The Characteristics Sought by Public School Leaders of Applicants for Teaching Positions

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This study examined the characteristics of teacher applicants that are sought by public school systems in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The Superintendents of each of the public school districts in the Commonwealth were surveyed. A total of 99 respondents completed the survey (n = 99). This response rate of 57.2% was well-above the average for this type of instrument. The results of the survey will be of interest to job applicants, school system leaders, and the colleges that are preparing preservice teachers to enter the workforce. Implications for each of these groups are discussed in this article. In addition, recommendations for future research are provided.

The shortage of qualified classroom teachers for K-12 positions has been well documented. These shortages are especially evident in the fields of mathematics, science, and special education (Brownell, Hirsh, & Seo, 2004). A variety of reasons, ranging from retiring baby boomers to overreaching governmental regulations, have been given for this shortage (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011). In addition, the hiring of individuals without teaching degrees to fill needed positions has been a growing trend in the US (Nagy & Wang, 2007).

School district administrators and others tasked with hiring new teachers are faced with a two-fold dilemma. They must hire individuals to fill vacancies, but they must also find qualified teachers who will positively contribute to the learning of the students in their classrooms. There is a research-to-practice gap in key areas such as special education (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008), so poor hiring decisions can exacerbate the problem. Given this challenge, this study was developed to determine the characteristics sought by public school leaders of applicants for teaching positions.

A previous study by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (NCEQW) at the University of Pennsylvania was utilized as a basis for developing the list of characteristics sought by employers. That study was conducted on a variety of employee characteristics and organizational performance issues, including the characteristics sought by employers when making hiring decisions (NCEQW, 1995). One of the findings of the study that generated the most attention in the media and in academic literature centered on the characteristics that were sought by employers for job applicants (Cappelli, 1995). For that part of the analysis, the researchers asked organizational leaders to rank a list of attributes of job candidates from most to least important in hiring decisions. Traditional characteristics, such as grade point average and teacher recommendations, were ranked near the bottom of the list of items. Instead, traits such as attitude, communication skills, and prior work experience were rated as the most important characteristics sought by the employers. These results generated a great deal of discussion and replication in an attempt to determine why high grades or attending a well-known university were not major determinants in

hiring decisions. The study that will be presented here was based on the basic methodology employed by the NCEQW. However, some modifications to the original research approach were made.

First, this study focused on the characteristics sought by public school systems for teacher applicants. The NCEQW's original study cast a broad net for its sample, but most of the survey's respondents were working in for-profit organizations. The current study surveyed the public schools systems in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. This focused approach allowed for a more-detailed analysis of the characteristics sought by public school systems.

In addition, the items on the survey instrument were modified from the original NCEQW study to better-reflect the characteristics related to teacher candidates. Items such as additional teaching certifications, technology integration skills, and extra-curricular activities were added to the original list of characteristics used by the NCEQW. Also, items that were not generally associated with teacher interview items such as years of schooling completed were removed from the original list. Most job candidates for teaching positions must have at least a bachelor's degree, so this item would not generally be a determining factor in a hiring decision.

Characteristics

The final modified list used in the current study consisted of ten items. A brief discussion of each of the ten characteristics used in this study will be provided below.

Academic Performance

It would seem obvious that college grade point average (GPA) would be a good indicator of professional success. After all, a great deal of attention is given to a student's academic performance when awarding honors such as Summa Cum Laude to graduating students. However, some researchers have concluded that the relationship between college GPA and professional success is tenuous (Dye & Reck, 1989). One of the reasons given for this has been the tendency for grade inflation and grade replacement by repeating a class where a poor grade was previously earned (Marx & Meeler, 2013; Nikolakakos, Reeves, & Shuch, 2012).

However, Silverhorn (2011) argued that GPA is still a consideration for many employers. In addition, D'Agostino and Powers (2009) concluded that GPA was a better predictor of teacher success than other measures such as scores on preservice teaching examinations. Finally, Imose and Barber (2015) suggested that GPA is still a popular hiring item for recruitment professionals because its quantitative measure is less subject and is easier to understand. Therefore, GPA was included in the study.

Additional Teaching Certifications

The possession of multiple teaching certifications indicates that the candidate has the ability and training to teach different subjects. For example, a candidate may have a regular education K-5 endorsement and a special education K-12 endorsement. This would indicate that the applicant could be used by a school district to teach an elementary school class or a special education class. In addition to having complementary certifications, a candidate may have certifications in unrelated fields such as science and music at the same grade level. The possession of multiple teaching certifications is an indication of increased pedagogical knowledge and professional training, and this often increases the attractiveness of a teaching candidate (Rutledge, Harris, & Ingle, 2010).

Attitude

The attitude of the applicant was the top-rated characteristic in the original NCEQW (1995) study. Those with better attitudes toward learning job skills and accomplishing goals at the work-place were considered by hiring managers to be the best candidates for the position. In addition, Osler and Russell (2013) found that the attitude of the classroom teacher was "a critical compo-nent vital to the academic achievement of young children" (p. 28). Because of the top rating of can-didate attitude in the original study, and because the disposition of the teachers is a significant contributor to student success, candidate attitude was included in the current study.

Communication Skills

Effective communication involves the ability to convey knowledge in a clear and meaningful way as well as the ability to listen to the feedback from others (Ellis, 2002; Spektor-Levy, Eylon, & Scherz, 2008). It has been recognized as a critical success factor for a number of professions (Ellis, 2002).

Göksoy (2014) examined the need for effective communication by teachers. He concluded that "effective teachers are also regarded as effective communicators" (Göksoy, 2014, p. 1335). In addition, other researchers have found a positive correlation between the communication ability of teachers and the academic performance of their students (Aydogmus, Aksu, & Kaya, 2014; Rutledge et al., 2010).

Extra-Curricular Activities

Participation in extra-curricular activities has been linked to academic and professional success (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Greenbank, 2015). The skills learned by participating in items such as athletic teams, musical groups, or other types of student groups foster the ability of participants to work as a team with others, to learn self-discipline, and to follow guidelines. They can also help the participant to improve his or her leadership and communication skills (Greenbank, 2015).

In theory, teacher candidates who participated in extra-curricular activities should also exhibit these positive characteristics. They would also be in a position to assist as a coach, director, or faculty advisor for the extra-curricular groups in which they participated in college. For example, a teacher who was on his or her college Tae Kwon Do team could serve as a leader for a similar group at the school. This would be an informal type of additional teaching certification that would assist the school district to provide those activities for its students. It would also help the teacher to set him or her apart from others who do not have the experience to lead these types of extra-curricular groups.

Local Resident

Hiring teachers who are from the community may seem like a good idea. These teachers already know the area, they will not have to move and acclimate to the culture and racial diversity in the community, and they might be more dedicated to staying in the area if their families live close to them. In addition, a local resident will be paying property and school taxes that will help to support their employers.

However, giving preference to local residents may give rise to charges of nepotism. Even hires that are not overtly biased may be defined as nepotistic upon later reviews (McKay, 2003). Despite the issues surrounding hiring local residents, it appears that many school districts would prefer to have teachers who are from the region when possible (Davis, 2007).

Prior Teaching Experience

Prior teaching experience demonstrates that the applicant has been able to obtain a teaching position in the past. It also generally indicates that the candidate has experience in the classroom setting that will help him or her to be a more effective teacher. Prior experience in the classroom is considered to be positively correlated with effective teaching and student success (Rutledge et al., 2010). However, more experienced teachers must be paid more. In addition, prior experience does not guarantee that performance will be better than a less-experienced applicant.

Recommendations from Professors/Former Employers

A job applicant's curriculum vitae and college transcripts will only provide part of the information used to make a hiring decision. Input from the candidate's previous employers or college faculty members can add a great amount of detail to the review process (Dhar & Bhagat, 2009). This can be especially true for newer or inexperienced teachers. If they do not have a great amount of classroom teaching experience, then the feedback provided from the professors where they completed their teacher training can provide insight regarding the teacher candidate.

Reputation of Applicant's College

US News and World Report (USNWR) publishes an annual ranking of colleges and universities in the United States. The rankings are often touted by schools that are ranked favorably by USNWR and criticized by others. Scholarly research on the usefulness of these types of rankings has been sparse and unfavorable (Capobianco, 2009; Farrell & Van der Werf, 2007). However, given the attention to the annual rankings, it was decided that the reputation of the applicant's college would be used as one of the hiring criteria in the study.

Technology Skills

Computers and other forms of technology are becoming more prevalent in the modern classroom. Nearly half of all American students use a computer for school assignments during the school day (Kleiner & Lewis, 2004; Saine, 2012). In addition, research has demonstrated that computer-assisted instruction can be as effective as traditional teacher-directed instruction in some settings (Stultz, 2013). Given this increase in the implementation of technology in the classroom, it would be prudent to consider the technology skills of teacher candidates.

Participants and Methodology

There are 173 public school districts in Kentucky. Fifty-one of the districts are urban or independent (UI) school systems. The remaining school districts are suburban or rural (SR). The Superintendents of each of the 173 school districts were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study by completing the survey instrument online. The study was kept brief to recognize the value of the participants' time and to increase the likelihood of completion. The Superintendents were chosen because they would be in the best position to provide the information requested by the survey. The online survey program, Survey Monkey, was utilized to conduct the survey. This program was selected because it facilitated the confidential and expedient completion of the surveys by the respondents.

A total of 99 responses were received. This represented a 57.2% response rate. This response rate was similar regardless of the school type (i.e., UI or SR). The response rate for UI school districts was 58.5%, and the rate for SR districts was 56.7%.

Baruch (1999) examined response rates for academic studies over a 20-year period. He found that the average survey response rate when targeting those who are leaders within their

organization was 36.1%, with a standard deviation of 13.3. It is clear that the response rate from this study was significantly better than the average for similar types of studies. This high response rate is promising. It demonstrates an interest by the leaders of the public school systems in Kentucky to identify the common characteristics being sought by school districts across the Commonwealth.

Results

The results of the survey can be found in Table 1. It appears that the Kentucky public school districts valued attitude, communication skills, and academic performance the most in making hiring decisions regarding educators. In addition, items such as extra-curricular activities, being a local resident, and the reputation of the applicant's school were the least important factors in these decisions.

The results of the survey were largely consistent between UI and SR school districts. Tables 2 and 3 show the order of importance given to all ten factors by UI and SR school districts, respectively. The only factors that changed were recommendations by teachers/former employers and technology integration skills. Those two items were ranked sixth and seventh on the list by SR districts, but they were in seventh and sixth place on the list of the UI districts. Other than those two items, all other factors remained unchanged between the different types of school districts.

In addition, correlation coefficients were calculated to determine if a correlation between any of the factors existed. The results for all data can be found in Table 4. In addition, the correlation statistics for the UI and SR school districts are in Tables 5 and 6, respectively. Cohen's (1988) interpretation of the strength of a relationship was used to examine the data. Within this interpretation, a relationship is judged as weak if the absolute value of the correlation statistic is below .30, moderate if it is between .30 and .50, and strong if it is .50 or larger (Cohen, 1988). Since there were ten variables, there were 45 individual correlation statistics to examine. This was confirmed using the formula discussed by Bedeian (2014) of k * (k – 1)/2, where k is the number of variables.

As demonstrated in Tables 4 – 6, no strong correlations were identified between any of the variables. However, a few moderate correlations were noted. All of the correlations in the three tables were indirect (i.e., negative) correlations.

In the combined correlation table (i.e., Table 4), three moderate indirect correlations were noted:

a. additional teaching certifications – recommendations from professors/former employers (-.4703);
b. attitude – prior teaching experience (-.3402); and
c. local resident – technology integration skills (-.3262).

The UI correlations (i.e., Table 5) revealed nine moderate indirect correlations:

a. academic performance – additional teach certifications (-.3066);
b. academic performance – recommendations from professors/former employers (-.3489);
c. additional teaching certifications – recommendations from professors/former employers (-.4494);
d. attitude – prior teaching experience (-.3767);
e. attitude – recommendations from professors/former employers (-.3235);
f. communication skills – prior teaching experience (-.3463); extra-curricular activities – prior teaching experience (-.4776);
g. local resident – technology integration skills (-.4156); and
h. prior teaching experience – technology integration skills (-.3204).

The SR correlations (i.e., Table 6) identified four moderate indirect correlations:

a. academic performance – local resident (-.3092);
b. additional teaching certifications – recommendations from professors/former employers (-.4864);
c. attitude – prior teaching experience (-.3294); and
d. extra-curricular activities – technology integration skills (-.4004).

Applicant attitude was the leading factor identified by employers. An examination of the direct (i.e., positive) correlations with attitude for the combined sample (i.e., Table 4) found that there were two direct correlations with attitude. Neither of the factors were moderately strong. However, it is worth noting the items that moved in the same direction as attitude in the rankings. Those two characteristics were communication skills (.1832) and technology integration skills (.1328). Communication skills ranked in second place in the overall ratings by the respondents, so it makes sense that at least some degree of correlation existed between attitude and this characteristic. Technology integration skills ranked consistently in the bottom half of the rankings, but they did seem to move in the same direction as the rankings for attitude. Again, neither of these characteristics had moderate or strong correlations, but they were the only direct correlations identified for attitude for the combined data.

Discussion

The results of this survey are helpful to a variety of groups. Three of the groups that will be interested in the results will be discussed here; they are: (a) preservice teachers, (b) school system administrators, and (c) colleges and universities that are preparing preservice teachers to enter the workforce.

Preservice Teachers

Preservice teachers are those who are generally near the end of their coursework, and they are beginning to enter the classroom for field observations or student teaching experiences. Preservice teachers will be interested in these findings because they help them to determine what type of characteristics employers are seeking from applicants. Items such as attitude, communication skills, and academic performance can all be refined during the preservice teacher's time in the college classroom. Preservice teachers should take advantage of any developmental opportunities given to them through classroom training, fieldwork, student teaching, and other emersion techniques during their undergraduate studies.

School System Administrators

School system administrators are often attempting to hire highly-qualified teachers who will help students to achieve learning objectives. Maynes and Hatt (2013) stated that this can be a difficult position because there is often no agreed upon list of requirements that teaching applicants should possess. This study helped to provide a preliminary list of these types of items. It also demonstrated that administrators from diverse geographical areas and educational systems in Kentucky have a generally agreed-upon set of criteria for determining the qualifications of a job applicant. This helps to support the decisions of those administrators and provide guidance to others who are compiling their own list of characteristics.

Colleges and Universities

A final group that will be interested in the findings of this study is the colleges and universities that are training teachers. Those schools should examine the characteristics that employers are seeking. They should then

takes steps to embed those characteristics in the curricula for preservice teachers.

Obviously, some of the items may be more difficult to address. However, colleges should seek to foster and develop them as much as possible. For example, the attitude of an applicant can be the result of several factors ranging from personality to professionalism. There is little that a teacher preparation program can do to change the personalities of preservice teachers. However, the level and quality of preparation they receive while in teacher-preparation programs can be addressed.

Kagle (2014) found that professional learning communities helped preservice teachers to develop their teaching skills and to become more confident in their abilities. In addition, Ergűl, Baydik, and Demir (2013) recommended an extended and more comprehensive field practicum for developing preservice teachers. They found that those who received more extensive training were more confident in their abilities and had a better attitude toward teaching.

Colleges and universities can examine the design of their programs to look for ways to strengthen these skills in their students. They might also need to examine if certain elements of their programs (e.g., extra-curricular groups or new technology integration) should be de-emphasized. This is not to recommend that the schools should abandon those items. However, they should realize their relative importance to overall student development and preparation. Doing this will assist the schools' graduates to have better job-related skills and will increase their graduates' likelihood of employment.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for future research can be made based on these findings. First, the current study only focused on public school systems in Kentucky. Expanding it to include private school systems would add to the current body of literature. Next, including school districts in other states would provide a broader view of the requirements for teacher applicants. This expansion could occur in a region of the county (e.g., the Southeast or the Northeast), or it could cover the entire country. Finally, the depth of the study could be increased. By expanding the study to determine if those teachers who are judged to have the desired qualifications are more productive than those who do not would help to determine if the findings of the study can be supported quantitatively.

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Tables

Table 1: Applicant Characteristics Sought by Employers (Combined)

Rank	Characteristics
1	Attitude
2	Communication Skills
3	Academic Performance
4	Prior Teaching Experience
5	Additional Teaching Certifications
6	Recommendations from Professors/Former Employers
7	Technology Integration Skills
8	Extra-Curricular Activities
9	Local Resident
10	Reputation of Applicant's College/University

Table 2: Applicant Characteristics Sought by Employers (Independent School Districts)

Rank	Characteristics
1	Attitude
2	Communication Skills
3	Academic Performance
4	Prior Teaching Experience
5	Additional Teaching Certifications
6	Technology Integration Skills
7	Recommendations from Professors/Former Employers
8	Extra-Curricular Activities
9	Local Resident
10	Reputation of Applicant's College/University

Table 3: Applicant Characteristics Sought by Employers (County-Wide School Districts)

Rank	Characteristics
1	Attitude
2	Communication Skills
3	Academic Performance
4	Prior Teaching Experience
5	Additional Teaching Certifications
6	Recommendations from Professors/Former Employers
7	Technology Integration Skills
8	Extra-Curricular Activities
9	Local Resident
10	Reputation of Applicant's College/University

Table 4: Combined Correlations

Item		*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
1	Academic Performance	1.0000									
2	Additional Teaching Certifications	-0.2571	1.0000								
3	Attitude	-0.2187	-0.0861	1.0000							
4	Communication Skills	-0.1103	-0.0425	0.1832	1.0000						
5	Extra-Curricular Activities	0.1006	0.0798	-0.0154	0.1253	1.0000					
6	Local Resident	-0.1752	0.1471	-0.0034	-0.2553	-0.0339	1.0000				
7	Prior Teaching Experience	-0.1169	-0.1240	-0.3402	-0.2918	-0.2697	-0.1096	1.0000			
8	Recommendation from Professors/Employers	-0.1722	-0.4703	-0.1649	-0.2088	-0.2417	-0.2203	0.1171	1.0000		
9	Reputation of Applicant's College	-0.0317	-0.0185	-0.1041	-0.0566	-0.2543	-0.2022	-0.0188	0.0913	1.0000	
10	Technology Integration Skills	-0.0633	-0.1846	0.1328	0.1829	-0.2781	-0.3262	-0.1930	-0.0562	-0.1803	1.0000

Table 5: UI Correlations

1	Academic Performance	1.0000								
2	Additional Teaching Certifications	-0.3066	1.0000							
3	Attitude	-0.1478	0.1582	1.0000						
4	Communication Skills	-0.1862	0.2431	0.1457	1.0000					
5	Extra-Curricular Activities	0.2561	0.0254	-0.0083	0.1376	1.0000				
6	Local Resident	0.1382	-0.2174	0.0794	-0.2575	-0.0631	1.0000			
7	Prior Teaching Experience	-0.0395	-0.2198	-0.3767	-0.3463	-0.4776	0.0187	1.0000		
8	Recommendation from Professors/Employers	-0.3489	-0.4494	-0.3235	-0.2399	-0.2256	-0.1207	0.2049	1.0000	
9	Reputation of Applicant's College	-0.2964	0.0942	-0.0358	0.1239	-0.2705	-0.2845	0.0617	0.0073	1.0000
10	Technology Integration Skills	-0.1063	0.0146	-0.0912	0.0408	0.0329	-0.4156	-0.3204	-0.0055	-0.2371	1.0000

Table 6: SR Correlations

Item		*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
1	Academic Performance	1.0000									
2	Additional Teaching Certifications	-0.2381	1.0000								
3	Attitude	-0.2568	-0.1986	1.0000							
4	Communication Skills	-0.0826	-0.1411	0.2037	1.0000						
5	Extra-Curricular Activities	0.0456	0.0912	-0.0160	0.1197	1.0000					
6	Local Resident	-0.3092	0.2720	-0.0373	-0.2636	-0.0369	1.0000				
7	Prior Teaching Experience	-0.1544	-0.0740	-0.3295	-0.2713	-0.1891	-0.1461	1.0000			
8	Recommendation from Professors/Employers	-0.0904	-0.4864	-0.0805	-0.2002	-0.2539	-0.2731	0.0828	1.0000		
9	Reputation of Applicant's College	0.1393	-0.0592	-0.1711	-0.1480	-0.2491	-0.1237	-0.1121	0.1658	1.0000	
10	Technology Integration Skills	-0.0422	-0.2694	0.2583	0.2461	-0.4004	-0.2800	-0.1405	-0.0785	-0.1726	1.0000