THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN HIGH-PERFORMING EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) are charged with the vital but often complex duty of preparing future teachers. Effective EPP leadership is required to achieve stated goals, and ultimately positively impact the quality of the teacher workforce. Teaching training programs in the state of Texas are rated on a number of accountability factors, and the highest achieving programs are recognized with commendations. This study sought to determine what leadership practices/style of leadership guides EPPs with proven success. A qualitative review of interview data revealed three themes as consistent across the data: *student-centeredness, trust/confidence,* and *emotional support/relationships* found to align with the theory of Authentic Leadership.

Keywords: *educator preparation, leadership, authentic leadership*

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Introduction

Effective leadership characteristics are imperative to gain respect from followers and to effectively influence them to work towards the common vision and goals (Abbas et al., 2020). In higher education settings, Suwandi & Setiawan, (2022) found that leadership significantly impacts workplace morale and employee performance, magnifying the importance of effective leadership. In essence, leadership impacts employees' well-being through their abilities to create a strong sense of community in the workplace (Arokiasamy & Tat (2020).

Dawson et al. (2020) and Northouse (2021) asserted that leadership in higher education settings consists of three categories: administrative (managing people and resources, as well as showing technical competence); interpersonal (socially perceptive, showing emotional intelligence and managing interpersonal conflict); and conceptual skills (creating visions, strategic planning and problem solving). While leadership controls the culture that is created in an organization, leadership skills, perhaps especially emotional intelligence, are important to

self-nurture in order to optimize organizational outcomes by activating employee and stakeholder talent (Northouse, 2021). Accordingly, there is value in leaders cultivating multiple leadership approaches, that can be adapted to follower's specific needs (Northouse, 2021).

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) are charged with the vital but often complex duty of preparing future teachers. The strongest EPPs are those which place dedicated emphasis on the practical experience, often called clinical or practice teaching, and any opportunity to practice skills in real-world, authentic settings (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In EPPs, often embedded in higher education settings, the finesse of effective leadership is not only a necessity for a positive work culture, but to positively impact on the future of the teacher workforce, and ultimately the schoolchildren those teachers will one day serve (Greenhill & Petroe, 2010). In essence, *"the challenge facing education schools is not to do a better job at what they are already doing, but to do a fundamentally different job. They are now in the business of preparing educators for a new world."* (Levine, 2006, p. 104). Thus, EPPs must establish themselves on operate on a clearly defined, mutually shared vision of exceptional standards and high-quality teaching (Varela et al. 2020).

To get there, EPP leaders must build consensus around and commit to the vision, consider stakeholder perspectives, focus goals on student mastery, and engage faculty and staff. As determined by Varela et al. (2020), because EPPs are multifaceted agencies "charged with the highly essential task of prepared the future of the education profession" (p. 3), that vision should be one of continuous improvement, advocacy, collaboration, strategy and shared-governance. Greenhill and Petroe (2010) contended that such is only possible with intentional, visionary leadership.

This study sought to determine what leadership practices/style of leadership guides EPPs with proven success. This qualitative study analyzed interview data for emergent themes to answer one central research question:
RQ1: How does leadership influence the success of high-achieving educator preparation programs?

Method

Using qualitative interview data analyzed for emergent themes, this study sought to understand and reveal how leadership influences the performance of high-achieving educator preparation programs. Results will serve as a guide for other educator preparation programs seeking to improve program culture and performance, and ultimately to increase success for future teachers.

Data Collection

Teaching training programs in the state of Texas are rated on a number of accountability factors, and the highest achieving programs are recognized with commendations. Commendations are awarded for rigorous and robust preparation, preparing the educators Texas needs (high-need areas), preparing educators for long-term success, and innovative educator preparation (Texas Education Agency, 2023). To best capture the study's goals, we sought participation from staff members employed at high-performing educator preparation programs as

identified by program commendations issued by the state's governing body. Potential participants were contacted via email with an invitation to review the goals of the study. Included in the email was a copy of the consent form and related assurances of anonymity. Individuals who accepted the invitation to participate were contacted via email to schedule an interview via Zoom. At the time of the scheduled interview, we asked the interviewee for permission to record for purposes of transcription at a later time and in order to facilitate the process of determining the themes present. No additional information related to the interviewee's place of employment or position was collected or will be reported here.

Results

Interviews were conducted with 4 individuals who work in commended, high-achieving educator preparation programs. Table 1 illustrates descriptive notes about each participant listed in generic terms where possible to protect identities.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

	Years of Experience	**Role**
Participant 1	37 years across all levels of education	Mid-level leader in an EPP
Participant 2	"many, many"	Mid-level leader and teacher educator in an EPP
Participant 3	30 years in education, 1 in EPP	Mid-level leader in an EPP
Participant 4	"long-time, 2 in this role"	Mid-level leader and teacher educator in an EPP

Data analysis revealed three themes as consistent across the data: *student-centeredness, trust/confidence,* and *emotional support/relationships.* Table 2 is a codebook to provide a description for theme and the frequency of each.

Table 2

Codebook

Theme	**Description**	**Terms and Phrases**	**Frequency**
Student-centered	A focus on student needs as primary to the goals of the organization; purpose of work centers on the student	Student-centered, student needs, best interest of students, etc.	36

Trust/Confidence	A display and firm belief of assurance, dependence and reliance	Trust, depend, confidence, rely, seek, value input, believe, etc.	31
Support/Relationships	A connection between people; care and concern about one another on a human level	Emotional support, have each other's back, strong relationship, good relationship, etc. positive relationship, mutual respect, community, family, care, etc.	45

Student-Centered

Participants were asked directly to describe the workplace culture, to talk about how the educator preparation program operates and with what vision or goals in mind. Participant 2 said:

> We have to be like 'what's occurring? What are the changes? How is this going to impact us? And, but, we have to have a mindset that says, 'I accept these changes.' Right? I'm not going to fight it and say 'why are we doing this?', instead of Okay, we got to do what we gotta do, let's get it done let's move forward... let's go. Let's get it done. It's, it's a very unique way of thinking, I think. yeah, we're not resisting. Right? Changes? We're accepting the changes, and you have to have a leader that accepts accountability, is accountability...and accountability is to protect everyone and just do it in an equitable manner.

All other participants echoed the remarks in their own interviews, and repeatedly referenced a priority of student-centeredness. Participant 1 said, "*It is about students. It is about how are we going to ensure that they are the best teachers? That will have the most impact on all of these young children?*" When prompted to talk a little more about how that impacts the culture of the workplace, Participant 1 continued, "*the culture was one of improvement, and support for that improvement.*"

Participant 3 described the educator preparation program as "v*ery student-centered. Everyone is very focused on every aspect from admission to completion for every student.*" Participant 4 noted:

> We have these common goals and so can we step back from these hierarchical perspectives to look at these common goals as a community. Keep things so that we all understand if we do these kind of things how will it impact the students that we're preparing for schools and you know eventually impact the children and community?

Participants were also asked about what they believed was the contributing factor to their record of success and related commendations. They spoke about how the commendation was never the goal. Instead, student success is and always will be the primary focus. Participant 1 said:

> our goal is always to be the best. But it's not the be the best so we can put achievements

up on our wall. It's truly to be the best so we can learn better ways to prepare teachers. That truly is the vision and the goal and it has been from the very beginning. Yes, we want to be the best but we want to be the best for the right reasons.

Participant 3 explained that in their program, the approach is the same.

Each student is unique. We identify every student as an individual. I mean I think the difference is that we are really student-centered, not so much policy- centered. It's not just about you know, accountability, compliance. But are you providing them the opportunities to be successful? That's what we're doing here."

In talking about commendations, Participant 4 admitted to not having knowledge about the specifics of the award or recognition*: "You know what, I didn't even know that (it was awarded)."* When prompted to talk about how the program achieved that recognition, Participant 4 continued:

I bet, you know most teacher education programs don't make the changes that we try to do here, using data in ways that help us help our students. I mean we have the data! You know? We have the data. It's not a TEA thing. It's more about culturally and linguistically responsive teaching that sustains and culturally responsive practices. I mean we think about things in terms of you know, how do we best serve the communities that are least served? That's our main goal. We want the kids, the teachers, to go on and do well.

In summation of the story told, Participant 3 directly stated, "*our dean is… I mean his personal philosophy is student-centered. Stay connected with students".*

Trust/Confidence

Each of the participants in this study repeatedly referenced the importance of trust in the working relationship with their leadership and among their colleagues in the educator preparation programs. Recognize the various levels of expertise needed to effectively impact the success of each student, participants talked about reliance one another, and a mutual respect for the value of everyone's individual and collaborative work. One point that came into discussion was the complexity of educator preparation programs embedded in higher education settings, in colleges of education or otherwise. While some teacher training programs can stand alone, those in higher education have added challenges of meeting state standards but also acknowledging academic freedom. Participants acknowledged that balance is a challenge but trusting in the vision brings the team together. To that end, Participant 1 said, "e*very time we make a decision and every time we're pulling curriculum together and every time we're trying to make these things happen, we're going to pull everyone together."* In similar tone, Participant 2 said:

we all work as a team, so if we're going to work on a project, and we have a Planning Team meeting. We all get our calendars together we all listen, we all get ideas we incorporate what we think how it's going to be, we all approve a final product. All of us. Like where is everybody, how are we going to get them to where they've got to go? and everybody has input, no one should say 'that's not my job' because it is all ALL our jobs.

Participant 4 added:

We huddle once a week for two hours. You know, all the people in teacher ed[ucation] and we talk about things and get things done, and then we meet again once a month and

talk about things and get things done. So you know there is a lot of discussion going on. Everyone. We have to.

In reverse, Participant 3 spoke about a sporadic lack of confidence, one that the leader of the educator preparation program quickly restores: "*Although I think I know the answer (laughs) I doubt myself. And I'll go to him [leader] and he reassures me, he'll tell me, 'you got it. You got it. You know what it is."*

Support/Relationships

The most prevalent theme in the interviews data were the concepts of support and relationships. Participants talked at length about their sense of a strong support system in the workplace, both in terms of work and task related needs like resources, training, information and knowledge sharing, etc., but also in emotional and personal matters. Participant 2 said, "*it's a culture in which we all support each other emotionally. I think it's the leadership that requires a lot of mentoring and supporting the individuals... that is a very critical component of this program."* When asked about the working relationship with the educator preparation program's leader, Participant 4 said, "o*h gosh, it's very comfortable. We laugh a lot, we joke a lot, we have lots of discussion all the time, every day."* Comparing the feeling to places of prior employment, Participant 4 continued, "*It feels good. I would a say on a scale of 1-10, a 10."*

Speaking with gratitude for the mentorship and guidance to become a stronger leader as well, Participant 1 also spoke with reference to the power and influence of support and a good working relationship:

> *What she [leader] does for me, that is something that I need to pass on. I need to support her and have her back. To value those people, to ensure they have the right level of professional development and let them work. But also, to pull them together as a team. Understand that no one works in isolation in educator preparation. Each team member has to be valued, and then you have to have their back.*

Participant 3 added that feeling valued has strengthened the working relationship:

> *He [leader] is very hands on, and his knowledge is very impressive. I mean with as much as he has on his plate, he has really good knowledge about everything. It is really impressive. And he is always picking my brain. We have a good relationship and he values what I know. I've got that support from him…he is in constant communication with the local school districts. We all know what the needs are.*

Referencing the leader's approachability, Participant 3 also said, "*I mean forget open door policy. He's the one knocking on OUR doors. "What's up for today? What's on your plate? How's it going? Hey good job yesterday" he's just always communicating."*

With appreciation for the leadership at the educator preparation program, Participant explained:

> *We have a great working relationship, and he respects what I do. I remember when I came here and I started talking about some new ideas, and he was just totally on board. And he'd go out and start talking to other people about these ideas, not really knowing everything about them yet but already advocating you know and sort of claiming it, like*

we're gonna make this happen! You know even though he is not naturally a member of this local community, he's a member of THIS community right here, you know?

Discussion

Initially, this study sought to uncover the ways in which leadership influences the success of high-achieving educator preparation programs. Through an analysis of the data, we learned that these programs operate from a deeply student-centered perspective, understanding the goals of their students as aspiring educators much more deeply than their own organizational operations. Leaders of these high-performing educator preparation' programs prioritize people, understanding, and motivation in order to nurture a culture that makes student success its number one priority. This mirrors the findings reported Greenhill and Petroe (2010) and Varela et al. (2020) about the necessary leadership priorities in EPPs.

It is important to note that educator preparation programs are established and must abide by a very prescriptive set of standards-- curriculum and operational guidelines that work to ensure that all aspiring teachers in Texas are prepared with the same foundational tools.

One consistency that was shown to make these high-achieving programs unique however was the collective approach and commitment to do more. Rather than to stop and turn at, what Participant 3 called "*the marching orders that come from TEA,*" there was consistent evidence of a deeply rooted effort to understand, and then act. Participant 2 admitted, "*we invested thousands of hours trying to understand. The what, the why, the how. Understanding an adult learning, and trying to understand how to make it make sense for our learner, to help them connect the reality.*" Participant 1 echoed the sentiment stating, "*it's not so much convincing them we have to do it, it's more about letting them come together and say 'where should we do it? How should we do it? We.'*"

Authentic Leadership

In our analysis of the data collected, we found strong connections to the concept of Authentic Leadership. This is due in large part to the contention that authentic leadership can be characterized on the dimensions of purpose, values, relationships, self-discipline, and heart (Northouse, 2021).

Studies on authentic leadership, though still in formative stages, have shown a positive correlation with a high perception of work engagement (Basaran & Kiral, 2020). Authentic leaders have an internal confidence, display psychological capital, and promote resilience in themselves and others such that the use of active, adaptive, and positive approaches towards solving problems increases followers' optimism (Feng, 2016). Staff are well-resourced, benefit from positive feedback, and find their work meaningful and the environment socially and emotionally supportive (Basaran & Kiral, 2020). This allows for a transparent, trust-based relationship between leaders and followers shown to facilitate decreases in resistance to change and a development of accountability and creativity (Kilic & Yavuz, 2021).

Purpose and Values

An authentic leader effectively demonstrates a sense of purpose, and a demeanor of approachability. Authentic leaders care deeply about the work being done such that the leader can be perceived as passionate. Leaders who are passionate about the work and the vision have followers/team members who are inclined to be the same. In the data collected, we heard various comments alluding to participant's EPP leader's true sense of purpose-- that is recognition of and allegiance to the overarching and prominent goal of preparing high-quality teachers well-equipped to effect student learning. The data also revealed how this permeated through the passion EPP team members collectively had for their roles in that process.

Participants spoke at length about a leadership culture of *student-centeredness* as key to their organizations' successes. Leaders practicing authentic leadership approaches have reflected and understand their own purpose for leadership; as a result, they exhibit passion for the activities and causes they lead. This sense of purpose aligns with the authentic leader's values; again, because of their awareness of their own values, the leader's outward behaviors both work towards their purpose and demonstrate their values through action (Northouse, 2021). An authentic leader behaves in a way that is in line with the values of the organization-- the vision *and* the mission-- above that of self.

Relationships (Connectedness)

Authentic leaders build relationships with their employees and colleagues, and try to establish real connections with the people around them throughout the organization. They are "mutual disclosers" willing to share things about themselves as much as they are willing to listen about others. The data revealed that *support/relationships* was a common theme. Participants emphasized that they felt a strong connection between themselves, their leaders, and the people with whom they work. They spoke of genuine care and concern about one another on a "human level". *Trust/confidence* was also identified as a prominent theme in the data, such that participants believed there to be evidence of dependence and reliance modeled by their leaders. Due to the strength of the working relationship, and the foundational trust, EPP staff members were empowered to do their jobs well. Through developed relationships, shared dialogue yields increased trust and shared connections.

Self-discipline, Consistency, and Compassion

Authentic leadership increases follower trust in an educational setting and creates an environment supportive of change (Kiliç & Yavuz, 2021). Moral or internal values of authentic leadership divergent from the internal social or political environment of an organization make for limited effectiveness (Munyon et al., 2021). In a setting like an educator preparation program, which are under constant review and subject to frequent changes to their guiding rules, self-discipline, consistency and compassion are seen as imperative to achievement. Participants spoke about commitment to their students, their students' goals, and the principal purpose of their work, despite the pressures of those "*marching orders that come from TEA.*"

> *We have to be what's occurring, what are the changes, how is this going to impact us and a mindset that says, I accept these changes. Right I'm not going to fight it and say why*

are we doing this? Instead, we got to do what we gotta do. Let's get it done. Let's move, forward let's go. Let's get it done.

Increased psychological capital (e.g. hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy) in followers resulted when subordinates rated leaders higher on dimensions that included consistency or self-discipline measures (Sepeng et al., 2020). Authentic leadership motivated increased follower positive behavior, cooperation, and individual performance in part through kindness or compassion (Tore & Cetin, 2022).

Conclusion

This study sought to determine what leadership practices/style of leadership guides EPPs with proven success. What was discovered is that a vision of student-centeredness, trust/confidence, and support/relationships are central components of the leadership disposition found to affect such success. These themes aligned with the theory of Authentic Leadership, which centers on purpose, values, relationships, self-discipline, and heart. Managerial capacity for authentic leadership has been shown to be limited by managers' personal psychological resources; increased resources however resulted in more frequent authenticity and was influenced by organizational climate (Fladerer & Braun, 2020). Rather than to lead the goals, leaders in these high-performing educator preparation programs lead the people, support the staff and prioritize student success, not just in terms of data and academic achievement but with the end goal in mind: the classroom and schoolchildren.

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