

# **Leadership Educator Journeys: Expanding a Model of Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development**

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## **Abstract**

There is a great deal of literature on leadership education best-practices (e.g., curricular considerations, teaching strategies, assessment of learning). Yet, to be a leadership educator is more than having knowledge or expertise of content and pedagogy. Perceptions, experiences, and values of leadership educators comprise a professional identity that is reflective of not only what leadership educators do, but also who they are and how they view themselves within the profession. This qualitative study builds on Seemiller and Priest's (2015) Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development (LEPID) conceptual model by analyzing stories from participants of a professional leadership educator development experience. Leadership educators' identity development reflected a consistent and linear progression through the identity spaces outlined in the LEPID model, and further can be viewed through three distinct dimensional lenses (experiential, cognitive, and emotional experiences). Additionally, leadership educator identities were shaped by a particular set of ongoing influences and critical incidents; the most prevalent incident was related to feelings of inadequacy in leadership expertise and competence. Findings from this study can inform educational programs and professional associations in efforts to train and develop leadership educators.

## **Introduction**

Leadership education is considered a sub-field within Leadership Studies, which is the study of pedagogical practices that facilitate leadership learning (Andenoro et al., 2013). The term "leadership educator" may include a wide range of academic disciplines and professional practice, for example teachers (primary, secondary, and postsecondary), community educators, coaches, trainers, consultants, and student affairs professionals ("About ALE," n.d.; "LEMIG," n.d.). A common element across roles and contexts is a commitment to the development of leadership capacity of individuals, groups, organizations, and society.

Within leadership education literature, the educator is often the intended audience, rather than the subject of research. As a result, educators themselves have become the "hidden who" in contemporary leadership education scholarship (Seemiller & Priest, 2015, p. 132). However, there is a small body of descriptive research exploring leadership educator demographics (Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Jenkins, 2012; Owen, 2012). Recently, Jenkins and Owen (2016) asked

the question, “Who teaches leadership?” to offer an emerging picture of those engaged in leadership education (p. 99). Comparing demographic data across both curricular and co-curricular contexts, their findings suggest there is a need to better understand the “multiple roles and identities of leadership educators” (Jenkins & Owen, 2016, p. 99).

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) assert that professional identity can be used as an analytic lens through which to examine influences on teaching beliefs and practices, and the ways educators explain or make sense of their professional lives. In this qualitative study, we used Seemiller and Priest’s (2015) Leadership Educator Professional Identity (LEPID) model as the lens to explore leadership educators’ identities as reflected through stories of their professional journeys. Two primary research questions guided the study:

1. What do leadership educators experience within spaces of leadership educator professional identity development?
2. What factors affect one’s leadership educator identity?

## Literature Review

Usage of the term *identity* often varies in conceptual meaning and theoretical role (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Broadly, identity is defined as one’s “self-concept,” or the dynamic, multifaceted, multidimensional cognitive representations that one holds of his or her self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Identity also refers to identification with social categories, groups, or relationships (Stets & Burke, 2000) or in association to multiple, specific roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Additionally, identity is considered a representation of shared language, conventions, codes, and values within a person’s socially, historically, and culturally situated experience (Cote & Levine, 2002).

Identity has also been addressed within the leadership literature. Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) define a leader identity as “a sub-identity that an individual holds regarding his or her role as leader” (p. 183). However, this self-view is not only related to formal leadership roles, but also “how an individual comes to think of oneself as a leader” (p. 183). The process of developing a leader identity was the focus of Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen’s (2005; 2006) grounded theory study and resulting Leadership Identity Development Model (LID). The LID model illustrates developmental influences on college students’ changing view of self in relation to others that shapes their broadening view of leadership (2006). Komives et al. (2005) suggest that understanding the process of leadership identity development is “central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership” (p. 594).

Given the importance of identity development in leadership education processes, this paper turns the focus from the student to the educator in order to understand how individuals come to think of themselves as leadership educators. Because the construct of leadership educator identity is not widely discussed in leadership studies literature, we looked to the similarly situated field of teacher education for insight into what professional educator identity *is*, and how professional educator identity *is developed*. Leadership educators are similarly situated to teachers in terms of job function; thus, teacher identity development studies can be useful and informative in their application to understanding leadership educator professional

identity. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop's (2004) review of studies on teacher identity highlights a scholarly focus on the development of professional identity, characteristics of identity, and stories that (re)present professional identity. Across the research, they identified four common features that help to define teacher professional identity: (1) a dynamic, life-long learning process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences, (2) that implies both person and context, (3) consists of multiple sub-identities, (4) and involves agency; that is, teachers are active in the process of their professional development (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Professional identity is more than taking on a teaching role or educator position; it is how one sees and names him or herself (self-perception), and is recognized and regarded by others (legitimization) (Danielwicz, 2001; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). For example, a person may identify as an aspiring teacher early in their career and then after gaining experience, identify as a practicing teacher (Danielwicz, 2001). Professional identity serves as "a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be,' 'how to act,' and 'how to understand their work and their place in society'" (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Yet, these identity constructions are "deeply connected to the communities in which they learn to teach and to their interactions with colleagues, students and families as they engage in learning pedagogical practice" (Schultz & Ravich, 2013, p. 37). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) conceptualize professional identity development as a process of "becoming" within various communities of practice. Membership in a community of practice provides a set of relationships and standards of practice that define competence or expertise, and participation in those relationships and practices legitimizes and propels one's trajectory of membership within the community (1998).

**Conceptual Framework.** Our study positions the field of leadership education broadly as a community of practice, and assumes that participants are situated as members of multiple sub-communities within and outside of leadership education (e.g., professional associations, organizations, universities). Thus, their stories of experience offer insight into relationships and practices that have shaped their own process of "becoming." Seemiller and Priest's (2015) LEPID Model (Table 1) provides a conceptual framework to explore leadership educators' professional identity and serves as the lens by which to examine stories of the professional journeys of leadership educators.

Table 1.

*Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development Model Identity Spaces*  
(Seemiller & Priest, 2015)

<u>Identity Space</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Exploration	The space in which an individual explores if, and to what extent, he or she might take on the professional identity of leadership educator.	Participating in professional development to learn about leadership, reading leadership literature, volunteering to assist with leadership education experiences in addition to a main job role, and networking with leadership educators to learn more about and connect with the profession
Experimentation	The space in which one tries on parts, or all, of the leadership educator identity.	Taking on a formal leadership educator role, getting an advanced degree that prepares one for the field of leadership education
Validation	The space in which one identifies as a leadership educator, yet engages in self-validation and/or seeks validation from others to maintain or enhance professional identity.	Presenting at conferences, writing articles, or heading up a campus based leadership initiative
Confirmation	The space in which one guides less seasoned professionals in developing their leadership educator identities.	Contributing literature to the field, taking on senior professionals roles, serving on editorial boards or reviewing proposals, serving on dissertation/thesis committees, teaching other leadership educators, or speaking at conferences

The model also highlights influences that may impact how one moves and occupies identity spaces. Influences are ongoing factors that persist throughout an extended period of time and are not single events. Table 2 provides a description of these influences.

Table 2.

*Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development Model Influences*  
(Seemiller & Priest, 2015)

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<u>Type</u>	<u>Description</u>
Personal Identities	Personal identities, especially salient ones, including those related to race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability, etc.
Personal Agency	Personal agency (self-efficacy, confidence, or beliefs in one's ability to succeed) as a leadership educator.
Perceptions of a Leadership Educator	Acting in accordance with one's own definition of leadership educator.
Expertise	Expertise in leadership subject matter.
Community of Practice	Networks of peers who provide support, guidance, collaboration to others in or entering the field.
Socialization	Learning the values, norms, and culture of the profession in order to act in alignment with professional expectations.
Context	Campus culture, hierarchies, reporting lines, funding and staffing structures, and leadership.

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In addition to ongoing influences, critical incidents can play a role in leadership educator identity development. Critical incidents are “key events in an individual’s life ... around which pivotal decisions revolve” (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985, p. 58). Critical incidents may elicit internal questions that either confirm or challenge one’s leadership educator identity. Table 3 outlines each type of critical incident and associated internal questions.

Table 3.  
*Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development Model Critical Incidents*  
*(Seemiller & Priest, 2015)*

<u>Type</u>	<u>Internal Question</u>
Commitment	Does this identity suit me?
Congruence	Do my values match those of the identity?
Credibility	Do others believe I should have this identity?
Competence	Do I have the knowledge to execute this identity?
Conflict	Do people outside my professional identity legitimize my identity?

## Methods

The assumptions of contemporary perspectives of identity (e.g., Rodgers & Scott, 2008) align with an interpretive inquiry paradigm: our realities are constructed through social interactions that are historically, politically, and culturally situated, and the understanding of reality is constructed through human perception and interpretation (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). As researchers, we acknowledge that we are simultaneously experiencing our own professional leadership educator identity journeys along with the participants. Our perceptions of ourselves, beliefs about leadership, and experiences as professionals in the field of leadership education have informed the study design, and also our interpretation and representation of the research.

**Data Collection.** The study participants were attendees of a national professional development symposium for student affairs and faculty leadership educators. The symposium consisted of presentations, group discussions, activities, and a personal narratives project, which was the focus of this study. On the first day of the symposium, the symposium co-chair (also a lead investigator and author of the study), introduced the personal narratives project, which involved writing and sharing a story about paradigm shifting “a-ha moments” and/or experiences that have shaped participants’ leadership educator identities. The co-chair shared a personal leadership journey story to set the tone for what was expected. Participants were given 2.5 days to write a story that when read aloud would equal about five minutes in length. On the third day, participants shared and reflected on their final stories with a small group of their peers. Participants were not invited to participate in the study until after they had completed the entire activity to allow for authentic and pressure-free involvement. Those who consented to the study shared either their typed or handwritten stories with the co-chair. Photocopied stories were transcribed into text documents; all stories were then uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Individual stories ranged from two to four pages of single spaced text.

Twenty-two of the 48 participants at the symposium consented to participate in the study. For the purpose of analysis, each participant was classified as one of four participant types based

on a certain set of criteria. New professionals (NP) included those with 0 to 2 years of professional experience in leadership, whereas emerging professionals (EP) included 3-7 years of experience and seasoned professionals (SP) included more than 7 years of experience. Career professional (CP) was a special classification for those who had more than 10 years of experience and a record of publications and/or extensive professional involvement. Because we included the criteria of publishing and/or professional involvement, not all participants with more than 10 years of experience were classified as career professionals and thus were deemed seasoned professionals. To confirm the appropriate classification for each participant, we used information provided in LinkedIn and/or institutional bios. In addition to their professional classifications, each participant was assigned a number for analysis and reporting (e.g. NP3 references New Professional 3, a specific individual). Participant information is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4.  
*Participant Information*

<u>Participant Type</u>	<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Number</u>
New Professional (NP)	0-2 years experience	6
Emerging Professional (EP)	3-7 years experience	7
Seasoned Professional (SP)	More than 7 years experience	4
Career Professional (CP)	More than 10 years experience; publication record and/or professional involvement	5

Because participants' stories reflected entire careers to date, we opted not to use information such as their current institution and geographic region for analysis. It is likely that over the course of their careers, participants worked at a variety of institutions and lived in multiple geographic areas.

**Data Analysis.** Deductive content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014; Klenke, 2008) was utilized to examine and categorize these stories through the LEPID model. We used a variety of collaborative analytical tools to prepare for and conduct coding, including note-taking, questioning, and drawing from personal experience to explore possibilities of meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each researcher conducted initial coding on one story using an *a priori* coding schematic informed by the themes within the LEPID model. Codes are listed in Table 5. At the same time, we remained open to emergent codes as one aim of this study was to clarify and/or expand the LEPID model. Next, an NVivo query of interrater agreement was used as a basis for discussing codes and establishing interpretive convergence (Saldaña, 2009).

The remaining stories were coded using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), comparing data within each story and comparing codes and emerging themes across stories. Two additional codes emerged from the data: the Pre-Exploration space, which

included any leadership experiences prior to becoming a leadership educator and Opportunity as an Influence, which included opportunities to enter the professional field of leadership education (also noted in Table 5). We used interpretive and reflexive memoing, as well as peer debriefing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to ensure a trustworthy process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and thus expanding on the initial LEPID model.

Table 5.  
*Coding Scheme*

<u>Identity Spaces</u>	<u>Critical Incidents</u>	<u>Influences</u>
*Pre-Exploration	Commitment	Personal Identities
Exploration	Congruence	Personal Agency
Experimentation	Credibility	Perceptions of Leadership Educator
Validation	Competence	Expertise
Confirmation	Conflict	Community of Practice
		Socialization
		Context
		*Opportunity

\*Emergent Codes

Each story element from all 22 stories was coded by participant type to analyze for themes as a way to make meaning of who occupies particular identity spaces. Quotations from 18 of the 22 stories are utilized to provide evidence of the findings in each theme as well as highlight participants' own words describing their identity journeys.

## Results

The analysis yielded three main findings, or themes: (1) Previous leadership experience plays a role in shaping leadership educator identities, (2) spaces of identity are multi-faceted and complex, and (3) (a) ongoing influences and (b) short-term critical incidents impact leadership educator identity development.

**Theme 1: Pre-Exploration Leadership Experience.** All 22 participants noted their former leader experiences laid the groundwork for entering into leadership education as a profession. SP3 exemplifies this by saying, "Because of my career path (military) I focused on practice long before I ever tried to teach." Leader experiences differed dramatically from holding a significant leader role to not getting a desired leader role. Participants discussed how their leader experiences shaped who they are and what they believe as leadership educators, resulting in their desire to create open access to leader experiences for students, correct mistakes they made as leaders, and give to students the opportunities they had or wished they had. These experiences are reflective of an emergent Pre-Exploration space in the LEPID model, which appears to be foundational for the participants before even becoming a leadership educator.



**Theme 2: Complexity of Spaces of Identity.** The identity spaces from the conceptual LEPID model were confirmed through the study; however, these spaces appear to include multiple dimensions that were not identified in the original model. The dimensions include:

- **Experiential:** *What do I do in each space?* Participants' administrative, operational, and applied experiences;
- **Cognitive:** *What do I know in each space?* Participants' perceptions around the concept of leadership; and
- **Emotional:** *How do I feel in each space?* Participants' feelings about being a leadership educator.

In the following section, we use participant quotes to illustrate how these dimensions emerged within each of the identity spaces.

**Exploration Space.** Exploration is the space in which an individual explores if, and to what extent, he or she might take on the professional identity of leadership educator.

**Experiential.** In the Exploration space, two types of experiential experiences stood out that helped new leadership educators explore the profession. The first was having other leadership educators who inspired, motivated, encouraged, and even urged them into the profession. EP3 reflected on entering the field by saying, "After some soul searching and mentor conversations, I had an eureka moment! I could 'help students,' just like all of my mentors and professors helped me."

Second, exposure to leadership literature helped those exploring leadership education as a profession. CP4 reflected on the profound impact of discovering theories early in their career in saying:

With a grounding in the relational leadership model and the 5 practices, I began to breathe more deeply. Burns. Bass. Hersey & Blanchard. Greenleaf. So many others. And then the point of no return: Wheatley, Rost and Heifetz. In quick succession I found my room in my new home.

**Cognitive.** The cognitive dimension demonstrates the evolving perception of leadership. Those who are "new" appeared to search for black and white leadership answers, whereas those embedded deeply in the field appeared more okay with the ever-changing nature of leadership and an absence of an agreed-upon professional definition. Two new professionals commented on their desire to know more or have more answers about leadership. NP6 said, "Some days I get incredibly frustrated by the concept of leadership education, especially on days when I feel like I have more questions about leadership than certain answers." And, NP2 said, "As a leadership educator I have a kindergarten vocabulary and I still find that I learn as much from my students, and they learn as much from each other, as they learn from me."

**Emotional.** Feelings emerged for many when entering the field of leadership education. These centered on being unsure about their career choice and seeing if the experience aligned with who they were and what they wanted. NP5 noted, "I decided to apply for a graduate teaching assistantship. I was interested in teaching; I wasn't sure if it

was my passion, but it was something I enjoyed, and perhaps something I would pursue as a career if it felt right.”

**Experimentation Space.** Experimentation is the space in which one tries on parts, or all, of the leadership educator identity.

*Experiential.* The experiential dimension of the Experimentation space was mostly focused around trying out a new leadership job, which SP1 wrote was “exciting and little scary at the same time” upon entering the field. There were a number of leadership educators who came into the field, left for another career path, and then returned. Others had a lengthy career in another occupation and came into their leadership educator roles later in their careers, and still others who were in their first professional leadership jobs right out of a graduate program at the time they were writing these stories.

*Cognitive.* The Experimentation space was filled with comments from participants not questioning what leadership was and seeking answers like those in the Exploration space, but acknowledging how difficult it might be to get clear-cut answers about leadership. Many did not define leadership specifically. EP4 noted that leadership is “messy,” and EP6 believes that leadership is not “one size fits all.”

*Emotional.* Stories in the Experimentation space reflected how participants felt about being a leadership educator. Many stories centered on being able to identify as a leadership educator after having previously done leadership development in other roles. So, it was not a matter of engaging in leadership education for the first time, but knowingly taking on a formal leadership educator role. EP6 noted: This journey is just beginning for me, but I want to start to add to the literature and research, empirically and quantitatively, what I have experienced throughout my leadership journey and what I have witnessed with many student experiences on a yearly basis at the college campuses I have worked at.

**Validation Space.** Validation is the space in which one identifies as a leadership educator, yet engages in self-validation and/or seeks validation from others to maintain or enhance professional identity.

*Experiential.* Those in the Validation space highlighted experiences with conferred leadership. SP2 wrote about an experience in confirmation in saying: One of my most profound moments when it occurred to me that I am a leader, and a leader who is getting noticed by others, was when [Organization] reached out, asking me to serve as the Regional Coordinator for the largest region in the association.

*Cognitive.* Comments related to leadership in the Validation space, whether by participants who occupied the space at the time of writing their stories or those who reflected on being in this space at one point in their careers, reflected direct language from current models and theories, as if they had put forth what they had memorized from the literature. They used words such as contextual, inclusive, empowering, process-

oriented, and less positional to describe leadership. These terms are prevalent among a variety of contemporary leadership models, such as the Relational Leadership Model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013) and Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (Shankman, Allen, & Haber-Curran, 2015).

**Emotional.** The emotional dimension was prevalent with seasoned professionals in the Validation space who contemplated their feeling or belief that they were truly leadership educators. SP4 shared a view of self-validation in saying, “[I need] to accept that I don’t have it all figured out while still realizing that I can provide information of value.” Validation also came from others, as EP4 pointed out, “They [faculty members] were persistent, and I started to think of myself as an academic, or at least as someone who had the potential to become one.” However, some participants questioned what validation as a leadership educator might mean for them. For example, EP3 said: It took me a while to become comfortable with labeling myself as a leadership educator – I just have hesitations. Leadership educator as an identity inherently assigns me with authority, a position, and I would rather like to think I am a person, along for the ride, to learn from other while also imparting my wisdom.

**Confirmation Space.** Confirmation is the space in which more seasoned professionals guide less seasoned professionals in confirming their leadership educator identities.

**Experiential.** Many career professionals and some seasoned professionals discussed publishing, professional involvement, and about how they had connections to prominent leadership scholars.

**Cognitive.** Both seasoned and career professionals shared views of leadership as far more complex than those in other spaces. Instead of just saying leadership was complex, they offered thoughts that reflected complexity. CP1 noted wanting to eliminate the words “leader” and “follower”, while SP3 highlighted the view that leadership can be both good or bad and that leadership definitions should focus on “inherent good vs. evil (wickedness, depravity, etc.).”

**Emotional.** Some career professionals also discussed their own sense of self in which they had accepted who they were as professionals. CP1 commented about “feeling comfortable in my own skin,” whereas CP2 noted being at a place to “forgive myself for past leadership failings.” And CP4 noted that their leadership identity journey consisted of “finding my own way.” These individuals did not make reference to conferring others but about what it felt like to finally arrive as a leadership educator.

**Theme 3a: Influences on Identity Development.** Influences are ongoing factors that play a role in one’s leadership educator identity development. For many participants, influences were not singular events, but perspectives, experiences, and external factors that continued over time. The LEPID model outlined seven influences on one’s professional identity including personal identities, personal agency, context, socialization, community of practice, perceptions of a leadership educator, and expertise (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Data from this study revealed an additional category of influence, opportunity, indicative of opportunities to participate in

roles, experiences, and positions related to leadership education. Although leadership educators discussed all eight influences, the three prominent influences included expertise, opportunity, and community of practice.

**Expertise.** First, many participants felt they did not have enough expertise to be a leadership educator, reflecting more than just a one-time incident in which a leadership educator would not be able to adequately answer a question in a particular situation. The lack of expertise is reflective of a deeper issue: the absence of training and preparation to adequately engage in leadership education as a profession. Not only did many participants feel they lacked training, they also did not know what they did not know, including where to find information. EP4 exemplified this feeling:

And when I'd talk to colleagues about their experiences ... They seemed to have this unending knowledge that I was unaware of. Where should I find resources? Where could I find the time to become as knowledgeable as my colleagues seemed to be?

Another issue related to expertise is the seemingly never-ending cycle of knowledge.

Once a participant would feel armed with content, he or she would realize that there was so much more to know. NP3 said, "It is the classic case of the more you know, the more you actually realize you don't know." EP7 added that every time they tried to learn more about leadership, they would become "an expert once again, of a wide breadth of leadership knowledge but soon came to realize it was lacking depth."

The leadership educators who were deemed as campus experts by others felt the pressure to be the institutional leadership authority, even if they did not believe they had the expertise. EP3 wrote, "I was the only person on a campus of 2,000 students doing leadership programs for '10 hours' a week with no leadership knowledge." And EP4 added:

People referred to me as the "expert" on campus ... When in reality I was the person with limited leadership experience and some opportunities for professional development in the area ... I had limited experience, while everyone else had none. In short, I was the best-case scenario in an already bleak leadership picture.

**Opportunity.** Another ongoing influence that impacted individuals' leadership educator journeys was simply an opportunity to be a leadership educator. Although opportunity may appear to be a critical incident (for example, a job opened, someone took it, and that person was now a leadership educator), many did not experience opportunity in such a linear or defined way. Opportunity was described more as ongoing experiences in which educators veered down different career paths to eventually get to their present position or role. This was evident when participants indicated that they did not initially set out to be leadership educators. There were alternate paths or opportunities that presented themselves to these individuals; and for personal and/or professional reasons, they went down a new career path. SP3 noted, "Becoming a leadership educator was never an explicit end goal."

Participants described their professional journeys as fluid. Rather than a moment of calling, their path to becoming a leadership educator grew over time. NP4 said:

I know there was not one moment when I actively chose to become a leadership educator or a student affairs professional or to do leadership work. I can't tell you about the weather that day, or who was with me, or the revelatory thoughts that accompanied this professional and personal declaration.

Some participants discussed seeking out opportunities to do leadership education, often by holding other jobs in student affairs and then volunteering to staff leadership events. Having volunteered at leadership events, some individuals liked the leadership work better than their "real jobs" and moved over to more prominent roles in leadership education. CP3 indicated:

Because we always needed extra staff at retreats, I assisted with them in my free time. It gave me more opportunities to learn how to be a more effective leader and think about how to teach skills and concepts to other.

**Community of Practice.** The data confirmed that the presence of a community of practice was influential to the participants' leadership educator identity journeys. Peers, both on and off campus, were identified as providing a network of support, being especially true for seasoned and career professionals who discussed specifically the value of having mentors at the onset of their careers. CP3 discussed the importance of mentorship in saying:

I worked with two women who both were/are awesome mentors and had a great influence on me ... They both made certain to introduce me to others in the field of student affairs and, particularly, to those doing leadership education. These women are still my mentors to this day.

These mentoring relationships contributed to a sense of belonging in the field and influenced participants' perspectives of themselves and on professional practice. CP1 recalled how a mentor ignited passion: "[My mentor] helped me to turn my begrudging yes to teach leadership to a passion for leadership development and teaching leadership. I am forever indebted to him." Finally, mentoring was not just seen as being helped by those with more experience. Mentoring was a way to ensure the sustainability of the profession and professional development. SP1 put it as "I'm sort of intimidated by those who have been studying leadership for years but also inspired to walk in their footsteps."

**Theme 3b: Critical Incidents in Identity Development.** Critical incidents also play a role in the identity development journeys of leadership educators. Although there were some instances of critical incidents that were positive and led to the support or confirmation of participants as leadership educators, overwhelmingly their stories reflected incidents that challenged them to re-think if they should be in the profession at all. Participants identified examples of all types of critical incidents from the LEPID model, however incidents related to competence were overwhelmingly the most prevalent.

**Competence.** By far, the primary critical incident participants identified was a fear of being found out – that their students and/or colleagues would discover or realize that they were not competent to be in leadership education (whether that was true or not). Many of the examples related to competence were reflective of critical incidents that had not yet occurred; rather, the

leadership educators feared they might occur. Participants made reference to the fear and anxiety of being found out to be a fraud. The feeling of incompetence was apparent especially with less seasoned professionals as evidenced by comments such as EP1 saying, “I ... suffered a bit from imposter syndrome. Always waiting on someone to call me out because I wasn't actually a leadership person.” NP5 wrote, “I am supposed to be a ‘master’ of this thing we call leadership, so I better fake it till I make it, I suppose!” And EP4 shared, “When would they figure out that I was an impostor? When would they figure out that I didn't have all of the answers, and sometimes didn't understand where others were getting theirs?” When more seasoned leadership educators reflected back on their journeys, they also pointed out the feelings of incompetence they had as newer professionals. CP1 noted, “What in the world did I know about leadership that gave me the ‘authority’ to be teaching this stuff?”

## Discussion

In pursuit of our research questions of (1) What do leadership educators experience within spaces of leadership educator professional identity development?, and (2) What factors affect one's leadership educator identity?, we were able to examine and confirm an existing professional identity development model for leadership educators (LEPID model). Yet, what emerged was far more complex and robust than initially envisioned. Through qualitative analysis, we uncovered additional components of leadership educator identity, resulting in a more holistic understanding of identity spaces and discernment about the impact of experiences on one's professional identity development.

**Role of *Leader* in Leadership Educator.** Not one leadership educator commented on their professional journey without reflecting on their prior leadership experience. Most discussed the impact of holding a leadership role or being conferred by others as a leader, while some also described failing as a leader. These leadership experiences served as a foundation to their identities as leadership educators. Our findings suggest a need to further explore the relationship between leader identity development and leadership education professional identity development. The leadership educator role is unique, as other types of educators may not readily shape their professional identities around the content area they teach, such as a math teacher also identifying as a mathematician. Understanding the intersection between leader identity and leadership educator professional identity is critical in the sense that leadership educators' experiences as a leader may affect how they view and teach leadership.

**Complexity of Identity Spaces.** One of the study's initial aims involved the application of the LEPID model to stories shared by leadership educators about their professional journeys to discern the extent of the model's accuracy. We found that the lived experiences of the participants reflected the proposed spaces of identity development, and the findings demonstrated a need to add complexity, resulting in three dimensions that define each space. Table 6 includes the updated LEPID model that incorporates dimensionality into identity spaces.

Table 6.

*Updated Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development Model*

<u>Identity Space</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Experiential:</u> <u>What do I do?</u>	<u>Emotional:</u> <u>How do I feel?</u>	<u>Cognitive:</u> <u>What do I know?</u>
Exploration: <i>Will it fit for me?</i>	The space in which an individual explores if, and to what extent, he or she might take on the professional identity of leadership educator.	Participating in professional development to learn about leadership, reading leadership literature, volunteering to assist with leadership education experiences in addition to a main job role, and networking with leadership educators to learn more about and connect with the profession.	Feeling unsure about leadership education as a career, questioning whether leadership education could be a passion.	Searching for black and white answers about what leadership is, trying to clarify an understanding of the ever-changing nature of leadership and an absence of an agreed-upon professional definition.
Experimentation: <i>Does it fit for me?</i>	The space in which one tries on parts, or all, of the leadership educator identity.	Taking on a formal leadership educator role, getting an advanced degree that prepares one for the field of leadership education.	Naming one's own professional identity as a leadership educator, especially for those having done leadership education without calling it leadership education.	Acknowledging how difficult it might be to get clear-cut answers about what leadership is.
Validation: <i>Do others think it fits?</i>	The space in which one identifies as a leadership educator, yet engages in self-validation and/or seeks validation	Presenting at conferences, writing articles, or heading up a campus based leadership initiative.	Contemplating the feeling or belief that one is truly a leadership educator, engaging in behaviors of self-validation	Using existing models and theories to come to an understanding of what leadership is.

	from others to maintain or enhance professional identity.		or seeking validation from others to confirm one's leadership educator identity.	
Confirmation: <i>How do I validate others?</i>	The space in which one guides less seasoned professionals in developing their leadership educator identities.	Contributing literature to the field, taking on senior professional roles, serving on editorial boards or reviewing proposals, serving on dissertation/thesis committees, teaching other leadership educators, or speaking at conferences.	Feeling a sense of self-acceptance as a leadership educator and passing that to others.	Offering views and perspectives of leadership that reflect complex thinking about leadership.

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The complexity of spaces provides a robust framework with which to better understand elements of leadership educator professional identity development and anticipate professional development needs of both individual educators and the broader leadership education community of practice. Battey and Franke (2008) point out that professional identity informs both the skills one seeks to develop and ultimately informs professional practice. By helping leadership educators understand the identity development process and the spaces they occupy, they may be able to better make meaning of their professional identities. It can be validating to put a name on an experience and realize that one is not alone in thinking or feeling certain ways throughout the professional journey.

There is also an underlying assumption that moving toward the Confirmation space could lead to more complex thinking, effective practice, and a greater feeling of self-worth as a professional as evidenced by the seasoned and career professionals in this study occupying the Confirmation space. New and emerging professionals may benefit from seeking out experiences that advance their professional perspectives and intentionally move them on a trajectory towards the Confirmation space.

**Process for Identity Development.** There are four identity spaces of the LEPID model, each with three dimensions. The complexity of identity challenges the notion that there is a direct route for identity development and that somehow one always brings their whole self from space to space. It is possible that leadership educators could occupy different dimensions and spaces of professional identity simultaneously. For example, an educator may be advanced in terms of content knowledge about leadership (Cognitive dimension for the Validation space) but novice in



terms of holding a role of leadership educator (Experiential dimension for the Experimentation space).

Despite the fluidity that can be present across spaces and dimensions, many participants' stories in this study demonstrated alignment by occupying all dimensions of the same identity space at the same time based on their professional experience. For example, most new professionals' stories reflected the Experiential, Cognitive, and Emotional dimensions associated with the Exploration space, whereas more seasoned professionals reflected all three dimensions associated with the Validation and Confirmation spaces. Our findings indicate that leadership educator identity development is likely a multi-dimensional linear process in which one moves from Exploration to Confirmation. This relatively linear projection can be informative for institutions, organizations, and associations in creating professional development opportunities that help advance new and emerging leadership educators through the identity spaces.

**Lack of Training and Expertise.** Expertise is implicit to one's professional identity (Kogan, 2000). Given that both expertise as an ongoing influence and competence as a critical incident were discussed among participants more than any other component related to professional identity, it appears that many of these educators have not felt prepared or knowledgeable enough to teach students to be effective leaders. Nearly all participants pointed out that they received little to no training in leadership education, yet were thrust into a role in which they had to serve as leadership educators, especially early in their careers. Many suffered from the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), and approached their roles in a "fake it till you make it" manner. But, under that facade, they feared being found out by colleagues, students, or administrators that they were somehow not qualified to be teaching leadership. The fear of being found out only added to their already existent internal questioning of their ability to effectively teach leadership to begin with. Although fear and doubt can be part of the professional developmental process, it is critical to help leadership educators move beyond their fear to develop the competence and confidence that can contribute to both effective teaching and advancing in their professional identity development. Expertise has been linked to higher quality level of explaining information and clarifying misinterpretations of content with students (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000), greater confidence to execute identity related tasks (Seemiller & Priest, 2015), and a greater connection to the profession (Kogan, 2000).

Some strategies for enhancing expertise and competence include (1) increasing access to resources such as lesson plans, curriculum, and best practices, (2) providing training in both leadership content and high-impact practices and pedagogy for leadership development, and (3) fostering connections with other professionals for networking and idea sharing.

**Mentoring as Vital to Identity Development.** The importance of mentors in the professional lives of leadership educators was also highlighted by the findings. Mentors included former faculty members, colleagues, as well as more established professionals in the field. The seasoned and career professionals connected mentorship with what propelled them, guided them, and supported them in their careers. This finding is not surprising, as mentoring can provide great benefits for those being mentored such as increasing one's capacity to face new challenges and increasing one's effectiveness (Holloway, 2001) and proficiency (Kilburg & Hockett, 2007; Watson, 2006). Yet, finding a mentor can be a complex and challenging process, especially

being the only leadership educator on a campus or not being connected to seasoned or career professionals from other institutions. Rather than relying on an organic mentorship process to hopefully emerge, offering formal mentoring programs through professional associations can expand access to mentors and help foster connections. In addition, hosting role-specific communities of practice (e.g., a community solely for online academic educators, student affairs professionals, or corporate trainers) can help leadership educators make meaningful connections with others who do similar work.

### **Limitations**

Because we sought to confirm Seemiller and Priest's (2015) LEPID model, we used an *a priori coding scheme*. Although we remained open to emergent data (as demonstrated in Table 6), we encourage others to engage in research using the LEPID model so as to have an external and comparative understanding of its accuracy. Second, the methodology was qualitative in nature and involved extensive storytelling. Using qualitative data provided depth in understanding participants' experiences, but also required utilizing subjectivity in interpreting and assigning elements of stories to pre-existing components of the LEPID model. Finally, the sample size was small and included professionals who sought out a professional development experience. It is assumed that the participants represented voices of engaged and connected educators with a motivation to develop. This may have excluded perspective of individuals who are unsure in their career selection, or do not have access to or interest in professional development.

### **Future Research**

Based on the findings, we suggest areas of future research. First, leadership educators are balancing multiple identities, so leadership educator professional identity is likely one of many other personal and professional identities. Better understanding of intersecting identities may offer insight into structures of support or barriers to advancement as a professional leadership educator. Second, professionals are likely navigating the balance between public identities and private identities. Who they let others see or believe they are may very well be different than how they see themselves. Future research could unveil intersections in how leadership educators see themselves and how they portray themselves to others.

Third, the current study showcased participants' past or current occupation of identity spaces, but not movement between spaces. To better understand how leadership educator identity development works, it will be critical to further examine the transition between spaces and how educators move from space to space. Finally, utilizing additional methodologies to study leadership educator identity is recommended to further explore these topics. Analysis of participants' stories provided a foundation for the exploration of the LEPID model; however, using other qualitative or quantitative methodologies could be useful in expanding upon the research.

## Conclusion

Our findings support and enhance Seemiller and Priest's (2015) LEPID model. Understanding leadership educator professional identity has benefits for leadership educators, their students, and the field of leadership education. Professional associations, institutions, and organizations can develop more communities of practice that engage and support new professionals, create more opportunities for resource sharing, build formalized professional mentoring programs, and offer more professional development opportunities that help move leadership educators through the spaces and dimensions of the LEPID model. Developing the capacity of leadership educators, especially new and emerging leadership educators, may not only assist in their individual professional identity development but could also result in developing more confident, competent, and effective leadership educators for the profession as a whole.

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