

The Hidden “Who” in Leadership Education: Conceptualizing Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development

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Abstract

A great deal of literature exists *for* leadership educators related to programs design, delivery, and student learning. However, little is known *about* leadership educators, who have largely been left out of contemporary leadership education research. We looked to teaching and teacher education literature to derive a model for leadership educator professional identity development. The four spaces of identity development are exploration, experimentation, validation, and confirmation. We propose that an individual can move forward and backwards through the model as a result of both ongoing influences and positive or negative critical incidents. We discuss implications for professional development and future research.

Introduction

“We were drawn to a body of knowledge because it shed light on our identity as well as on the world. We did not merely find a subject to teach-the subject also found us.”
(Palmer, 1998, p. 25)

Our Stories

I (Corey) guess in some sense, I have always seen myself as a leadership educator. Even at a young age, I would engage in activities to mentor others and teach them principles of good character. I did not know that at the time, but certainly in reflection, I can see this quite clearly tied to my identity and profession as a leadership educator. Throughout high school and college, I was always in roles in which I educated others. This seemed to be a natural fit for me and today is a quite comfortable identity to wear. It was not until many years into my student affairs experience that I realized that I could have a profession

exclusively in leadership education. So, for me, it was not an issue of WHAT I wanted to do, but an issue of HOW I could access this experience.

My (Kerry) first thought is to share with you my timeline for becoming a leadership educator: first I did *this*, then I did *this*, and then I did *this*. But highlighting my resume is not a very interesting or helpful way to understand HOW or WHY my career trajectory took these twists and turns. It does not illustrate the complexity and challenge of recognizing, “Leadership education is a *practice* and I’ve done it!” and realizing, “Leadership education is a *people* and I’m one of them!” Experience has been a valuable teacher; however, it has been the personal and professional relationships formed through those experiences that have shaped how I see myself as a leader, a scholar, and a teacher. I have been fortunate to meet other practitioner-scholars who invited me to share challenging conversation and collaborate on projects that stretched my own thinking and practice and research around leadership education, and more recently, leadership *educators*.

While our stories are unique to us, they respond to common questions we have asked ourselves - and been asked by others: *How did we become leadership educators? What factors shaped our leadership educator identity development?* Over the past several years we have conducted informal focus groups around professional development and training of leadership educators. While we discovered that there is certainly a need to help educators learn how to *do* leadership education (e.g., content knowledge, teaching and learning, curriculum and program design, assessment and evaluation), we also found that to feel supported and grow as professionals, leadership educators need communities of practice, mentors, and opportunities to share and celebrate diverse stories of their experiences. These are not simply strategies for best practice; they are shapers of professional identity. This paper explores identity-shaping factors to enhance our profession’s understanding of the leadership educator experience.

Definitions. The International Leadership Association defines leadership educators as those “for whom the teaching of leadership is integral or of interest, and who are committed to the development of leadership capacity at educational institutions and organizations” (“Leadership Education Member Interest Group,” n.d.). Based on this description, we define leadership educators as individuals in higher education instructional and/or programmatic roles who teach leadership in credit or non-credit based programs. In this paper, we use the term teacher and educator interchangeably; however, we recognize that teaching and learning happen outside of formal classrooms, by individuals who may or may not hold the title of “teacher.” While our focus is higher education, we draw from teacher education literature that encompasses multiple contexts and roles. We also acknowledge that leadership educators may include a wide range of practice, including community educators, peer leaders, coaches and consultants, student affairs professionals, and leadership training officers (“About ALE,” n.d.).

Situating the Educator in Leadership Education. A great deal of literature exists for leadership educators on research and practice questions related to leadership program content, design, and delivery, and the influence of these considerations on learning and leadership development of students. However, literature about leadership educators has been limited to demographics and descriptions of preferred pedagogies and background/training, or embedded within larger inquiries into programmatic best practices (e.g., Allen & Hartman, 2009; Eich,

2008; Jenkins, 2012; Owen, 2012). Perhaps the lack of inquiry around leadership educators has been due to the inherent student development focus of most higher education leadership programs, coupled with the movement away from teacher-centered educational practices to learner-centered teaching and learning (Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2002). Also, defining the field of leadership education itself has been an evolving conversation amongst a growing community of practice situated with the broader disciplines of leadership studies and leadership development (Andenoro et al., 2013; Sowcik, 2012; Sowcik, Lindsey, & Rosch, 2013; Ritch, 2013).

The recent National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA) proposed critical areas of research to guide applied scholarship on leader development through higher education and further define the discipline (Andenoro et al., 2013). The research priorities are organized around two key areas: (a) pedagogical priorities - “the applied how of leadership education” (p. 4), including teaching, learning, curriculum development, and programmatic assessment and evaluation, and (b) content based priorities - “the applied what and who of leadership education” (p. 12), including the psychological and sociological development of leaders, learners, and followers, influences of social identity, social change and community development, and global/intercultural capacity. The “who” that seems to be missing in this framework is the leader educator herself.

If we assume that leadership is taught and learned as educators and students engage together in leadership processes (Ganz & Lin, 2012; Grint, 2005; Posner, 2009), then we must acknowledge that leadership educators hold in tension dual roles of teacher and leader. In terms of identity development, the intersection of these roles is complicated: being a teacher is a profession, while being a leader is a role that one can take on within multiple professional contexts. Recognizing this tension is critical in understanding leadership educator professional identity; whether a leadership educator identifies as a leader could impact how they see themselves as an educator of leadership.

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize leadership educator identity through the lens of professional identity development. Drawing from literature in similarly situated fields including teaching and nursing (Middlebrooks & Allen, 2008), we offer insight on the professional journey of the leadership educator. The following questions guided this exploration:

1. How do we understand *leadership educator* as a professional identity?
2. What might be intervening factors or influences in professional identity development?
3. How might critical incidents and tensions play a role?

Background

Professional Identity. The study of professional identity development dates back decades, with classic works attempting to specify processes by which individuals gain and internalize “occupational identifications” (Becker & Carper, 1956, p. 289). Modern scholars describe identity as a broad term relating to how individuals understand self, experience, and belonging within and among various social groups (Sachs, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Rodgers and Scott (2008) highlighted the shared assumptions of contemporary perspectives of identity: (a) identity is formed by and within the social, cultural, historical, and political forces within

multiple contexts, (b) identity is shaped through relationships and involves emotions, (c) identity is not fixed; it is shifting, dynamic and multiple, and (d) “identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through stories over time” (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 733).

Professional identity is both a matter of self-perception and legitimization by others (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010) and is a factor of the individual’s position within society, interactions with other people, and how the individual interprets those experiences (Gee, 2000). Sachs (2001; 2005) pointed to Wenger’s (1998) dimensions of identity as a useful heuristic for conceptualizing the social, cultural, and political aspects of professional identity. These dimensions include: 1) *a negotiated experience*, meaning we define self through how we see ourselves through participation, and how we are seen by peers in community; 2) *community membership*, meaning we define self by our familiarity and competence within particular groups; 3) *learning trajectory*, meaning we define self by “where we have been and where we are going”; 4) *nexus of multi-membership*, meaning that our definition of self is shaped as we integrate “various forms of membership into one identity”; and 5) *local-global interplay*, meaning we define self by negotiating how our individual practices and local ways of belonging are connected to broader relationships and communities, manifesting in “broader styles and discourses” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). These dimensions may inform us theoretically as to what shapes professional identity, but what do these dimensions look like in practice? How does one’s shifting perceptions of self and negotiated experience in the profession shape the development of his or her leadership educator identity? Assuming identity is a dynamic process (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), it is essential to explore the factors at play in professional identity development to construct professional development opportunities and support systems to recruit, retain, and develop the capacities of the leadership educators.

Leadership Educator Identity Spaces

From our synthesis of professional identity literature of similarly situated professions, we derived a proposed model for better understanding leadership educator professional identity development. We suggest that individuals move forward and backwards through identity spaces (exploration, experimentation, validation, and confirmation) as a result of the impact of both ongoing influences as well as positive and negative critical incidents (see Figure 1).

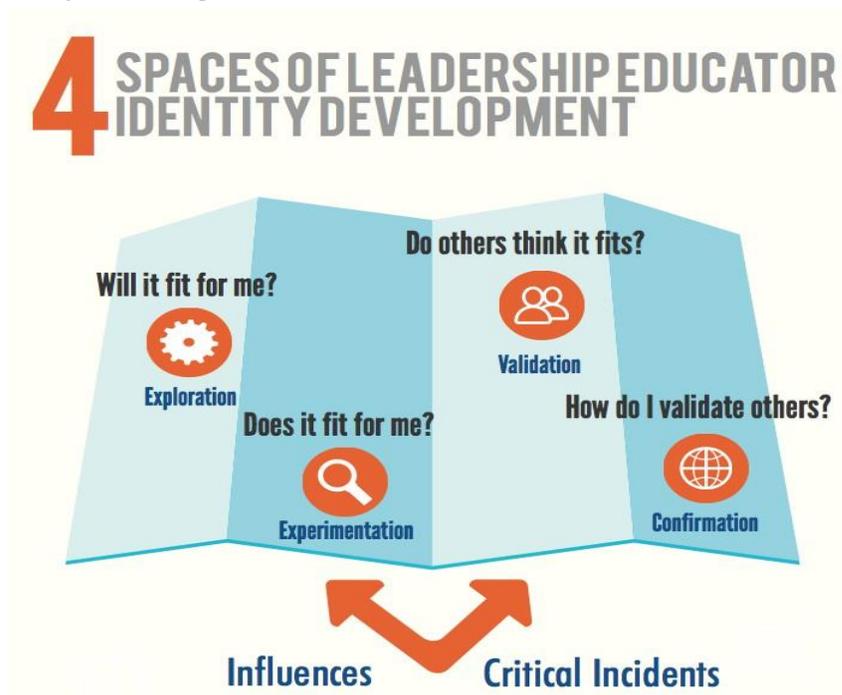


Figure 1. Four spaces of leadership educator identity development.

Exploration. Exploration is defined as the space in which an individual explores if, and to what extent, he or she might take on the professional identity of leadership educator. Questions the individual may consider in this space include:

- What is this identity and what does it mean for me?
- Do my values, beliefs, and styles fit with my perception of this identity?
- Do my values, beliefs, and styles fit with others' expectations of this identity?

We assert that Exploration is a space that can be occupied simultaneously with other spaces and that a person may be in a constant state of exploration as a means of creating a professional identity. As new information emerges, individuals re-conceptualize and re-interpret their place as a professional by exploring new meanings. However, Exploration is an initial space for those new to the profession. The impetus for Exploration may vary for individuals. Some may have been assigned a duty or role in leadership education, whereas others might be exploring on their own. Kozminsky (2011) described how one's previous experience as a student can have an impact on his or her professional identity: for example, someone who had a positive experience as a student may want to explore being on the other side as the educator. Similarly, followers' experiences in change processes may impel them to become leaders (Burns, 1978). Experiences in the Exploration space might include:

- participating in a leadership development or education experience (e.g., class, workshop, conference, webinar) to learn leadership subject matter;
- reading leadership literature to enhance leadership knowledge;
- teaching a leadership class or coordinating/facilitating a leadership program in addition to "real" job duties; or
- networking with leadership educators to learn about the profession

Experimentation. Experimentation is the space in which one tries on parts, or all of the leadership educator identity, creating multiple versions of him or herself to determine what feels right (Ibarra, 1999). In experimenting, the leadership educator often imitates others who are more experienced in the field and then selects what he or she considers to be best practices that become part their own identity (Ibarra, 1999). Questions the individual may consider in this space include:

- How do different aspects of this identity fit with my values, beliefs, and styles?
- How do I feel in each version of my leadership educator identity?
- What will be core components of my leadership educator professional identity?
- To what extent do I want to delve deeper into developing this identity?

In the space of Experimentation, determining personal fit with the professional identity of leadership educator is essential. As an individual changes values, beliefs, styles, circumstances, and contexts, the congruence of the professional identity of leadership educator may also change. A person's professional identity can be impacted by a conflict between personal agency and social expectations of the field (Coldron & Smith, 1999), as well as the fit between one's values and skills and their environment (Deppoliti, 2008). Because individuals are ever changing, they may try on different components of the identity throughout their professional lifespan to see if they fit as well as revisit the identity. Experiences in the Experimentation space might include:

- taking on a new leadership educator role (job, volunteer role in the field), or
- getting an advanced degree in leadership education/studies.

Validation. Both self-validation and validation from others is critical for entering the Validation space. Questions to consider in this space include:

- Who validates my identity?
- What counts as validation?
- What are the criteria for having this identity?
- What do I need to do to demonstrate or prove this identity?
- When can I claim this identity?

Coldron and Smith (1999) asserted that being a teacher is a function of both the individual and others seeing that person as a teacher which results in social legitimization. The Leader Member Exchange Theory can also shed light on professional identity validation (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). An individual in the in-group might receive benefits not afforded to other members, such as opportunities to publish or present, or access to a job or role. These opportunities may factor into the extent to which an individual feels validated in their leadership educator identity. Experiences in the Validation space might include:

- presenting at a conference;
- writing an article; or
- heading up a campus based initiative on leadership.

Confirmation. Within the Confirmation space, an individual has attained full membership within a leadership education community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Questions the individual may consider in this space include:

- How will I know when I am confirmed?

- What are the expectations of me as a confirmed member of this professional identity to enhance our profession's understanding of the leadership educator experience?

One's language around professional identity changes in the Confirmation space. For example, one author described her professional identity evolution as going from someone 'who teaches preschool' toward 'being a preschool teacher' (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). In this space, a person may call herself a "leadership educator" rather than "someone who teaches leadership or runs a leadership program." Additionally, identifying as a member of the leadership educator community in the Confirmation space brings new responsibilities such as mentoring and socializing others as well as contributing to the field - all elements laden with power. Mentoring others involves providing advice, guidance, and support to new professionals to help develop them as professionals (Smith, 2007), whereas professional socialization entails passing on the expectations and norms of the professional role (Zarshenas et al., 2014). Socialization includes creating training and development opportunities for those newer to the field of leadership education and passing on both the content and culture of leadership education. Finally, those in the Confirmation space are also potentially writing the books, models, and theories that have shaped or are shaping the field. Not only are these individuals in this space being confirmed, but they validate and confirm others. Experiences in the Confirmation space might include:

- publishing literature for the field;
- taking on senior roles in the field (professional association roles);
- serving on an editorial board or as a proposal reviewer;
- serving on a dissertation/thesis committee;
- serving as a role of educator of leadership educators; and
- speaking at conferences.

Influences and Critical Incidents

There are many ongoing influences and critical incidents that can affect the movement and occupation of identity spaces of leadership educators. Ongoing influences are factors that have a continued presence in one's life and do not manifest as single events. Critical incidents, on the other hand, are "key events in an individual's life... around which pivotal decisions revolve. They provoke the individual into selecting particular kinds of actions which lead in particular direction" (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985, p. 58). For example, being hired for a formal role or position as a leadership educator may move one forward from Experimentation to Validation. On the other hand, rejection of a manuscript for publication may cause someone to doubt their contributions and validity in the field, thus moving them from the identity space of Confirmation back to Validation.

Influences. Professional identity formation can be impacted by a number of influences. These include one's own personal identities, personal agency, context, socialization, community of practice, perceptions of a leadership educator, and expertise.

Personal Identities. Individuals have many identities beyond that of a professional identity. These other personal identities can include racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, religious identity, sexual orientation identity, political identity, and many others. Someone who

occupies any space within a leadership educator identity process is likely to have his or her personal identities, especially the salient ones, conflict or align with each other and ultimately impact his or her professional identity (Mishler, 1999, as cited in Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). There are “unavoidable interrelationships between professional and personal identities” (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006, p. 603).

As one’s professional identity is validated and confirmed, the educator receives an element of prestige that comes with privilege (Benveniste, 1987 as cited in Slay & Smith, 2011). But, those with personal identities that are targeted may be given less privilege and prestige in their professional identity (Slay & Smith, 2011). For example, being a female professor teaching leadership in a business school heavily comprised of male professors may influence how that woman sees herself as an educator, which may be different if this same female was teaching leadership in a school of education comprised primarily of female professors.

Personal Agency. Personal agency is the “capacity to exercise control over one’s own thought processes, motivation, and action” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Those with high personal agency set high goals, have high levels of motivation and perseverance, and a perceived ability to anticipate outcomes (Bandura, 1989). Exploring personal agency is a way for educators to understand and justify their experiences (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

An important element of personal agency is self-efficacy: one’s belief that he or she can fulfill a role or task (Bandura, 1989). Those with high self-efficacy may experience their professional identity formation differently than those with low self-efficacy. For example, someone who believes in their ability to write an article, get it published, and present on it might be more likely to set those goals and persevere. That person then would have a different professional experience than someone who did not set those goals because of low self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is affected by the process of individuals seeing themselves as educators and then others seeing them as educators resulting in “acquiring and then redefining an identity which is socially legitimated” (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 712). Therefore, to be a leadership educator, one must believe he or she can complete the tasks and fulfill the role of leadership educator.

Perceptions of a Leadership Educator. Fagermoen’s (1997) symbolic interactionism occurs when an individual acts a certain way based on his or her own interpretations of meaning derived from social interaction. Thus, people ascribe their own meanings and interpretation to the identity of leadership educator leading to no objective definition of what constitutes a leadership educator. This individualized social construction of identity (Adams et al., 2006) may impact what each person perceives each identity space to look like and the developmental process of movement between those spaces, as well as their own actions toward identity development.

The role of symbolic interactionism and identity development is further complicated by the notion that professional identity formation does not just take into account who an individual is and the meanings they give to the leadership educator identity at only one moment in time, but also who he or she wants to become in the context of their changing meanings ascribed to the leadership educator identity. Conway (2001) refers to this process as anticipatory reflection. Being able to imagine oneself as a leadership educator may lead to motivation to achieve that professional identity (or even status). Yet, the changing meanings of what constitutes a

leadership educator can impact if, and to what extent, someone sees oneself- or continues to see oneself- as a leadership educator in the future.

Expertise. Kogan (2000) indicated that possessing subject matter expertise impacts one's professional identity, and that receiving more professional education may result in identifying more strongly with the profession. Additionally, Kozminsky (2011) identified previous experience as a teacher (and the resulting impact on sense of professional efficacy) as a factor influencing professional identity construction. In regard to the leadership educator identity, a person might be emboldened by attending conferences, taking courses, reading literature, and participating in further training and development opportunities as a way to expand expertise. The more knowledge one has about leadership, the greater one's belief or confidence may be in their own capability of executing the expectations set forth in that identity.

Community of Practice. A community of practice is a group of people who share an interest or profession, who engage in collective learning together (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Professional communities of practice are defined by a shared domain of interest (e.g., leadership education), a community (engagement in shared activities that allow for interaction, learning, and accountability to one another), and shared practices (stories, resources, or ways of doing thing) (Wenger et al., 2002). Kozminsky (2011) suggested that it is the community of practice that constructs the culture, perceptions, values, norms, and expectations of the profession and ultimately what constitutes professional identity. Lave and Wenger (1991) called those in the community of practice who shape these forces "old timers" (p. 29). It is their stories of experience that construct meaning and expectations of community membership. "Newcomers", or novices in the community enter from a peripheral perspective; as they participate in the activities of the community, they gain mastery of knowledge and skills that move them toward full participation and legitimacy as a member of the community (p. 29). To be a leader educator identity begins with seeing oneself as a member or participant of (or belonging to) the broader professional community.

Socialization. Obtaining a professional identity goes beyond acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for the role. One must learn the values, norms, attitudes, perspectives, and language to make meaning of experiences and interactions as well as act appropriately in a professional context (Perna & Hudgins, 1996 as cited in Page, 2004). Internalizing this learning comes from socialization to the profession (Kreitner & Kinick, 2004). Formal socialization processes may include participation in a graduate program on leadership studies, taking part in a structured orientation program to the profession at a conference, or attending a professional conference altogether. Informal processes may include joining a professional association, receiving mentoring from a leadership educator (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Clark, 2006), reading leadership literature, and connecting with other leadership educators through social networks.

In general, many educators who do not become adequately socialized tend to leave the profession after a few years (Dewert et al., 2003, Johnson, 2004, & Wong, 2004 as cited in Nasser-Abu Ahlija & Fresko, 2010). This means that those who are newer to the profession and have lower levels of socialization may leave before their full professional identity can be realized. Further, a person who experiences high socialization into the leadership education profession may be more likely to see themselves as a leadership educator than someone who has not been as socialized.

Context. Contextual factors matter in professional identity formation (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010); especially for new educators (Archer, 2008). Context can include campus culture and leadership (Flores & Day, 2006), as well as perceptions, expectations, norms, values, and culture of the professional community (Kozminsky, 2011). Context can also include structural influences, such as the department in which a leadership course or program is situated, the number of other leadership educators on campus, and the campus-based or national networks one belongs to. These factors vary between individuals, and have direct implications on resources, support, exposure, and available opportunities. A person with a great deal of institutional support and available resources may be more supported in a leadership educator identity as the institution already values leadership. On the other hand, a person with very little institutional validation may find that identifying as a leadership educator is not the way to gain support and resources, and thus couch their work in other content areas. However, as context changes over time, individuals continually reconstruct their identity (Kozminsky, 2011).

Critical Incidents. Critical incidents are positive or negative moments that matter in one's life that result in a shift in paradigm or future action. Experiencing a critical incident can lead to one's professional identity being challenged, or a significant change in professional identity altogether (Kozminsky, 2011). Critical incidents are not just connected to professional identity development but to leadership development as well. Being able to identify and analyze critical incidents is a key strategy in authentic leadership development (Avolio & Luthens, 2006). As described in stage three of the Leadership Identity Development model (Komives, Longersbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006), those trying on the identity of leader can experience a critical incident. There are several different types of critical incidents that can occur that might impact one's professional identity formation. These include incidents that challenge or reinforce commitment, congruence, credibility, and competence, as well as create conflict.

Commitment: Does this identity suit me? Trying on a professional identity - or even components of it - can conjure up a variety of emotions for an individual. It can feel like a calling, a challenge, or even something out of alignment. The concept of a critical incident around commitment entails having an experience that reinforces or challenges one's commitment to continuing through the identity formation process in pursuit of Confirmation.

So, is someone more likely to stay committed to the profession and professional identity journey after a critical incident? If it is a positive critical incident, it is assumed that that the experience would contribute to an individual's perception of him or herself as a leadership educator and thus move him or her forward through the process of identity formation. For example, being asked to collaborate on a national initiative or co-author a chapter of a leadership book could potentially enhance a person's commitment to the field, and thus their identity development process, because that person feels a sense of responsibility to see the task through while at the same time serving in a role that potentially shapes the profession.

The experience of a negative critical incident may cause someone to question his or her person-vocation fit (Ehrhart & Makransky, 2007), or the fit between personal styles and expectations and those of the leadership educator role. If the identity does not fit, he or she may abandon the identity. However, Ducatt (2014) points out that as a negative critical incident is resolved, a person can develop a stronger commitment to his or her identity resulting in staying

in the identity formation process to try on the identity again. An example might include a person receiving a low performance evaluation and either questioning his or her continuation in the profession or stepping up to increase performance which commits him or her further to the identity development process.

Congruence: Do my values match those of the identity? Values embedded in the leadership educator identity may be comprised of content-related values (What do I believe leadership is?), process-oriented values (How do I believe leadership should be taught?), and expectations-related values (How do the expectations of this identity align with what I believe a leadership educator is and should do?). Any critical incident that reinforces or challenges those beliefs can impact one's professional identity formation, possibly resulting in the acceleration, slow down, or halt of one's identification as a leadership educator. For instance, if a leadership educator defines leadership as an activity or process and takes a job in which the education and practice of leadership reflects the philosophy of leadership as primarily positional in nature, this may create an incongruence within the individual, and lead to the questioning of continuing in that role. This phenomenon may be less likely to occur on a global level since there is a diverse (and sometimes contradicting) array of leadership content and a variety of ways in which leadership educators teach leadership. But, locality may matter to the extent that a person may decide that being a leadership educator is not his or her calling based on a incongruent experience at the local level and opt out of the profession altogether.

Another case of incongruence may arise when emerging professionals find their values challenged by more seasoned professionals. This may be viewed as an inevitable part of the socialization process, as the challenge is situated in a context of structural inequalities within the profession itself (Archer, 2008). Whereas some may see a values challenge by more seasoned leadership educators as something to be expected as one enters a new profession, others may find it to be too contrary (or incongruent) to their beliefs. This can impede professional identity development, or even cause one to leave the profession altogether.

Credibility: Do others believe I should have this identity? Professional credibility, or the trust and confidence bestowed by one's colleagues and constituents (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) can play an important factor in one's self-perception of their professional identity. On one hand, earning others' approval or validation can enhance one's credibility, bolstering self-confidence and propelling him or her forward through the leadership educator identity development process. On the other hand, a critical incident or conflict that breaks trust or fails to meet others' expectations may cause oneself and others to question if an individual is indeed a "real professional."

In the latter case, Clance and Imes (1978) give insight on the Imposter Syndrome, which may help explain how some professionals and aspiring professionals deal with issues of credibility. Individuals with Imposter Syndrome believe that they may not be credible or adequate; yet, they maintain an outward appearance that indicates otherwise (Pedler, 2011) so that others validate their membership in the community of practice. Take for example, a new leadership educator who has been invited to give a presentation at a conference. Before the presentation she notices that a seasoned scholar - whose work she is citing - is in attendance. Internally the presenter may feel inadequate to present on the topic, yet she "fakes" confidence in the presentation. Another example of Imposter Syndrome is leadership educator who recently

made an unethical decision and then taught a lesson on ethics. He feels he needs to “fake it” as an ethical individual or run the risk of losing credibility as someone who can teach ethics. In both examples, others may reinforce the educator’s professional identity based on the “fake” outward appearance; however, the incongruous experience internally may challenge the individual’s self-efficacy and belief that this profession is a good fit. In addition, if others in the profession do not validate an individual as a credible member of the community of practice, he or she may feel compelled to depart the field.

Competence: Do I have the knowledge to execute this identity? An individual’s perceived level of competence may impact if, and to what extent, that person sees him or herself as a leadership educator. This can include both competence with students in a teaching setting and competence with other members of the community of practice.

In regard to teaching, there is often an expectation that the educator knows more than his or her students. How much more does the educator need to know beyond what the students know? And, what if there is a component of the subject matter that the educator is just not as well versed in making the educator less competent in that area? This conflict of feeling incompetent versus the expectation of needing to be the expert (Fuller & Bown, 1975; Katz & Raths, 1992; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998 as cited in Pillen, Den Broka, & Beijjaard, 2013) may lead to self-doubt in one’s ability to be a leadership educator. On the other hand, because professional credibility can be enhanced through developing expertise (Ponte, Glazer, Dann, McCollum, Gross, & Tyrrell, et al., 2007), it might also lead to feeling pressure to gain competence to maintain leadership educator status. For example, this may occur when someone teaches or facilitates on a leadership topic he or she is not very knowledgeable in and then has students question or challenge the content in ways that the educator cannot respond adequately. This can result in feelings of incompetence and potentially challenges the confidence of the educator’s identity (i.e., Am I a good leadership educator?), and/or propel him or her to gain knowledge he or she perceives is necessary to maintain that identity.

The professional culture of a community of practice creates, conveys, and confirms expectations of competence. For example, a leadership educator presenting original research at a conference may be challenged by other members of the professional community about methodology, approach, structure, or even the topic itself. This may lead someone to question their own competence, confidence, and place along the identity development process.

Conflict: Do people outside my professional identity legitimize my identity? Critical incidents are not simply limited to occurrences inside the profession, but also to inter-professional conflicts. Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain through Social Identity Theory that individuals create personal significance by placing themselves in groups and taking on that group identity. Because groups exist in an intergroup context, they create value by comparing themselves to other groups which could lead to conflict (Hogg, 2001). If a leadership educator is somehow challenged by an external entity on the legitimacy, content, pedagogy, or some other aspect of the profession, he or she as may be propelled to claim or deny part of that professional identity. Instances involving external constituencies may lead to doubt around one’s legitimacy. It is one thing for someone within the profession to question someone’s ability and credibility and yet another to have that happen with someone outside of the profession. For example, a student affairs professional who facilitates leadership workshops may be questioned or critiqued

by an academic faculty member for not “really teaching” leadership. Or, university leaders may not view leadership studies as its own discipline, and thus question the legitimacy of faculty members teaching leadership courses as part of an academic major or minor.

When these inter-professional incidents occur, an individual in one sense may want to defend the professional identity (perhaps publicly to save face) but then change their self-perception or behaviors as a leadership educator. This may include a shift in discourse around the language used to convey meaning of the leadership educator professional identity such as a shift from student affairs professional to leadership educator or liberal arts faculty to leadership faculty. What individuals call themselves can be indicative of the way they see themselves. Or, it may include a change in pedagogy or content to legitimize both to oneself and the external entity that indeed the profession is valid.

Implications for Professional Development of Leadership Educators

This model describes leadership educator identity as a developmental process, acknowledging the importance of validating the experiences and emotions of individuals as they occupy and/or move through identity spaces. Exploring identity through a process-oriented lens can illuminate personal challenges, areas of strength, and future goals for an individual. However, the implication of the process is that the Confirmation space has value beyond the other spaces; thus, to be “confirmed” is a destination or outcome of the process. If one is valued and confirmed by the community of practice, he or she may have more competence and confidence to effectively educate others. This may lead to more sophisticated teaching. In addition, the Confirmation space is a place of full inclusion where one’s opinion and voice are valued in the profession - a place of support. Although each space is valuable, there are advantages to working towards and ultimately occupying the Confirmation space.

How then do leadership educators move towards the Confirmation space? Being able to enhance content knowledge, connect with mentors, engage in professional networks, all while exploring one’s own identity process can help move an individual towards Confirmation. While there may be few formalized paths to help one move through their identity journey, the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) and the International Leadership Association (ILA) are two examples of professional communities that foster the sharing of knowledge on leadership content and pedagogy, as well as provide spaces for leadership educators to share professional experiences. These communities are ripe for helping leadership educators make meaning of their experiences in the context of their own leadership educator identities by offering thoughtful and intentional programs and experiences.

Additionally, we believe that understanding the leadership educator identity process is important as it can contribute to recruitment and retention of leadership educators. Knowing where leadership educators come from (disciplines, experiences, knowledge fields), influences and critical incidents in their leadership educator journeys, and how leadership educators advance through their identity journey can help provide insight into better developing the capacity of leadership educators and finding meaningful ways in each identity space to retain them in the field.

Future Research. We believe there is a need is to continue to explore the leadership educator role as an explicit priority within the discourse and applied scholarship of leadership education. Future research may utilize quantitative or qualitative inquiry approaches to explore questions related to:

- leadership educator identity development, in particular the spaces, critical incidents, and influences proposed by the proposed model;
- the influence of professional identity on practice, and reciprocally how practice may influence professional identity;
- methods or pedagogical approaches for professional development that may enhance or accelerate leadership educator professional identity development;
- how professional communities and the opportunities within them (e.g., conferences, training, resources, or leadership roles) may serve as “identity workspaces” (Petriglieri, 2012, p. 298); and
- the intersections between teacher identity development and leader identity development (e.g., Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Hall, 2004; Komives et al., 2006) in order to more fully understand the role of a leadership educator.

Conclusion

The study of professional identity development dates back decades (e.g., Becker & Carper, 1956). As the field of leadership education continues to define itself, there is a need to better understand the professional identity development of leadership educators. Literature from similarly situated fields (e.g., teaching and nursing) provide a starting point for conceptualizing leadership educator professional identity. Our proposed model and suggestions for research and application offer a next step for scholarly inquiry and professional practice. We believe that as leadership educators continue to share, listen, and learn from the stories of one another’s professional journeys, we will uncover questions for inquiry that generate new ways of knowing and being. This new insight can further the construction of our own professional identities, while contributing to the larger field of leadership education.

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