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Conceptualizing educational leadership in an academic development program

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ABSTRACT

Promoting the development of educational leadership in higher education is essential for strengthening the quality of teaching and learning. Additional research is needed to conceptualize educational leadership, especially within informal roles. We analysed how faculty members in an academic development program conceptualized educational leadership. Five key characteristics emerged that inform the development of educational leadership capacity in postsecondary contexts: affective qualities, mentoring and empowering, action-orientation, teaching excellence, and research and scholarship. Three characteristics of academic programs aimed at developing educational leadership were also identified: funding and resources to implement a change initiative, building interdisciplinary communities, and embracing identity.

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Educational leadership; distributed leadership; educational development; academic development; higher education

Introduction

Within higher education, an educational leader can be viewed as someone who holds a formal leadership position in a department or faculty, and who influences academic policies, strategies, structures, management, resource allocation, and decision-making (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016); department heads and deans are examples of this type of educational leadership role. Mårtensson and Roxå (2016) designate these individuals as *local leaders* 'that individual teachers interact with personally; leaders that individual teachers talk to, discuss with, and take instructions and advice from in matters that concern teaching' (p. 248). Informally, educational leaders are viewed as knowledge catalysts, and are further described as individuals who possess the capacity to create new knowledge, to diffuse it rapidly, and to leverage their access to social resources and networks for this purpose (Hannah & Lester, 2009). Regardless of whether they hold formal or informal roles, local educational leaders can have a significant impact on teaching and learning cultures by way of their approaches to sharing knowledge, forming positive social support networks, engaging in mentoring relationships, and facilitating change (Bolden et al., 2008; Hannah & Lester, 2009; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016; Pifer, Baker, & Lunsford, 2015). It is imperative for institutions across the globe to better understand the characteristics and qualities of educational leaders that enable them to influence and enact change.

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Much of the educational leadership literature within higher education focuses on those who hold formal leadership roles such as head, chair, dean, vice-chancellor, or president (Drew, 2010; Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, & Murphy, 2005; Spendlove, 2007). Relatively little scholarship has focused on educational leadership within informal contexts, where those who facilitate change may not occupy a position that involves formal leadership responsibility. Although the concept of educational leadership within higher education is contested (Bento, 2011; Burke, 2010; Sinha, 2013), there is a body of evidence suggesting that it is best conceptualized as distributed (Bento, 2011; Bolden et al., 2008; Burke, 2010; Floyd & Fung, 2015; Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009; Jones, 2014; Jones et al., 2017; van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & van Meurs, 2009). Distributed leadership theories suggest a departure from traditional hierarchical structures, and advocate for a collaborative approach to leadership that is both spread and shared across an institution (Bolden et al., 2009). Bolden and colleagues (2009) claim that distributed leadership '...is represented as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated' (p. 259). Three underlying properties of distributed leadership are: a) it is emergent and evolves from within a networking group; b) there is openness with respect to the way that members respect the boundaries of leadership, acknowledging that formal leadership roles may be irrelevant; and c) varieties of expertise exist across a distributed leadership network (Bennet, Harvey, Wise, & Woods, 2003).

Although research suggests that the concept of educational leadership is best explained through the principles underpinning distributed leadership, there is no consensus regarding how faculty members conceptualize educational leadership within their local disciplinary and organizational contexts. It is not clear how the emergent, collaborative, and situational processes that define distributed leadership unfold, or what they look like in academic development programs designed to strengthen informal educational leadership at a postsecondary institution. This lack of consensus regarding both theoretical and practical aspects of educational leadership in higher education points to an absence within scholarly discourse. If we know that we need to develop local leadership to strengthen and sustain strong teaching cultures, communities, and practices, then we must advance our understanding of how educational leadership is characterized.

Context

Our University is a mid-sized, research-focused, medical-doctoral institution in Canada. The institution piloted an academic development program in 2016 to foster the development of educational leadership across our campus. The Program was modelled on teaching fellowship initiatives that are designed to enable educators to enact change and strengthen teaching and learning practices and cultures (Gruppen et al., 2006; Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2010; Searle, Hatem, Perkowski, & Wilkerson, 2006).

The Program focused on developing informal educational leadership to strengthen and sustain the quality of teaching and learning environments, especially at the meso-levels of the institution (i.e. faculty, department or working group) (Bolden et al., 2008; Hannah & Lester, 2009; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016). It was designed to create a community of educational leaders, each of whom was given the opportunity and resources to implement an initiative over a three-year period that addressed a specific teaching and learning opportunity of shared interest within or amongst the institution's faculties. The Program drew together fourteen

faculty members into a community of practice from across multiple disciplines including arts, education, engineering, medicine, veterinary medicine, nursing, science, and social work. The participants developed, implemented, evaluated, and disseminated ten teaching and learning initiatives.

We present findings from a qualitative case study exploration of our academic development Program, which aimed to strengthen informal educational leadership. The purpose of our research was to gain an understanding of how the group of academics engaged in an educational leadership program conceptualized educational leadership, and to uncover the aspects of the Program that supported their development as educational leaders. The results of our study can be adapted to help institutions across the international postsecondary landscape establish processes, practices, and structures to enhance educational leadership capacity within localized contexts.

Methods

Research design

Our central research questions were: a) How do participants in the Program define educational leadership? What qualities or characteristics describe a strong educational leader? b) How do participants conceptualize educational leadership within the context of the Program? c) How do they demonstrate educational leadership within the context of their Program initiative? To uncover what aspects of this Program supported their development as educational leaders, we also asked probing questions such as: How do you think the Program allows faculty members to develop and demonstrate educational leadership?

We used a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995) to explore the notion of educational leadership, which best aligns with research seeking to explore human perceptions and experiences about a particular phenomenon (Porter, 2000). This type of design enables researchers to engage in an emergent process of uncovering multiple themes during the analysis of human perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). It also allows for flexibility, so the researcher can pose additional questions in response to interviewees' comments to ensure mutual understanding of the data constructed during the interview process (Patton, 2002).

Participant recruitment

This research was approved by our University's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Participants were approached by virtue of their appointment in the Program, which was based on a peer-reviewed two-stage application and adjudication process. At the midpoint of the three-year Program, each participant was emailed an invitation to engage in the study, and consent forms were provided to explain the purpose and expectations implicit in the study. Eleven of the fourteen Program participants agreed to participate, resulting in a 79% response rate. At least one participant from each of the ten Program initiatives participated in the interviews.

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007) over a three-month period that were aimed at acquiring the participants' rich narrative descriptions of their perceptions of educational leadership, and their views about the elements of the Program that were supporting their development as educational leaders. Each interview was 45–60 minutes in length. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We conducted member checks with each participant to confirm that their narratives were accurately captured, a task which supports a rigorous research process (Patton, 2002).

Analysis

We used thematic analysis to interpret the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The review team comprised all three study authors. The interview data were coded to preserve participants' anonymity. Consistent with the steps identified by Nowell et al. (2017), the following process was used to analyse the data:

- Two members of the review team independently reviewed each transcript to familiarize themselves with the data and identify initial codes.
- Initial codes were recorded in an excel spreadsheet along with representative quotes from the transcripts. These codes were also diagrammed in a reflective journal to further make sense of the emerging themes and connections to the data.
- The team met monthly over a five-month period to review, discuss, and refine the themes presented in the spreadsheet and diagram, returning to the raw interview transcripts as needed.
- The review team then reached consensus on the theme names and descriptions, and identified key representative quotes for each.

Themes emerging from analysis: conceptualizations of educational leadership

We gained several insights about participants' views on educational leadership. Five key themes emerged: a) affective qualities, b) mentoring and empowering, c) action-orientation, d) teaching excellence, and e) research and scholarship.

Affective qualities

Several interviewees indicated that educational leadership involves affective skills and dispositions, including the ability to demonstrate humility during the normal course of academic work and everyday life: '… educational leaders have to show a lot of humility and a willingness to listen' [INT9]. The participants stated that it was important for educational leaders to demonstrate empathy, as illustrated by one respondent who noted, '…it's important in order to gain others' trust …it's someone who treats others with respect and dignity' [INT8]. They felt it necessary for educational leaders to establish trust in order to build healthy and productive relationships with both colleagues and students, and to encourage

honest, open dialogue regarding teaching and learning. The over-arching or emotive quality of educational leadership was captured succinctly by one participant, who indicated that 'leadership for me has that sort of feeling quality ' [INT10].

Mentoring and empowering

A recurrent theme that emerged throughout the interviews was that of mentoring and empowering. Interviewees felt it was their responsibility as educational leaders to help their colleagues strengthen their teaching and learning practices; they felt that the most effective way to do this was through mentoring and coaching: '… to me [educational leadership] is about empowering others…it's about mentoring others and coaching them towards success …' [INT11]. Our participants believed that educational leaders reduce barriers to collaboration so they can share resources, ideas, and expertise with each other. Modelling behaviour plays a key role in our participants' conceptions of this aspect of educational leadership; as one respondent indicated, 'it's demonstrating and paving the way and helping others to do good educational practice' [INT4]. The interviewees shared that, as educational leaders, they were building capacity for growth in teaching and learning, and simultaneously creating a network of peers: 'You're getting people together who otherwise wouldn't have met. They're learning from each other one way or another. They're networking…' [INT3].

Action-orientation

Our participants communicated a common belief that educational leadership involves intentionally effecting and facilitating change with respect to teaching and learning. As one participant explicitly noted, an educational leader is '… someone who is going to facilitate change' [INT5]. The respondents felt that, as educational leaders, they were taking risks and demonstrating innovation: 'I think a really important aspect of it is, the idea that… taking risks in your practice is not just ok, but it's important …' [INT5]. They indicated that, by creating and implementing new initiatives, they expected to strengthen student learning, enhance their own teaching approaches, and influence the pedagogies used by their colleagues: 'So it would be about effecting change on others teaching practice and not just any change but positive and meaningful change' [INT1]. They noted that their initiatives were facilitating further connections with colleagues within and across faculties at the university, with community partners, and with their national and international disciplinary networks. One participant suggested, 'Educational leadership cannot happen in isolation or only within one's own classroom or with one's own students. Educational leadership always has a much larger impact' [INT9].

Teaching excellence

Interviewees communicated that, as educational leaders, they are responsible for facilitating student learning, or '…building confidence in learners and… helping them access the resources that they need to learn' [INT10]. Educational leaders promote conversation, collaboration, and the construction of knowledge between students and instructors. They establish positive learning environments and model productive partnerships with students

and colleagues alike. Another participant stated educational leadership is about 'leading by example… being there for the students… creating a very positive learning environment first hand…' [INT3]. Our interviewees saw educational leaders as 'the people who are the exemplary master teachers. They are the individuals who do education, they do it well, they have a real passion…' [INT4]. The participants claimed responsibility for eliminating barriers to student learning, and for being exceptional teachers who provide resources that enhance students' learning experiences.

Research and scholarship

Participants offered differing views about what research and scholarship mean within the context of educational leadership. One interviewee stressed that educational leaders demonstrate research capacity through rigorous inquiry that yields peer-reviewed, published works in teaching and learning at national and international levels: 'Educational leadership means… being conversant and up to date on the strong educational research that has been done in the past … having a solid foundation in educational research that facilitates the translation of projects and [research] questions into publications' [INT7]. Alternatively, another participant held that research and scholarship are not necessarily synonymous, and that scholarship is embedded in teaching practice with a focus on evidence-based activity that impacts learners' experiences. This participant described their view of scholarship as representative of a current gap in educational discourse:

> …there's very little written about service learning with [the communities we work with]. So, we are informing our students, but at the same time they're informing us… By studying their experiences, I think we're creating a new area of scholarship" [INT8].

Regardless of the participants' views on research and scholarship, there was a consensus amongst interviewees that an educational leader is 'being a leader in the terms of scholarship' [INT4].

Themes emerging from analysis: supporting the participants' capacity and development as educational leaders

Key themes also emerged about Program elements that were important to supporting the participants' capacity and development as educational leaders. These themes were: a) participating in an interdisciplinary community, b) having access to resources and support to implement a meaningful teaching and learning initiative, and c) embracing an identity as an educational leader.

Interdisciplinary community

Participants mentioned the benefits of their participation in the Program's on-going community of practice. They reported that this fostered engagement in, and the development of, interdisciplinary partnerships and collaborations, which helped them implement their projects and resulted in the emergence of new projects and networks outside of the formal context of the Program. One participant asserted, 'I think one of the big advantages of the community of practice is that it's so interdisciplinary that we have all these hugely

diverse disciplines and that we can really draw on expertise from others who teach in fields that seem completely unrelated to our own' [INT9]. Another stated that the community of practice had 'help[ed] to alleviate anxiety' [INT1] as they discussed the challenges they had faced in implementing their initiatives.

Resources and support

The participants acknowledged that the Program's project award ($40,000CDN over 3 years for each project) provided critical funding that helped them to implement an innovative and meaningful teaching and learning project. This funding enabled them to hire research assistants, to garner release from their teaching duties, or to fund travel, conference, or publication fees related to project dissemination. They noted that the institution's teaching and learning institute provided practical, scholarly and collegial support to enable their success. One participant succinctly summarized the importance of the resources provided as part of the Program: 'The funding has been an important piece… [because] you need resources in order to be able to build capacity' [INT10].

Identity

Participants in the Program acknowledged that their engagement allowed them to be recognized as, and to acknowledge their identity as, educational leaders. This acknowledgement was important in terms of fostering recognition from their colleagues: 'I'm being called a leader more and more by my faculty which is really interesting to me … I was at a gathering yesterday, you know people make remarks, "You're seen as a leader, you're an emerging leader." There's more of that identity around me …' [INT2]. The Program participants also reported enhancement of their sense of confidence in their professional learning and growth: 'I had to reflect on that whole term educational leader and I feel much more comfortable seeing myself in that role' [INT9].

Discussion: relating our themes to scholarly literature

A five-pillar framework for conceptualizing educational leadership

The characteristics described in our findings (affective qualities, mentoring and empowering, action-orientation, teaching excellence, and research and scholarship) become pillars of an educational leadership framework (Figure 1). Based on the participants' perceptions of educational leadership, each pillar is characterized by a range of interrelated attributes that were communicated throughout the interviews. Educational leaders may not necessarily possess all characteristics at one particular time or in each context, as these leadership qualities are highly context-dependent (Gibbs et al., 2008; Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Rege Colet, 2010; van Ameijde et al., 2009).

Affective qualities, mentoring and empowering, and action-orientation

The first three pillars (affective qualities, mentoring and empowering, and action-orientation) are well-supported by the literature about academic leadership in higher education. Several qualities are reported to be essential for academic leaders: a)

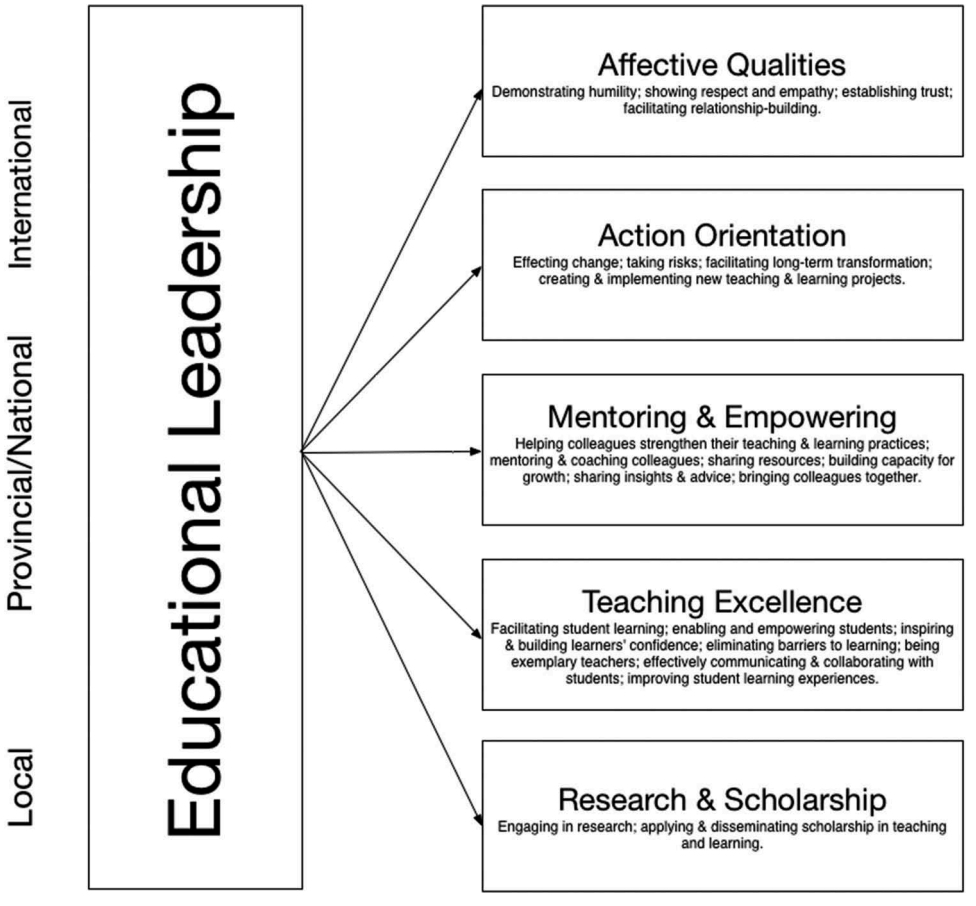

Figure 1. A framework for educational leadership based on the key emergent themes from the participants' interviews

interpersonal skills including visioning, negotiating, active listening, and building relationships; b) the ability to empower and support colleagues; c) demonstrating creativity, innovation, and risk-taking; and d) strategically taking action to initiate and inspire change (Drew, 2010; Osseo-Asare et al., 2005; Spendlove, 2007; Taylor, 2005).

Leadership behaviours such as being considerate, treating others with integrity, being trustworthy, and having personal integrity were highlighted by Bryman (2007) in a review of literature about leadership effectiveness at the departmental level. Similarly, Taylor (2005) suggested that qualities such as listening, being open to input, understanding local contexts and communities, and enabling others to enact change were perceived as core qualities of university leaders. The affective qualities highlighted by our research participants are well-aligned with a leader's ability to develop trusting relationships with colleagues and to enable change in teaching and learning cultures and practices. Such trusting relationships are core to the formation of collegial networks that are bounded by significant conversations about teaching and learning, contributing substantially to instructors' on-going growth and development (Roxå, Mårtensson, & Alveteg, 2011).

Another key theme amongst the interviewees' conceptualizations of educational leadership was coaching, mentoring, and empowering colleagues towards success in their educational practices. These findings are congruent with those of Taylor (2005), who suggested that academic development leadership was rooted in 'facilitating the learning of others' (p. 38). We see alignment in the interviewees' perceptions of the qualities of educational leadership and the approaches of academic developers, where building collegial relationships, understanding local contexts, enabling the development of others, and effecting change are foundations of practice (Gibbs, 2013; Taylor & Rege Colet, 2010; Timmermans, 2014).

Teaching excellence

Our study revealed insights about educational leadership characteristics regarding teaching excellence, which were seen as core components of the participants' conceptualizations of educational leadership. Scholars have suggested that having credibility, acting as a role model, and having a strong commitment to one's academic activities are important aspects of higher education leadership (Bryman, 2007; Spendlove, 2007). Our results indicate that one's academic credibility as an educational leader is grounded both in demonstrating teaching excellence, as well as in applying, engaging in, and disseminating research and scholarship related to teaching and learning. The participants' narratives strongly aligned with learning-centred approaches to teaching, where instructors facilitate learning processes and break down barriers to learning in order to best enable student success (Paris & Combs, 2006; Weimer, 2013). Conversations also revealed educational leadership approaches that recognized students as partners in learning and research (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016). Given the transformative potential of these learner-centred practices and partnerships in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2014; Marquis et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), these approaches should be explicitly integrated into initiatives intended to strengthen educational leadership.

Research and scholarship

Our research also revealed the interviewees' perceptions that educational leaders actively apply, engage in, and disseminate research and scholarship related to teaching and learning in higher education. Participant narratives highlighted the interrelationships between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Richlin, 2001), where educational leaders were viewed as those who consult and apply literature to strengthen their own teaching practice. Educational leaders were also perceived as those who actively engage in systematic inquiry, and who investigate and disseminate their teaching and learning practices. We noted varying views and tensions in perceptions of what constituted research and scholarship across disciplines, as well as a variety of scholarly engagement and dissemination methods. However, there was a consistent message from participants about the importance of scholarship in the context of their educational leadership practice.

This Program is situated within a research-intensive institution and includes requirements for the implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of the impact of the participants' teaching and learning projects. We were therefore not surprised to see the themes of research and scholarship develop as a pillar of educational leadership through our interviews. Creanor (2014) and Mårtensson and Roxå (2016) also described the impact of how

the scholarship of teaching and learning was used to build leadership capacity and influence teaching and learning practices, cultures, and communities. Further research is needed to examine the relationship between educational leadership and engagement in research and scholarship related to teaching and learning in a variety of institutional contexts, especially with respect to the ways that this engagement contributes to faculty members' development and growth as educational leaders.

The participants' varying views on research and scholarship are not new (O'Meara, 2006). Poole (2013) stated that, '…a discipline's beliefs about the purpose of research and the nature of knowledge help define that discipline and the people who align with it' (p. 147). He further highlighted how isolated disciplinary beliefs inhibit interdisciplinary collaboration, especially in fields such as the scholarship of teaching and learning. We saw the prevalence of faculty and institutional cultures and microcultures at play, where the shared history, norms, values, beliefs, expertise, and traditions of one's discipline impacted participants' views on research and scholarship (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Stensaker, 2014; Roxå et al., 2011). These results point to the importance of continuing to emphasize, explore, and make explicit the multiple forms of scholarly engagement and dissemination related to teaching and learning. We recommend using existing discussion papers related to the principles of, and approaches to, scholarship related to teaching and learning as a guide (e.g. Felten, 2013; Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015; Poole, 2013).

Educational leadership and distributed leadership

The participants' perceptions of how educational leadership was conceptualized in the Program supported models of distributed leadership, where leadership is viewed as an emergent and collaborative process that is shared across the institution (Bolden et al., 2009; Bennet et al., 2003; Creanor, 2014). Research suggests that partnerships, collaboration, and shared governance need to be embedded in distributed leadership to facilitate change in higher education (Bolden et al., 2009; Burke, 2010; Pyörälä, Hirsto, Toom, Myyry, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2015 ; Youngs, 2017). This type of distributed leadership, which further enables the development of local leaders, is core to building strong teaching and learning cultures that become suffused across an organization through collective action (Creanor, 2014; Hannah & Lester, 2009; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016; Roxå et al., 2011).

Program elements to support the development of educational leaders

The interviewees emphasized that core elements of the Program including: a) having sufficient time and resources to implement and evaluate a teaching and learning initiative, b) having opportunities to cultivate meaningful interdisciplinary relationships and communities, and c) identifying themselves as leaders, were integral to their learning and development as educational leaders.

Resources and support

There is a gap in the literature about academic development programs that focus specifically on educational leadership. Aligned with Creanor (2014) and Mårtensson and Roxå (2016), our findings suggest that programs designed to build capacity in educational leadership should ensure that participants are provided with the time and resources

necessary to implement, evaluate, and disseminate the artefacts of a meaningful teaching and learning initiative. For academic development programs designed to foster educational leadership, a duration of one to three years is likely needed for participants to have the appropriate time and capacity to implement, evaluate, and disseminate an impactful teaching and learning initiative. While we recognize that many institutions may not have access to the financial support available for this Program, our results do suggest the importance of the practical, scholarly, and collegial support provided through an academic development unit in contributing to the development of educational leaders.

Interdisciplinary community

The participants' perceptions of educational leadership within the Program supported the importance of informal networking, partnership-building, and collaboration within and across disciplines. The participants identified that the Program's community of practice had increased their sense of engagement, sparked their intellectual curiosity, strengthened their academic expertise and their teaching and learning initiatives, and inspired further scholarly collaboration outside of the context of the Program. The participants also identified the emergence of additional disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations, encounters, and emerging communities of interest related to their projects that existed outside the context of the Program.

Identity

An additional theme emerged as a key component of the Program, which involved fostering the development of the participants' educational leadership identities. The participants felt that as a result of the Program they had been recognized, and consequently embraced their identities as educational leaders. They identified factors such as the peer-reviewed application process, which required them to articulate an educational leadership philosophy, as important to their ability to recognize themselves as educational leaders. They also acknowledged the sense of prestige and agency they felt as being part of the Program and being recognized by their colleagues as educational leaders. Although further research is needed in this area, we did find that giving voice to the term educational leadership and intentionally incorporating this concept in the naming of the Program, and throughout various stages of the Program, helped the participants self-identify and be recognized by their colleagues as educational leaders. McLean (2012) identified that discourse analysis can be used as a valuable research tool to further analyze academic identities, including how individuals make sense of their experiences and negotiate their identities in a particular academic context. We recommend that institutions and academic development units further explore how and when this sense of identity and agency can be explicitly integrated within their programs and activities to build capacity for educational leadership and influence change.

Conclusion

Our research fills an important gap in research related to academic development programs that are aimed at strengthening informal educational leadership at the local or meso-level. Our qualitative study revealed rich narratives that described how faculty members participating in an intensive academic development program conceptualized educational

leadership. As this research was conducted with a selected group of faculty in a specialized academic development program, more research is needed to confirm how our five-pillar framework can be adapted and applied in other academic contexts. However, the framework provides a guide to help inform how educational leadership is conceptualized within the context of academic development programs and activities. In addition, the core Program elements identified by participants as facilitating their growth as educational leaders (resources and support, interdisciplinary community, and identity) can be used to help inform the creation of academic development programs designed to enhance educational leadership. Given the importance of educational leadership in facilitating change in teaching and learning communities, cultures, and practices, further research is needed to illuminate how academic development can contribute to, influence, and build capacity for educational leadership in higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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