Influencing Individual Learning through Entrepreneurial Leadership: An Analysis of Iranian SMEs

Afsaneh Bagheri

Faculty of Entrepreneurship, University of Tehran, Iran

Amon Simba[1]

Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom and HEC Montreal, Canada

Abstract. Organisational learning has, for a long time, been one of the main focuses of management, entrepreneurship and leadership researchers and practitioners. However, studies explaining ways in which entrepreneurs influence and direct individual learning in SMEs are still lacking. Thus, with this exploratory study we focus on entrepreneurs in Iran and we develop an in-depth understanding of their methods for leading and shaping the learning processes of individuals in their SMEs. We combine the concepts of entrepreneurial leadership, personal construct and organisational learning to explain the learning architecture(s) the entrepreneurs established in their SMEs. Data for analysis is generated from a cross-sectorial sample of 25 entrepreneurs. Considering their innovative way, we utilise entrepreneurial leadership and personal construct theory for data analysis. Accordingly, we extend the concept of organisational learning by developing a comprehensive understanding of leadership of learning in SMEs. Such understanding contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial leadership and organisational learning with theoretical, practical and policy implications.

Keywords: leadership of learning, entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial leadership, SMEs, Iran.

1. Introduction

There is ample evidence in management, entrepreneurship and leadership literature emphasising the benefits of organisational learning to innovation, firm growth and development (see for example: Aragón-Correa, García-Morales, and Cordón-Pozo, 2007; Deakins and Freel 1998; Flores, Zheng, Rau, and Thomas 2012; Honig 2001; Ratten, Marques, and Braga 2018; Waddell and Pio 2015; Wyer, Mason, and Theodorakopoulos 2000). As a concept, organisational learning has a profound effect on product innovative capacity (Figueiredo and Piana 2018), performance (Alegre and Chiva 2008; Aragón-Correa, García-

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1. Corresponding author: Amon Simba, Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, 8th Floor Newton Building, Room 819, Nottingham, NG1 4FQ, UK. Tel: +44 (0)115 848 2203. Email: amon.simba@ntu.ac.uk

Morales, and Cordón-Pozo 2007), opportunity recognition (Lumpkin and Lichtenstein 2005), entrepreneurial orientation (Hakala 2011; Hernández-Linares, Kellermanns, and López-Fernández 2018), financial and non-financial performances (Prieto and Revilla 2006), organisational change (Bamberry, Sabri-Matanagh, and Duncan 2015) and survival (Casey 2005), as well as the international growth (D'Angelo and Presutti 2019) of SMEs.

However, there is little knowledge on organisational learning, particularly the way leaders inspire and direct individual learning in SMEs. Our knowledge on organisational learning in SMEs is mainly derived from studies that focus on large firms of industrialised economies (e.g., Figueiredo and Piana 2018; D'Angelo and Presutti 2019). In fact, such literature provides limited examples of comprehensive case study-based empirical research on leadership of learning in the context of SMEs. This is particularly problematic as it has resulted in the scarcity of knowledge explicating ways in which entrepreneurs in SMEs influence and direct individual learning (e.g., McNaughton & Armitage 2010), especially in transitioning economies, to achieve what Senge (1990) termed a "learning" organisation. Indeed, knowledge about learning organisations, i.e., those organisations that encourage learning as part of their fundamental culture and overall vision for long-term success remains under-developed. Thus and in considering this knowledge gap, we study entrepreneurs in Iran to develop comprehensive understanding of the methods they adopt in their endeavours to lead and shape individuals' learning in their SMEs.

Our main aim is to develop deep and penetrating insights into the underlying mechanisms of learning that underpin their approach to leadership of learning (Edwards, Elliott, Iszatt-White, and Schedlitzki 2013; Wyer et al. 2000) among members of their teams to achieve "learningful" diverse small businesses. Accordingly, to unpick these interconnected and complex factors of leadership of learning, we are guided by an overarching question:

In which ways do leaders of SMEs in Iran influence individual learning among members of their teams?

In order to address this key question, this study draws from established theories of personal construct (PCT) (Kelly 1955), entrepreneurial leadership (Coglister and Brigham 2004; Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie 2004) and organisational learning (Cope 2003; Kempster and Stewart 2010; Pittaway and Cope 2007). It particularly utilises the cognitive dimensions of these theories in order to detect the specific ways entrepreneurs running SMEs geographically located in Tehran—the capital city of Iran—lead individual learning amongst members of their teams. On the basis of the leadership-SME-learning analysis carried out for the purpose of this research, we offer the following contributions to entrepreneurship and SME research. First, it develops contextualised perspectives and insights into Iranian entrepreneurs especially their approach towards leading individual learning in their SMEs despite various constraining factors they have to contend with that include cultural, socio-economic and

political obstacles. Second, the study extends the concept of organisational learning by illustrating leadership of learning in small businesses. Furthermore, its findings contribute to the literature and theory development on entrepreneurial leadership by spotlighting the critical roles entrepreneurs play and the methods that they use to direct and shape their team members' learning processes. This study also extends the literature on organizational learning in SMEs by improving our understanding of leadership of learning.

After the introduction, the rest of the paper is organised as follows: firstly, the paper provides an insight into the general conceptualisation of learning, entrepreneurial leaders' antecedents and what entrepreneurial leadership entails with respect to learning in entrepreneurial teams. The empirical paper also details the research approach adopted to achieve our research goals. The findings section offers an interpretation of the comments supplied by identified key informants and it follows Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) and advice on cross-case analysis. The discussion section provides theoretical explanations to our key question guiding the research and the theoretical and practicalities of our findings as well as key research contributions. The last section provides concluding remarks, research limitations and suggestions for future studies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Learning in organisations

The concept of organisational learning or learning in organisations as it is sometimes defined in the literature, became more prominent during the 1990s (Burnes, Cooper, and West, 2003; Easterby-Smith 1997; Franco and Haase 2009; Tsang 1997). It was particularly advanced by Senge (1990) who comprised a selection of ideas concerning change, learning and communication. Despite that, these ideas were drawn from an array of sources, their focus was inherently attractive (Burns 2017) because they described business complexity and dynamism in a world that is interconnected (Armstrong and Foley 2003). Crucially, Senge's work called for work in an organisation to become more "learningful" (Senge 1990). This change, in terms of focus meant that it was no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organisation, but everybody was supposed to be engaged in the process.

For SMEs and entrepreneurial businesses, this has profound implications as it advocates for wholesome learning as opposed to concentrating more on a single person who, in most cases, is often the founder or owner-manager (Simba and Thai 2019; Stefanovska and Soluncevski 2015). Consistent with that, Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1991) defined a learning organisation as one that facilitates the learning of all its members whilst continuously transforming itself. That is, adapting, changing and developing in line with the aspirations of both its internal and external stakeholders. Other scholarly works on organisational

learning (see for example Cangelosi and Dill 1965; Franco and Haase 2009) emphasise the need to understand interactions between individuals and organisational learning to identify environmental, organisational and human characteristics, that inuence the learning potential and to detect what allows anticipation and identication of situations where learning takes place.

Previous studies highlighted the critical roles that leaders play in stimulating and directing their employees' (Lundkvist and Gustavsson 2018; Driver 2002; Matsuo 2012) and organisational learning (Armstrong, Cools, and Sadler-Smith 2012; Mazutis and Slawinski 2008; Edmondson 2003; Vera and Crossan 2004; Berson et al. 2006; Waddell and Pio 2015). While these scholarly works have highlighted the importance of a collective approach to learning in organisations, they seem to downplay the role entrepreneurial leaders perform in their position as a coach, instructor or facilitator. Thus, with this study we extend organisational learning theory by providing new perspectives and insights explicating ways Iranian entrepreneurs lead the individual learning processes of each member of their entrepreneurial teams. In doing so, we apply entrepreneurial leadership attributes punctuated by their antecedents. Likewise, we draw on Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory (PCT) particularly because of its cognitive dimension in order to understand this transformation process. Table 1 summaries studies that have focused on learning together with those that featured learning and leadership.

Table 1: Summary of studies on learning

Theme	Author(s)/Year	Article Title	Methodology & Methods	Sample
Management learning	Bryans & Mavin (2003)	Women learning to become managers: learning to fit in or to play a different game?	Thematic group discussion	Six average women managers
	Liu (2015)	Management learning in business networks: The process and the effects	Sequential exploratory mix-methods research/ Phase 1: multiple case studies/ phase 2: online questionnaires	The process of firm learning in business networks/and its impact on new product development
Leadership Learning	Driver (2002)	Leaning and leadership in organizations	Quantitative approach using questionnaires	
	Edwards *et al.* (2013)	Critical and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development	Introduction to a special issue	
	James *et al.* (2007)	Leaders as lead learners: A case example of facilitating collaborative leadership learning for school leaders		School leaders/participants of a leadership learning program
Entrepreneurial learning	Kempster & Stewart (2010)	Becoming a leader: A co-produced autoethnographic exploration of situated learning of leadership practice	Qualitative/autoethnographic study	A single case

Entrepreneurs' learning	Cope (2003)	Entrepreneurial learning and critical reflection	Qualitative, case study research	Six entrepreneurs
	Lans et al. (2008)	The influence of the work environment on entrepreneurial learning of small-business owners	A qualitative study/ In-depth semi-structured interviews	A specific sample of 25 small-business owners in an innovative, successful sector in the Netherlands.
	Sherlock & Nathan (2008)	How power dynamics impact the content and process of non-profit CEO learning	A qualitative research study of the learning experiences of entrepreneurs	Twelve CEOs of non-profit making organizations was used
Employees' learning	Butcher (2018)	Learning everyday entrepreneurial practices through coworking	Qualitative/ ethnography participant observer	The researcher
	Macpherson et al. (2010)	Making sense of mediated learning: Cases from small firms	Longitudinal case study approach	Three cases of small firms
Business learning capabilities	Prieto & Revilla (2006)	Assessing the impact of learning capability on business performance: Empirical evidence from Spain	Quantitative approach using questionnaires	One hundred and eleven Spanish companies,
	Tsui-Auch (2003)	Learning strategies of small and medium-sized Chinese family firms: A comparative study of two suppliers in Singapore	A comparative study of the learning strategies	Two Singapore-based Chinese family firms
Students' learning	Pittaway and Cope (2007)	Simulating entrepreneurial learning integrating experiential and collaborative approaches to learning	Qualitative approach	The study focused on the NVP course at the authors' university and on the student cohort of 2003. Seventy-three students completed the course, working in 15 teams.

Leadership of learning	Casey (2005)	Enhancing individual and organizational Learning: A sociological model	The article applies the model to a strategic planning scenario, showing how managers may be able to use the model as a guide to address the learning needs of individuals and organizations.	
	Edmondson (2003)	Speaking up in the operating room: How team leaders promote learning in interdisciplinary action teams	Multiple case study	The study tested a model of team learning leadership using qualitative and quantitative data derived from 16 cardiac surgery teams form 150 U.S hospitals.
	Matsuo (2012)	Leadership of learning and reflective practice: An exploratory study of nursing managers	Quantitative/ structural equation modelling	The study investigated the characteristics of leadership behaviours that facilitate workplace learning, using data from a survey of 228 nursing managers in 22 hospitals
	Mazutis & Slawinski (2008)	Leading organizational learning through authentic dialogue		The study examines how top managers who exhibit authentic leadership capabilities of self-awareness, balanced processing, self-regulation and relational transparency can shape an organizational culture characterized by authentic dialogue. This culture then supports feed-forward and feedback learning across individual, group and organizational levels, promoting and reinforcing double-loop learning.
	Stead and Elliott (2013)	Women's leadership learning: A reflexive review of representations and leadership teaching		Examining leadership learning as an experiential process, we present the development of a typology intended to act as a summary of literature focusing on women's experiences of leadership learning.
	Waddell and Pio (2015)	The influence of senior leaders on organisational learning: Insights from the employees' perspective	Qualitative research utilising a case study of a New Zealand–operated information technology company	Studying the influence of senior leaders on organisational learning, from the employees' perspective
	Wong, Tjosvold and Lu (2010)	Leadership values and learning in China: The mediating role of psychological safety	Quantitative	Examining the impact of leader values of participation, people, and productivity on improving learning of 292 team members from 85 firms from China.

2.2. Entrepreneurial leadership, learning and cognitive processes

Entrepreneurial leadership as a concept is still evolving and it has been defined in several different ways (for example: Cogliser and Brigham 2004; Cunningham and Lischeron 1991; Fontana and Musa 2017; Harrison, Paul, and Burnard 2016; Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison 2009; Nicholson 1998; Renko, Tarabishy, Carsrud, and Brännback 2015). As it continues to evolve some scholars have described entrepreneurial leadership as a practice conducted in small firms (Simba and Thai 2019) whilst others have seen it as a style of managing business (Leitch and Volery 2017; Yukl 2012) applicable at different stages of firm development (Flamholtz and Randle, 2021; Freeman and Siegfried 2015; Karol 2015; Middlebrooks 2015). While this has been the case, for the purpose of this study we align with Leitch and Voleryís (2017, p. 148) idea that íit is simply a type of leadership that occurs in a specific setting, such as emerging organisations or small, fast-growing businesses.î Thus, the idea of focusing on how business leaders influence individual learning amongst their teams within their SMEs in Iran, significantly advances knowledge on organisational learning and leadership. Moreover, there is an academic and practical merit for understanding the strategies they apply in the way they lead individual learning among members of their entrepreneurial teams. Kellyís (1955) PCT is applied in this research particularly because of its cognitive dimension (Bandura 2001). We use it to explore the activities with respect to the way our sampled entrepreneurs lead personal learning amongst their entrepreneurial teams.

Since entrepreneurial leadership is depicted as a type of leadership, which provides for the scenarios' where committed followers are gathered so as to be led by the vision of the leader towards finding new opportunities and utilising them for sustainable success (Goossen and Stevens 2013; Gupta et al. 2004). It is conceivable that the individual cognitive processes of these followers are emergent brain activities that exert determinative influence (Bandura 2001).

Thus, when entrepreneurial leaders use their competencies as a mechanism for managing and enabling personal learning amongst their entrepreneurial teams they operate as interactive agents and enablers of change (Bandura 1986). Moreover, by employing their antecedents in the way they foster the learning of their entrepreneurial teams their approach can be seen as embodied material entities that are informed through neural events (Bandura 2001).

In light of the above, it is worth mentioning that individuals located in entrepreneurial teams have their personal constructs (Wyer et al. 2000) in other words, mental models (Shepherd and Krueger 2002), often influenced by their past experiences. In the event that an individual's personal construct(s) act as adequate frames of reference they rely on for assessing and predicting the value/ benefits of their learning, they are likely to validate them (Kelly 1955; Wyer et al. 2000). On the contrary, if they prove to be inadequate frames of reference in relation to the new knowledge being received, then the assumptions upon which they are built on have to be questioned and the constructs modified in order to

improve work practices. From that perspective, it means that the process of managing personal learning is complex and it may require a high-level of interpersonal skills.

Thus, entrepreneurial leadership can provide the capabilities/competences (Bagheri and Abbariki 2016; Gupta et al. 2004) entrepreneurial leaders need to engender behavioural transformations. Against that backdrop, a process of leading personal learning in a firm can be viewed as double edged. That is, entrepreneurial leaders may need to pay attention to their self-competences for example, cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral and social (Bagheri and Abbariki 2016) as well as their functional competencies including managing, coaching and facilitating (Bagheri and Abbariki 2016; Le Deist and Winterton 2005; Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010). Existing scholarship on entrepreneurial leadership (e.g. Bagheri and Pihie 2011; Kuratko 2018; Harrison and Leitch 2018) recognise that in order to enhance individual, group or business performances, entrepreneurs should exhibit a high-level of leadership capabilities.

Thus, we propose that in "learning" organisations (Senge 1990), the self-and-functional competencies of their founders/leaders are a catalyst for leading learning in business.

3. Research Approach

This study is explorative in nature and it follows an inductive process, thus enabling us to engage with entrepreneurs running SMEs in Iran and to explore the ways these entrepreneurs lead and shape personal learning amongst their entrepreneurial teams. In order to detect the methods, they use for leadership of learning, we employed a multi-case study strategy. By adopting a multi case-oriented design, we were able to interact (Baxter and Jack 2008; Guba and Lincoln 1994) with these entrepreneurs in their natural environment and explore their real experiences and behaviour in influencing their team members' learning. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Chen 2007; Huang, Ding, and Chen 2014; Kang, Matusik, Kim, and Phillips 2016), we utilised a purposive sampling technique in other words we followed set parameters for inclusion. To be eligible for this study, the SMEs should have equal or less than 50 employees and started in less than 10 past years. Table 2 provides an overview of the enterprises whose founders participated in the study. As Table 2 shows, the selected entrepreneurs varied in having taken or not taken training courses to improve the diversity of sample in their learning orientation. Although, they all had a strong learning ordination that was demonstrated in human capital development approaches and specifically their focus on and investment in employees' training. We also selected the entrepreneurs from those who showed their tendency towards learning by locating in science and technology parks and incubators as well as

independent entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs had between 9 and 50 employees and started their business between 2011 and 2016.

Table 2: An overview of the enterprises whose founders participated in the study

Companies (E)											
	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12
Founders' capabilities	-------	Take part in training courses	--------	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	--------	Take part in training courses	--------	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	--------
Human capital development	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning
Type of business	IT	Women credit cooperation	High-tech agriculture	Online training	Entrepreneurship Clinique	Entrepreneurship Consultation	Herbs and Aromas	Nano-fibre production	International trans services	IT	3D Printing	Wireless modems
Location	Science & technology park	Incubator	Incubator	Science and technology park	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Incubator	Stand-alone business	Science and tech park
Year of starting the business	2014	2013	2016	2013	2012	2014	2012	2011	2012	2014	2014	2012
Company Size	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Small	Small	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Small	Medium
Number of Employees	15	25	16	12	9	9	48	23	21	14	8	20

...continuation of Table 2

Companies (E)											
	E13	E14	E15	E16	E17	E18	E19	E20	E21	E23	E24	E25
Founders' capabilities	--------	Take part in training courses	------	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	---------	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses	Take part in training courses
Human capital development	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning	Strong focus on learning
Type of business	Safety & security systems	IT	Flower and plant production	Entrepreneurship crowdfunding	Software development	Software development	IT	Chemical detergent products	Advertisement and publicity	Online transportation	Car safety devices	Crowd-funding platform design
Location	Incubator	Science and tech park	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Science & technology park	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Science & technology park	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business	Stand-alone business
Year of starting the business	2011	2013	2016	2015	2015	2016	2014	2014	2013	2014	2011	2016
Company Size	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Small
Number of Employees	16	21	18	20	12	16	54	23	50	15	48	10

Through interacting with our key informants, we were able to gain a "close-up look" and generate rich data (Farquhar 2012; Yin 2003). As opposed to survey-based studies that tend to generate quantitative data and make law-like generalisations (Gray 2014), we benefited from data triangulation (Creswell et al. 2007; Mason 2006; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009). That is, data was

collected from our group of entrepreneurs through face-to-face interviews, observations and artefacts. Although studies that adopt a case-oriented approach are often criticised for the generalisability of their findings (see Henn, Weinstein, and Foard 2009), our main goal was to achieve analytical generalisation to use Yin's (2003) felicitous term. Explained differently, our goal was to generalise our findings from data to theory.

3.1. Data collection

The data collection process involved interacting with entrepreneurs who were responsible for managing and developing their SMEs in Iran. By adopting such a data collection technique, we developed unique insights into the ways these entrepreneurs fostered personal learning amongst members of their entrepreneurial teams. A total of 25 face-to-face interviews were carried out ranging from 47 to 110 minutes in length with an average duration of 105 minutes. Collecting data through qualitative interviews was deemed appropriate for exploring the self-and-functional competencies that entrepreneurial leaders often used for leading learning in their entrepreneurial teams (see for example: Neergaard and Leitch 2015; Fernald, Solomon, and Tarabishy 2005). Further to the interviews, some follow-up interviews were conducted to deepen our understanding of how the entrepreneurs influence individual learning process in their business (Brinkman and Kvale 2015).

As a part of the data collection process an interview guide comprising open-ended questions (Cameron and Price 2009) was utilised to ensure that the same topic concerning entrepreneurship, leadership and organisational learning was covered during the discussions with all the key informants. However, before it was adopted, the interview guide was submitted to an "expert panel" comprising three entrepreneurship lecturers based at the first authors' university. The rationale for doing so was to enhance the content validity of the questions (Gerring 2005) in the interview guide. Our interview guide contained questions such as; "how do you improve the capability of your team members?" and "what makes you capable of developing your team members' capabilities?". The interviews were conducted by the first author in Persian and then were translated and back translated by two bilingual researchers to validate and ensure the quality of our understanding of the data (Brislin, 1970, 1986). Each interview was transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the actual interview. Each participant was presented with a consent agreement form describing what their participation entailed (Henn, Weinstein, and Foard 2009). Data confidentiality was also explained as detailed in both the authors' research ethics documentation at their institutions. Furthermore, the participants were also informed that they were free to opt out of the interview process at any point. Additionally, their permission to record the interviews was sought (Groenewald 2004).

Data collection was discontinued after 25 face-to-face interviews and repeat visits were also discontinued as we were no longer receiving any new

information. In other words, we had reached qualitative saturation (Saunders et al. 2018).

3.2. Data analysis

We analysed our data using NVIVO 8 software. The software was used for transcribing, organising, coding and analysing data (Bell, Bryman, and Harley 2018). Consistent with Grbich's (2007) and Miles et al.'s (2014) advise concerning analysing qualitative data. Two phases of data analysis were conducted with the first, data analysis being conducted during its collection. That is, soon after each interview, the recorded data was analysed separately by both authors to identify any emerging trends, potential codes and themes as well as gaps in the data. In cases where additional data was required the participants were further contacted for more information. Through this iterative process, we were able to check the quality of the data we collected and revised the questions we asked to better explore the competencies of our participants (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009).

The next phase of the research involved analysing data thematically. This process of examining the initial codes provided a deep understanding of how entrepreneurial leaders guide the personal learning of the members of their entrepreneurial teams (Braun and Clarke 2006). Also, this phase was concerned with organising data into manageable and meaningful groups, categories and themes. At this data analysis stage, the authors read all the interview transcripts and highlighted sections of this data in which the key informants described their approach to leading learning in their SMEs. Examples of the initial codes comprise of: 'inspiration to learn and improve abilities', 'higher learning capability expectations of the team members' and 'improved perseverance in learning.'

In order to identify how the entrepreneurs, lead personal learning amongst members of their entrepreneurial teams, we used the constant comparative method (Merriam 1998) and examined responses of each participant to the same questions against other participants. This accelerated the process of identifying and exploring the similarities and differences in their self-and-functional competencies. This stage of the analysis led to the identification of the key themes relating to how the entrepreneurs facilitate personal learning amongst members of their entrepreneurial teams using their entrepreneurial competencies.

3.3. Validation of the results

Several techniques were adopted to ensure the validity of the research findings. First, detailed transcriptions and field notes were prepared, and the findings were checked for any biases by presenting generated codes and themes to two lecturers involved in entrepreneurial leadership research (Bogdan and Biklen 1997). Second, in order to avoid selection biases entrepreneurs who participated in the study were selected from several locations including Science, Innovation and

Technology Parks and Incubators. Some of the entrepreneurs were identified using the snowball sampling (Saunders Lewis and Thornhill 2009).

Our cross-sectorial approach in the way we selected the participants ensured that our sample included entrepreneurs who were fully involved in different businesses and processes such as team leadership (Renko et al. 2015), rather than those who were merely managing a small business. In addition, data were triangulated by comparing and contrasting the cases (Patton 1990). The rationale for doing so was to identify the different realities that are constructed through social interactions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2012). From this triangulation process we were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors determining leadership of learning because we were able to converge information from multiple cases and sources accessed at the data collection stage.

4. Findings

In this section of the article, we detail the underlining methods Iranian entrepreneurs deployed in leading individual learning in their SMEs. Our sample comprised 25 entrepreneurs in SMEs drawn from several but diverse business sectors across the town of Tehran in Iran (see table 2). Through interacting with our group of purposively sampled entrepreneurs, there was logical evidence showing that the process of leading learning in SMEs was mainly influenced by several social aspects that included: the creation of a learning architecture by building work relationships as well as promoting individual learning and training. Drawing on Kelly's (1979) personal construct analogy, it was apparent that the entrepreneurs leading our sampled SMEs utilised their high-level order skills to modify held assumptions about work thereby stimulating individual learning. More importantly, they perceived their role in doing so as learning champions. They showed what Edwards et al. (2013) described as leadership of learning. As part of their perceived roles, they created a learning architecture comprising of supportive structures and caring and friendly working conditions to cognitively transform individual members of their entrepreneurial teams. This was at the core of their approach for leadership of learning in their SMEs and it was cross-sectorial.

4.1. The process of leading and influencing individual learning in SMEs
Knowledge and skill needs analysis
The process of influencing and directing individual learning in SMEs in Iran often started by understanding knowledge and skills needs and use. In other words, the capability development and deployment (Teece 2011) of members in established entrepreneurial teams. Business leaders or entrepreneurs in SMEs ranging from IT, services, to manufacturing who took part in our experiment identified problem solving, intuition, opportunity recognition, desire to develop, learning to be

creative and to work effectively in a team as fundamental for individual development and business success.

In a conversation covering the topic of employees' capabilities it was confirmed that:

> *At the moment people I have in what I believed were project teams lack creativity and team working skills and yet creativity and teamwork are very important attributes given the competition we face.*

> *I therefore think that I should direct more of my energy towards helping them to understand the importance of working collectively. So, it's obviously a worry when you have individuals that lack such important skills* (E5).

> *My personal believe is that people should have a continuous desire to learn and develop themselves which is also good for their and our success. Thus, my role should be to inspire them to constantly learn and develop by trying to do different things; that is the only way they can enhance their creativity which we need in our business* (E1).

> *I encourage my employees to keep challenging themselves by moving away from their comfort zones and try new things, simulate problem solving and use their intuition to identify business opportunities. Doing so is very important for us if we are to grow this small business* (E11).

> *I inspire my employees to think about self-development. In my view self-development is very much higher in start-ups than established businesses, because in a start-up you put yourself in a challenging position, and that pushes you to want to develop your capabilities needed to deal with the challenges small businesses like ours encounter in our daily operations* (E17).

> *I understood that business is not easy, but you have to be firm and resolute, without which business success can be hard achieve. More importantly, one has to have the ability to think differently. Successful business people have that ability and I encourage my employees to persevere so as to develop their cognitive abilities* (E15).

Their assessments unequivocally revealed more about the entrepreneurial orientation of the group of entrepreneurs that we observed. Specifically, it was learnt that, their take on individual development needs in relation to business success emphasised their entrepreneurial leadership capabilities. That is, they were able to recognise individual development needs and to consider the ways in which learning can be used as a tool to meet such needs. This itself offers unique insights into their self-and-functional competences. More importantly, it shows that their entrepreneurial leadership qualities (Leitch and Volery 2017) were a key catalyst that enabled them to systematise the individual learning process of their employees because they were able to understand what they needed for their development. Crucially, the steps they took to understand the knowledge and the

skills gaps of their employees explained more about their approach to leadership of learning (Edwards et al. 2013).

Individual learning process

To influence and direct learning in their SMEs, our group of entrepreneurs that participated in this study became coaches. They used their self-and-functional competences that foster learning to create good working relationships with the members of their entrepreneurial teams. In other words, they employed their entrepreneurial leadership style in order to lead individual learning within their teams. Crucially, they established a learning architecture in their businesses in which individuals were given the opportunity to acquire knowledge about the key business functions. A considerable amount of time and financial resources were invested with the view to introducing behavioural determinants that were targeted at encouraging individual members of their entrepreneurial team to enhance their personal learning. The entrepreneurs clarified their strategies by stressing that:

> *I encourage a culture of knowledge exchange and sharing. A culture of collaboration across members of different teams. Crucially, I challenge them to learn best practice from each other and I think doing so is important for individual members and my company* (E2).

> *I aim to establish a mutual learning environment build on high tolerance enabling more time for learning. A stress-free environment is key to achieving individual and organisational goals* (E3).

> *We get them involved in the process of decision making and we directly support them. The idea is to help them to understand our thinking process and in that way they will understand our business strategy and crucially our mindset* (E25).

> *I select members of a task group based on their capabilities. I create a climate whereby all the members of the task group are all responsible for the outcomes of their task. As part of that I encourage them to collaborate across teams and with specific groups of individuals, outside our business, who I have connections with. In my view I strongly believe engaging with various individuals is all part of learning we need to enable our business to develop* (E6).

Thus, the idea of creating a supporting environment was a common feature in the responses given by the other 21 participants. It meant that in the context of Iran, regardless of the sector, starting from the service-based, IT-based to production-based industries, success for SMEs was underpinned by establishing a learning architecture. Quite clearly, these entrepreneurs paid a lot attention towards developing this architecture in their businesses and they focussed on building individual capabilities, which they felt were fundamental to their overall business success. Moreover, they adopted the principles of instructive coaching as a way of complementing their strategy of creating a learning atmosphere in their small businesses. As part of their overall strategy, training-by-involvement

was an effective technique. They were able to utilise this when leading individual learning within their entrepreneurial teams and such an approach was evident across the diverse business sectors we sampled for this study. When responding to the topic on how they (Iranian entrepreneurs) led learning among individual members of their teams, it was clear that involvement ('learn-by-doing') was their most favoured method as they confirmed that:

I give them their tasks and control them through the end of projects, but a week to the end,... I am also closely beside them even when I delegate the work to them, when they have any problems they can come and ask me,...By this accompanying, I create their passion and motivation for innovation, often it worked and I gradually improved their passion for innovation (E4).

I ask them to come with me and observe how I do the business, how I communicate with people, they see how I can negotiate with people,... they can feel the environment and learn,.. , I inspire them to learn from different environments that we go together,... (E5).

I often bring someone (i.e. an outside coach) who has the capability of connecting people and deal with the challenges of communicating with the customers to teach my employees. By doing this we really overcome the challenge successfully (E11).

I mean when they have an idea, for example they want to connect with a new business and they discuss the idea with me I am beside them and step by step help them to improve and develop their idea, I would tell them, OK, your idea is good but why not we do this,...when I give them my idea I ask them to go and think about it which idea is the best and why, why we should concentrate on this and not that. When I guide them, they finally come to the conclusion that I am right, this is not opposing the ideas directly and try to teach and train people and direct them to the right path that he decides....(E25).

....we try to build a model for the business, then, I ask one person to be the CEO of the business and I encourage that person to simulate it launch...I believe that when someone gives an idea, he is the best to run the business....(E24).

Their remarks highlighted a symmetrical approach in the way entrepreneurs in Iran got members of their entrepreneurial teams involved ('learning-by-doing') as a way of leading learning in their SMEs. An insightful cross-sectorial approach Iranian entrepreneurs adopted to influence learning among their entrepreneurial teams involved encouraging individual members to be observant, to participate in key business activities and to lead the process of opportunity recognition, as well as start, launch and run computer-generated business ventures.

These insights extend Bandura's (2001) idea of exerting determinative influence on the brain and individual activities. Their leadership of learning approach characterises a new and holistic way of developing individual cognitive abilities. Crucially, it introduces another theoretical avenue, which explains a

human psychology transformation process, which is centred on Kelly's (1979) "person as scientist" metaphor.

Moreover, their leadership of learning approach explains more about their self-and-functional competences which Simba and Thai (2019) saw as lacking in most managers/owners of SMEs. Their style also shows the way they applied their enterprise development experiences to instil business values in members of their entrepreneurial teams. Explained differently, they used their personal antecedents to influence individual learning amongst members of their teams. From their perspective, using their self-and-functional skills brought about mental transformations amongst their employees because they were able to use multiple behavioural stimulants. This opens another direction in SME research in which the current literature too often portrays entrepreneurs who run small businesses as self-centred individuals (Hill and Stewart 2000; Smallbone, Leig, and North 1995) who take a casual approach towards managerial and business development issues (Fuller-Love 2006; Gray 2002). Their holistic approach in leading learning clearly provides original knowledge showing news ways of leadership of learning that can make SMEs more "learningful".

Paradoxes of individual learning in SMEs
Despite their progress in establishing learning conditions and leading learning in their small businesses, as reported above, the entrepreneurs pointed to several other factors that, at times, conspired to derail their strategy of making their SMEs more learningful. They reflected on their sometimes limited self-and-functional competences, lack of capabilities and commitment amongst their staff. To that end they clarified that:

> *I sometimes don't know how to encourage my employees to be fully involved in doing their tasks. That is, inspire them to put their brains and capabilities to do their tasks better* (E1).

> *I was not competent in terms of connecting with people. I did never care about the people who were working with me. As a result, I lost many of my competent group members. They came and worked with me for a while but because I couldn't I didn't have people skills; they left the business. This took a lot of time and energy from me; I spent much time interviewing many job volunteers and those who had the skills I gave them the training they needed. But again, they stayed for a short time and they left the business. I couldn't influence them to become committed to the business. To be fair some of them completed their tasks but not to the level I wanted. I had high expectations and didn't know how to balance my expectations with their abilities* (E5).

> *Sometimes I need to be different. I mean need to demonstrate my leadership qualities when it comes to leading my staff. I think my skills are not enough to work with these particular people, sometimes I feel frustrated…(E6).*

You know I have to work with many different people than in other companies, here I am mostly working with technicians, chemists,… we have software engineers, electronic engineers,…those with high educational qualifications, although working with such people is very enjoying, it however comes with some difficulties.

Because of their specialised jobs you cannot give them orders, i.e. you cannot use a command and control approach. We also have mechanics and workers who do the operational parts of the machines and repair them, working with them and the ways to communicate with them is very different than others, so I have to change my way of communicating and behave with this group of staff different than others (E8).

I feel that I am weak in connecting people, in my relationships with the teammate I become too friendly to them and this makes me lose the work, too focusing on the friendly relationships and missing the work, and I feel this is my weak point, I think maybe this problem emerges because we are all at the same age, and this breaks the work climate and changes into too much friendship so that sometimes it stops us from achieving our goals effectively (E11).

At first I didn't have effective ways to communicate my team, so they left the business, bit-by-bit I learned that I should employ effective ways to talk and communicate with my team, then, I started to text them through social media, and I established a discussion group. I realised that I am good in terms of bringing people together, but leading was not one of my strength. The group I established initially started with 4 members and now we have around 20 members, but leading/managing them remains very difficult. I found myself struggling with connecting with managing each member particularly dealing their personal concerns proved a challenge which I felt, if the business is to succeed I have to be able to solve problems of individual members and then instill our business values using various techniques…(E17).

The issues laid out in the responses above, are well defined within the concept of entrepreneurial leadership (Chen 2007; Cogliser and Brigham 2004). Entrepreneurial leadership emphasises the importance of one's ability to communicate organisational strategy, the ability to get followers and to use self-and-functional competences (see for example: Bagheri and Pihie 2011; Simba and Thai 2019; Leitch et al. 2013) as fundamental to a cohesive strategy. In that context entrepreneurial leadership can be a vehicle for enabling a learning organisation.

Without which the leadership of learning approach can be irrelevant making it difficult to transform held assumptions about work. The entrepreneurs we interviewed recognised that they needed to apply the principles of entrepreneurial leadership as a means for leading learning amongst members of their teams. Accordingly, they explained several techniques they employed to enable members of their entrepreneurial teams to develop a habit of learning, which they were trying to propagate in their SMEs, in the following statement:

I tried to improve their motivation by telling them how important they are, how and what they do is important in achieving our goals (E1).

I attended courses to improve my team working as well as my management skills. I also attended creativity courses to learn how to organise my thoughts, how to think systematically, how to activate my thoughts, I learned about how to look ahead. Back in my business I applied the skills I acquired from the course I attended to push my teammates to learn (E5).

My first step was to consider self-development. My idea was to overcome my leadership deficiencies by reading books and other different sources such as inspirational talks. The books I read were mainly on human resource management detailing ways in which managers can enable the creativity of their staff members, and ways of embedding creativity in daily work routines (E18).

I always try to share my personal life-story with my group members. For those who reflect my old-self, i.e. those who are shy and find communicating with other people challenging, I share with them how I built my confidence. I emphasise on believing in themselves and not to be put off by other people (E24).

In addition to the entrepreneurial leadership skills, they utilised to bring all the members of their work teams on board, entrepreneurs in Iran shared their past experiences, their beliefs, vision and their business ethics with the view to encouraging learning amongst their employees. From that perspective, entrepreneurs of Iranian firms also utilised their antecedents to achieve behavioural transformations in individual members of their SMEs. They used their life histories as a way of inspiring and as a tool for coaching their employees. Thus, their learning strategies for developing learning SMEs were built from a combination of management skills and personal experiences.

4.2. Patterns associated with factors that influence individual learning

While the sections above detail the processes and issues of leading and influencing individual learning in SMEs across different sectors from IT and services to manufacturing, Table 3 provides a cross-case analysis showing a pattern of a series of factors that were at play in the process of leading, directing and influencing learning. For example, the entrepreneurs in our sample articulated how they developed working relationships with their employees as a way of establishing a platform for learning and they instilled business values to be used as a reference point. They expressed that developing such relationships made the process of facilitating knowledge sharing and its exchange possible. This was a cross-sectorial picture.

Another important strategy they applied effectively, focussed on developing an entrepreneurial mindset amongst their employees by encouraging them to adopt behaviours often associated with entrepreneurs including; working with ambiguity, experimental, problem solving, and the desire for change. As part of that culture, which was communicated through the organisational

(entrepreneurial teams), relationships, efficacy and flexibility was also the backbone of their learning strategy. Table 3 below illustrates a range of cross-sectorial factors that Iranian entrepreneurs depicted as influential in their process of leading learning in SMEs.

Table 3: Cross-sectorial factors demonstrating leadership of learning in SMEs

	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12
Entrepreneurial Leadership (*self-and-functional competences*)	Engages self-training as well as directed task work	Shows high level of interpersonal skills & had a good relationship with each team member which enhanced the opportunities for learning	Similar to E1 *plus* delivers internal workshops to learn about business development	Adopts a self-directed learning approach through set business development tasks	Similar to E21 Also reflects on personal skills & those of team members to enhance the opportunity for learning	Similar to E1 & also seek for team members who are eager to learn (this is built into the recruitment strategy)	Similar to E13 *plus* adopts a self-directed learning approach	Similar to E2 plus encourages team members to participate by assuming leadership roles in product & market development	Is forthright about building personal and team working skills	Encourages self-training *plus* provides team members knowledge development opportunities	Similar to E7 & also emphasises on the importance of self-reflection	Similar to E10 & also emphasises on skills development via problem solving
Leading and inspiring learning	Encourages team members to practice new venture creation techniques by using computer-aided systems	Encourages learning-by-doing to develop the business skills amongst team members	Discusses with team members about the benefits of entrepreneurship *plus* set a learning agenda for team members	Sponsors team members to attend entrepreneurship education camps. Also adopts a similar approach to E12.	Similar to E2 but also facilitates learning through coaching & mentoring	Utilises personal experience to inspire team members & also follows E18's approach of observations	Adopts an unorthodox approach & encourages team members to develop spin-off companies	Similar to E5 and also encourages team members to engage in deliberate networks of learning	Adopts a similar approach to E2 *plus* takes a keen interest in individual member learning & development	Similar to E4 *plus* challenges team members to implement their training within internally managed small projects	Assumes a coaching role and assigns tasks related to new venture creation. Also closely monitors learning amongst team members	Believes in coaching, mentoring & sponsors external collaborations
Self-Efficacy	Encourages team members to demonstrate their abilities in communicating their ideas & knowledge assimilation	Similar to E13 *plus* utilises management express forums for members to enhance their communication skills, ability to establish relationships & to network	Challenges team members to practice what they learn from workshops & show an initiate through their plans for learning & development. Adopts similar approach to E20	Similar to E15 *plus* drives team members to show what they have learnt by using their initiatives to solve business development-related tasks	Similar to E17 *plus* accelerates individual member learning by employing self-and-functional competences. Also follows E13's approach of using business experience.	Works tirelessly to establish a learning behaviour among team members. Recognises that changing mindsets requires high-level abilities. Follows a similar approach to E19	Similar to E4 & E15. Also accepts the challenges of transforming entrenched behaviours. But utilises persuasive communication strategy to encourage a learning behaviour	Proactive & effective in providing a vision for the business that is based on continuous learning	Shows a genuine interest in individual team member development & effectively uses it to inspire them to learn for their personal development & to benefit the business	Recognises challenges the business faces & effectively communicates the importance of individual learning & its cumulative effect on business development	Effectively uses past experience to influence team members to see the role of learning in business development. Also, follows E23's approach.	Similar to E8 & E21
Learning environment	Team members have space & autonomy to make decisions about their job roles and tasks. Also adopts a similar approach to E18	Drives knowledge sharing & exchange through internal databases and team projects & follows E8's approach of establishing diverse teams	Established a safe, caring & supportive business environment intended to encourage learning. Also uses off-site team building event (similar to E7)	Similar to E1 *plus* gives team members responsibilities for their own learning. Similar to E15 & E25	Treats failure as a learning curve & encourages experimentation in project teams. Achievements are celebrated (similar to E16)	Establishes diverse teams to maximise learning potential & harness best practice. Also similar to E21 on regarding study leave	Similar to E3 *plus* initiates off-site team building events to maximise learning opportunities	Similar to E3 & E7.	Encourages intra-firm and inter-organisational networks of learning. Also embraces diversity.	Has a flatter entrepreneurial structure which designed to enable learning through direct interaction amongst different teams. Also follows a similar approach to E20 regarding a learning agenda.	Allows team members to learn about running a business through taking part and contributing to decision-making on markets & product development etc.	Takes an inclusive approach to problem-solving. Aslo follows a similar approach to E5 by treating failure as a learning opportunity

Table 3, continued

	E13	E14	E15	E16	E17	E18	E19	E20	E21	E22	E23	E24	E25
Entrepreneurial Leadership (*self-and-functional competences*)	Emphasises on developing capabilities necessary for business development	Similar to E10 but is also keen on empowering employees	Similar to E2 & also employed a hands-on approach	Believes in learning through challenging tasks	Focusses on developing interpersonal skill while upskilling individuals working in teams	Similar to E10, E16, E13 *plus* maintains virtual systems of information gathering & sharing	Similar to E1 & E3 *plus* emphasised on the importance of developing personal knowledge about the business	Similar to E10 *plus* encourages team members reflection on personal learning	Follows similar approach to learning as E8	Similar to E4 *plus* takes a joint approach to problem solving	Invests in personal training & development. Also follows E16's approach of learning through task-based projects	Has an in-house mentoring system for developing newer team members	Similar to E1 & E4 *plus* provides team members support in terms of time and resources

Leading and inspiring learning	Similar to E3 *plus* tells stories of his personal experience	Similar to E8 & wants team members to also learn from other outside the firm	Similar to E1 and also gives team members the opportunity to contribute to decision-making	Supports personal development by investing time & financial resources. Also follows E24's appraisal system	Similar to E2 & E13 *plus* encourages team members to learn about launching & running a new business venture	Similar to E7 & encourages observations of good practice	Similar to E3 *plus* reward innovative ideas. Uses an appraisal system like E24	Follows a similar approach to E11 *plus* sets a learning agenda for each member	Similar to E12 & also uses personal stories as a stimuli for learning & development	Similar to E4 *plus* uses the history of the company to inspire team members	Often invites successful guest speakers to give a talk about their experience	Encourages participation in exhibitions. Uses an appraisal system to enhance learning & development	Similar to E15 *plus* invest in external business development related training for team members
Self-Efficacy	Similar to E7 *plus* draws on personal experience to influence team members to develop a habit of learning	Similar to E6. Also, influential and inspires a habit of learning new things	Efficiently utilises able team members to enable other member's learning through knowledge sharing	Similar to E6 i.e. strives to establish a learning behaviour	Effective in establishing personal relationships geared towards learning through knowledge sharing & exchange	Similar to E6 *plus* utilises communication skills to influence learning amongst team members	Acknowledges team member fallibilities & effectively utilises them to demonstrate the need for individual learning & development	Assertive & uses interpersonal skills to inspire a habit of taking business challenges as an opportunity for learning and development.	Utilises leadership qualities to influence team members to buy into a habit of learning about business development. Also, follows similar approach to E8.	Effective in establishing a collective approach to problem solving.	Similar to E10 *plus* effectively uses peer learning to drive personal & organisational development	Similar to E9 *plus* listens & takes onboard suggestions from team members	Similar to E21 *plus* maximises internal experience to facilitate learning through knowledge sharing and exchange
Learning environment	Similar to E2 & E5 *plus* encourages peer learning amongst team members. Also encourages them to apply for study time (similar to E21)	Similar to E3 *plus* adopts a direct communication approach.	Emphasises on knowledge sharing & mutual trust between team members & leaders & encourages peer learning	Similar to E5 *plus* achievements are celebrated. Also integrates knowledge gained from solving business tasks into manuals for future learning	Values each member's ideas & good ideas are adopted. Produces internal memos highlighting the best ideas that were adopted and makes a link to continuous learning	Members are allocated resources i.e. financial resources & space (time) to support their learning. Also uses a similar approach to E20	Tolerates failure but encourages members to treat it as a learning opportunity. Also encourages an inclusive approach to problem solving (similar to E12)	Each member's learning agenda is directly embedded into the organisational learning plan	Similar to E11 *plus* team members have the opportunity to apply for study time on full salary.	Generates problem solving manuals for knowledge sharing and learning. Also follows a similar approach to both E5 & E12	Similar to E3 *plus* provides financial resources to support individual learning	Members are given an opportunity to have some input in in their learning objectives. Also adopts a similar approach to E9	Similar to E15 *plus* members have the discretion to plan their learning and development

5. Discussion

The process of influencing individual learning is complex and it would be hard to find people who are prepared to argue against the idea that leadership of learning can be important toward establishing a learning organisation and is likely to be more so in small businesses. Nonetheless, that still leaves a big question about the methods leaders of small businesses should adopt to facilitate what unequivocally complex and individually centred process of is establishing a learning organisation (Senge 1990). To that end, if we follow Kelly's (1979) metaphoric expression of "person as scientist" which places the individual as the ultimate shaper of his/her destiny, transforming people's mental modes using leadership of learning would require high-order skills. Thus, drawing on entrepreneurial leadership (Cogliser and Brigham 2004) to develop a theoretical framework for defining and understanding human psychology in organisations can provide a new theoretical avenue that systematically apprises the process of developing high-order skills in business leaders. Arguably, applying an entrepreneurial leadership style in a small business context, which is less represented in the extant literature on entrepreneurship, meaningfully advances understanding about learning organisations (Senge 1990), and the underlying social mechanisms

(Bandura 2001) that create and sustain the architecture for transforming individual cognitive abilities.

From a transitioning economy perspective, there is ample evidence to suggest that it is possible that the process of leading and directing individual learning in SMEs can be systematised (Wyer et al. 2000). Business leaders of SMEs in Iran quickly establish a learning architecture, which was based on their internal business needs and external challenges. Determining the readiness of the various systems needed to establish a learning organisation (Senge 1990), and in our case, a learning SME, demands a far-reaching reflection by business leaders on the self-and-functional competences (Bagheri and Abbariki 2016; Bagheri and Pihie 2011; Gupta et al. 2004).

Explained differently, taking a holistic approach towards setting up systems and employees to be receptive to their learning stimuli is key toward establishing a learning architecture via leadership of learning.

When considering that traditional literature on SMEs often revolves around the notion that owner-managers as less-structured in their management practices (e.g. Ates, Garengo, Cocca, and Bititci 2013; Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright 2013) and are self-centred (Smallbone, Leig, and North 1995). This rather distinguishable leadership of learning (Driver 2002; Edwards et al. 2013) approach, which describes the specific methods entrepreneurs, adopt to influence learning offers fresh insights in entrepreneurship and SME research. The way they are able to find solutions to mitigate their capability deficiencies in terms of leading learning underpins how they are able to provide leadership that fosters individual learning in their small businesses. Clearly, their distinctive approach towards learning provides a clear dimension which explains entrepreneurial leadership in SMEs (Simba and Thai 2019). Specifically, this approach extends the importance of building self-and-functional competencies (Bagheri, Pihie, and Krauss 2013) in order to understand other people's learning needs and how entrepreneurs can pivot themselves to champion learning in their SMEs. Their distinctive approach in leading learning also uncovers what we feel is an exciting point of discussion in debating leadership of learning (Edwards et al. 2013) in entrepreneurship and organisational learning studies.

In considering the above, we argue that this study has profound theoretical and practical implications for several stakeholders comprising owner-managers of SMEs, entrepreneurship scholars, entrepreneurship educators and policy makers.

Theoretical implications: Drawing on the exchange between entrepreneurship and leadership, this study offers entrepreneurship scholars new insights on how this relatively new concept can be a catalyst in the process of leading learning in SMEs. Its innovative use of entrepreneurial leadership alongside the personal construct (Kelly 1955) and organisational learning theories (Senge 1990), provides a new and powerful theoretical avenue in entrepreneurship, organisational and SME research. It particularly assists theory development with respect to the notion of leadership of learning, particularly in

the context of SMEs. Arguably, doing so significantly enhances extant literature given that recent studies mainly on organisational learning (Ratten et al. 2018; Waddell and Pio 2015) with limited or no emphasis on the process of leading learning. Thus, the notion of leading learning through establishing a learning architecture brings a different perspective to organisational learning studies. Moreover, the context of a transitioning economy further expands this literature.

Practical implications: For owner-managers, the study provides a unique knowledge describing the most effective methods for enabling learning and ways of establishing learning organisations. It highlights the process of leading and influencing individual learning in SMEs from a transitioning economy perspective. Given that owner-managers of SMEs have often been criticised for devoting less-time towards developing their functional competences (see Blackburn et al. 2013), this article provides both current and future entrepreneurs with some insights on how they can propagate learning in their ventures. Likewise, business practitioners are offered an opportunity to reflect on organisational learning practices that can be effective, in particularly, how they can create a learning architecture in their organisation. Given that learning is multi-dimensional i.e. it can take place within the organisation, outside of it and across territories, thus this study provides policy-makers with the impetus to consider developing territorial environments for knowledge spillovers for SME leaders to tap into and use as part of their strategy for leading learning in their SMEs.

In summary, our study makes three important contributions to the theories of organisational learning and entrepreneurial leadership by clarifying;

1. The roles that self-and-functional competencies of owner-managers can play in driving/facilitating learning in SMEs

2. The processes and procedures that current and future owner-managers can learn from in order to lead learning in their business.

3. Leadership of learning is the emerging task of entrepreneurial leaders that can be developed in future entrepreneurial leaders.

Accordingly, we contribute to the understanding of the influential role of entrepreneurial leadership in leading learning and in establishing learningful SMEs. We also added to the existing knowledge on learning in the context of entrepreneurship which mostly focused on entrepreneurs' learning (e.g., Holcomb et al. 2009; Cope 2003, 2005; Corbett 2005, 2007). For future studies, we are interested is developing an in-depth understanding of the impact of socio-cultural factors that either drive or hinder leadership of learning in small businesses in transitioning economies. Instead of focusing on a single country, we would recommend studies that elevates to a regional context. We feel that studying the regional context may yet reveal a clearer picture about ways in which small firms, across diverse sectors, lead learning in their businesses.

6. Conclusion

The primary thrust in this article was to understand the influential role of entrepreneurial leadership in leading learning within small businesses. To that end, we were quite successful. Our data from the interviews and follow-up discussions revealed uniform patterns of behaviour in the way our sampled entrepreneurs led and directed learning in their firms. It was unequivocal from our data that establishing a learning architecture was one of the major factors that had a profound impact on employee engagement in learning. Often the entrepreneurs in our sample were the leading architects in learning for their SMEs.

Our findings also confirmed that the process of leading learning in small businesses is extremely complex and fraught with challenges. Yet it also revealed that adopting a type of leadership that focusses on self-and-functional competences (Bagheri and Abbariki 2016), the environment and an understanding of the psychology of personal constructs (Kelly 1955) was key in terms of nullifying obstacles associated with individual learning. Thus, this article points to entrepreneurial leadership (Cogliser and Brigham 2004; Leitch et al. 2013; Leitch and Volery 2017), as a form of leadership that provides business leaders with the high-order skills they need to influence and direct learning in small businesses. From that perspective, our study meaningfully advances the notion that practicing entrepreneurial leadership is a catalyst enabling entrepreneurs to create and sustain learning organisations. It provides entrepreneurs with the framework they need to enhance their leadership of learning in businesses.

6.1. Limitations

For a qualitative study, the limitation of narrow sampling and scope is apparent, and this multiple case study is no exception. Despite all due care in design, selection, data collection, and analysis, it is difficult to dismiss the possibility that some observations may have been different had we chosen a different country context. For example, the business context may profoundly vary in different sectors in different countries. Nonetheless, our main goal was to achieve analytical generalisation (Yin 2013) as already explained. Furthermore, we were not so much interested in organisational learning, in general, but rather the process of leading learning amongst individual members within entrepreneurial teams. In other words, we were interested in understanding the leadership of learning approach in SMEs.

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