and workload distribution, ensuring the departmental leadership role is recognized and supported accordingly.

Recognition of HoDs' Role by the Educational Authorities. Interview data with the LEA representative and senior leaders suggests that the HoD's role is valued, recognized and well supported. They express a collective acknowledgement of the important role HoDs play, emphasizing their contribution to the overall functioning of the school. HoDs, in their turn, also confirmed that they feel this support from their leaders, and they are proud of their close connections with the LEA. However, when it comes to the higher level, such as the Ministry of Education, they feel as if they are not endorsed as middle leaders. This conclusion is derived from multiple factors. Although the HoD's position has an outlined job description, their work is

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

regulated by the school, regional, and Ministry of Education legal acts and documents, in the financial and accounting records, they are positioned as subject teachers, and remunerated for their work accordingly. Some HoDs shared their concerns that “somewhere in the Ministry”, they know nothing about HoDs. From this statement, it can be inferred that at the higher level of authority, HoD’s role is underrecognized and to them, this signals a lack of collective endorsement, recognition of HoDs as middle leadership layer within the school structure and the role they play for organizational effectiveness. The more their position is recognized by the higher levels of authority, the more individuals tend to claim leadership and practice leadership. (DeRue & Ashford, 2010)

Financial compensation for HoDs’ role plays an important role in the construction of their leadership identity. It impacts at all three levels of identity construction, according to the leadership identity construction theory, at the individual internalization level when HoDs feel themselves more as teachers rather than leaders as they tend to compensate for the lack of pay with more teaching hours. At the relational recognition level, teachers do not view HoDs position attractive and, therefore, perceive the person in that position as lacking authority or power. Therefore, they prioritize senior leaders’ and classroom teachers’ tasks over HoDs’. In other words, they grant leadership to those with more authority than HoDs. At the collective endorsement level, the HoDs’ position and its importance are overlooked by the higher-level authorities such as the Ministry of Education, and this acts as not leadership granting.

Societal Culture’s Impact on HoD’s Identity

Organizational culture in schools is a mere representation of a broader societal culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), which changes “gradually over long time periods, if at all” (Dimmock & Walker, 2000a, p. 156). In organizations where societal culture is characterized by high power distance, top-down directive leadership styles prevail; subordinates expect guidance, and the

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

principal is the sole leader of the school (Yakavets, 2016). Coupled with the ‘Soviet’ education system legacy which continues to prevail in former USSR states (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, 2016), ‘Soviet’ in schools appears through the authority of the state. The power is concentrated in the hands of the principal (Ayubayeva, 2018) and senior leaders. In such societal cultures, due respect is given to those in authority and those of older age. Some HoDs, especially those of young age feel as if they neither have authority nor are of suitable age for a leader to be respected and followed. Half of HoDs participants reported that their middle leader role within the organizational structure has little authority and power, therefore, by older colleagues, they are not viewed as leaders to follow, especially at the time when they were appointed to lead the department. HoDs understand that with time, they will gain more experience, expertise, will build relationships with their colleagues, and demonstrate the results of their work. However, at the time when they take the HoD’s role they are not granted leadership by their older colleagues. HoDs need to continue to claim their leadership over time. Similar experiences have middle leaders in Bassett & Shaw’s study (2018) who feel under pressure to prove themselves as leaders to more experienced teachers.

Summary

Leadership identity is constructed at different levels and in a myriad of ways, where certain factors act both as catalysts and barriers in complexity and interchangeably. In the discussion chapter I discuss the major findings in response to the overarching research question that this study aimed to explore in the context of existing theoretical and empirical literature.

The study reveals that HoDs and other participants conceptualization of leadership aligns with Western models likely due to national professional development programs that were developed in partnership by the NIS Center of Excellence and the University of Cambridge. The ongoing school reform in curriculum and assessment has shifted HoDs’ roles from top-down

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

control to a more collaborative approach. Further, the study explores how others such as senior leaders, teachers, and LEA view HoDs' role. HoDs are pivotal in translating policies and implementing reforms, representing and advocating for teachers, and managing talents and human resources. They mediate contexts and navigate multiple demanding roles. Despite their clear job functions, the lack of clarity in time allocation between teaching and departmental leadership remains a challenge that has an influence of the leadership identity construction.

Catalysts and barriers to leadership identity are also discussed through the theoretical framework guiding this study (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). At the individual level, there is tension between teacher and leader identities, with self-belief and leader self-efficacy serving as significant catalysts. Leadership education plays an important role, not just in skill development, but also as equity mechanism, not engaging HoDs to the school leadership structure. Relationally, HoDs benefit from role models, mentors, and recognition from senior leaders and colleagues, with relational trust and involvement in a teacher leader group being essential. At the collective endorsement level, the financial implications, organizational structures, and recognition by educational authorities significantly impact HoDs' leadership identity construction.

This study advances our understanding of the reality in which middle leaders in schools operate, practice and experience their leadership roles. By exploring the multidimensional role of HoDs, this study challenges the conventional views of school leadership and emphasizes the need how middle leadership roles are structured, supported and utilized. The findings drawn from research employing embedded multiple case study design suggest the complexity of the leadership identity construction process of middle leaders in the educational context characterized by the top-down approach to leadership and management, power dominance of superiors and Soviet legacy, thus contributing to existing literature on middle leadership which is primarily composed of theoretical and systematic reviews. This study, therefore, significantly contributes to

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

the field by providing an empirically grounded account of currently under-researched and under-recognized concept of middle leadership in the non-Western contexts.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple case study was to explore the leadership identity construction and how Heads of Departments (HoDs) being middle leaders construct their identity through experiences, interactions and relationships they encounter in their role. The overarching research question of the study was: What experiences, relationships, and interactions contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity? In this final chapter, I synthesize the major findings, their implications and recommendations for further research, policy and practice. I also discuss the theoretical, methodological and practical contribution of this doctoral study. Finally, I present the limitations of this study.

This chapter is organized in four sections. In the first section I draw conclusions to the overarching research question and the extent the study provides understanding of the research problem, reflection on the research rationale and its design. In the second section, I discuss implications for theory, implications for practice and organization of middle leadership in schools, HoDs, school leaders, implications for policy, implications for me as a researcher. In the third section, I present the limitations of the study and reflection on research design. I conclude this chapter with concluding remarks and recommendations for further research.

Major Findings

The first research question aimed to explore the conceptualization of the leadership and understanding of HoD's leadership role, their experiences and practices in this role.

Conceptualization of Leadership and HoDs' Leadership Practices

Despite operating in a centralized educational system, HoDs in this study perceive leadership as leading by example, enabling others and fostering collegiality in the achievement of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

common shared vision and goals. This understanding can be attributed to the recent large-scale renewed curriculum and assessment reform which prompted a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered to a learner centered approach (Fimyar et al., 2014). This shift not only transformed classroom practices, but also influenced the overall dynamics promoting a more collegial, collaborative and horizontal relationship within departments, schools and beyond (Yakavets et al., 2023).

The renewed curriculum reform has encouraged HoDs to adopt leadership styles that emphasize collaboration and support. They prioritize empowering colleagues, sharing responsibilities, working together towards common goals rather than imposing directives from above. This collegial approach is reinforced in the professional development courses that incorporate the Western leadership concepts, including coaching, mentoring, collaborative practices of teacher research such as lesson study and action research. Collaborative practices have significantly impacted the HoDs' leadership styles (Ayubayeva, 2018). The emphasis on coaching and mentoring fosters an environment where teachers support one another's growth and development (Ablayeva, 2022). Senior leaders' approaches have also evolved, they are also supportive of HoDs, engaging them in collective decision-making, seeking advice and recognizing HoDs as professional subject leaders, a connecting link between the teachers and the leadership (OECD, 2020).

HoDs play multiple roles and mediate different contexts at the classroom, departmental, school level and beyond. To ensure the areas of responsibility and performance indicators are achieved, HoDs need to apply the mixture of managerial and leadership practices. Although the job description for HoDs primarily emphasizes managerial functions, they often practice leadership to effectively fulfill these responsibilities. Strong subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise are crucial for others to recognize HoDs as leaders. Understanding this, HoDs lead by

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

example by constantly improving their teaching practice and modeling it to other teachers.

Teacher appraisal is a significant departmental performance indicator, therefore, HoDs act as a role model by demonstrating their individual professional development. To ensure this performance indicator is achieved, they need to show the vision for individual teacher trajectory, monitor teachers' progress and support their achievement throughout the process.

HoD's Role and Position within the Organizational Structure

At present, HoD is the only positional middle leadership post. HoDs have occupied this role long before the emergence of other middle and teacher leadership positions which are primarily non-positional and voluntary in nature. This indicated that HoDs' role holds an established status within the organizational structures and leadership hierarchies in schools. Senior leaders and local educational authorities recognize the HoDs role as their extension and a link connecting them with the teachers. However, despite this recognition, there are several factors in practice that suggest the role of HoDs is not fully acknowledged to the extent it deserves.

HoDs' job role is not financially compensated. They are paid for their teaching workload, whereas for the departmental responsibilities they are granted additional days off that can be taken during term breaks. In practice, the extensive reporting and administrative tasks they have to complete leave them with little to no time to actually use those days. Existing funding system does not include HoDs' remuneration and therefore, schools compensate their role with additional days off. In another school, HoDs were given two hours per week to their workload from the school budget. With the shift to per capita funding, schools will have autonomy over how to distribute funding and where to allocate (Kasa & Mhamed, 2023). However, the current remuneration system or the lack of additional compensation implies that the role and position are not fully integrated into the school organizational structure as middle leaders. This lack of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

financial recognition suggests that their contributions and responsibilities as middle leaders are undervalued and insufficiently acknowledged.

In regard to decision-making, HoDs role is advisory as it is specified in their job description and existing regulations on departmental organization. HoDs practice collegial and collaborative discussions within their departments and report back to the senior leaders with their recommendations. Although their role is advisory, their recommendations are heard and often accepted. Senior leaders regard HoDs as equal partners and highly value their expertise and decisions. This recognition underscores the importance of the HoDs' contributions and reflects a collaborative approach to leadership within the school. Senior leaders' recognition of HoDs and trust to their decision-making also act as a positively contributing factor to HoD's leadership identity.

On the other side, HoDs did not appear dissatisfied with their advisory role and did not seek greater decision-making power. There are two possible explanations for this: First, since they are not financially compensated for their leadership role, they may be reluctant to take on additional responsibilities and decision-making authority. Second, in centralized educational contexts and high-power distance cultures, the expectation is that major decisions are made by the main or senior leader (Hofstede et al., 2010). As a result, HoDs, as middle leaders, do not aspire to greater power; instead, they rely on school principals and senior leaders to make final decisions.

Leading School Status

To the research sites I came with the assumption that the school participating in the leading school projects would have more opportunities and responsibilities for HoDs to practice leadership. The project aims to showcase best practices and share experiences with colleagues from four-five partner schools (non-leading). The findings showed that HoDs are not directly

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

involved in the project, other than organizing lesson study groups of teachers within the department. Instead, the school personnel responsible for this project are the coordinator and deputy principal in charge of science-methodological work. The role of the HoDs is to ensure that teachers participate in activities organized within the project, and present the results of their teacher research at conferences and seminars. The HoDs are not involved in the leading school project as I assumed. Therefore, there was little difference in the role of HoDs in the leading and non-leading schools. There are two unexpected findings, one is that the non-leading school has previously been a leading school three years ago, indicating similarities between the settings of both research sites. What is intriguing is that despite no longer being obligated to do so, the teachers at this school continue to engage in lesson study to enhance their teaching and learning practices. This suggests that the ultimate goal of this project was achieved as the schools sustain teacher research regardless of the obligation to do so. Secondly, being a leading school implies greater opportunities for teachers and leaders to demonstrate their experience and expertise, resulting in more accomplishments that contribute both to their individual teacher appraisal and overall effectiveness of the department. These findings will add to currently scarce research (Ausheva & Kabdykarimova, 2023) on the impact of leading school project.

Through the second research question I aimed to explore how others with whom HoDs interact view their leadership role. The perspectives of senior leaders, teachers and the representative of the local educational authority are presented below.

View of HoDs by Senior Leaders, LEA and Teachers

In this study I explored the perspectives of key individuals with whom HoD interact daily, focusing on how these interactions influence the construction of HoDs leadership identity construction. By exploring the relationships and interactions between HoDs and their colleagues,

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

including teachers, senior leaders, and local educational authorities, I aimed to uncover the ways in which these various perspectives shape and impact the HoDs' sense of identity as leaders.

Building Vision for Teachers' Professional Development. Teachers view HoDs role in building a vision for their professional development trajectories. This role is closely tied to teacher appraisal, as HoDs guide teachers, particularly novices, through their development journey. They provide hands-on support and mentorship, showcasing their own experiences as teachers with the highest teaching categories. Teacher achievements include not only classroom teaching, but also accomplishment beyond the classroom. These involve completion of professional development courses, presenting research at conferences, sharing best practices, student achievement at Olympiads, competitions, developing authored projects and more. HoDs play an important role in motivating and facilitating teachers to participate in these activities despite the lack of time and their busy schedules.

For senior leaders and LEA, teacher appraisal is a high-stakes process (Ablayeva, 2022). Therefore, they value HoD's role in ensuring that teachers successfully navigate the process, meet the criteria and are awarded the expected teaching category. Recognizing the importance of this role, over the previous years the HoDs began to work directly with the local educational authorities and were given more autonomy to negotiate the process bypassing the senior leaders at school. Direct links with the local educational authority had a positive impact on HoDs' leadership identity construction by granting them leadership authority. The LEA expects HoDs to be more involved in this process. However, the feasibility of this increased involvement is questionable given the HoDs' overloaded timetables and lack of financial compensation. Balancing their demanding schedules with additional responsibilities may be challenging, and without adequate recognition and reward, HoDs' willingness to fully engage in this process remains uncertain.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Representing and Advocating for Teachers. Teachers view HoDs as advocates, individuals who are close to the leadership team and who can effectively represent their voices, concerns and ideas. Despite the shift toward more collegial relationships within the school, teachers still respect the existing hierarchy and rely on HoDs to act as their representatives to senior leaders. In this interaction, HoDs function as a connecting link between the teachers, school leaders and LEA.

In centralized educational contexts and high-power distance cultures, those in power tend to be more removed from those with less power, such as teachers. In this context, HoDs play an important liaison role, bridging the gap between the two groups. Senior leaders, in turn, recognize this middle leader role, as they cannot feasibly engage individually with all teachers. However, by working through 10 HoDs, they can manage their responsibilities more effectively. HoDs not only advocate for teachers's interests from the bottom up but also mediate directives, tasks from the top down. Balancing this, HoDs buffer teachers from multiple demands and unreasonable requests. For HoDs, this middle leader role creates numerous opportunities to claim leadership and to be granted leadership both from the teachers and senior leaders.

The Impact of School Reforms on HoD's Leadership Role. The renewed curriculum and assessment reform has impacted the role of HoD's reshaping how they are viewed by teachers and senior leaders. Teachers regard HoDs as critical friends, trusting their experience and valuing their support as colleagues. This perspective emphasizes the importance of guidance and constructive feedback. Teachers also rely on HoDs for their ability to provide practical, collegial support aimed at improvement of teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

In addition to being critical friends, teachers also view HoDs as coordinators. This role involved monitoring teacher performance and guiding them towards both individual and departmental goals. Teachers expect HoDs to translate policies and directives into actionable

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

steps, making them more meaningful and manageable. Given HoDs' closer links with the senior leaders and LEA, they are often seen as more informed about the policies and school-wide initiatives. This positions them as an important link who can bridge the gap between the policy and practice, ensuring the teachers are well-informed and supported.

Senior leaders, on the other hand, view HoDs as data analysts. The changes brought about by the reform, particularly in the criteria-based assessment system, have expanded the HoDs to include the collection and interpretation of student assessment data. HoDs and teachers regard this role as time-consuming, and that not all HoDs possess strong data analysis skills. Successfully integrating these roles, HoDs demonstrate their capacity to lead effectively, therefore reinforcing their leadership status within the school. Senior leaders, in turn, recognize the importance of all the multiple roles HoDs play in their role, demonstrate their trust and acknowledgement. It matters who recognizes leadership, therefore, these interactions with senior leaders help solidify HoDs' identity as leaders (Lanka, 2018).

The renewed curriculum and assessment reform has brought about significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of HoDs, making their leadership more multifaceted and dynamic. Through their interactions and engagements with others in their roles, HoDs participate in numerous exchanges of claims and grants, which contribute to identity development as leaders.

In the following section, I present the major findings to the overarching research question exploring experiences, relationships and interactions which contribute to HoDs' leadership identity.

Catalysts and Barriers to HoDs' Identity as Leaders

HoDs often experience tension in identifying themselves as either leaders or teachers due to their extensive teaching workloads and the ambiguity surrounding their position within the school leadership structure. Lack of financial compensation for their leadership role creates this

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

ambiguity over balancing competing demands and being recognized in the eyes of the school community as a middle leader layer. HoDs experience an implicit hierarchy in the way they are perceived relative to other leaders. Teachers tend to prioritize directives and tasks from senior leaders and classroom teachers over those from HoDs. This unwritten importance of others over HoDs affects how their authority and leadership are acknowledged, and how HoDs view themselves as leaders as a result. Recognition of HoD's input and their ability to lead the department adds to their positive self-image (Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004).

The majority of participants in this study view themselves more as diligent doers rather than as leaders, reflecting a common perception that middle leaders are often selected based on the assumption that good teachers can become good leaders (Grootenboer et al., 2021). However, in practice, middle leaders encounter difficulties in identifying themselves as leaders. This challenge is largely due to their low self-belief in their leadership capabilities, which significantly impacts their ability to lead confidently and effectively. For HoDs who lack confidence in themselves as leaders, leadership development would be a valuable asset. However, the existing provision of professional development adequately supports their needs as teachers, and not as leaders. The participants recognized that leader self-efficacy plays a crucial role in their identity construction, emphasizing the importance of both personal and departmental accomplishments in symbolizing their efficacy as leaders.

Middle leaders being good teachers, however, are in need of leadership development, which none of the HoDs had received. Leadership training is essential not only for equipping HoDs with the necessary skills and knowledge to lead the departments, but also for affirming their competence as leaders. The absence of formal training leaves many HoDs feeling inadequately prepared for their leadership role, which reinforces their low self-belief and hinders the ability to position themselves confidently as leaders. Moreover, the current educational

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

context in Kazakhstani schools is characterized by heavy emphasis on teacher appraisal and certification (Ablayeva, 2022). Certificates and diplomas are highly valued as indicators of competence and professional development. If HoDs were to receive certificates in leadership training, it would not only enhance their self-belief but also lead others to recognize and respect them as legitimate leaders. Currently multiple leadership training programs are available exclusively for senior leaders, while middle leaders only have access to teacher training programs. This disparity in leadership development opportunities symbolizes a form of exclusion from the broader leadership team and reinforces the perception of HoDs primarily as teachers rather than leaders. For HoDs, this lack of access to leadership-specific training highlights their ambiguous status within the school hierarchy and limits their professional development in leadership roles.

Apart from individual internalization, the construction of HoDs leadership identities is influenced by their interactions at the relational level and their collective endorsement as middle leaders. In their daily interaction with teachers and senior leaders, HoDs encounter numerous opportunities where their superiors can grant them leadership. HoDs often adopt specific leadership styles and practices that they have learned from role models who typically include senior leaders or those teachers whom they regard as strong leaders. The influence of these role models can be both positive and negative, shaping HoDs' perceptions of the types of leaders they aspire to become or avoid becoming. Positive role models inspire HoDs to adopt best practices and foster a supportive and collaborative environment. Whereas, negative role models highlight the examples of poor leadership, guiding HoDs on what to avoid in their practices. This finding exemplifies the role of senior leaders as beacons and significant individuals in the school leadership who model behavior, approach to leadership and the quality of interactions that others adopt. In both case study schools; school leadership was characterized as collegial and

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

supportive. HoDs in their turn practiced similar leadership approaches which were positively perceived by the teachers.

HoDs work closely with senior leaders, and for them, recognition from these superiors acts as a significant catalyst in their leadership identity construction. This dynamic is not unique to Kazakhstan; in many educational contexts, the endorsement of the superiors plays a more influential role than that of peers (Lanka, 2018). When HoDs are viewed as equals, it conveys a powerful message of recognition, trust and principal support. This recognition is crucial for HoDs as it validates their leadership and reinforces confidence in their abilities as leaders.

The manner in which senior leaders acknowledge HoDs can vary, but it consistently serves as a grant of leadership. For example, when senior leaders publicly recognize HoDs' contributions at the pedagogical council meetings, it highlights their importance within the school's organizational structure. Similarly, nominating HoDs for important, large-scale projects further demonstrates senior leaders' trust in their capabilities. Knowing that their contributions are valued at the highest levels of school leadership and beyond (LEA), this endorsement helps HoDs practice their roles with greater confidence.

Positioned in the middle, HoDs interact with teachers more than with senior leaders. There are more engagements, interactions, relationships and experiences that provide opportunities for HoDs to claim and for teachers to grant leadership. One of them is so-called relational trust. When teachers seek professional advice from HoDs they implicitly grant leadership, affirming HoDs role and expertise. To HoDs these interactions serve as an enabling factor which contributes positively to their identity, as teachers express their respect and recognition of HoDs' professional expertise in subject knowledge, pedagogy, teaching practices. For this process to occur, HoDs must first claim leadership by demonstrating confidence, professional knowledge, initiating a reciprocal and relational process of claims and grants.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Teachers often highlight the approachability of HoDs, noting they can seek advice at any time, and from any department. By being available and responsive HoDs foster an environment of trust and support. The more teachers approach them for professional expertise, guidance and support as critical friends, the more HoDs feel themselves as leaders and act accordingly, engaging in meaningful professional interactions with their colleagues. Additionally, HoDs benefit from participating in teacher leader groups, where they connect with like-minded individuals, sharing best practices, collaborating, and exchanging ideas. Being a part of teacher leader groups allows HoDs to develop leadership identity continuously through feedback, shared experiences and mutual recognition. As a group, they are also collectively endorsed as teacher leaders. Relational trust fosters HoDs sense of identity, and fosters collaborative and supportive school culture (Kemmis et al., 2014).

At the collective endorsement level, various organizational structures can both catalyze and hinder the construction of leadership identity. The role of HoDs is positional, defined by the specific job description and a clear place within the school hierarchy. While schools often view HoDs as an integral part of the leadership team, there is a need for more explicit recognition of this role. This clarity would help HoDs reinforcing their leadership identity. Time and space are forms of organizational control (Lanka, 2018) that significantly impact HoDs' ability to perform their duties effectively. Schools need to specify the amount of time HoDs should dedicate to their leadership responsibilities and provide designated spaces for them to carry out these roles. The lack of time allocated for leadership tasks and the absence of dedicated space often force HoDs to prioritize their teaching duties over leadership functions. This situation not only undermines their leadership identity but also limits their capacity to influence and lead effectively.

The existing budgeting and funding structures within school present additional barriers. The current financial system does not allow schools to compensate HoDs' adequately for their

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

roles substituting with additional days off. HoDs perceive this as lack of recognition at broader levels such as the Ministry of Education and local educational authorities whose directive specifies the funding schemes. This financial constraint signals to HoDs that their leadership contributions are undervalued. The shift to per capita funding (Kasa & Mhamed, 2023) will allow schools increased autonomy and discretion in allocating resources. Thus, schools will be able to demonstrate their recognition of HoD's role.

Clear recognition of their leadership roles, adequate time allocation, designated spaces, and appropriate financial compensation will allow schools to empower HoDs to fully embrace their leadership role. At present, lack of these organizational structures in place pose barriers to HoDs leadership identity construction as collective endorsement.

Contribution and Implications

Contribution to Theory

The findings of this study contribute to existing empirical literature on how middle leaders construct their leadership identity in centralized educational contexts, collectivist and high-power distance cultures. By investigating the conceptualization of leadership and the experiences, relationships and interactions of middle leaders in schools traditionally characterized by management, administration, and control (Yakavets, 2017), this research offers fresh insights into leadership dynamics. A notable contribution of this study is its focus on the Eurasian/Central Asian context, particularly Kazakhstan, a region significantly underrepresented in the literature. Most existing research is concentrated in Western countries, such as the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand (De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023). By focusing on a contextually and culturally different educational setting, this study fills this gap and provides a more complete account of leadership identity construction in contexts with emerging teacher and middle leadership such as that of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, this study

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

advances the theoretical framework by examining leadership identity construction comprehensively across three levels proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010): individual, relational and collective. This multilevel analysis contrasts with other studies that typically focus on a single level, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of leadership identity construction in educational settings.

This study's methodology significantly contributes to the field by allowing a more in-depth and complex exploration of leadership identity construction. This research gathers data from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations and document analysis. Embedded multiple case studies research design provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of how middle leaders construct their leadership identities in a hierarchical and top-down educational context of Kazakhstan.

Practice and Policy Implications

Implications for School Leaders and Policy Makers. The findings of this study have, first of all, implications for school leaders aiming to enhance the effectiveness of their schools by fostering a more supportive environment for middle leadership. For that, schools need to understand the role of HoDs in achievement of departmental effectiveness, which in turn contributes to the overall school effectiveness. School leaders should ensure that the role and position of HoDs is explicitly recognized within the school's organizational structure. This involves clearly defining their responsibilities, expectations, and the scope of influence. By doing so, HoDs will have a better understanding of their position, as well as others will recognize and respect the leadership role of HoDs, thereby reinforcing their leadership identity.

To enable HoDs to fulfill their leadership duties effectively, school leaders must allocate specific time within their schedules alongside teaching. This might involve reducing their teaching load or providing scheduled periods during the school day. Additionally, providing

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

designated space for HoDs to hold departmental meetings, to collaborate with colleagues and other responsibilities required for leadership tasks and activities. These changes would demonstrate a commitment supporting HoDs and recognizing their role in the department and beyond.

The findings also highlighted the need to provide support to novice and young HoDs due to specific challenges they face related to age and experience perceptions. School leaders could consider establishing mentorship programs, supportive networks or professional learning communities where they can connect with peers, share experiences, and collaboratively solve problems or seek guidance. Public acknowledgement of their achievements can help counteract any biases related to their age and experience. This recognition can boost their confidence and encourage others to view them as credible and capable leaders. Recognition of all HoDs should be clear, visible and credible (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), for example, at pedagogical council meetings, specifying their position within the leadership hierarchy in the school, demonstrating the importance and their recognition.

Local educational authorities and the Ministry of Education should consider policy changes that recognize and reward HoDs, as well as funding models that provide schools with greater autonomy to financially compensate HoDs' for their job. Providing professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of HoDs can significantly enhance their confidence as leaders and equip them with leadership knowledge, skills and expertise. Professional development can take various forms: workshops, leadership training, mentoring from experienced leaders. As HoDs mentioned, they would benefit from leadership training that certified them as leaders within current professional development courses offered by the national centers such as Orleu, NIS Center of Excellence and others.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Implications for Middle Leaders. For all the participants, this study marked the first time they were interviewed as part of research focused on HoDs, raising their individual voices. During interviews HoDs engaged in reflective experience uncovering the importance of their role for the overall school performance. Through the discussions, participants gained a deeper understanding of themselves as leaders and what experiences and interactions have a larger effect on the development of their leadership identity. This research not only amplifies their voices and ensures their experiences and insights are recognized and shared more broadly, but also encourages officials who organize HoDs' work to reconsider and potentially rethink their roles and responsibilities.

Limitations of the Study

The findings and conclusions drawn in the study should also be considered in relation to the limitations.

Sample Size and Generalizability

It is acknowledged through this study that identity construction is an individual process and the findings should not be generalizable. The stories of only six HoDs from two case study schools present a small sample size and cannot be generalized to other schools and contexts. By including participants from five different subject areas (multi-disciplinary science subjects, history, English, physical education, self-reflection) and from subjects with different examination statuses (compulsory, elective, non-UNT subjects), I aimed to ensure a broader range of views, stories, and experiences. However, the participants represent only two urban schools in the capital city of Kazakhstan. The findings are, therefore, limited to the urban context and are therefore not representative of the rural context, or any other geographical location in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, this study is one of the first doctoral studies exploring the experiences

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

of middle leaders and their leadership identity construction in interaction with others at the individual (micro-), relational level (meso-) and wider organizational level (macro-).

Limited Access to Research Sites

The data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation. The collection of data was delayed and was longer in length than planned due to the unexpected school closures and shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pedagogical council meetings take place once a term, totaling four during the academic year. These meetings are conducted at the whole school level, and include an agenda that is confidential and not open to the general public. I was invited to only one meeting at the end of the year in each school. I was fortunate that meetings were scheduled at different times in the two schools, however, I would like to attend more than one meeting. Due to school closures and limited access to the school, I spent less time to observe and to understand the context of the school that I initially planned, and that is suggested for case study research. Therefore, in non-participant observations I added not only official meetings such as departmental and whole school, but also teachers' rooms and hallways.

Selection of the Case Study Schools

According to research design, the sites included two schools, one identified by the local education authority as a leading school, another a so-called non-leading school which is not a part of the leading school project. Before going to the field for data collection, I had an assumption that two types of schools will have a different context, leadership opportunities or obligations for teachers, and HoDs in particular. Schools were selected according to the LEA document specifying the leading/non-leading schools for 2021-2022 academic year. During those interviews I found out that although school is referred to as non-leading, it used to be a part of the project three years ago. In documents it is non-leading, in practice it has prior experience of being

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

a leading school. I acknowledged this fact in the methodology and findings chapters. I decided to continue collecting data in this research site as the HoDs did not have an active role or an obligation to be a part of the project, and the leading/non-leading status and context of the school did not have much impact on them.

The Potential Effect of School Closures on HoDs' Interactions

Leadership identity is constructed in interaction, relationships with others. In HoD's position they interact with teachers, school senior leaders and the context. School closures and a shift to distance learning could limit these interactions leading participants to recall experiences that might not accurately represent their actual realities. Taylor et al. (2016) suggests that the limitation of interviews as data collection methods is that participants' answers may differ depending on the situation or time. In other words, their answers may be different if the data collection took place before the pandemic in normal times. On the other hand, the majority of interviews were online at times and places that were convenient for the participants. This arrangement ensured additional confidentiality and privacy, as their colleagues were not aware of their participation in this study. During the online interviews, HoDs and teachers were asked questions about their superiors. If conducted in person at the school, the power relationships could have influenced their responses. However, the online format helped mitigate this risk.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on major findings, contributions, limitations of this study, I identified several recommendations for further research.

Future research could consider longitudinal studies to track the development of HoDs over time. This approach would provide insights into how their leadership identity evolves over time, the long-term impact of professional development, mentorship, and leadership training. An exploratory study of how scope of HoD's role, experiences, position and recognition within

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

leadership hierarchy will continue to change in light of current renewed curriculum and assessment reform.

This study took place in the capital of Kazakhstan. It would be valuable to explore the experiences of HoDs through comparative studies between different regions and cities of the country, as some regions tend to be more hierarchical and traditional. A comparative study of HoDs' experiences in different types of schools - urban, rural, state and private schools, etc. This study represents a response to the call for more qualitative studies employing the leadership identity construction framework of DeRue & Ashford (2010). Future research should continue to explore this topic from diverse perspectives, more specifically social psychology. By exploring deeper, the psychological processes, cultural and contextual factors behind identity construction researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how HoDs perceive and enact their leadership role.

Concluding Remarks

My PhD journey has been an enriching experience for me as an educator, a scholar, and a school leader. Looking back over the past six years, I wonder if I would still embark on researching middle leaders in Kazakhstani schools. I can confidently say yes, as this study allowed me to raise unheard voices of HoDs - leaders whose roles are significant yet undervalued. I am proud to have conducted the first doctoral study exploring the middle leaders within the educational context of Kazakhstan, characterized by innovative school reforms and hierarchical school system. In such a contradictory environment, their leadership potential of these middle leaders for enhancing school effectiveness and improvement often goes unnoticed. However, if their potential is uncovered and utilized well, it can bring significant benefits to many. With this study, I believe I managed to highlight the crucial role middle leaders can play in schools and it will promote discussions and further research on middle leadership among

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Kazakhstani researchers. Going forward, I am dedicated to sharing these findings with the school leaders, policy makers, ministry officials.

Through my PhD studies I gained valuable experience in conducting research, including developing and justifying research designs, methods, and instruments. Reflecting on this journey, I now recognize that the research design was indeed complex. However, this complexity was essential in allowing me to conduct a thorough and comprehensive exploration that aligned closely with the research purpose and addressed the overarching research questions effectively. This embedded multiple case study research design enabled me to gather robust data and analyze it rigorously, ensuring that the study's findings were solid and credible. This experience was instrumental in shaping my research skills and methodology expertise, empowering me to contribute meaningfully to the field of school leadership and pursue further inquiries as a scholar.

On a personal note, thanks to this PhD journey, I have deepened my understanding of school leadership and its critical role for school effectiveness and improvement. This understanding now comes not only from my experience as a practitioner, but also from the insights gained through existing empirical research and literature. Having grown as a researcher, I have been empowered to start an independent consultancy specializing in providing research-to-practice solutions for schools. This consultancy aims to bridge the gap between research findings and practical application, addressing schools' specific challenges and goals for continuous improvement, while also raising awareness about the middle leadership for school effectiveness. This PhD journey has not only shaped me as a researcher but also uncovered my potential to make meaningful contributions to the field of educational research, policy and practice both in Kazakhstan and beyond.

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LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview protocol with Heads of Departments- Round 1

Overarching research question:

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

General questions

What is your education? How long have you been working as a teacher? How long have you been working as a HOD?

How many teachers are there in your department? How is it organized, which subjects are included?

What kind of professional development in leadership and management in school have you had? If any?

Conceptualization of leadership and leadership role of a HOD

How do you understand leadership? Who do you consider a strong leader and why?

Who do you consider a weak leader and why?

Do you think that in HoD's job it is important to practice leadership? If yes, why and in which matters? If not, why?

To what extent your job responsibilities allow you to practice leadership at the departmental level? In which matters and how is it realized in practice?

To what extent your job responsibilities allow you to practice leadership at the school level and beyond? In which matters and how is it realized in practice?

What do you like in your job of HoD? What don't you like in your job of HoD?

Which challenges do you come across with?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Individual internalization

Do you consider yourself a leader? If yes, why? If not, why?

There are different types, styles and approaches to leadership? What kind of leader are you?

Do you think that over time your perception of yourself as a leader has changed? What was the reason?

What would help you think of yourself as a leader and practice leadership in your HoD role?

How has your role changed due to curriculum and assessment reform?

How has your role changed due to the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Relational recognition

Which senior leader do you work directly with and to whom do you report?

At school there is school leadership, teachers, and there is you. Which role do you play in this interaction?

Can you please share an important experience that had impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?

Can you please share an important relationship that had impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?

Do you think there is anyone in the school who thinks of you as a leader? If so, how did you come to the conclusion that this person/these people view you as a leader?

How do you think the school leadership views your role?

How do you think the teachers view your role as a HoD?

Collective endorsement

What is the school's approach to distributed leadership where every staff member can be a leader?

How involved are you in discussions and decision-making in the current and strategic affairs of the school?

How empowered are you to make key decisions at the school level?

How does the way school is organized helps you perform your leadership role?

What conditions/improvements can be made at school on behalf of the LEA, Ministry of Education that will help you perform your leadership role effectively?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 2

Interview Protocol with Heads of Departments- Round 2

Overarching research question:

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

Leadership role – understanding, experience and practice

What are the knowledge, competencies and personal characteristics you consider as important to carry out your leadership role effectively?

In what ways do you think the characteristics (UNT, qualitative and quantitative) of your department may affect your leadership role?

What are the characteristics of an effective department?

What is the role of HoD in making this department effective?

Leading/Non-leading status of the school

What are the criteria for a school to become a leading school?

What does being a leading school mean to you school? (L)

What does working with a leading school mean to your school? (NL)

In what way does this influence your job role?

What leadership opportunities do you get or miss as a result?

Shift to distance learning during Covid-19 pandemic

Discuss your experience leading your department during shift to distance learning (probes: challenges, change in role, power shift, authority, new approach)

How did this experience influence your relationship and interaction in your department and at the school level?

How did it make you feel of yourself as a leader?

Catalysts and barriers to leadership identity construction

Can you tell me about an important experience that you have had that you feel has had an impact on how you think of yourself as a leader? – Follow up from 1st round interview

Can you tell me about any important relationships that you have or have had, which you feel have had an impact on how you feel of yourself as a leader? – Follow up from 2nd round interview

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 3

Interview Protocol with Teachers

Overarching research question

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

How long have you been a teacher?

How long have you been working in this department?

How do you understand leadership?

What knowledge, skills and personal qualities are important for the effective work of the HoD?

Why do you think so?

What do teachers expect from the HoD?

At school there is school leadership, teachers, and there HoDs. Which role do they play in this interaction?

Do you think it is important for HoDs to demonstrate leadership in their work? If yes, then why and in what matters. If not, why not?

How do the characteristics of your department (probes: UNT, quantitative and qualitative composition) affect the work of HoD?

What, in your opinion, contributes to the development of HoD as a leader and motivates them to practice leadership?

What is the barrier to the development of HoD as leader?

How has HoDs' role changed since the renewed curriculum and assessment reform?

How has HoDs' role changed with the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What challenges to HoDs face in their work?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 4

Interview Protocol for Senior Leaders

Overarching research question:

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

General questions

How many departments are there in your school? How are they organized?

Who works directly with HoDs? Which senior leader do they report to?

What are the criteria for the selection and appointment of the HoDs?

What documents regulate their work?

Conceptualization of leadership and leadership role of a HOD

How do you understand leadership? Do you think that in HoD's job it is important to practice leadership? If yes, why and in which matters? If not, why?

To what extent do HoDs' job responsibilities allow them to practice leadership at the departmental level? In which matters and how is it realized in practice?

To what extent do HoDs' job responsibilities allow them to practice leadership at the school level and beyond? In which matters and how is it realized in practice?

Relational recognition

What expectations do school leaders have for HoDs?

How has their role changed since the renewed curriculum and assessment reform?

How has their role changed with the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

How do you describe your leadership style in regard to HoDs? How does it impact on the way they practice leadership?

Collective endorsement

What important decisions are made by HoDs? (probes: hiring, appraisal, resources allocation, bonuses)

How does the school feel about the idea of distributed leadership?

How does the way school is organized helps HoDs perform their leadership role?

What conditions/improvements can be made at school on behalf of the LEA, Ministry of

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Education that will help HoDs perform their leadership role effectively?

What, in your opinion, contributes to the development of HoD as a leader and motivates them to practice leadership?

What is the barrier to the development of HoD as leader?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 5

Interview Protocol for LEA Official

Overarching research question

What experiences, relationships, and interactions within school context contribute to the construction of Kazakhstani secondary school heads of departments' leadership identity?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do heads of departments understand, experience and practice their leadership role?

RQ2: How do others (senior leaders, teachers, local education authority) view heads of departments' leadership role?

RQ3: What are the catalysts and barriers of the heads of departments' leadership identity construction process?

General questions

Please tell about your role in the LEA, what does your department do?

How do you interact with the HoDs?

What documents at the LEA, Ministry of Education level regulate HoDs' work?

Which body determines their functional responsibilities?

Conceptualization of leadership and leadership role of a HOD

How do you understand leadership?

Do you think that in HoD's job it is important to practice leadership? If yes, why and in which matters? If not, why?

To what extent do HoDs' job responsibilities allow them to practice leadership at the school level and beyond? In which matters and how is it realized in practice?

Relational recognition

What expectations does LEA have for HoDs?

How has their role changed since the renewed curriculum and assessment reform?

How has their role changed with the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

How do you view HoDs' role? What is their main role?

Collective endorsement

What important decisions are made by HoDs? (probes: hiring, appraisal, resources allocation, bonuses)

How does the way schools are organized helps HoDs perform their leadership role?

What conditions/improvements can be made at school on behalf of the LEA, Ministry of Education that will help HoDs perform their leadership role effectively?

What, in your opinion, contributes to the development of HoD as a leader and motivates them to practice leadership?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

What is the barrier to the development of HoD as a leader?

Please tell about the “Leading school” project. How are HoDs involved in this project?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 6

Non-participant Observation Protocol

Is the general atmosphere positive, neutral, or negative?

Is there a sense of community and mutual support among staff?

How do senior leaders and HoDs interact with each other during the meeting? Are interactions formal or informal?

How do teachers and HoDs interact with each other during the meeting? Are interactions formal or informal?

Are the interactions more collaborative or directive?

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 7

Informed Consent Form for a Head of Department

Title of the study: Leadership identity construction: An exploratory case study of heads of departments in two mainstream secondary schools in Kazakhstan

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study conducted by Aisulu Badanova, a PhD student from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. The purpose of the study is to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities, i.e. become leaders in their middle leader role.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews lasting for about 60 minutes each. The interview will take place anytime that is convenient for you between September-December 2021. If you permit, the interview will be audio recorded.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are only minimal risks for you to participate in this study. Although you will not be asked any sensitive question, you may feel a little discomfort in talking about your own work, your colleagues and school leadership. However, you are free not to answer such questions if you do not want to. Also, your participation in the study will not have any negative results for your work, your employment and relationships in your school. A potential risk of participating in this study is that of breach of confidentiality. However, all interview tapes, and classroom materials will be de-identified to reduce the likelihood of this occurrence. Moreover, the soft data (interview transcript) will be saved in password protected files on my personal computer and all hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to me and my advisors. The main benefit for you will be the opportunity to share your perspectives on the head of department's leadership role and how its potential could be maximized and utilized.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential. The information collected from you through interview will be stored in password protected files in my personal computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible to me and my research advisors only. The PhD research committee will NOT discuss anything about the interview with anyone in and outside the school and you will be requested to do the same. Any data analyzed by the researcher will be de-identified to protect anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and would like to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the choice to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview anytime and no negative consequences will result.

POINTS OF CONTACT: In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Aisulu Badanova, at +7 701 524 7532, aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz or my PhD research committee, main advisor Full Professor Filiz Polat at filiz.polat@nu.edu.kz and Associate Professor Mir Afzal Tajik at afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted,

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent

Please check all that apply and sign this consent form if you agree to voluntarily participate in this study.

I, _____, have carefully read the information provided. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for me personally and for my school. I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Therefore:

I agree to participate in this study at my own free will

I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

I give permission for the interview data to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study but without using my personal and my school's actual name:

I understand that if I have any concerns I can contact: Aisulu Badanova by email: aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 8

Invitation Letter to the School Principal

Dear Principal,

My name is Aisulu Badanova. I am a Ph.D. student at Graduate School of Education Nazarbayev University. I invite you to participate in my research study on “Leadership identity construction: An exploratory case study of heads of departments in two mainstream secondary schools in Kazakhstan”. The purpose of the study is to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities, i.e. become leaders in their middle leader role. Empirical research suggests that the impact they can make for school improvement and school reforms is crucial. Understanding the process of their leadership identity construction and the view of senior leaders and teachers on heads of departments’ leadership role will shed a light on how their leadership role can be maximized and utilized well.

Therefore, I invite your school to participate in this study and share your school’s view on heads of departments’ leadership role and their perspectives of becoming leaders and practicing leadership. I assure you that the study does not assess the work/performance of the school or research participants’ knowledge, but it seeks to explore your perceptions, experiences, and reflections on the topic of the study. Please read below information before granting me the permission to include your school in this study:

Time involvement

If you allow your school to participate in this study, I will ask you to share the e-mail addresses of the senior leaders (principal and deputy principals) and heads of departments. I will then ask heads of departments who agree to participate in this study to send an email invitation letter I addressed to teachers in their departments. 3 heads will be primary participants, 1 senior leader and 6 teachers will be additional participants. Individual face-to-face interviews will last approximately one hour. An Informed Consent Form will be provided to each participant in which details about the study, participants’ rights, and procedures related to the confidentiality of data will be explained. The interviews and observations will be held anytime that is convenient to you between September 2021 and June 2022

Risks and benefits

There are no known risks for your school and all who volunteer to participate in this study. Your participation in the study will not have any negative consequences for your school and staff and your relations with higher authorities. The benefit for your school, which may reasonably be expected from this study, is that you and your HoDs and teachers will have the opportunity to share your views on HoDs’ leadership role and experiences, relationships, and interactions, which help or hinder HoDs’ leadership identity construction.

Compensation

No tangible compensation will be given to the schools participating in the study. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study.

Confidentiality and privacy

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The original data collected in this study will be stored in password protected computers. Any data analyzed by me will be de-identified to preserve anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data.

Participant's rights

The school and individual participants, who decided to participate in this study, must understand that their participation is voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw their consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. They have the right to refuse to answer particular questions during the interview. The results of this research study may be presented at an academic, scientific or professional meetings, conferences or published in journals, but without disclosing the participants and the school's identity.

Points of Contact

In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Aisulu Badanova, at +7 701 524 7532, aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz or my PhD research committee, main advisor Full Professor Filiz Polat at filiz.polat@nu.edu.kz and Associate Professor Mir Afzal Tajik at afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of approval

Please check all that apply and sign this Approval Form if you give permission for your school and staff to participate in this study.

I, _____, have carefully read the information provided. I understand that the participation of my school and staff (heads of departments, teachers, principal, and/or deputy principal) in this study is voluntary. The school and the participants can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw from the study, and this will not have any negative consequences for the school and for the participants. I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Therefore:

I give permission for my school to participate in this study

I give permission for the heads of departments, deputy principal and teachers to participate in the study at their own free will

I give permission for the data collected from my school to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study but without using the school and participants' actual names and any other information that help deduce the school and participants' identity.

I understand that if I have any concerns I can contact: _____ by email: _____

Principal:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 9

Informed Consent Form for Teachers

Title of the study: Leadership identity construction: An exploratory case study of heads of departments in two mainstream secondary schools in Kazakhstan

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study conducted by Aisulu Badanova, a PhD student from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. The purpose of the study is to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities, i.e. become leaders in their middle leader role.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview lasting for about 60 minutes. The focus of the interview will be on your perceptions, experiences, views, and reflections about the head of departments' leadership role. The interview will take place anytime that is convenient for you between September-December 2021. If you permit, the interview will be audio recorded.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are only minimal risks for you to participate in this study. Although you will not be asked any sensitive questions, you may feel a little discomfort in talking about your own work, your colleagues and school leadership. However, you are free not to answer such questions if you do not want to. Also, your participation in the study will not have any negative results for your work, your employment and relationships in your school. A potential risk of participating in this study is that of breach of confidentiality. However, all interview tapes, and classroom materials will be de-identified to reduce the likelihood of this occurrence. Moreover, the soft data (interview transcript) will be saved in password protected files on my personal computer and all hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to me and my advisors. The main benefit for you will be the opportunity to share your perspectives on the head of department's leadership role and how its potential could be maximized and utilized.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential. The information collected from you through interview will be stored in password protected files in my personal computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible to me and my research advisors only. The PhD research committee will NOT discuss anything about the interview with anyone in and outside the school and you will be requested to do the same. Any data analyzed by the researcher will be de-identified to protect anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and would like to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the choice to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview anytime and no negative consequences will result.

POINTS OF CONTACT: In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Aisulu Badanova, at +7 701 524 7532, aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz or my PhD research

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

committee, main advisor Full Professor Filiz Polat at filiz.polat@nu.edu.kz and Associate Professor Mir Afzal Tajik at afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent

Please check all that apply and sign this consent form if you agree to voluntarily participate in this study.

I, _____, have carefully read the information provided. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for me personally and for my school. I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Therefore:

I agree to participate in this study at my own free will

I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

I give permission for the interview data to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study but without using my personal and my school's actual name:

I understand that if I have any concerns I can contact: Aisulu Badanova by email: aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 10

Informed Consent Form for Senior Leaders

Title of the study: Leadership identity construction: An exploratory case study of heads of departments in two mainstream secondary schools in Kazakhstan

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study conducted by Aisulu Badanova, a PhD student from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. The purpose of the study is to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities, i.e. become leaders in their middle leader role.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview lasting for about 60 minutes. The focus of the interview will be on your perceptions, experiences, views, and reflections about the head of departments' leadership role. The interview will take place anytime that is convenient for you between September-December 2021. If you permit, the interview will be audio recorded.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are only minimal risks for you to participate in this study. Although you will not be asked any sensitive questions, you may feel a little discomfort in talking about your own work, your colleagues and school leadership. However, you are free not to answer such questions if you do not want to. Also, your participation in the study will not have any negative results for your work, your employment and relationships in your school. A potential risk of participating in this study is that of breach of confidentiality. However, all interview tapes, and classroom materials will be de-identified to reduce the likelihood of this occurrence. Moreover, the soft data (interview transcript) will be saved in password protected files on my personal computer and all hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to me and my advisors. The main benefit for you will be the opportunity to share your perspectives on the head of department's leadership role and how its potential could be maximized and utilized.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential. The information collected from you through interview will be stored in password protected files in my personal computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible to me and my research advisors only. The PhD research committee will NOT discuss anything about the interview with anyone in and outside the school and you will be requested to do the same. Any data analyzed by the researcher will be de-identified to protect anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and would like to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the choice to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview anytime and no negative consequences will result.

POINTS OF CONTACT: In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Aisulu Badanova, at +7 701 524 7532, aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz or my PhD research

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

committee, main advisor Full Professor Filiz Polat at filiz.polat@nu.edu.kz and Associate Professor Mir Afzal Tajik at afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent

Please check all that apply and sign this consent form if you agree to voluntarily participate in this study.

I, _____, have carefully read the information provided. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for me personally and for my school. I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Therefore:

I agree to participate in this study at my own free will

I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

I give permission for the interview data to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study but without using my personal and my school's actual name:

I understand that if I have any concerns I can contact: Aisulu Badanova by email: aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 11

Informed Consent Form for Local Educational Authority Official

Title of the study: Leadership identity construction: An exploratory case study of heads of departments in two mainstream secondary schools in Kazakhstan

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study conducted by Aisulu Badanova, a PhD student from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. The purpose of the study is to explore how heads of departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstani secondary schools construct their leadership identities, i.e. become leaders in their middle leader role.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview lasting for about 60 minutes. The focus of the interview will be on your perceptions, experiences, views, and reflections about the head of departments' leadership role. The interview will take place anytime that is convenient for you between September-December 2021. If you permit, the interview will be audio recorded.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are only minimal risks for you to participate in this study. Although you will not be asked any sensitive questions, you may feel a little discomfort in talking about your own work, your colleagues and school leadership. However, you are free not to answer such questions if you do not want to. Also, your participation in the study will not have any negative results for your work, your employment and relationships in your school. A potential risk of participating in this study is that of breach of confidentiality. However, all interview tapes, and classroom materials will be de-identified to reduce the likelihood of this occurrence. Moreover, the soft data (interview transcript) will be saved in password protected files on my personal computer and all hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to me and my advisors. The main benefit for you will be the opportunity to share your perspectives on the head of department's leadership role and how its potential could be maximized and utilized.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential. The information collected from you through interview will be stored in password protected files in my personal computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible to me and my research advisors only. The PhD research committee will NOT discuss anything about the interview with anyone in and outside the school and you will be requested to do the same. Any data analyzed by the researcher will be de-identified to protect anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and would like to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the choice to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview anytime and no negative consequences will result.

POINTS OF CONTACT: In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Aisulu Badanova, at +7 701 524 7532, aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz or my PhD research

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

committee, main advisor Full Professor Filiz Polat at filiz.polat@nu.edu.kz and Associate Professor Mir Afzal Tajik at afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent

Please check all that apply and sign this consent form if you agree to voluntarily participate in this study.

I, _____, have carefully read the information provided. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for me personally and for my school. I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Therefore:

I agree to participate in this study at my own free will

I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

I give permission for the interview data to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study but without using my personal and my school's actual name:

I understand that if I have any concerns I can contact: Aisulu Badanova by email: aisulu.badanova@nu.edu.kz

Signature: _____ Date: _____


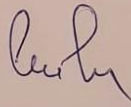
Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 12

Approval to Conduct this Study

НҰР-СҰЛТАН ҚАЛАСЫНЫҢ БІЛІМ БАСҚАРМАСЫ» МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК МЕКЕМЕСІ		ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЕ «УПРАВЛЕНИЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ ГОРОДА НУР-СҰЛТАН»
0000, Нұр-Сұлтан қаласы, Бейбітшілік көшесі, № 11, тел.: 55-68-51	<i>107-06-11/9237</i> <i>06.10.21.</i>	010000, город Нур-Султан, ул. Бейбитшилик, № 11, тел.: 55-68-51
№ _____		
№ _____		
		«Назарбаев Университеті» Дербес білім беру ұйымы Жоғары білім беру мектебі
2021 жылғы 28 қыркүйек №19-37/198		
Білім басқармасы Назарбаев Университеті Жоғары білім беру мектебі PhD in Education бағдарламасының студенті Айсұлу Баданованың Нұр-Сұлтан қаласының мектептерінде ағымдағы жылдың қыркүйек-желтоқсан аралығында зерттеу жұмыстарын жүргізуге келіседі.		
Болашақта жемісті ынтымақтастықта жұмысты жалғастыруды қолдаймыз.		
Басшы		Ш. Сейсенбай
А. Досмухамет Тел: 48-11-57		

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 13

CITI Training



Completion Date 05-Feb-2022
Expiration Date 04-Feb-2025
Record ID 46962485

This is to certify that:

Aisulu Badanova

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Course Learner Group)
2 - Refresher Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Nazarbayev University



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w6c2bf2d0-c545-4b6f-a3bc-63ee352f7c8a-46962485

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 14

Ethics Approval



53 Kabanbay Batyr Ave.
Astana 010000
Republic of Kazakhstan
Date: 7.09.2021

Dear Aisulu Badanova,

This letter now confirms that your research project titled “Leadership identity construction: An exploratory embedded multiple-case study of heads of departments in two schools in Kazakhstan” has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Filiz Polat

On behalf of:
Dr Zumrad Kataeva
Chair, GSE Ethics Committee
Graduate School of Education
Nazarbayev University

Block C3, Room M027
Office: +7(7172)6016
Mobile: +77079240053
email: zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, gse.irec@nu.edu.kz

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Appendix 15

Teaching Categories

Previous teacher appraisal	Current teacher appraisal	Competences and qualifications
N/A	Teacher-master	At least 5 years teaching experience; author or co-author a published textbook/teaching aids; engage students in research; has Olympiad winners and competitions at national/international level; all competences of lower categories
Highest category	Teacher-researcher	At least 4 years of teaching experience; engage students in research, mentoring; has Olympiad winners and competitions at national/international level
First category	Teacher-expert	At least 3 years of teaching experience; has Olympiad winners and competitions at the district/city level
Second category	Teacher-moderator	At least 2 years of teaching experience; has Olympiad winners and competitions at the school level
Beginning teacher with no category	Teacher	Beginning teacher/graduate of pedagogical institution, knows content of the subject, teaching and assessment methods.

Adapted from Ablayeva, 2022