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Negotiating tensions in identity: from physical education teacher educator to academic leader

Chris North ^a, Kevin Patton ^b and Maura Coulter ^c

^aSchool of Health Sciences, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand; ^bDepartment of Kinesiology, California State University, Chico, CA, USA; ^cInstitute of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Academics in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE), similar to their counterparts in other disciplines, receive little formal preparation when they take on academic leadership positions. Yet such career changes require different skill sets and expose academics to complex challenges of leadership. We (three academics) initiated this study to explore the implications of academic leadership positions for our PETE identities. We wished to unpack the consequences of taking on these leadership roles, or our 'desire to become more' and 'to better understand' (Ovens, A., & Fletcher, T. (2014). *Doing self-study: The art of turning inquiry on yourself*. In A. Ovens & T. Fletcher (Eds.), *Self-study in physical education teacher education: Exploring the interplay of practice and scholarship* (Vol. 13, pp. 3–14). London: Springer, p. 7). This research used a collective self-study methodology and drew on Skype meetings, reflections, critical friend prompts and emails. We present our findings as coming to view identity changes as tensions: bridging between roles; competing identities; identity as stable or malleable; and educator or fiscal manager. Gee's four identity perspectives including natural, institutional, discursive and affinity are used to unpack these tensions. While challenges associated with our role change persist, collective S-STEP was critical to understanding ourselves, the tensions experienced, and navigating the gaps between PETE and academic leadership.

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Introduction

There is a need to support academics as they move through different roles in their careers and particularly to 'identify what knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to develop, and continue to up-skill, as self-reliant learners' (MacPhail, 2017, p. 681). Over recent years, literature in physical education and sport pedagogy (PESP) has highlighted aspects of early academic careers (Alfrey et al., 2017; Enright et al., 2017), transitions to mid-career academics (Casey & Fletcher, 2017) and career retrospectives by professors (Kirk, 2014; MacPhail, 2017). Missing from the PESP literature are transitions from mid-career academics into academic leadership positions. There is a growing body of research into professional learning for academic leaders (Thornton, 2020) and this paper offers a contribution from the perspectives of three PETE academics undertaking a collective self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) to explore this career transition.

Similar to Casey and Fletcher's (2017) purpose 'to reveal the tensions and uncertainties in our socializing experiences as early career academics who are now navigating a transition to 'mid-career'' (p. 106), our research set out to better understand the implications of academic leadership

CONTACT Chris North  chris.north@canterbury.ac.nz

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positions for our PETE identities. We wished to unpack the consequences of taking on these leadership roles, or as stated in the S-STEP literature; our 'desire to become more' and 'to better understand' (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 7). As our S-STEP evolved, our collaboration was a process of coming to understand the construct of identity, our fear of losing elements of our core identities, and how we might resolve these tensions.

Theoretical framework: leadership, identity and tensions

The theoretical underpinnings of this research occur at the intersection of leadership, identity change and how these may be viewed as tensions.

Academic leadership

Academic leadership is one of the least studied and most misunderstood management positions yet the 'preparation of academic leaders takes time, training, commitment and expertise' (Gmelch, 2016, p. 1). The academic leadership role is complex, however, it is common for academic leaders to be selected from staff who have proven themselves as capable scholars, but who have little experience in leadership (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; Loughran, 2015).

We use the term academic leadership to include both leadership and management although some scholars argue that although they overlap, the two activities are not synonymous (Bass, 2010). Management is a set of well-known processes, like planning, budgeting, staffing, measuring performance and problem-solving, which help an institution function efficiently. By contrast, leadership is associated with taking an organization into the future, finding opportunities emerging and successfully exploiting those opportunities (Kotter, 2012). For Kotter, the leadership process involves (a) developing a vision for the organization; (b) aligning people with that vision through communication; and (c) motivating people to action through empowerment and through basic need fulfillment.

Leadership is focused on collaboratively developing a vision, and guiding and supporting people to work together in making the vision a reality. Management provides systems and processes essential to the smooth day-to-day running of the department. Both leadership and management are essential for successful department development. This combination of roles is a potential minefield for those new to academic leadership and who are drawn to leadership rather than management aspects of the positions.

Identity and career changes

In this article, we draw heavily on the work of Gee (2000) who argues that 'all people have multiple identities connected not to their internal states, but to their performances in society' (p. 99) and therefore 'identity' provides a useful analytic tool for researching issues of theory and practice. Because of this, identity is more than simply an individualistic self-perception, identity is also communicated and constructed through all our interactions in society, and is a lifelong learning process involving negotiating tensions and identity development (Wrench & Garrett, 2012).

Building on investigations into teacher identity, researchers have examined transitions to teacher education. Those who are new to teacher education often feel out of place with their former colleagues in schools, but not yet comfortable as teacher educators (Young & Erickson, 2011). It is therefore little wonder that early career teacher educator's self-views are of being vulnerable, exposed, marginalized, disempowered and de-skilled (Murray & Male, 2005). Williams and Hayler (2015) conclude that it is critical for teacher educators to reach out and make connections with colleagues to help guide and support them through this process.

The complexity of teacher education and the distance between the work of teacher educators and teachers means the transition is often bumpy. In a similar way, the transition between teacher educator and academic leader can be viewed as a significant shift (Allison & Ramirez,

2020). Despite an increased number of studies examining teacher educator identity development, limited attention has been placed on studies of teacher educators who have taken on leadership roles. In one such study, Loughran (2015) described how his identity as a teacher educator shaped his actions as a Dean. Also examining the shift from teacher educator to academic leader, Clift (2011) raises several important questions; what challenges do teacher educators face during induction to their new leader role, and what facilitates their transition from teacher educators to leaders? These questions continue to be relevant (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; MacPhail, 2017).

Framework of identity

Gee locates identity at the intersection of four perspectives: **natural; institutional; discursive; and affinity identities** and states:

What is important about identity is that almost any identity trait can be understood in terms of any of these different interpretive systems. People can actively construct the same identity trait in different ways, and they can negotiate and contest how their traits are to be seen (by themselves and others) in terms of the different perspectives on identity. (Gee, 2000, pp. 107–108)

Natural identity is an inherited or core character trait. For example, caring is a core characteristic of teaching physical education (Andersson et al., 2018) and the same is likely true for academics in PETE. In PETE, Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa (2009) identified self-care as a condition for caring for others. Gordon et al. (1996) define caring as ‘a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility’ (p. xiii). A commonality among these definitions of care is that caring occurs within mutual relationships. In our roles in PETE, the authors align with these notions of care in the teaching relationship and view this as a core part of our natural identities. How this care is manifested and whom it serves is contested (see Trout, 2018), however, we concur with Warin et al. (2006) who see educators as those who ‘position themselves as people who can influence outcomes not only for those in their care, but for wider society’ (p. 241). In our experiences, teacher educators in PETE gravitate towards these caring natural identities.

Institutional identity is conferred through title or institutional authority on a person such as ‘professor’ or with this study, Associate Head, Chair or Associate Dean. This identity requires that academic leaders relate not just to their peers, but engage regularly in meetings with financial managers, deans and organizational leaders. In these different meetings, institutional identity is simultaneously a passport into the meeting and a sign of rank or status within a decision-making hierarchy (Enright et al., 2017). A significant challenge for many is how to acquire, understand, and use the authority that comes with the leadership position (Kirk, 2014).

Discursive identity is constructed when people talk together in ways which may alter or maintain their current form of identity. For example in teacher education, considerable effort may be spent reducing power differences to promote dialogue and discussion (North, 2020). In such situations, teacher educators are constructing a welcoming and friendly identity. By contrast, academic leaders may need to draw on the authority vested in them to advocate for a particular position. Discursive identity represents the continuous process of defining and redefining our identities in diverse contexts.

Finally, **affinity identity** is the choice to interact with like-minded people. Gee (2000) provides the example of people who hold public roles, forming international affinity groups with others in similar situations. Such groups can help to reduce a sense of isolation and allow freer conversations than is possible with colleagues in the same institution who sometimes have a vested interest in the outcome of the conversation.

Tensions and leadership

At the intersection of a new academic leadership role and a previous identity as a teacher educator are uncomfortable spaces which can be viewed as tensions. In such cases, career changes may cause

feelings of discomfort because fundamental aspects of identity are shifting. Teacher educators have used tensions to explore such challenges in transitions from school teaching (Young & Erickson, 2011). For example, Murray and Male (2005) analyzed the tensions arising for early career teacher educators, identifying feelings of acute professional unease when their core beliefs and discursive identities were out of alignment. Here, we take this approach and apply it to shifts into leadership positions.

Loughran (2013) encourages teacher educators to hold contrasting perspectives in tension to highlight the complexity of teaching. He argues that by examining pedagogical decisions through divergent positions, we can generate a more nuanced understanding. In one such example, Berry (2007) identifies the tension between safety and challenge. In this way, Berry shows the decisions which teacher educators must make to both extend their pre-service teachers (PSTs) (to challenge them in their thinking and actions), but also to allow the PSTs to feel some security in their learning (to help them feel safe). Holding safety and challenge together, creates a tension that must be negotiated. By understanding tensions, teacher educators are better prepared for the perplexing decisions of teaching (North, 2020).

Tensions also emerge for those transitioning into academic leadership roles. Academic leadership is contested because managerialism and the focus on performativity in higher education together have constructed a negative view of leaders because of the impingement of academic freedoms (Kirk, 2014; Lumby, 2019). Due to such perceptions by peers, leadership positions can be confronting for the identity of a new leader who suddenly finds themselves shifting from belonging to a group of teacher educator peers, to exile in a role that is one step short of a pariah. As Collins (2016) found as she entered a leadership role that her reflections exposed her 'own unconscious subscription to an us-versus-them mentality' (p. 202). Academic leaders are sometimes accused of having no commitment to scholarship, research, or even any 'big ideas' (Smyth, 2018). They have sold out to the lure of greater status and power (Lipman-Blumen, 2004) and gone over to the 'dark side' (Gmelch, 2016). Yet without a strong voice in institutional decisions, PETE is vulnerable to ongoing and poorly planned changes (North et al., 2018). The tensions present in these complex and potentially high-stakes situations are intense and not easily resolved. Transitions from teacher education to leadership appear ripe for explorations through a framework of tensions.

Purpose

We are three teacher educators from different ends of the world (Ireland, California and New Zealand), who met at a conference and discovered a mutual concern about the implications of academic leadership roles for our physical education teacher education (PETE) identities. We hold strongly to our careers in PETE and have between 14 and 20 years experience in initial teacher education. Each of us had moved (or moved during this study) into a leadership role which resulted in discomfort as we struggled to fit our identities from PETE into these new positions. The goal of this research was to better understand the implications of academic leadership positions for our physical education teacher educator identities.

Methodology

According to Samaras (2011), S-STEP 'is an empowering research methodology for teachers that holds much promise for educational reform' (p. 15), and in which teachers systematically and critically examine their actions and their contexts to develop a more consciously driven mode of professional activity. S-STEP research is improvement-aimed, interactive, and includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods to collect data (LaBoskey, 2004). We demonstrated LaBoskey's criteria of being improvement-aimed through our efforts to more fully understand the implications of our career trajectories for our identities. We have drawn on critical friendship framed as co-mentoring (Allison & Ramirez, 2020), whereby there is a mutual and collective benefit of collaborators on the

same journey. We used interactivity by seeking critical perspectives from each other, and multiple qualitative data sources included Skype conversations (SCs), reflections, responses to reflections and email communications. This approach acknowledges Zeichner's (2007) call for S-STEP researchers to develop chains of inquiry across departments, cultures, and contexts to build a robust knowledge base of teacher education research, contributing to trustworthiness. In addition, our research demonstrated trustworthiness by critically examining identities, relating our work back to the literature, and ensuring our analysis was transparent (Mena & Russell, 2017). Having collaborators beyond our countries avoided defensiveness by providing a confidential sounding board, and an outsider's perspective free of institutional politics (Roose, 2010). A key responsibility of S-STEP researchers is to make the private insights public to extend the knowledge base of teacher education (Beni et al., 2019) and with this research, the career development of teacher educators.

Context

Chris, has been in PETE for 14 years with a specialization in outdoor and environmental education at a University in New Zealand. After being invited to become Associate Head of School five years ago, Chris became concerned about the changes in his relationships with peers and his discomfort with the new role.

Kevin has worked in PETE in the western United States for the last 16 years and for 5 has served as the Department Chair of Kinesiology. Kevin views this role not only as largely gratifying but also personally and academically unsettling. Because of reduced teaching responsibilities, he experienced feelings of disengagement from students, teacher education and scholarship. For Kevin, the collaboration represented opportunities to remain connected with and intentional about his own identity.

Maura has 20 years experience in primary PETE in Ireland. She spent 16 years in a teacher education college before the college incorporating with a university to become a Faculty of Education. Following this incorporation, many opportunities to move into administrative roles and for promotion were presented to her. Maura collaborated with Chris and Kevin to establish how she might best navigate these opportunities and maintain her personal and professional identity by learning from, and challenging, their experiences. During this research, Maura was appointed Associate Dean for Research (a three-year appointment).

Data sources

SCs took place at intervals of three to six weeks, lasted between 50 and 90 min and consisted of relatively open discussions. Discussions covered topics such as learning to lead, the impact of leadership role on teacher education identity, negotiating the role of critical friendship and benefits of the S-STEP collaboration. Meetings were recorded and transcribed ($n = 20$) and reflective journal entries ($n = 21$) were generated over an 18-month period. We published an online reflection (R) and also responded to the reflections of the other two teacher educators as critical friends (CFs) (Allison & Ramirez, 2020). These were typically completed a week before the SC on an agreed topic or reading from the previous SC. We each responded to what was similar, different, resonated or jarred, by asking questions, seeking clarification, making observations and connections and by comparing understandings and/or experiences (Schuck & Russell, 2005). The reflections and responses framed our SCs. At times it was necessary to communicate administrative tasks by email (e.g. agreeing to change a scheduled Skype call); where the emails contained data relevant to this study they were included (E).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016) was utilized as a method to identify patterns in the dataset, and for describing and interpreting the meaning and importance of those themes. We employed a

collaborative approach to analyzing the data guided by the goal of better understanding the implications of academic leadership positions for our teacher educator identities. This involved an ongoing process of identifying patterns during our collective S-STEP in both an inductive and recursive way (Samaras, 2011). For example, as we reflected on our Skype meetings and made CF comments on each other's reflections, we would highlight convergences and divergences in our experiences, and this informed the focus of our next meeting. On an early reading of the data, Chris identified a process through which we had progressed, from a sense of being a victim of identity theft to acquiring a sense of purposefulness (North, Coulter & Patton, 2020). This progression could be seen as a series of tensions to navigate. This analysis (Braun et al., 2016) was validated by Maura and Kevin. There were opportunities to verify the interpretations and meanings made by participants because we each took on dual roles of participant–researcher, being involved in both the data collection and analytic processes. This meant that inaccuracies or misinterpretations could be identified and modified in the analytic and reporting process. Analytical processes were carefully designed to facilitate our voices being heard and building in a critical questioning of our own assumptions throughout to avoid any one message or perspective being voiced without consensus grounded in evidence and experiences. Using multiple data sources and perspectives, along with our process of data analysis enhanced the trustworthiness of our data.

Findings

Our findings are presented as a series of tensions which we identified between: the familiar PETE role and the new academic leader role; competing identities; identity as stable or malleable; and teacher educator or fiscal manager. By intentionally examining these tensions we came to better understand how our identities transform. We highlight connections to Gee's (2000) perspectives on identity, which we unpack further in the discussion.

Tension: bridging between familiar and new roles: a sense of discomfort

The first tension that emerged was between the familiar and cherished teacher educator identity, and the new and less understood academic leadership identity. This tension initiated our collective S-STEP:

I don't want to lose my teacher educator roots because that's who I am and that's where I came from, but I'm realising that I need to embrace an additional aspect of my identity ... So, that's really what I'm struggling with ... for the last year I did not teach at all [due to leadership responsibilities], so that was a huge challenge! (Kevin SC 2)

Kevin acknowledges his time as a teacher educator and that is 'who I am'. There is a clear concern for him that he will lose connection with this strong sense of identity. This tension was explored several times in our reflections:

Sometimes the new feels uncomfortable and the old feels familiar and friendly. Spending less time in the old means spending more time in the less comfortable, more exposed and possibly exposed to higher stakes losses. That is how I feel about the transition to leadership. (Chris R7)

An academic leader often has more authority and their decisions have a greater impact. Rather than focusing on the opportunities this brings, Chris is anxious he will make a mistake which results in 'higher stakes losses'.

Both Chris and Kevin held academic leadership roles from the beginning of the study. Maura was considering a career shift towards academic leadership which she wanted to examine as part of our S-STEP:

For me it's the shifting of institutional settings which has allowed me (or has it made me?) to think about my identity and career pathway ... This [collaboration] has the added benefit of helping me in career advancement and deciding, is that what I want to do? (Maura R1)

The tension for Maura was that academic leadership held some appeal, it seemed like a challenge and a way to contribute to the field. The tone of our early discussions was dominated by Kevin and Chris's concerns and feelings of lost identity. This had a significant impact on Maura's view of leadership:

I was thinking at the start of taking on leadership roles and it kind of really hit home that ... , because I would have seen it as a positive towards promotion and that you're mixing with the big boys, the people who make the decisions. And then I read that [reflection] and ... go, maybe I'm better off not going that way. (Maura SC 16)

We were collectively concerned about the consequences of an academic leadership role and experienced this as a sense of discomfort. As leaders, our decisions affected not just the PSTs in our courses, but also staff and programmes. We viewed our former **natural** identity of being solely a teacher educator nostalgically as it appeared to become ever more distant. This nostalgia was limiting our ability to see the benefits of our new roles, something which Maura challenged us on: 'What about the management – do you find it rewarding? I feel we need to be more positive and identify the positives of your roles.' (Maura CF – Chris R1). Interestingly, despite the challenges, neither Kevin nor Chris regretted taking on leadership roles. Instead, both embraced the challenges associated with their new role and noted that they often felt that their hard work was making a real difference.

Tension: competing identities pulling in different directions

This second tension shows the gap between our identities in PETE and our identities as academic leaders; in particular the exposures to greater levels of complexity: 'I find I have a number of identities –some overlapping, some intersecting, and sometimes trying to be all of them at once and yet not "being" any of them ... ' (Maura R2). In Maura's words the competing identities of teacher educator, researcher and some leadership roles she stepped into, were causing significant tensions. While we may have **natural** identities towards which we gravitate, we may also have access to multiple, even divergent identities. Here, Maura explores the tensions arising from the different identities she takes on as either sharing similarities (overlapping or intersecting), or being myriad and divergent (not being any of them).

Another aspect of this tension emerged in interactions with colleagues. The new **institutional** leadership identity diverged from a previous identity as a teacher educator working amongst peers:

As a leader, I find my spontaneity sometimes unhelpful and I have to learn to hold my tongue. That feels like I am becoming a different person. I have to think about who I am talking to and what they already know and what they are allowed to know. It is a level of complexity that doesn't come naturally to me because I value openness and transparency. (Chris CF – Maura R1)

We were motivated to become teacher educators through our care for young people. Within teacher education, openness and transparency are valuable as the PSTs can see into our pedagogical reasoning and come to better understand their future roles as teachers. Openness also allows for greater power sharing in the classroom and indicates that PST experiences and voices are welcome in teacher education. Above, we can see how Chris is struggling with his natural tendency to be transparent because he is privy to knowledge that should not be shared broadly. He needs to carefully consider who he is talking with and this can have a stifling effect on what were previously spontaneous conversations at the photocopier.

The dominance of this caring and nurturing aspect of our teacher educator identities held other limitations:

My sense thus far is that being supportive is something that may be inherent in our personalities ... avoiding difficult situations is a bit of a hangup I have already identified in my own practice. (Kevin R3)

Leaders, perhaps more than teacher educators, are confronted with problem situations involving conflict among colleagues or strong disagreements about their leadership decisions. In such

challenging situations, our nurturing (**natural**) identities needed to be augmented by clear and authoritative communication. Bringing our caring teacher educator identities to the contested conversations of leadership was not always a successful strategy. For example, when Chris attempted to thoughtfully deliver bad news to a colleague (that they had been unsuccessful in gaining tenure), his intentions were misunderstood. Instead of being seen as a caring colleague, he was viewed as an authority and was met with anger and frustration. Reflecting on these changes helped us to realize that holding too tightly to our teacher educator identities was limiting our effectiveness as leaders. Becoming a better leader required identity work, and this raised the specter of losing touch with our former identities.

Tension: identity as stable or malleable?

The third tension arose from an exploration of understanding if and how we might lose our teacher educator identity. Through discussions and reflections, we identified two competing views of the stability and durability of our identities: if an individual's identity is stable throughout their life, then it cannot be lost; if identity is malleable then it can be potentially reformed into something very different, even to a point where it becomes changed beyond recognition. These divergent conceptualizations of identity could either raise our anxiety about identity loss or ease them. Our conversations showed how we drew on metaphors in this exploration:

I do think we have a stable core of characteristics that are a constellation ... that our identities will always revolve around ... But I think that it's quite malleable and I do think that as one thing gets emphasized something gets carved off, and over time it atrophies. (Chris SC 7)

While arguing we have a core set of **natural** identities, Chris selects a physical education metaphor as he worries that the teacher educator identity will weaken like a muscle which is no longer exercised and, so shrivels. The institutional leadership identity muscles are used more frequently and dominate. The adaptability of the human body to physical demands represents one way of viewing identity shift. Maura suggests a different metaphor:

... like a graphic equaliser. So, we are the sound system and depending on who you are those levers come up or down, so ... this one maybe goes down depending on your situation maybe [one identity] fades maybe a little bit? Other ones just ... amplify. (Maura SC 7)

The graphic equalizer emphasizes our ability to tune up or down different identities, but without losing them. This was far more comforting than the thought we might lose contact with our valued identities (possibly forever) through lack of use. Our growing curiosity about identity change sent us to the literature and we read Swennen et al. (2010):

We have spoken in the past about our capacity for identity and whether we lose identities to take on new ones or can we cope with infinite identities – I like the language in this article in the discussion around '**transforming and generalizing**' identities from the past to become part of the present. (Maura R7)

The phrase 'transforming and generalizing' was appealing because it suggested an agentic and continuous process of an identity shift. This resolved to a large degree our concerns about unconscious identity shift and showed that we could create new identities.

Tension: teacher educator and fiscal manager

Regardless of how much our identities are malleable or stable, they are important to examine as a deeper understanding of identity can help us to enact the appropriate identity required for a particular context. A recurring tension for us was the shift in discourse communities from teacher educator to fiscal manager.

As academic leaders, we learned that we were held to different measures than teacher educators. While a teacher educator will be primarily concerned with the teaching and learning of their PSTs,

leaders spend a great deal of time justifying courses, programmes and staffing levels to finance managers:

We're speaking a completely different language than administrators and staff, and it's just trying to get that language as you say to be able to have a conversation with them and explain what you want, not in pedagogy but in pounds, shillings and pence. (Maura SC 7)

Chris responds to Maura's statement noting:

... by doing that [engaging in arguments based on finances], at what point do you become become complicit? And this erosion of this profession that's torn apart because there's no coherence anymore, it's just a course that has more students in it and fewer staff teaching into it. It's perfect! [sarcastic tone]. (SC 7)

The requirement for academic leaders to immerse ourselves in the discourses of financial viability caused a great deal of concern for us. This **institutional** perspective (leadership role) was a different job and required a different skill set. That is why we were attracted to it; because it offered a chance to 'become more' and to 'better understand' the wider context of our work. It also meant dealing with at-times competing agendas, and attempting to bring those together raised the work to a higher level of complexity. For example, Kevin noted:

Instead of a singular focus on pedagogical quality, now I also have to be concerned with 'cheeks in seats'. My courses and academic identity used to guide my day, my work is now directed by the immediate and pressing concerns of the day, like classes having adequate enrolment. (Kevin E)

With our peers, the main differences we noted were that our free-flowing chats with colleagues at the photocopier could become hijacked by those wishing to advocate for a particular position. For Kevin, conversations sometimes turned from family and vacation plans to being asked, 'What's the minimum enrollment for my class to run?' Further, at many formal gatherings, we were now expected to do the introductions, set the scene, or fill the void of the initial conversation. In contrast with our lack of fluency in the leadership languages, our data did not show that our institutional leadership language set us apart from our teacher educator colleagues. This suggests that we remain closely knitted to our teacher educator identities.

Learning to live with the tensions

Through this collective S-STEP, we became more aware that career development inevitably involves identity work because to 'become more' we need to expand and move outside of our established boundaries of confidence and competence and therefore our identities also need to encompass these new demands. This meant that time and effort was needed to 'better understand' these changes:

This discussion of identity includes that of a teacher educator and researcher and my still-forming identity as a leader. Reflecting on our conversation allowed me to begin to really think about who I am professionally and who I want to become. (Kevin R1)

This act of becoming and gaining a better understanding of this process appears helpful for Kevin here. The collective discussions bore fruit early on with Kevin noting already after our first discussion the importance of taking time to reflect with peers (**affinity**):

If I am not stable, but plastic and malleable in different settings, then being aware of how my identity is shaped in these different contexts is important to understand my influence on others. AND importantly, understanding my identity at different times does require an **ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experience** which is why the discipline of this collaboration is SO helpful. It pushes me to reflect and consider which is rare in my work. (Chris R7 – emphasis in original)

Despite his passive language 'how my identity is shaped' he emphasizes his new understanding which indicates the importance of 'ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation of experience'.

Maura's engagement in conversations (**discursive** perspective) 'in some ways I am resisting the change and in others embracing it ...' (R2) is where the different identities are reinforced or undermined. Here, Maura describes how she is contesting or even welcoming these identities at different times. In this section, we can see how we might be able to live with the tensions by making the different identities of leadership conscious and becoming purposeful about which aspects of identity best fit the expectations. Not that we should become chameleon-like, but rather take a considered examination of the context, combined with an understanding of our tendencies to revert to comfortable identities, and purposefully establish the presence which will be most appropriate.

Despite these challenges, we shared a sense of purpose and accomplishment with our leadership roles:

Chris: the majority of people in the article said that they actually got a lot of satisfaction out of their [leadership] role, even though it was difficult and challenging which I think resonates as well?

Maura: Yeah.

Kevin: It certainly does with me. (SC 16)

These findings have highlighted our collective exploration of the tensions we encountered on the transition to leadership positions. We now draw together these findings to discuss in more depth the identity perspectives of Gee, and the implications for our positions.

Discussion

Through this collective S-STEP, we uncovered and revealed some of our assumptions and limited understandings of identity but also leadership. If 'Identity is a sense making device, which provides the illusion of consistency, that is of repetition of characteristics over time, and performs a vital function in governing our choices and decision-making' (Warin et al., 2006, p. 235), then understanding our identities, means we can know how our identities are shaping our actions and choices. As our S-STEP progressed, we developed our understandings of identity as socially constructed which has proved helpful in building our capacity to see how we work to reinforce certain identities in different contexts. Such work is critical to fit into our new leadership role, while simultaneously holding on to important aspects of our PETE identities.

This discussion focuses on the identity development in our transition to leadership roles. We use Gee's four perspectives to show how each perspective provides valuable insights into identity negotiation and enactment.

Natural perspective

Natural identities 'gain their force as identities through the work of institutions, discourse and dialogue, or affinity groups, that is, the very forces that constitute our other perspectives on identity' (Gee, 2000, p. 102). Given the possible or even inevitable transformation of our identities over our life spans, it is difficult to point to a particular aspect of our identities which is 'natural' without being drawn into a debate of nature versus nurture. In the literature, we can see that moving from teacher educator to leader is a difficult bridge to cross (Collins, 2016) and this held true for us from PETE.

We found a sense that our identities were aligned with caring and nurturing. Whether or not this should be labeled 'natural', this caring aspect of our identities consistently emerged as a familiar stance and touchstone which we used as a measure of whether we were staying 'true' to ourselves. The limitations of a PETE identity became obvious to us as we encountered situations which called on perspectives drawing on different approaches such as those requiring institutional authority.

Institutional perspective

The process through which this [institutional] power works is authorization; that is, laws, rules, traditions, or principles of various sorts allow the authorities to 'author' the position of professor of education and to 'author' its occupant in terms of holding the rights and responsibilities that go with that position. (Gee, 2000, p. 100)

Our leadership roles bestowed on us by our institutions give us authority over our peers and place us in a 'chain of command' with line managers above us and staff under us. Such organizational structures allow for efficient decision making and delegation to conduct certain management and leadership tasks. When teacher educators adopt an **institutional** title, the feeling of belonging in a group of peers can be lost. The **institutional** authority sat uncomfortably on our shoulders and emerged in the findings as a tension between our PETE and leadership identities as we wished to create as egalitarian a structure as possible based on principles of 'openness and transparency'. As leaders, we were compelled into situations where wielding this authority was necessary for providing direction and clarity for those we were responsible for. Softening unpalatable decisions by using gentle language can be akin to bubble wrapping a brick; the hard news (brick) is effectively hidden (Loughran, 2015). Bringing our unaltered nurturing and inclusive identities to these roles potentially resulted in bubble wrapping of messages and therefore a lack of clarity and decisiveness. Lumby (2019) argues that 'middle-level appointments may encourage the leader to project a disingenuous identity, conforming to a normative, idealized leader prototype, for example favoring notions of collegiality and transparency' (p. 1627). Coming from PETE, we felt under-prepared for the limitations of our open and transparent approach to leadership.

One can view an institutional identity as either a calling or an imposition (Gee, 2000). In our case, we viewed leadership as both: on the one hand, we felt the attraction of contributing to our field and growing as people (becoming more); we were confronted by the unanticipated contested nature of leadership work and the jarring change in our identities. Our institutional positions remain problematic and rewarding.

Discursive perspective

The discursive perspective combines:

(a) speaking (or writing) in a certain way; (b) acting and inter-acting in a certain way; (c) using one's face and body in a certain way; (d) dressing in a certain way; (e) feeling, believing, and valuing in a certain way; and (f) using objects, tools, or technologies (i.e. 'things') in a certain way. (Gee, 2000, p. 110)

This is done to be perceived as a particular type of person or identity. In our interactions with others, we can influence the identities which we are producing by either complying or resisting them (Webb & Macdonald, 2007). Loughran, while reflecting on his role as dean with a CF, discovers that 'It's a gigantic confidence stretch when they make really fine scholars responsible for running a business because you end up in another job' (Loughran, 2015, p. 7). Similarly, in our leadership roles, we were confronted with management conversations where quality learning was not recognized and we needed to resist the one-sided financial discussions.

At other times, our discursive identity took the role of being decisive and using our authority to make what for some would be an unwelcome decision. For Gee (2000), the socially constructed nature of our identities is linked to our performances in society. These discursive opportunities to construct our identities were altered by the leadership roles we had taken on and therefore the communities we had access to. We sensed a growing distance from our former PETE circles and simultaneously a feeling we didn't belong with our new leadership peers. Clinging to a previous identity may provide solace, but is likely to prolong the discomfort in the new role and increased stress. Navigating these discursive perspectives was difficult as we were attempting to work through the uncomfortable identity and discourse changes which required a high level of discernment to decide whether it was our identity discomfort pricking us or our core values. The tensions of changing identity are inevitable in role changes and this process can feel very lonely.

Affinity perspective

Given our feelings of isolation, and our past positive experiences with collective S-STEP research, it was natural to seek a group of peers with whom to develop our understandings of our leadership transitions. Gee (2000) states that

some groups of people, especially 'elites', are coming to share a set of practices and experiences with other well-off people across the world (a certain 'lifestyle') in terms of which they are beginning to constitute a powerful affinity group that transcends local and state borders. (p. 107)

For us, the key aspect was coming together to share our set of leadership practices, experiences and concerns. Interestingly, the other connection to Gee's quote was that our S-STEP transcended local and state borders to include countries so widely dispersed that it was impossible to hold meetings within regular work hours. While there were logistical disadvantages to our global separation, there were several benefits, including the value in sharing experiences with those well beyond our institution and even countries. This allowed for a view from the outside of our local challenges and ironically identified numerous common concerns that allowed us to find power in collaboration. Our collective S-STEP provided a valuable affinity group through which to develop our shared understandings, and also to find a sense of global collegiality.

Tensions

Viewing problematic situations from multiple perspectives enables a richer view of the problem under consideration (Berry, 2007; Loughran, 2013). Applying a framework of tensions to the experiences of identity change through an academic career shift has helped to reveal a variety of insights and offered a way of describing our work which allows these tensions to remain unresolved. This lack of resolution should not be a sign of indecision, but rather as a sign of maturity. Rigorously examining these tensions as part of an affinity group of S-STEP researchers from around the globe has been motivating, relieving and productive. As Warin et al. (2006, p. 237) state:

The experience of identity dissonance can activate a richer narrative of self which then functions to accommodate competing feelings about past, present and future as well as mismatches between existing and preferred selves. We argue in this paper that reflective practice is a key enabling strategy

Being impelled through our S-STEP into collective reflection has been a central benefit of our project. Building on Warin et al.'s work, we argue that collective S-STEP with an affinity group has been immensely helpful for our professional development.

Implications

This article builds on the body of research supporting reflection in professional development and particularly in identity work. While such identity work might happen incidentally over time, the intentionality of the S-STEP process appears crucial to deepening understanding in a way which does not superficially resolve the tensions but allows the nuance and complexity to remain. Returning to the request to better support academics through their career development (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; MacPhail, 2017), we argue that collective S-STEP with an affinity group from different institutions, was highly productive in providing both support and professional development. This work shows considerable potential to allow others to navigate the sometimes traumatic process of becoming an academic leader. Myriad benefits will come from supporting academics through career changes and building the capacity of individuals and institutions.

Warin et al. (2006) found that 'stayers' (those who continued to careers as teachers as opposed to those who left after a short period) had more sophisticated and effective strategies for integrating identity. Allison and Ramirez (2020) suggest this is also true for academic leaders. We wonder whether we will be 'stayers' in our leadership roles. These decisions are difficult and we would

not consider someone who left academic leadership as somehow less complete or less committed. We understand and live the tensions. By moving into these leadership positions, academics are forced to ‘become more’. It is the professional and personal duty of all academics to ensure that we can ‘better understand’ the impact of career changes on our identities and the choices we make or do not make, so we can ultimately work on a broader scale to support the critical work of PETE in society.

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ORCID

Chris North  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4849-8496>
 Kevin Patton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6587-791X>
 Maura Coulter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9406-2349>

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