

## EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BECOMING AND BEING A LEADERSHIP EDUCATOR:

### A Phenomenological Inquiry

#### Abstract

Little is known about the leadership educators who work in more than 2,000 leadership programs worldwide. This phenomenological study of 13 experienced leadership educators from four states and 11 universities explored the lived experiences of becoming and being a leadership educator in higher education. Four sub themes emerged from participants' understanding of becoming a leadership educator: (a) Impact; (b) Serendipity; (c) Fake it till you make it; and (d) Developing others. And, six sub themes emerged from participants' understanding of being a leadership educator: (a) Being a helper; (b) Being experimental; (c) Being an advocate; (d) Being a role model; (e) Being passionate; and (f) Being an agitator.

#### My Story

In the first year of my doctoral program, I was offered a chance opportunity to teach an introductory leadership course. Having only taught political science courses at a community college for a year, I knew little about teaching leadership, and had taken only one undergraduate course—nine years prior—on the subject. I drew on my love for teaching, experiences as an overinvolved undergraduate (e.g., student government, Greek life) and brief careers in finance, hospitality, and state and local government. When I first entered that classroom in 2008, armed with the second edition of *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference* (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006) and the associated *Instructor's Guide* (Owen, Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007), it all seemed to click. My evaluations affirmed that I was enthusiastic and effective but I pondered the preparation and experiences that brought me to be so. I was curious

if my peers in the field had experienced more training or preparation, whether they had been more formally prepared to teach leadership, and what life experiences they brought to their classrooms.

#### Introduction and Background

Over the last 25 years a handful of postsecondary leadership programs exploded into more than 2,000 academic undergraduate and graduate degree programs as well as co-curricular and student affairs programming in the form of retreats, training, or other workshops (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006; ILA Directory of Leadership Programs, 2018). To boot, tens of thousands of full- and part-time faculty, student affairs professionals, and academic administrators are delivering the courses, programs, and workshops that make up these experiences (Jenkins, 2014). Yet, little is known about the lived experiences of these "leadership educators" who educate, teach, coach, instruct, or

facilitate in higher education instructional and/or programmatic roles in credit or non-credit based programs in the context of leadership (Harding, 2011; Seemiller & Priest, 2015).

Harding and Matkin (2012) conducted the only known published phenomenological inquiry of educators' experiences teaching leadership. Yet, their study was limited to leadership educators who taught in undergraduate leadership development programs only. More recently, Seemiller and Priest (2015, 2017) explored the professional identities of leadership educators. Seemiller and Priest (2015) developed a Leadership Educator Professional Identity Development (LEPID) conceptual model and later (2017) expanded on this model by analyzing stories from participants of a professional leadership educator development experience. Additionally, there are only a handful of quantitative studies that include demographic data such as leadership educators' gender, terminal degrees, length of teaching experience, and institutional role (Jenkins 2012, 2013; Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Owen, 2012), as well as instructional and assessment strategy preferences in face-to-face (Jenkins, 2012, 2013) and online (Jenkins, 2016) programs. Yet, these studies only skim the surface of a rapidly expanding community of practice. Through this study, I hope to add new knowledge to our understanding of this vastly unexplored area. Specifically, I hope that through exploring leadership educators' experiences becoming a leadership educator we can increase our awareness of and in turn further develop and create preparatory (formal and informal) programs that will improve the readiness of leadership educators to engage in this important work. In the same way, I feel that the more we learn about individual leadership educators' experiences entering and working in the field, the more intentional we can be as a community of practice to create environments—whether they be within our academic institutions

or in our professional associations—and learning opportunities that advance our field.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of becoming and being a leadership educator in higher education.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What drew individuals to the work of leadership education? (Becoming)
2. What does the preparatory journey of becoming a leadership educator look like? (Becoming)
3. What is it like to be a leadership educator? (Being)

## Review of the Literature

The literature on leadership educators in higher education is sparse. Accordingly, this literature review will include only the most salient qualitative and quantitative research that specifically explored the experiences of or described leadership educators in higher education.

**Qualitative Studies.** Two research teams have explored the experiences of leadership educators. The first—Harding and Matkin (2012)—sought to expand what was known about the role educators play in developing leadership capacity in undergraduate programs. Their phenomenological study of 12 leadership educators at colleges and universities in the Midwest led to four emergent themes: (a) I teach leadership. What does that mean? (b) Not dancing alone in the learning community; (c) Helping students make a difference; and (d) The educator's journey: A place of becoming (Harding & Matkin, 2012, p. 12). Harding and Matkin's (2012) last theme relates most directly to my first two research questions here and revolves "around the educator's internal journey as a leadership educator" (p. 14). Harding and Matkin

(2012) share a great deal about how participants in their study were strongly influenced by colleagues (i.e., models and mentors), the challenges they faced preparatorily (i.e., capacity to teach leadership), and their need to “to be authentic in what they’re doing or the students wouldn’t respect them” (p. 15) (i.e., modeling or walking the walk). Harding and Matkin’s (2012) first three themes prompted me to explore leadership educators’ experiences teaching in more depth and relate directly to my third research question. I wanted to know more about how leadership educators’ experience in the classroom and delivering leadership programming relates to their sense of identity doing this work, how their work impacted their identity, and how all of these factors are shaped by our community of practice.

The second—Seemiller and Priest (2015, 2017)—explored the professional identities of leadership educators and shared some of their own personal narratives of becoming and being leadership educators. According to Seemiller and Priest (2015), leadership educators’ identity development reflects a consistent and linear progression through the identity spaces outlined in the LEPID model—Exploration (Will it fit for me?), Experimentation (Does it fit for me?), Validation (Do others think it fits?), and Confirmation (How do I validate others?)—and can be viewed through three distinct dimensional lenses: (a) experiential; (b) cognitive; and (c) emotional experiences. Here, my objective is to shed some additional light on the questions posed in the LEPID model through the stories shared by the participants in this study.

Becoming. From this perspective, Seemiller and Priest (2017, p. 133) note: “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?” This emphasis on “becoming” stemmed from Seemiller and Priest’s (2015) critical analysis of Kozminsky’s (2011) description of “how one’s previous experience as a student can have an

impact on his or her professional identity” (Seemiller & Priest, 2015, p. 136); Burns’ (1978) proposition that one’s leader and follower experiences, particularly in change processes, may drive them towards leadership roles; Ibarra’s (1999) construct of experimentation where, through this lens, a leadership educator may imitate others in the field who are more experienced and then select what they consider to be best practices (which ultimately become part their own identity); and Conway’s (2011) concept of anticipatory reflection whereas imagining oneself as a leadership educator may lead to motivation to achieve that professional identity.

Being. Here, Seemiller and Priest (2015) make a compelling argument:

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. (p. 134)

Equally, one’s experience being a teacher or a leader was undoubtedly preceded and shaped by experiences where that same individual was a student or follower (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Burns, 1978; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Kozminsky, 2011; Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Similarly, this process is shaped and influenced by one’s critical incidents, specifically those related to an individual’s personal identities (e.g., trying on the identity of a leader), personal agency (e.g., leadership educatory self-efficacy), perceptions of being a leadership educator (e.g., imagining oneself in the role), one’s own expertise (e.g., subject matter or teaching), community of practice (e.g., one’s status as a member or participant), socialization (e.g., participation in a professional leadership conference), and context (e.g., resources or a leadership program’s institutional “home”) (Seemiller

& Priest, 2015). This research provides leadership educators a better understanding of the experiences and factors that shape their professional identities.

**Quantitative Studies.** Literature related to leadership program content, design, and delivery, and the influence of these considerations on learning and leadership development of students is steadily increasing (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Yet, literature describing the nature of the work of leadership educators has been limited to demographics (e.g., Jenkins 2012, 2013; Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Owen, 2012), portrayals of instructional and assessment strategy preferences (e.g., Jenkins, 2012, 2013, & 2016), or embedded within larger inquiries into programmatic best practices (e.g., Allen & Hartman, 2009; Eich, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Owen, 2012). From this data, it may be generalized that leadership educators in higher education are mostly white, may be male or female, have terminal degrees in areas other than leadership, and have more than five years teaching experience. Yet, this data tells us nothing about the meaning of the experiences of leadership educators.

## Method

In order to better understand the phenomenon of becoming and being a leadership educator in higher education at a deeper level (Merleau-Ponty, 1956), a phenomenological method was used. Specifically, I sought to describe the common meaning for leadership educators of their lived experiences becoming and being a leadership educator (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A semi-structured interview protocol and interviewing technique (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) consisting of 17 questions and 12 sub questions were used. The protocol was piloted with three leadership educators not included in the sample to ensure the questions were relevant to the study and guided the process.

**Participants.** A snowball sample of 13 leadership educators—eight men and five women—from four states and 11 universities, participated in

this study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a snowball sample requires that the researcher identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know that cases are information-rich. During the fall of 2014, I contacted 25 preeminent leadership educators in my network—who ranged from five to twenty-five years of experience in the field and held roles as faculty and/or student affairs professionals in various leadership education contexts and had served in leadership roles in professional associations which include large populations of leadership educators (i.e., the International Leadership Association, Association of Leadership Educators, NASPA, ACPA, NCLP)—and asked them to “recommend three exemplary leadership educators to participate in interviews” who had “taught an undergraduate- or graduate-level academic credit-bearing leadership studies course in the last two years.” 15 of the 25 individuals contacted provided at least two potential participants. Then, I invited potential participants who were (a) recommended more than once; and/or (b) lived within a reasonable proximity of specific metro areas I could access with available research funds. Participants ranged from adjunct faculty and professional staff or administration to tenured and tenure-track faculty as well as department head. Additionally, participants’ institutions ranged from large and AAU land grant universities serving student populations upwards of 60,000 to small private religious-affiliated colleges serving less than 4,000 students. And, reflective of the disciplinary diversity of participants in Jenkins’ (2015, 2017) study, participants here also included a diverse array of terminal degrees (see Table 1).

**Procedure.** After receiving recommendations through the snowball sampling method, I contacted 19 potential participants via e-mail, citing the individual who had referred them, and asked for their voluntary participation in the study. Four of the 19 potential participants opted out and three others could not be accommodated by their own or the researcher’s schedule. As alluded to above, I was a recipient of an internal university research grant

which funded travel between January and April of 2015 to each participant's university and interviewed them on their campus, and most often, in their workspace. Interviews ranged in length from 76 to 131 minutes and the average interview lasted 86 minutes. I conducted all 13 interviews.

After obtaining informed consent, I had each participant complete a short questionnaire of 15 questions related to their demographics, education, and teaching experience (see Table 1). No incentives

were provided. Then, each participant was asked to verbally respond to interview protocol questions. This study includes the following protocol questions: (a) three questions and two sub questions related to participants' journeys towards becoming a leadership educator and (b) four questions and five sub questions related to participants' experiences being leadership educators (see Table 2). The remaining questions and sub questions in the protocol were related to instructional design and are not included here.

Table 1.  
Participant Demographics.

Participant Code	Gender	State	Degree & Discipline	Current Position	Yrs. in current position	Yrs. teaching leadership	Yrs. in higher education
M1	M	IL	Ph.D.; Comm. Studies / Org. Comm. / Leadership	Assoc. Dir.; Clinical Assoc. Prof.; Engineering	7	11	8
G1	M	IL	Ph.D.; Public Affairs	Dir.; Clinical Assoc. Prof.; Engineering	8	28	28
D1	M	IL	Ph.D.; Counseling	Assoc. Prof.; Higher Ed.	8	15	15
R1	M	IL	Ph.D.; Higher Postsecondary Ed.	Asst. Prof.	4	11	17
A1	M	OH	Ph.D.; Leadership & Change	Assoc. Prof.; Management	7	15	8
S1	M	MD	Ed.D.; Ed. Leadership	Senior Lecturer; Engineering	.5	7	33
L1	F	OH	Ph.D.; Higher Ed. Admin	Dir. of non-profit; Adjunct	2.5	25	25
H1	F	OH	Doctorate, Org. Leadership		3.5	9	20
R2	F	MD	M.A.; Higher Ed. & Student Affairs	Ph.D. student; graduate coordinator; Adjunct; Ed.	2	8	9
M2	M	DE	Ph.D.; Ed. Psych.	Assoc. Prof.; Org. & Comm. Leadership	10	15	15
B1	F	OH	Ed.D.; Ed. Policy, Planning, & Leadership (Higher Ed)	Senior Lecturer; Higher Ed. & Student Affairs	3.5	10	17.5
L1	F	OH	Ph.D.; Ed. Leadership	Chair & Prof.; Leadership Studies	16	14	40
O1	M	MD	Ph.D.; College Student Program (College of Ed.)	Assistant Director; Adjunct	1	12	22

Table 2.

Interview Protocol: Scope, Questions, and Sub-Questions.

Scope	No.	Question/Sub-Question
Participants' journeys to becoming a leadership educator.	1	How did you decide to become a leadership educator? What drew you to the work? (Critical incidents? Crucibles?)
	1(a)	Why do you do what you do? What motivated you to be a leadership educator?
	2	How did you come to work in your current position at [Institution]?
	2(a)	How do you feel your prior education, training, experiences, etc., prepared you to be successful as a leadership educator in this role? How does this compare to your peer leadership educators? [Can you give an example?]
Participants' experiences being a leadership educator.	3	Think back to your first experience as a leadership educator (course, workshop, etc.). How did you know what to do? What influenced your practice? [If not stated: Were you ever a student in a leadership course? If so, please describe the course environment for me.]
	1(b)	How would you describe your professional work? [What is it like to be a leadership educator?]
	1(c)	How do you think it might be described by someone from outside the profession?
	1(d)	In what ways do you contribute to the profession?
	4	In general, how would you describe the classroom environment of one of your leadership classes?
	5	What is teaching leadership like? [In what way?]
	5(a)	How do you see the relationship between teaching leadership and how you manage (or facilitate learning in) the classroom?
	14(a)	Please tell me about any other professional development opportunities you have sought out or participated in.
	15	As you think about your practice as a leadership educator now, what is different? What influenced that change? (Or) What has been the biggest influence on how you currently practice leadership education?
	16	What keeps you in this leadership educator role?

Data Analysis. A phenomenological method (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989) was employed in analyzing participants' transcripts. In this method, I—and one graduate assistant recruited to assist in analyzing interview transcripts for themes—read the transcripts while simultaneously listening to participants' corresponding audio interviews to obtain an overall feeling for them. Then, building on the data from the research questions, I followed the steps of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), went through the interview transcripts using NVIVO and highlighted "significant statements," sentences, and quotes that provided understanding of how the participants experienced becoming and being a leadership educator, and developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reliability and validity. Identified reliability techniques utilized in this study include the

recording of detailed field notes, an audio recorder for accuracy, and intercoder agreement from the researcher and an outside coder, with the latter technique being the most critical process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2013). The outside coder analyzed data independently and then met with the researcher to discuss codes. There were no significant discrepancies, and any small differences were discussed and resolved to create one set of themes. Additionally, I sought out two peer "de-briefer" faculty to provide an external check of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018)—a prolific, published qualitative scholar from the institution where I completed my doctorate and an experienced qualitative scholar from my institution's college unit—to vet the questionnaire and interview protocol

method, and proposed analysis process. Both the debriefers and I kept written accounts of these “peer debriefing sessions” (Lincoln, 1985). With respect to validity, my trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) may be validated by engagement in the field and intellectual objectivity and curiosity related to the study at hand. Further, my chosen qualitative method—phenomenology—is inherently interpretive; thus, it is important to note that the data reported here is open to reinterpretation (Angen, 2000).

**Limitations.** As suggested in the preceding section, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution and context. This sample was limited to three geographic regions, which may limit the transferability of findings to other parts of the U.S. and abroad. Also, all participants in this study together with the researcher are Caucasian and teach in the U.S.; the perspective of underrepresented populations and individuals who teach abroad are missing and may be different. Moreover, these findings represent the researcher’s best effort to understand only the lived experiences of leadership educators who participated in this study. Further research, which considers these limitations, may have different outcomes.

## Findings

After coding and analyzing the data, the two major themes of becoming and being a leadership educator emerged. The meaning of becoming a leadership educator, that is, how they understand their attraction to teaching leadership to college students, includes four subthemes: (a) Impact; (b) Serendipity; (c) Fake it till you make it; and (d) Developing others. The meaning of being a leadership educator, that is, how participants understand their experiences teaching leadership,

includes six subthemes: (a) Being a helper; (b) Being experimental; (c) Being an advocate; (d) Being a role model; (e) Being passionate; and (f) Being an agitator.

**Becoming.** The following four subthemes describe the meaning of becoming a leadership educator. These subthemes are rooted in participants’ previous experiences and the influences these experiences had on the development of their leadership educator professional identity (Kozminsky, 2011; Seemiller & Priest, 2015, 2017).

**Theme 1A: Impact.** In this theme, participants described their inherent need to make an impact on others’ lives. This theme resonated through participants’ responses to the Interview Protocol Questions 1 and 1(a) (see Table 2). There was a certain tinnabulation of desire in participants to not only make a difference in others’ lives through leadership education, but to also see and feel the impact of their work.

I wanted to have a real impact and significance. I wanted the fact that I was here on earth to have some type of ripple effect, in a positive way and that’s what I feel like this job gives me. -M1

Participants believed they would make more of a difference in leadership education than in other academic fields as well as careers outside higher education.

Absolutely loving it and feeling like I was having much more impact being in the classroom as opposed to advising students in extracurricular activities outside or working with Directors –S1

**Theme 1B: Serendipity.** In this theme, participants described serendipitously finding their way to leadership education, often as “autobiographical work” (Sparrowe, 2005) resulting from early impressions or experiences leading others, working with bad leaders, and a curiosity about the process of

leadership development and terminology. Additionally, many participants began their leadership educator journey as graduate students or in entry-level student affairs roles where new or imagined leadership programs required development. This led to what Seemiller and Priest (2017) refer to as "Opportunity", i.e., circumstances where individuals "did not initially set out to be leadership educators" but "alternate paths or opportunities presented themselves (p. 12). The following three excerpts illustrate these opportunities:

I worked in the first-year experience office for 8 years... after being there a year and responsible for most of first-year programming we got a donor who came to us and said 'I want to give \$40,000 to your office and I want it to be geared towards leadership development for first year students.' -B1

We both thought that it would make sense to try to bring an academic component into student affairs... so we started talking to people in this new program in the engineering school... and then they said well why don't you develop this leadership theory course... we don't have one and it would be really great. So, I developed that, got it approved, and started teaching part-time. -S1

And, the following two excerpts illustrate participants' conceptions of autobiographical work, that is, narratives related to their ongoing exploration of leader identity:

When I was younger, I started to realize that that there was more to leadership education than just being in charge of people and started to take an interest in some of the theory -R2

I have found that most of us do autobiographical work. I got interested in this in experiences I was having growing up... in High School ... I was the smart kid who wasn't friends with very many people. My

girlfriend, junior year, convinced me to run for class president. That was probably the first experience for me personally that gave me the indication I might be able to do some of this stuff, okay, like. I did alright, I had to give a speech on the intercom in front of all the, it was so nerdy I mean back then but I didn't think of it at that point of time. I was ready. That was probably the gateway -R1

Theme 1C: Fake it till you make it. Participants landed some opportunity to teach early in their careers, most frequently in graduate school or in entry-level student affairs positions. However, few had any formal teaching preparation or specifically related educational coursework preparing them to do this work nor did they have much training specific to leadership studies. Indeed, many suffered from the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) and "approached their roles in a 'fake it till you make it' manner" (Seemiller & Priest, 2017, p. 17):

I feel I fell prey to trying to legitimize myself as an instructor ... I had my students do research or an article critique... I felt like you had to do that in a graduate class ... it was useless... they didn't have enough content or background knowledge... it was really an exercise... of what I thought a graduate experience should be... I ended up canning that... I feel like there's hundreds of examples of assignments where I'm like, yup, that didn't work. -D1

In terms of teaching classes I just imitated what I had seen other professors do... I hadn't done it enough to have any sense of my own style ... you just kind of ... get up there and teach this class. I'll just do what I think I'm supposed to do and then gradually you kind of find out what you're good at what you're not good at... -M1

Theme 1D: Developing others. In this theme, participants shared their

common experiences, backgrounds, and interests—personally, educationally, and professionally—in development theory and/or practice including human (e.g., counseling), human resource, psychological, social, leadership, and student development, as well as public or student affairs. Correspondingly, participants spoke often about their commitment to developing people and organizations. Through an NVIVO text query for the term “development,” within the questions related to participants’ journeys to becoming a leadership educator, the following words preceded “development”: (a) cognitive; (b) intellectual; (c) self; (d) organizational; (e) personal; (f) professional; identity; (g) student; (h) training; (i) psychological; (j) resources; (k) human; (l) social; and (m) adult. The following excerpts illustrate this path:

Where I do get very passionate is that the tenets around leadership development, social action, community good, personal development and human capacity building align with my espoused values... so they’re a vehicle to do that work. –D1

I think my psychology background also fed into that very nicely... I became really interested in how leaders develop and ... how they see themselves as a leader. –H1

The more that I was studying college student development ... rooted in psychological development... human development processes ... the more I recognized how tight a link there is between the way we develop as people and the way we work with others... the way that we engage with organizations, how we understand the importance of something bigger than ourselves. – R2

Being. The following six subthemes describe the meaning of being a leadership educator. These subthemes are rooted in participants’ intersecting

experiences being a teacher and leader (Seemiller & Priest, 2015) within their current and recent professional contexts.

Theme 2A: Being a helper. Similarities abound when compared to the Impact subtheme in the Becoming t h e m e above. Correspondingly, this subtheme represents participants’ commitment to developing people and organizations as well as their need to impact the lives of others for the greater good. They described their work as a selfless profession—it was others, not them, who they wanted to impact—but cited being influenced by strongly held beliefs or values.

It’s nice to get it in and of itself, but it’s also nice to get it because it’s just a kind of a confirmation that I’m having the impact I hope to have ... it confirms the whole reason I got into this... it really is working out that way. ...just knowing that so you’re just helping somebody in the middle of their life. –M1

Specifically, it was the impact participants wanted to continue to make on their students, the world, and their communities; they hoped to change the trajectory of others for the better.

The impact on individuals, people and communities. I don’t need to know that I was... Mayor... and there is going to be biographies written about me, I need to know that I have helped change the trajectory of people’s lives. –G1

Theme 2B: Being experimental. Many of the participants described how, while they may have learned from or observed mentors in action, had little or no training in teaching or leadership studies. They brought their passion for the idea of leadership with them to their classroom, which was most often an “educational laboratory”:

It’s a series of experiments ... trial, error,

what hits, what doesn't, asking them for feedback ... it's about getting that special sauce in place and just like some leaders have a recipe in place where it connects with a larger percentage of the people... I believe it's the same thing for instructional design. – A1

Yeah, I feel like there's been so many... cuz you experimented and you're like, woop, that didn't work! –D1

In this way, participants were not afraid to experiment and were authentically invested in the development of their leadership educator capacity. Equally, participants gleaned the benefits of this method over time, developing into more strategic instructional planners and increasing their capacities to navigate through leadership education curriculum.

I'm better now than I was that first semester and I'll be better next semester than I was this semester and there is always the reason I can have the plan b, plan c, plan d in my pocket because I've tried enough variations of different things to know what works, what might work, what can I change, I've done that before I just tried that, your toolbox grows and your repertoire increases through teaching more. –O1

Theme 2C: Being an advocate. Many of the participants described how they created "safe" or "brave" spaces (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) in their classrooms. They felt that their classrooms should be a safe space for experimentation and reflection as well as conversations about turbulent issues, social justice, and identity exploration. Participants saw themselves as advocates:

If you have an underrepresented identity and you are asked ...be in a safe space, you don't always feel safe ... In any group setting you can't trust everybody in the group. So, I think I do a lot to create the safe space or brave space early on in the semester, talk about

how we are going to share stories, do some sharing of stories early on to set the tone. –B1

There has to be this role of inquiry, there has to be dialogue; there has to be space for each individual to voice what they think and practice some new ways of being. –L1

And give them a culture in the classroom that allows them to fail, but learn from that failure" –S1

Theme 2D: Being a role model. Participants described modeling leadership through the way they taught or facilitated learning in the classroom, that is, they saw teaching as a type of leading. This is because they either had great role models who they sought to emulate as part of the leadership/teaching process and/or they were modeling the leadership they wanted students to exhibit. Two participants said it best:

In a way, I think teaching is not leading but it is a type of leading. But leading is always teaching because you are demonstrating by who you are, you are vicariously teaching others what it is to be a leader. –M1

What's interesting about teaching leadership is that you're not just teaching content, you're also – through the course design and the way you teach, modeling the leadership you want students to exhibit. To some degree the classroom is a lab for doing leadership itself. ...if I believe that inclusion is an important leadership trait, then I as an instructor for class need to be modeling inclusion. –O1

Theme 2E: Being passionate. In this sub theme, participants articulated a deep affection for their work from teaching and learning to their research and students:

I love what I'm doing now... I love, being in a community that supports that kind of work... I'd be bored to death if I was doing something else... I don't want to be or do bureaucratic or... administrative... I feel like what I'm doing

has always mattered. –S1

I can't believe I get paid to do this. I love spending my time this way... I see the world through leadership, so the fact that I get paid to look at it that way when I just naturally do it, it's exciting, it's challenging, it's energizing, it teaches me all the time that as much as I may be educating others, I'm being constantly educated. -M1

Theme 2F: Being an agitator. In this subtheme, participants explained how they were constantly agitating their students' thinking, making a difference, and helping other people to rethink, develop, engage, dive deep, and experience learning about leadership. The following excerpts illustrate how participants helped students examine, discover, and understand their talents, strengths, and purpose:

If we do this activity here, this will complement this, this will agitate that... if we do this assignment it's gonna benefit students who learn this way so how do we create another assignment that challenges people over here... lay out a class as a puzzle that has a constant state of challenge...push them to grow and then offset it. –D1

My job isn't to tell students what they think. My job is to expose students to ideas and make them think. Not what they need to think about, or what they need to believe. I have a lot of back and forth with people in leadership education about this. It's not about telling students you need to believe this but it's about giving the information and poking them. Poking them with a stick like agitator, like stirring the pot a little bit, stirring it up and making them consider. Making them say oh I hadn't thought about that. That's a new idea I hadn't considered that. Getting them to have conversations with each other so that they get exposed to different points of view. And they come out the other end different than when they started. –O1

## Discussion

Participants in this study described the meaning of their own experiences of becoming and being a leadership educator. Participants described how their pursuit toward a helping or development-focused field and often serendipitously, led them to leadership education. Seemiller and Priest (2017) describe this stage as the "Pre-Exploration Leadership Experience" where the emerging leadership educators' experiences shaped their identities and beliefs, "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" (p. 12). Entry-level or graduate assistantships posts in student affairs were common opportunities for doing this work. Likewise, participants' early impressions of leadership in high school or in undergraduate or community activities and experiences, often with key mentors in place, mirror Harding and Matkin's (2012) "The educator's journey: A place of becoming" theme, which highlighted external experiences.

Participants shared the meaning of being a leadership educator as a rewarding, helping field with a lot of creative authority. Harding and Matkin's (2012) themes of "Being authentic" and "Helping students make a difference," were also repeated here. Arguably, this study's sub theme of "Being a role model" speaks to participants' identities in terms of being a leader themselves. An important part of being a leader and thus, perhaps equally teaching leadership, is modeling the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) and walking the talk (Harding and Matkin, 2012). From there, leadership educators created safe classroom environments to experiment, discuss complex social issues, and empower students to make a difference in their lives and communities.

Identity Development. Recent inquiry into the professional identity development of the leadership educator (i.e., Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Seemiller & Priest, 2015, 2017) provide impetus for further

exploration. Participants in this study recounted a narrative in line with what Harding and Matkin's (2012) described as leadership educators' internal journey or "The essence." R2 articulated this concept beautifully:

...there is this element of developing that identity as a leadership educator. I can't separate right now... I can't separate [name] from that leadership educator identity. I see elements of my leadership educator side in everything I do. I think it's made my personal and professional life better. I've seen things that are totally unrelated to my work in teaching or running programs. Parts of my life that I do and approach differently with family, friends ... because of my work in leadership education. So I think that idea of going through your own personal developmental process and being aware of that, reflecting on that is so crucial to how we develop leadership educators in general. I think that's why you and I both do what we do with professional associations, giving people the opportunity to look internally and examine the kind of leadership educator they want to be and what does that mean to them and how are they going to make that their own. I think that internal work is so, so important to what we do and that's where leadership becomes not a skill, or not a program or not you know part of your job description, but it becomes this like essence, this concept, this idea that is woven into whatever it is that you do, whether you call it leadership program or not. So I think we can't count that importance of the identity piece that it's wrapped up in developing yourself as a leadership educator."—R2

M1's narrative above was echoed by other participants in this study as well as the work of Seemiller and Priest (2017). The leadership educator identity undoubtedly includes a "Confirmation Space" (where more seasoned professionals guide less seasoned professionals in confirmation of their

leadership educator identities) and an emerging "Community of Practice" of on- and off-campus peers, members of professional associations, and mentors.

## Implications for the Field of Leadership Education

Through analyzing the results and aforementioned themes derived from this phenomenological inquiry, three areas emerged that I will spend some time discussing in this section. First, I will share some implications related participants' formal preparation becoming leadership educators. Second, I will discuss some of the implications of an emerging community of practice alluded to in the section above. Finally, I will interrogate some of the inherent whiteness of this study.

Preparation for Becoming. Participants in this study tend to learn on the job and few had terminal degrees in Leadership (while some were in related fields, e.g., Educational Leadership, Higher Education Administration). These findings are consistent with the research of Jenkins (2014) who reported that less than 15% of leadership educators who taught academic for-credit leadership courses and had terminal degrees in leadership and Jenkins and Owen (2016) who reported that only two-thirds of leadership educators in undergraduate curricular and co-curricular leadership programs had completed any significant post-baccalaureate coursework in leadership theory or development. While rare exceptions exist, such as the Leadership Education graduate program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the total number of dedicated educational pathways or preparatory programs for leadership education professionals is scant at best. Instead, we have a hodgepodge of experiences—academic and professional—that led participants in this study to their careers. Accordingly, more training programs like the Leadership Education Academy (<http://www.ila-net.org/lea/>) as well as dedicated graduate coursework, programs, and terminal degrees are needed. Moreover, perhaps

career counselors working in higher education and other areas could be provided more information on the field of leadership education in order to steer those who want to make the kind of impact or develop others in the ways discussed here.

A Leadership Educator Community of Practice. The theme "Not dancing alone in the learning community" emerged from Harding and Matkin's (2012) leadership educator research. Relatedly, Seemiller and Priest (2015) explored the critical incidents related to one's community of practice. Here, as in Seemiller and Priest's (2017) findings, there is evidence that the support and sense of community afforded to the participants in this study contributed to how they interact within and further develop our professional community of practice. I hope that through this confirmation space, new and diverse leadership educators join the field and ultimately mentor and guide our next generation.

Whiteness Among Leadership Educators. Another implication that is important to note stems from the Limitations section above. While I did not intend for all 13 participants in this study to be Caucasian, the snowball sampling method utilized provided these results. That is, through my network leadership educators in late 2014, the vast majority of leadership educators recommended to me as exemplary in their field were Caucasian. Reflecting on this in 2018, I can only hypothesize that this result is attributed to the overall lack of diverse leadership educators within the networks utilized in the snowball sampling method back in 2014. Further, this apparent trend of whiteness seems to be shifting. I am excited to see conference presentations such as Chapman's (2017) "Interrogating Whiteness in the Profession: Implications for Leadership Educators", which offer profound perspectives and lead us to not only explore the role of our intersecting social leadership educator identities while also highlighting the importance of positionality and self-reflectivity in our professional practice. Similarly, Dugan (2017) called for leadership educators to critique models, theories, and programs embedded in dominant

hegemony and whiteness. In response to Dugan, I must critique my own research for the same reasons.

Relatedly, but in no way a solution for the aforementioned, I am grateful to an African American male leadership educator who is also a tenure-track faculty member at a large public institution in the Southeast, for providing extensive feedback on this manuscript. His perspective helped me to better understand and consider the implications of the sample of participants in my study. Consequently, future researchers seeking to contribute in this area must intentionally seek out, or at the very least use extreme prudence to ensure that their study participants are not simply more diverse but represent the greater population and are not limited only to the experiences of Caucasian leadership educators.

Future Research and Concluding Thoughts. Before delving into implications for the field at large, I feel authentically inclined to bookend my narrative relative to this study. Engaging in this research has largely been the autobiographical work referenced earlier in this paper. I have been teaching leadership in an academic setting for just over a decade. As an undergraduate a decade prior, I was changed by the diversity of my state university and the opportunities afforded to me by the diversity of the membership in student organizations where I volunteered my time (often spending more time there than on my studies). When I began teaching leadership courses, just over half of the students looked like me and all of the leadership textbooks and related scholarship were authored by people who looked like me. Equally, when I began to engage in the field as a doctoral student and aspiring scholar, participating in professional conferences and volunteering my time in professional associations, I noticed a similar whiteness around me. Fortuitously, from my perspective, a paradigm shift occurred somewhere in the last five to seven years. This shift welcomed not only more inclusive discourse evident in diverse voices through scholarship and

conference presentations, but also in a plurality of proliferation of new leadership educators who do not look like me. Consequently, I feel as if I am living in a renaissance period in leadership education. Inasmuch, I hope that through authentic engagement in the field—volunteerism and contributing to professional associations, scholarship, and networking—I will again reap the reciprocal benefits of the diversity that profoundly impacted my undergraduate experience. What is more, I am hopeful that the architects of graduate and preparatory programs for aspiring leadership educators are also a part of this renaissance.

Our field is still young. Hence, finding career leadership educators with twenty-plus years' experience or a critical mass of "less white" leadership educators to share their stories may only present itself at the end of the current decade. Despite the varied and serendipitous pathways of our leadership educators, there is virtually no research that explores the meaning of becoming and being a leadership educator in higher education curricular and co-curricular contexts or what attracts them to the field. Similar studies such as this that included a more diverse sample—ethnically as well as from more diverse institutions of higher education, including perhaps outside the U.S.—would add to the understanding of how leadership educators regard and are attracted to higher education. Understanding how leadership educators experience their trajectory towards and within higher education and how the meaning of these experiences sustains their investment in their roles will facilitate the development of creative strategies to prepare, recruit, and retain a qualified and diverse pool of leadership educators.

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