

Principal Selection and School District Hiring Cultures: Fair or Foul?

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Abstract

A host of research dating back to the 1970's has established the link between principals and school success. Yet, research on how principals are selected has been infrequent, and, the use of merit-based within principal selection processes has been a concern of researchers since the 1950s. This qualitative research study examined the perceptions of 221 California public school principals regarding inequity within their principal selection experiences. Results of this study indicated a considerable number of participants had encountered inequity in their experiences as analyzed through the lens of a justice judgment theoretical framework. In many districts, participants perceived that merit-based selection was practiced; however, other participants described pervasive inequity. Participants also described a dichotomy within school district hiring cultures regarding the use of merit. Students need the most-qualified principals leading their schools as Common Core implementation marches toward assessment. Subjective selection procedures and hiring cultures which breed inequity may lead school districts to select less-qualified principals at a critical time when the highest order of leadership is needed to raise and sustain student achievement within public schools. Using rigorous selection methods which minimize bias ensure equity and may improve the quality of educational leaders assuming the principal ship.

Keywords: principal selection, hiring procedures, human resources, personnel selection, justice judgment model

Public education in the United States is in the midst of a paradigm shift as the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014) moves students away from rote-learning towards critical thinking and real-world application which are hallmarks of 21st century learning. According to CCSS (2014), Common Core Standards entail rigorous academic standards in English and mathematics which provide specific learning targets for students to acquire by the end of each respective grade level. The standards were developed to ensure students have acquired the necessary skills to achieve success post-high school regardless of where they live. As the principal is crucial in affecting school success (Anderson, 1991; Clifford, 2010; Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2005), the role of the principal cannot be understated. Inequity in principal selection is a long standing issue that can prevent the most-qualified candidate from obtaining a principal ship. Inequity is defined within this study as a "lack of fairness" (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.). Therefore fairness and equity were used interchangeably throughout this study.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain principals' experiences of principal selection processes regarding equity. The research sought to answer the question, what are the experiences and perceptions of principals' regarding fairness in the selection process used to select principals? The research question was developed based on a review of six decades of principal selection literature in which merit appears as a primary concern. Principals provide the opportunity for a different research perspective than has been previously presented in principal selection research. Previous research has been conducted from the Superintendent's' perspective (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Hooker, 2000; Rammer, 2007), the aspirant's perspective (Blackmore et al, 2006; d'Arbon et al., 2002; Gronn & Lacey, 2006), or other general aspects of principal selection (Ash et al., 2013; Schlueter & Walker, 2008).

Furthermore, principal selection is seldom the focus of education researchers (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Hogan & Zenke, 1986; Hooker, 2000; Schmitt & Schectman, 1990). Continued research of principal selection can provide researchers and educational leaders alike opportunities to present valuable information which can improve principal selection and ultimately sustain or raise student achievement public schools. In order to ensure the most-qualified principals are leading schools, the equity issue must be addressed.

Review of Principal Selection Literature

Throughout principal selection literature, four salient points are common: (a) the principal is an important determinant of student achievement, (b) procedures used to select principals are highly subjective and not commensurate with the importance of the role of the principal, (c) principal selection has not been widely interrogated by researchers, and (d) inequity is a prevalent occurrence within principal selection. The selection process is the first stage in the employment relationship where the candidate and the organization meet to determine if their identities are congruent (Herriot, 2002). Within principal selection research, the processes of this “relationship” have been bifurcated into two equally essential components: selection criteria and selection procedures. In theory, these processes are designed to determine the “most-qualified” candidate (Wendel & Breed, 1988). However, school districts often lack criterial specificity (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983) and use highly subjective procedures, which may increase the chances of inequity occurring (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore, Thomson, & Barty, 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006).

Selection Criteria

Selection criteria were defined by Baltzell and Dentler (1983) as the “qualifications required for eligibility” (p. 5) and are considered to be foundational for assessing candidates (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kwan & Walker, 2009). Yet, several issues with selection criteria have been noted over the last several decades such as the use of vague, irrelevant, or non-assessable criteria (Anderson, 1991; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kahl, 1980). Roza (2003) found that even within the same district, desired selection criteria varied between Superintendents and Human Resource managers. School districts purport to select or attempt to select the “best” candidates (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987); however, according to Baltzell and Dentler (1983), district Human Resource managers were largely unable to articulate what “best” entailed and those managers that could did not have any formally written or defined selection criteria. In the 1950s as few as two selection criteria were reported (Featherstone, 1955), while more recent research (Waters et al., 2004) catalogued 66 selection criteria encapsulated within 21 leadership responsibilities which were correlated with student achievement through a meta-analysis. Despite a quantum leap in the number of selection criteria, selection processes used to analyze selection criteria have largely remained unchanged since the 1950s (McIntyre, 1974; Palmer, 2014; Wendel & Breed, 1988). As Clifford (2010) suggested, established selection criteria and relevant data are often disregarded by selection panels. If relevant data and established criteria are overlooked what are the purpose of selection procedures?

Selection Procedures

Selection processes have previously been described as “a data collection exercise at the end of which a decision is taken by the organization” (Herriot, 2002, p. 385). The data collection should be formalistic and systematized (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013; Clifford, 2010; MacBeath, Oduro, Jacka, & Hobby, 2006), but has largely been based on intuition (Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Morgan, Hall, & Mackay, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Rammer, 2007; Wendel & Breed, 1988) and described as unsuitable for selecting principals (Anderson, 1989, 1991; Blackmore et al., 2006). The primary methods used to select principals (e.g., interview, resume submission, reference checks) are highly subjective (Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006) and lack psychometric rigor (Baltzell & Dentler, 2006; Palmer, 2014), as “anecdote” and “hearsay,” are common determinants of selection (Walker & Kwan, 2011). These processes also tend to be “flawed, complex, cumbersome” (d'Arbon, Duignan, & Duncan, 2002, p. 473) and “far from systematic” (Schmitt & Schectman, 1990, p. 232). Unfortunately, principal selection procedures which lack criterial specificity create a reliance on the use of “fit” (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).

“Fit”

The term “fit” was first used by Baltzell and Dentler (1983) in their national study of principal selection and has been described by other researchers using a similar term (Baron, 1990; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn and Lacey, 2006; Kahl, 1980). The concept of “fit” is characterized as a perception and projection of characteristics and community values that a candidate possesses which demonstrate congruence between the candidate and the organization (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). While Kahl (1980) believed “local tailoring” (i.e., “fit”) should be an integral part of selection, the use of “fit” in selection is generally decried as it unfairly affects candidates who are either outside the hiring district or are women or minorities (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006). Baron (1990) gave two interpretations for the use of fit: (a) the principals needing to be aware and considerate of their community and (b) the politics involved in principal selection. According to Baron (1990), politics result in selection based on factors other than merit.

Principal Selection Criticism

Although limited, the majority of recent principal selection research has been critical of principal selection processes (Ash et al., 2013; Blackmore et al., 2006; d’Arbon et al., 2002; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2004; Kwan & Walker, 2009; MacBeath et al., 2006; Walker & Kwan, 2011; Wildy, Pepper, & Guanzhong, 2010). Merit concerns have long been a mainstay of principal selection research dating back to the 1950s when Greene (1954) discussed the need for political proof, merit based hiring procedures. Almost 30 years after Greene’s research, Baltzell and Dentler’s (1983) national study of principal selection focused on the very concept of merit. Nonetheless, the absence of merit and the use of problematic practices within principal selection has been raised and often attributed to either selection personnel, selection procedures, or a combination of both (Ash et al., 2013; Blackmore et al., 2006; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Baron, 1990; Cornett, 1983; d’Arbon et al., 2002; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; Hooker, 2000; Kahl, 1980; Kwan & Walker, 2009; Kwan, 2012; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Rammer, 2007; Walker & Kwan, 2011; Watkins, 1991; Wildy et al., 2010).

Selection personnel have a notorious reputation within principal selection literature. Aside from not being skilled or experienced in interviewing (Hooker, 2000; Watkins, 1991; White & White, 1998; Winter & Jaeger, 2002), a plethora of problematic practices by selection panels have been reported. White and White (1998) found selection panels which relied on the candidate’s advice during the interviews for conducting the procedural aspects of the interview. Selection panels also often use spurious information during selection proceedings to evaluate candidates (Blackmore et al., 2006; Clifford, 2010; Cranston, 2012; Walker & Kwan 2012). Baltzell and Dentler (1983) described some selection panels as “free-wheeling” where any selection panel member could bring up any topic spontaneously (p. 11), while others have described selection panels as incompetent (Blackmore et al., 2006; Winter & Jaeger, 2002). Blackmore et al. (2006) described nefarious actions by selection panels against candidates such as making false claims and using subtle body language to orchestrate a candidate’s ousting from contention. Favoritism is also a pervasive problem within principal selection processes (Walker & Kwan, 2011). Who a candidate knows is far more critical to selection than what a candidate knows (Baron, 1990, Gronn & Lacey, 2006, Kahl, 1980). Specifically, how well a candidate knows their selectors was distinguished as a major factor in selection as early as the 1950s (Featherstone, 1955) and continued to be considered a primary factor within recent principal selection literature (Johnson, 2010; Kwan, 2012; Kwan & Walker, 2009). Known candidates typically are already employed within the district where they are seeking the principalship and have been referred to in more contemporary research as incumbents (Blackmore et al., 2006). Incumbents are often favored and can override merit in selection because of their service to their institution (Blackmore et al., 2006). Gronn and Lacey (2006) reported the pattern of hiring incumbents as a primary source of grievance and a common reason for candidates to discontinue interest in the principalship. Candidates also routinely question if open positions are actually open because of the presence of preferred candidates who may have already been pre-selected prior to the selection process actually taking place (Blackmore et al., 2006; Walker & Kwan, 2011). Panel incompetence and merit issues related to selection are well known (Blackmore et al., 2006), therefore principal selection processes must be reevaluated (Frias, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to analyze results of this study was Leventhal's (1976) justice judgment model. Based on the inequity found within more recent principal selection literature, a justice judgment model built upon Adams' (1965) Equity Theory was deemed appropriate. Although Leventhal's work was theoretical and other justice judgment models were later developed based on his and others' work, the model he postulated was utilized for several reasons. First, Leventhal's justice judgment model provides utility as it was designed for general allocative processes. Second, other models encompassed myriad organizational elements or other elements of selection outside the scope of this study (e.g., Blader & Tyler, 2003; Gilliland, 1993). While not specifically described by Leventhal (1976), personnel selection processes are congruent with allocative process as they distribute rewards or resources (i.e., principalships).

Leventhal (1976) presented six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness for evaluating fairness of allocative processes: the consistency rule, the bias-suppression rule, the accuracy rule, the correctability rule, the representativeness rule, and the ethicality rule. Each rule describes a fundamental fairness expectation within allocative processes. For example, the consistency rule necessitates a consistency of procedures "across persons and over time" (Leventhal, 1976, p. 23). If a candidate was subject to a procedural modification that disqualified their selection such as personal questions that no other participant encountered, a violation of the consistency rule occurred. Another rule, the accuracy rule dictates allocative processes must be based on reliable and correct information (Leventhal, 1976). If a selection committee member presented hearsay and a candidate was evaluated based on that hearsay and not selected because of it, a violation of the accuracy rule occurred. Within this study participant responses related to their selection experiences were analyzed for violations of the six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness. Hiring cultures were not analyzed using the Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness because hiring cultures are not an allocative process.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative approach in order to gain an understanding of principal selection from the perspective of the principal. According to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorenson (2010), qualitative inquiry is appreciative of context and "assumes human behavior is context bound" (p. 424). Furthermore, Ary et al. (2010) asserted participant perspectives and experiences are of primary concern when obtaining descriptive data. An electronic questionnaire emailed to principals of K-12 public schools in California served as the data collection method for this study.

Participants

California public school principals were purposively sampled for this qualitative study. Ary et al. (2010) suggested purposeful sampling could increase the credibility of a study by selecting participants from a larger group. The California Department of Education School Directory (2014) was used to obtain 7,386 principal email addresses. Search fields within the electronic database included: (a) all counties, (b) all districts, (c) public elementary, junior high, intermediate middle school, (d) non-charter schools, and (e) active and pending status. Microsoft excel was used to compile and sort principal emails for delivery of the electronic survey. During the week-long notification period of the survey, 1,546 emails were removed due to returned email notifications and requests not to participate in the survey. The survey was sent to 5,840 participants with 221 surveys being returned for a 3.8% response rate (221 of 5,840). Demographics are located in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of Participant by Percentage of the Sample (n=221)

Variables	Percentages
Race/ethnicity	
Caucasian	69.7
Hispanic	17.2
African-American	3.2
Asian	5.0
Other	5.0
Gender	
Male	52.9
Female	47.1
Age range	
56 years and older	24.9
46-55 years	36.2
36-45 years	33.0
35 years and older	5.9
Experience as Principal	
21 years or more	5.9
16-20 years	6.8
11-15 years	20.8
6-10 years	33.0
1-5 years	38.0
Education level	
Doctorate	23.1
Master	70.1
Some graduate	6.8
Hiring context	
Within district	60.2
Out of district	39.8

Instrument

As no other principal selection instrument has been validated (Kwan & Walker, 2009), an instrument was created by the researcher and reviewed by an expert panel consisting of an education professor, three district level administrators familiar with principal selection, and three current principals to establish face and content validity. All members of the expert panel possessed doctoral degrees and were familiar with educational research. The instrument was reviewed by the expert panel and then revised based on their feedback. The instrument consisted of nine personal and professional demographic questions and three questions pertaining to participant's experiences and perceptions of principal selection processes as well as their school district's hiring culture. Participants were asked to describe an experience when someone less qualified than them obtained a principal position and the factors they believe led to this event. Participants were also asked to describe their district's hiring culture in terms of whether they believe hiring is based on merit or other factors.

Data Collection and Analysis

An e-mail was sent to participants shortly before the study commenced describing the nature of the research, advising participants of their rights as research subjects, and providing contact information for the researcher. Subsequently, the survey was sent to 5,840 California public school principals, and remained open for a period of 2 weeks. At two separate intervals during the 2-week period participants were reminded to complete the survey. At the end of the period, 221 participants had completed the survey. Demographic survey questions 1-9 were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data from the other three questions were analyzed using coding methods associated with constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965). Two coders conducted the analysis and an inter-coder reliability of at least .80 was established by analyzing and comparing results at several intervals during the data analysis. The use of multiple coders allows reliability of the data to be tested (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

Also, the use of multiple coders is an essential component of establishing validity (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Selective coding of survey questions related to participants' principal selection process experiences was accomplished by utilizing the six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness postulated by Leventhal's (1976) justice judgment model.

Results

Results are organized into two distinct sections: participants' selection experiences and hiring cultures. Responses are further organized under themes which emerged through data analysis. Participants' responses regarding their selection experiences were analyzed using coding methods associated with constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) and Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness. Hiring culture responses were only analyzed using coding methods associated with constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965).

Participant Selection Experiences

Participants' responses regarding their selection experiences were categorized into three major themes: (a) N/A, (b) merit-based factors, (c) non-merit-based factors. Of the 221 participants of this study, 91 (41.2%) indicated they either obtained every principalship they have applied for, or wrote "N/A" as a response to questions regarding principal selection. N/A was interpreted by the researcher as the participant stating the situation described in the survey item was not applicable to them (i.e., they had not experienced the situation before). Thirty-two (14.5%) participants described their selection experiences as merit-based. Seventy-eight (35.3%) participants indicated they had been previously involved in a principal selection experience where someone else less-qualified was selected to the principalship. Eleven (5.0%) participants did not respond to the question regarding principal selection experiences and 9 (4.1%) participants answered the survey items without addressing the survey items. Responses within each category exceeded the number of participants because participants often described several factors within a single experience.

Merit-based Factors in Selection

Participants who described their selection experiences as merit-based (32, 15%) believed experience (16 responses), interviewing skills (11 responses), and qualifications (8 responses) were the primary factors in merit-based selection processes they encountered. All merit-based responses are displayed in Table 2. Responses were categorized based upon the factor described by the participant. Participant responses reported for merit-based factors exemplify each respective factor noted by participants. Regarding experience, Participant 114 stated "vastly under-experienced." "I made it to final round on each because I was a qualified leader but did not have the proven experience of the other top candidates." Participant 92 described interviewing skills as a factor of his merit-based experience. He stated "I did not interview well. There is an art to successful interviews and I grow from this experience." Qualifications were mentioned by several participants as factors in merit-based selection. Participant 208 explained "I once missed out on a position because I was not as qualified as my colleague." This participant described qualified as being more articulate than the other candidate. The participants who reported merit-based responses did not indicate any rule violations based on analysis using Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness, therefore no rules were violated and the processes were considered equitable.

Table 2: Merit and Non-merit Based Selection Experiences

Merit Based Selection Experiences (n=221)		Non-merit Based Selection Experiences (n=221)	
Variables	Responses	Variables	Responses
Experience	16	Relationships	21
Interviewing skills	11	Incumbents	13
“Fit”	8	Gender	10
Proven success	5	“Fit”	9
Screening issues	1	Race/ethnicity	9
Other	1	Politics	7
		Pre-selection	6
		Superficial attributes	5
		Out of district	4
		Foreignlanguage	3
		Perceptions	3
		Time in service	3

Non-merit-Based Factors in Selection

Participants who described factors other than merit (78, 35%) within their responses thought relationships (21 responses), incumbents (13 responses), gender (10 responses), “fit” (9 responses), race/ethnicity (9 responses), politics (7 responses), and pre-selection (6 responses) were major factors within non-merit-based selection practices. All non-merit-based factors in selection noted by participants are shown in Table 2. Responses were categorized based upon the factor described by the participant. Participant responses for non-merit based factors exemplify each respective non-merit-based factor in selection reported by participants. Relationships were the most frequently cited factor in non-merit based selection as indicated by participants of this study. Participants used the following phrases or terms throughout their responses: “who you know,” “relationships,” “personal connections,” favoritism,” “cronyism,” “nepotism,” “friends” and “preferential favor.” Participant 69 described the following regarding their selection experience, “After completing interviews it was discovered that the position was given to the interview chairperson’s best friend. It was at this point I sought employment in my current district.” Participants from outside the district of the open principalship reported that being an incumbent was a major factor of inequitable selection processes. Participant 168 described a situation in which a less-qualified candidate from within the same district was selected. The participant stated the less-qualified candidate was “more of an incumbent than me.”

While in the literature gender is not often stated as an equity issue within principal selection, participants of this study felt otherwise. Both men and women participants of this study experienced inequitable selection processes which were based on gender. Participant 159 described an experience where he were told by the Superintendent they were selected as the next principal, however they stated “the Superintendent told me that a board member wanted to assure that the other candidate would not leave the district and wanted to foster more women in leadership roles.” The use of “fit” is a noted problematic practice within principal selection literature and identified by some participants of this study as a factor in an inequitable selection process. Participant 220 described an experience where she was promised the next principal position but another candidate from outside the district was given the position because that person “fit the community profile.” Principal selection primarily based on race or ethnicity is nearly absent from principal selection research. Race/ethnicity was a factor in nine responses within this study, four of which believed a less-qualified minority candidate was given the position and five of which believed a less-qualified Caucasian candidate was given the position. Participant 3 stated, “I had far more experience, board members stated they wanted a Hispanic male.” Politics was reported by some participants as a factor in an inequitable selection process. Participants typically used the term “politics” and referred to some sort of relationship between the selector(s) and the individual(s) selected. Participant 133 explained she was “praised by the superintendent for her service and advised to seek opportunities outside the district. The politics were clear there, his intent was not to promote me but others who he showed preferential favor for.” Pre-selection was reported by several participants and typically signified a perception that the selection process was predetermined at some point before the actual outcome should have been decided at final selection.

Participant 106 stated, "I had an excellent interview and I got my rejection letter in the mail on the same day. The outcome had been decided prior to the actual process."

Analysis Using Leventhal's Justice Judgment Model

Participant responses were analyzed using Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness. All of the non-merit-based selection factors noted by participants constituted a violation of one or more of Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness. Participant's experiences and perceptions indicated that relationships, incumbents, gender, "fit", race-ethnicity, politics, and pre-selection were factors that overrode merit and constituted violations of the consistency rule. Within individual responses (e.g., relationships, pre-selection) other rules were also violated such as the bias-suppression rule or the accuracy rule.

The consistency rule dictates that allocative processes should be consistent across persons and over time with no candidate benefiting from a special advantage (Leventhal, 1976). Participants who experienced and perceived non-merit-based factors within selection indicated general inconsistency of selection practices across persons and that special advantage was given to certain persons based on factors other than merit. Relationships, which overrode merit, illustrate a primary example of an inconsistent process which allows a special advantage to be given to a particular candidate based on their relationship(s) with persons influential within principal selection processes. Furthermore, personal relationships between selectors and candidates which overrode merit were also a violation of the bias-suppression rule because these relationships created a conflict of interest within the selection process. Pre-selection violates both the consistency rule and the accuracy rule. Choosing a candidate prior to the selection process gives a special advantage to the pre-selected candidate which violates the consistency rule. The accuracy rule is violated by pre-selection because the selection process is not based on "as much good information and informed opinion as possible" (Leventhal, 1976, p.27) because other candidates are not examined thoroughly before a decision has been reached.

Hiring Cultures

Participants were also asked to describe the hiring culture of their current district in terms of merit. Specifically is merit the prevailing element or are other elements involved? Hiring culture was defined as "the general description of an organization's prevailing human resource selection practices as perceived by a member(s) of the organization in question (i.e., merit-based, "fit," favoritism)" (Palmer, 2014, p. 13). Participant responses regarding hiring culture were analyzed using methods associated with constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965). The purpose of this survey item was to establish a context for the individual experiences and perceptions of the participants. Merit-based cultures were indicated or described by 87 (39.4%) participants. Cultures as non-merit-based factors were indicated or described by 72 participants (32.6%). Mixed cultures where merit and other factors are involved were described by 30 participants (13.6%). An additional 32 participants (14.5%) either described hiring procedures or did not respond to the survey item.

Merit Based Hiring Cultures

Merit-based hiring cultures were described by 87 participants. The primary elements of merit-based hiring cultures were: non-specific (31 participants), procedures (30 participants), fair-equitable (11 participants), varied (10 participants), and candidate attributes (8 participants). Each participant response noted below exemplifies a respective element of hiring cultures. All merit-based hiring culture results are shown in Table 3. Within 31 responses participants made general statements such as "The most qualified applicants are selected" or "I feel in my new district, positions are filled with the most qualified individuals." Procedures were identified by 30 participants as the most salient element in their district's merit-based hiring culture. Participant 160 stated, "My current district has a strong process for selecting individuals for management positions. . . . I believe very strongly that the most qualified individuals are hired." Fair-equitable hiring cultures were described within 11 participant responses. Participant 101 stated, "positions are definitely filled with the most qualified candidate a careful and fair interview process." Varied factors which participants indicated produce a merit-based climate were described by 10 participants. Participant 20 stated several elements of his district's merit-based hiring culture: "We look for the most qualified candidates. Sometimes these are in house employees, sometimes they come from outside the district." Candidate attributes were described within eight participant responses as elements within a merit-based hiring culture. Participant 80 described three key attributes: "experience, ability to adapt and communicate, as well as knowledge about school leadership."

Table 3: Merit and Non –Merit Based Hiring Culture Elements

Merit Based Hiring Culture Elements (n=221)		Non-merit Based Hiring Culture Elements (n=221)	
Variables	Responses	Variables	Responses
Non-specific	31	Incumbents	21
Procedures	30	Relationships	18
Fair-equitable	11	“Fit”	13
Mixed hiring practices	10	Perceptions	5
Candidate attributes	8	Non-specific	5
Culture	3	Gender	4
Experience	2	Politics	4
Demographics	1	Out if district hiring	3
Mission and beliefs	1	Pre-selection	3
Recruitment	1	Race/ethnicity	2
Reputation	1	Age	1

Non-merit Based Hiring Cultures

Hiring cultures based on elements other than merit were described by 72 participants. Responses were categorized within non-merit based hiring cultures if the participant response indicated either the culture was not merit-based (i.e., the most-qualified candidate is not usually selected). The three primary categories of non-merit based hiring cultures were incumbents (21 participants), relationships (18 participants), and “fit” (13 participants). Each participant response below exemplifies a respective non-merit based hiring culture element described by participants. All results for non-merit based cultures are located in Table 3. Hiring cultures based on the selection of incumbents (i.e., in-house hiring) were described within 21 participant responses. Participant 126 described her district’s hiring culture as follows: “District favors in house hiring over more qualified individuals. It is more of a ‘who’ you know, rather than ‘what’ you know.” Participants described relationships as a primary element in their hiring cultures within 18 responses. Participant 64 stated, “at this time, one key cabinet member seems to be recruiting and hiring those candidates with whom she has had a personal relationships, and this is creating a culture where favoritism seems to prevail.” Thirteen participants indicated “Fit” was an element of their district’s hiring culture. Participant 24 described his district by saying, “I believe it’s based on school fit. Not always the best candidate on paper, relationships and culture are valued and taken into consideration.”

Mixed Hiring Cultures

Mixed hiring cultures were indicated within 30 participant responses. A response was coded as a mixed hiring culture if the participant described their current district’s hiring culture as one that is merit-based but also based on other elements simultaneously. The two primary elements of mixed hiring cultures indicated by participants were “fit” and incumbents. Participant responses for mixed hiring culture represent each respective mixed hiring culture element. Participants described “fit” and merit as the primary elements of their hiring culture within 10 responses. Participant 217 characterized their district’s hiring culture as follows: “I believe that this district chooses candidates who are the best fit for the culture of the district as well as the best qualified. I think they lean a little more heavily in the direction of fit as our parent community is VERY engaged and active.” Incumbents and merit were described within nine participant responses describing their current districts hiring culture. Participant 115 stated, “usually hired from within based on best person for the job.”

Perceptions and Experiences versus Hiring Cultures

Selection results of participants’ perceptions and experiences and their perceptions of hiring cultures were cross-tabulated to determine which participants who previously encountered inequity in selection viewed their current districts hiring cultures as merit-based or non-merit- based. Only participants who answered both the principal selection experience survey item and the hiring culture survey item were calculated (n=181). Of the 29 participants who perceived and experienced principal selection to be merit-based and responded to the survey item regarding hiring culture, 19 participants (59%) believed their current districts were also merit-based, six participants (19%) described mixed hiring cultures and four participants (13%) described non-merit-based cultures.

Of the 69 participants who participated in a principal selection experience that was non-merit-based, as analyzed using Leventhal's (1976) six justice rules for evaluating procedural fairness, and responded to the survey item regarding hiring culture, 28 (36%) believed their current districts hiring culture was merit-based, 8 (10%) described mixed hiring cultures and 33 (42%) described non-merit-based hiring cultures. Of the 83 participants who were selected to every principalship they applied for or wrote N/A as a response regarding their experience described their current districts hiring culture as follows: 35 (38%) believed their current district has a merit-based hiring culture, 14 (15%) described mixed hiring cultures, and 34 (37%) described non-merit based hiring cultures.

Discussion

The inadequacy of selection criteria and procedures used to select the most-qualified principals and the inequity within selection has been well established within principal selection literature. Some participants of this study (78, 35.3%) experienced inequity as they perceived a less-qualified candidate was selected to the principalship. Likewise, 72 (32.6%) participants described their current district's hiring culture as one which is based on elements other than merit. Even participant principals who had obtained every principal position applied for were near evenly split on (35 merit-based responses to 34 non-merit-based responses) whether or not they perceived their current districts hire the most-qualified individuals. The perceptions and experiences of the participants of this study add another layer of complexity to the already murky process of selecting principals as there are also myriad other personnel factors outside of a candidates knowledge that may result in another less-qualified candidate's selection to the principalship (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). For example, the use of "fit" was encouraged by Kahl (1980) but condemned by numerous researchers (Baron, 1990; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006). Correspondingly, in this study "fit" was mentioned by participants within both merit and non-merit based selection experiences, as well as non-merit based hiring culture elements. "Fit" should be further investigated within principal selection to determine whether or not it is an acceptable criteria for selection and what effects it has on selection processes.

If the participants of this study's perceptions are even partially correct, a substantial number of school districts may not be selecting the most-qualified principals. While equity in principal selection may appear as a storm in a teacup, the effect of the principal on student achievement has been correlated in other research and student achievement may be adversely affected within schools where less-qualified principals have been selected. Participant's merit-based experiences of principal selection and their perceptions of merit-based hiring cultures are encouraging and should be further investigated. While a relatively small number of participants indicated they participated in a selection process that was merit-based, a considerable number of participants believed their current district's hiring cultures are merit-based primarily because of the procedures that are employed. Selection criteria that are measurable through rigorous procedures are fundamental to equitable selection practices. School districts should consider reviewing their selection processes to ensure they are equitable.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Principal selection should not just be fair but also seem fair (d'Arbon et al., 2002). There are multitude ways human resource management in school districts can improve equity within their principal selection practices:

- Train selection personnel to avoid bias in selection processes (Wildy et al., 2011).
- Maintain written documentation at each step of the process with rationale/scoring to address bias/fairness issues if they arise (Ash et al., 2013).
- Establish selection criteria prior to advertising an opening (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983) to create a benchmark from which all candidates can be equally analyzed from the onset.
- Advertise openings in large geographic areas (even nationally) to allow for a diverse group of candidates from within and without the district (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).
- Paper screen candidates according to the selection criteria that was previously established (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983) and send letters to all candidates, even those not considered for interviewing (Ash et al, 2013).
- Use interviews strictly to analyze candidates based upon the selection criteria established (Baltzell and Dentler, 1983).
- Use identical and highly structured interview questions for all candidates (Ash et al, 2013).
- Ensure selection personnel recuse themselves when personal or professional relationships exist that pose a conflict of interest (Palmer, 2014).
- Use performance tasks with established validity and rigorous scoring procedures (Wildy, et al., 2010).

- Make hiring decisions based upon the selection criteria established at the onset of the hiring process (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).
- Provide supportive and constructive feedback to candidates (Gronn & Lacey, 2006).

The correlation of the principal with student achievement necessitates the selection of the most-qualified principals to lead schools during and beyond Common Core implementation. Ensuring equity in principal selection is one factor that may contribute to the most-qualified candidate's selection to the principalship. This study found that participants' experiences in principal selection processes and their perceptions of their district's hiring culture demonstrated an equity dichotomy within principal selection. In some locales, participants' experiences indicated merit-based hiring processes while other participants experienced inequity due to factors such as personal relationships between selectors and candidates. Hiring cultures of school districts also appear to be divergent in terms of merit. Merit-based hiring cultures of school districts are seen as such primarily because of the procedures used in selection processes. Non-merit-based hiring cultures were perceived to exist based on the status of being an incumbent and relationships between candidates and influential district personnel, both of which appear to override merit. Results of this study indicate principal selection is both fair and foul depending upon the locale. Superintendents and district Human Resource Management personnel should consider reviewing selection processes to ensure principal selection practices are equitable. The principal is integral in raising and sustaining student achievement, therefore, the most-qualified principals should be leading schools at this critical transition to Common Core State Standards.

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