

# **The Quest for Meaningful Program Improvement: Lessons Learned and Practical Guidance for Educator Preparation Programs**

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## **Abstract**

This article is the result of one educator preparation program's multifaceted approach to significant and long overdue program improvement. Aided by longitudinal accountability data analysis, a compliance audit, and a qualitative program inspection, these reflective experiences have provided the tools and data necessary to better understanding the challenges that were in existence, and the clear and innovative opportunities for growth. Discussion is grounded in existing literature and is followed by a series of practical tips as guidance for intentional program improvement. This article seeks to encourage educator preparation programs to disrupt the status quo and work towards closing the gaps between the teacher preparation experience and the realities of the classroom. Attention will be given on leveraging resistance from faculty, students, higher education administration, and community partners (e.g., Independent School Districts or ISDs) in order to promote efficacious change.

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Strong educator preparation programs share common characteristics. Darling-Hammond (2006) lists among these characteristics an emphasis on clinical teaching experiences and real-world application of methods. Additionally, programs with a clear vision of good teaching and well-defined, consistently evaluated standards of practice are those programs which best prepare future teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher educators play an integral role in the preparation of future teachers but find the task complex as they work to balance their own

professionalism with a collective responsibility to meet program goals (Milner, 2013). Thus, for programs struggling to accept the need for improvement and a necessary shift in the status quo, this is especially difficult to achieve and so to the detriment of the quality of preparation for future teachers. Especially now as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Education Preparation Programs (EPPs) across the nation as they find themselves struggling to adapt to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world involving technology, data-informed decision-making, and the contemporary learner of the future. All this has produced a perfect storm for resistance from a variety of stakeholders attached to EPP programs.

This article is the result of one educator preparation program's multifaceted approach to significant and long overdue program improvement. Aided by longitudinal accountability data analysis, a compliance audit, and a qualitative program inspection, these reflective experiences have provided the tools and data necessary to better understanding the challenges that were in existence, and the clear and innovative opportunities for growth. The synergistic series of events catapulted the program into a position for change that neither time nor administrative leadership could have provided or predicted. Discussion is grounded in existing literature and is followed by a series of practical tips as guidance for intentional program improvement. This article seeks to encourage educator preparation programs to disrupt the status quo and work towards closing the gaps between the teacher preparation experience and the realities of the classroom.

Attention will be given to leveraging resistance from faculty, students, higher education administration, and community partners (e.g., ISDs) in order to promote efficacious change. Proposed change is targeted on strategies dedicated to better support students, improve the quality of teacher education, draw attention to iniquitous practices and perspectives which usually impact underserved and under-represented populations, and offer encouragement to those struggling with supporting EPPs during these unprecedented times. It highlights the complexity of preparing high-quality educators in a system that seems to work for faculty and staff but fails to produce an environment designed for evolution and improvement. Unintentionally, these types of programs produce underprepared educators unable to compete for teaching positions in high-performing school districts and unable to positively impact student learning in struggling districts where disadvantaged students are served.

### **Literature Review**

EPPs are charged with the important and complicated responsibility of preparing future teachers. Strong educator preparation programs share common characteristics. Darling-Hammond (2006) lists among these characteristics an emphasis on clinical teaching experiences and real-world application of methods. Additionally, programs which operate on a clear and mutually shared vision of good teaching and with well-defined high-quality standards of practice and performance are those programs which best prepare future teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Sykes et al. (2010) contend that there is however no consistent, long-standing, or universally proven effective set of standards or methodology in teacher education from which policy can be created. Instead, teacher education lacks professional guidance and is disjointed and disconnected with subject matter training in the disciplines, pedagogy in colleges of education, and practice in schools.

Policy makers often assume that teaching is technical work (Peck et al., 2010) and is therefore rooted in behaviors like strategies for classroom management, professional behaviors, and teacher growth instead of student growth (Hamel & Merz, 2005). Under increasing pressures

as a result of accountability and federal regulations, teacher education programs are finding themselves lost and struggling to balance local knowledge, professional standards, and community interests with state and federal policy guidelines (Peck et al., 2010) which may not align with one another and can change on a dime (Earley et al., 2011). Moreover, EPPs struggle to find a balance between theory and practice, while their faculties, already faced with the challenge of a de-professionalized teaching workforce (Milner, 2013), work to establish their own professionalism and understand their role in effectively preparing future teachers. Despite these complicated efforts, teachers are still frustrated and leaving their positions because they feel inadequately prepared for the realities of teaching.

Much research has been conducted on teacher preparation reform often with the goal of determining what set of standards is best to affect increases in student learning. Sykes et al. (2010) contended that a valiant approach would be for educator preparation programs to aspire to produce new teachers who are well-equipped for their first few years in the classroom and with the desire to continue learning and refining their craft. In agreement, Varela and Maxwell (2015) found that for teachers to leave educator preparation programs better prepared, they must leave with an ability to adapt to various classroom environments, and a life-long learner identity.

## **Understanding and Improving Educator Preparation Programs**

### **Leadership**

Before there can be any discussion about meaningful and intentional program improvement, there must be a discussion about program leadership. EPPs are multilayered agencies guided by multiple bodies of rule and regulation, influenced by multiple stakeholders, and charged with the highly essential task of preparing the future of the education profession. An EPP leader's first task is to create a desire for and a culture of continuous program improvement. Program leadership must authentically advocate for the profession. In educator preparation, there is simply no room for disengaged leadership. EPP leaders must model and facilitate collaborative experiences with internal (students, staff, faculty, etc.) and external (community, alumni, etc.) stakeholders. They must be resourceful, strategic, and deliberate. EPP leaders must be able to recognize and then garner the resources necessary to contribute to the continued development of a high-qualified, highly-effective teacher workforce.

The task does not come easily. Educational leaders must therefore engage in strategic approaches to redirect resistance into a driving force for positive change. Leaders will benefit from "addressing the autonomy (political nostalgia) or relationships (social nostalgia) perceived to be in jeopardy in the mind of the change recipient" (Snyder, 2017, p. 5). In multilayered organizations like educator preparation programs, leadership must remain cognizant of and address psychological barriers and must work toward the redefinition of relationships in order to effective the more trusting environment (Akmal & Miller, 2003) needed for a shift in the status quo. Above all, EPP leaders must be informed, ready and willing advocates for a profession that is worthy and deserving of such dedication and investment, and must do so in way that encourages other along.

## **Changing the Status Quo: Strategies and Approaches Embracing Compliance**

Understanding the value of compliance is of utmost importance. The term compliance is often spoken with negative connotation but for meaningful program improvement, it is deserving of both recognition and respect as a powerful equalizer. Therein lies the difficulty. Program teams often view matters of compliance such as documentation and standards alignment as tedious work which distracts and impedes on independence and academic freedom. Program leadership must work to develop a culture of understanding that compliance is not only important for form and function of educator preparation, but also works to establish consistency and accountability across all programs. It ensures at the very least that all EPPs follow an established set of minimum standards—minimum in that the standards are designed to allow for program flexibility and room for creation and innovation in program delivery specific to the needs of its students. Compliance outlines the musts but leaves room to discuss and negotiate the “hows.”

### ***Data-Driven Improvement***

Compliance and accountability in educator preparation provide leadership and staff with concrete data to understand areas of success, areas of deficiency, and areas of opportunity. Program leadership and staff must work to thoroughly understand and properly identify data sources in order to make those important connections between what is happening versus what needs to be happening. With that, in order to make data-driven improvement worth its weight in work, the data must be accurate. The work of data collection, manipulation, and reporting requires an intentional attention to detail. There is no value in otherwise rich data sources if the data is flawed.

### ***Clinical Experiences***

Compliance outlines what must be done. Data reflects if it was done, and to what extent. What comes next is what will write the story of either progress, regression, or stagnancy. Program leadership and staff must be willing to innovate. The program’s organizational culture must welcome continuous improvement, new strategies, and more than the minimum required in order to positively affect program improvement.

Coined “the glue for powerful preparation” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 152), the clinical experience, when carefully designed as immersive and intentional, proves to be the most comprehensive experience in the development good teachers. In agreement, research on effective teacher preparation program design and delivery suggests that programs should aspire for a training sequence which includes immersive, diverse, and engaging practical field experiences in real classroom settings wherein candidates can build a diverse repertoire of instructional strategies (Varela et al., 2019).

Student teaching assignments must go beyond surface-level goals of subject and grade level match. Instead, this invaluable period of professional immersion should include multiple and diverse settings which are accurately representative of the equally diverse learning styles and student needs found in real classrooms. The goals of teacher preparation should seek to offer students ample opportunity to experience real-world classrooms before they are left to their own devices as first-year teachers. Candidates must be classroom ready when they leave teacher preparation. Thus, training must be embedded in these real-world classrooms and the learning must take place in practice.

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### *Strategic Partnerships*

It takes a village and building that village takes strategic leadership. Educator preparation programs must work to develop intentional strategic partnerships with local school districts. Educator preparation programs often have partnerships with schools for field experiences and student teaching placements. While these partnerships are important, it is far more important that the partnerships are strategically developed to accurately portray the diversity present in the education system, whether demographically, environmentally, or in terms of school performance levels. Coordinating with only the best performing schools for example is counterproductive to practical experiences. Pre-service teachers should be exposed to educational settings that will encourage them as well as to those that will challenge them. It is within these multiple experiences that future teachers can develop a repertoire of teaching strategies for diverse learners. Further, these experiences afford more realistic opportunities to understand and develop for themselves a diagnostic awareness of student strengths and needs in the context of practice.

### *Governance*

Just as critical as strategic partnerships therefore are a network of critical friends who serve on an advisory board dedicated to the continuous improvement of the educator preparation program. Schuck and Russell (2005) distinguish an advisory board comprised of critical friends as one whose members act as a sounding board, who ask challenging questions, and who are unafraid to engage in those crucial conversations needed to inform meaningful change. With that, the leadership must be able to identify and network with key stakeholders, alumni, just as well as student voice. Rather than a convenient group of colleagues, the advisory board must be represent a calculated balance of all the most important perspectives that guide the program toward its mission, vision, and goals.

### **Lessons in Dealing With Resistance**

Through the course of the program's multifaceted approach to significantly improve, several key lessons were culled from an intensive reflective practice. This proved to be a long and difficult process but accepted as necessary to affect the desired transformation. The lessons focus on all aspects of the organizational mission, from workflow to leadership to vision. Educator preparation programs must be able to understand how effectively or ineffectively they operate and how those operation ultimately impact how they train teachers. Until then, it is impossible to understand what educator preparation program should be doing at all. Hence, the five lessons provide practical tips as guidance for intellectual program development and improvement.

#### **Lesson #1: Attention Must Be Given to the Organizational Structure, Management, and Work Practices of the Program**

The realities of the program were dismal. We realized that if we did not change the way we were organized to do the work, we would continue to get the same result. It was then the certification coordinator and the interim dean advocated for an organizational restructuring that accounted for productivity, efficiency, and accountability for all involved in the program. Too

often individuals in the program were working tirelessly without realizing they were doing double work and or even outdoing each other's work. Furthermore, the disconnection from faculty, students, and community stakeholders was evident as the program performance was stagnant. It was then a new organizational vision was created and a restructuring of the program was born. With the new organizational vision, the team initiated the process by accounting for and reviewing all program roles, duties and responsibilities. This much needed vision also led to the creation of a new leadership position within the program. For the first time in university history, the educator preparation program was under the helm of a director who created a new structure, designed new processes, evaluated talent, managed roles, implemented new strategies and acquired new tools in order to create a more responsive work environment for all.

### **Lesson #2: A More Responsive Work Environment Needed to Be Created**

Kim and Gonzales-Black (2018) describe a responsive organization as one which “puts responsiveness at its foundation—responsiveness to new information; to the needs and talents of staff, teachers, students, and the community; to unforeseen challenges and opportunities” (p. 3). Placing responsiveness as our foundation required we that we embraced a new way of thinking about how we were conducting business with our staff, faculty, students and community. Early on after the new organizational structure was established, we agreed to confront the realities as harsh as they were. The process began with the new program director together with the interim dean and former certification coordinator engaging in interactive planning about the future of the program while allowing program director full autonomy to create new approaches. Placing responsiveness as our foundation also required we embraced the idea of re-establishing relationship and engagement with staff and faculty members that would eventually create high levels of trust to allow for effective patters of decision making and improvement in the program.

### **Lesson #3: Leadership Has to Be Adaptable**

When engaging people in a complex process of change, it is imperative that leaders strike a balance between what DuFour and Fullan (2013) call *loose and tight* leadership styles—a happy medium between assertiveness and autonomy. “If we know anything about change it is that ordering people to change doesn't work, nor does leaving them alone” (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 33). Knowing this, the new program director focused attention in getting to know each team member well and their particular work styles, building strong professional relationships, and creating a positive team concept within the program. A book study using Jon Gordon's *Proven Principles and Practices That Make Great Teams Great: The Power of a Positive Team* (2018) was initiated to instill the idea of inclusiveness and teamwork among staff. With this concept in mind, the program director moved on to create a mission focused, purpose driven team willing to try new things together in an environment of optimism, positivity, and belief.

### **Lesson #4: A Program Must Have a Shared Mission and Vision and a Set of Purpose-Driven Goals**

As an educator of more than two decades of public school and school administrator experience, the program director understood the importance of mission, vision, and goals. Although the program already had a mission and vision in writing, there was no ownership and

little awareness of its origin and meaning. At the knowledge of this, the program director knew it was imperative for the team to work together toward a shared vision with a greater purpose. This understanding facilitated the collaborative creation of a new mission, vision, and set of goals for the program. The process allowed all the members of the team to feel part of something meaningful and purposeful knowing each of them played a pivotal role in the success of the program. The program's mission and vision statements created were simple statements, easy to remember, memorize, and repeat but most importantly to live by. These statements also serve as a set of performance and commitment standards for each one of the team members. Gordon (2018) acknowledges the idea of capturing the thoughts and ideas of all team members into the creation of the mission and vision. He said,

It's powerful to have each team member identify and share what the vision and mission means to them and how they can contribute to it. The research shows that when people know how they are contributing to a shared vision and a bigger purpose, engagement and passion soars. A shared vision and greater purpose is brought to life one person, one team at a time. (p. 38)

### **Lesson #5: Resistance Is a Result of Ineffective Leadership**

In his article, "The Unfamiliar Truth about Resistance to Change in Schools," Cruz (2020) attests "resistance to change occurs mostly as a result of well-intended but nonetheless ineffective leadership" (p. 30) and explains resistance can be placed in two different categories. Resistance to change can be logical and illogical. The logical resistance (also referred as rational resistance) happens as a result of individuals not understanding why something needs to be done, not trusting their leader(s), and not been very clear on how they are to do their work. These were some of the exact revelations captured by the new program director upon arrival. Most if not all of the staff members claimed not to have ever been included in any time of decision-making, planning, or data review indicating why, who, or how to do their job.

The second type of resistance is illogical resistance. This is the type of resistance to change comes from no observable need (why, who, how), and "is the intrinsic desire to refute change for the sake of refuting change" (Cruz, 2020, p. 31). Fortunately, the program did not have obvious revelations of such resistance. The implications of logical resistance has prompted the program director, interim dean and other leadership team members to ensure enough support is provided to all staff and faculty in the form of why, who, and how while at the same time engaging in active professional monitoring, sharing of information and feedback. The ultimate goal is to build trust, and engagement while allowing for shared effective decision making.

### **Conclusion**

In essence, stagnate minds produce stagnate programs. Program improvement requires committed leadership to cultivate an environment conducive to the collective effort needed for meaningful change. It is imperative to focus on the culture of the group and on team habits that are situated in fixed mindset and complicit of the status quo. Bain and Varela (2020) concluded: "Key to any leadership position is the imperative task of building a trusted team. Build your team with people you can work with, whom will help to promote and embody the communicated

vision and focus” (p. 7). Transparency and communication are essential and it should be expected that tension and stress are part of the evolutionary cycle of the program. New organizational practices are difficult. Still, if we do not change how we work and how we organize ourselves, we will never realize the full potential of our work and ourselves.

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