Factors in the Selection of Secondary School Teachers

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The move toward more heavily field-based teacher education programs and professional development schools has implications for secondary principals seeking to hire teachers. Unfortunately the standard interview questions and processes for selecting teachers may not allow highly qualified and better prepared candidates to rise to the top of the list.

For many principals, filling teacher vacancies is a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it is an opportunity to bring new energy to the school and to hire a teacher who has a philosophy compatible with the principal's vision for the school. On the negative side, it is an awesome responsibility; even the most experienced principals have found that some teachers they felt very good about hiring turned out not to fit the school at all.

Principals may also find the involvement of site-based decision making teams in the hiring process to be a mixed blessing. Many heads may be better than one, but site-based teams tend to select teachers very much like themselves. This may hinder the hiring of teachers who could help bring about fundamental changes and could work against achieving diversity within the faculty.

Regardless of who participates in the selection of faculty members, a number of factors should be given careful consideration. The following nine factors may lead to a more dynamic and informed hiring process and perhaps to fewer regrets among all involved.

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Beginning the Selection Process

The nine factors discussed here are intended to supplement, not supplant, such selection criteria as college grade point average, courses completed, and references. It is understandable that many administrators prefer experienced teachers and will be strongly influenced by the experience of the veteran and the recommendations of that person's colleagues and administrators. When the decision is made to consider the novice applicant, however, the difficult task of assessing the novice's potential begins.

The importance of selecting the strongest novice available is probably even greater than many persons involved in the hiring process realize because of the difficulties encountered by first-year teachers. Many studies have found that the first year of teaching can be extremely stressful, traumatic, and difficult (Reinhartz, 1989; Odell, 1990; Huling-Austin, 1994); indeed, an estimated 40 percent of novice teachers abandon their careers in the first three years of teaching (Schlechty and Vance, 1983; Smith-Davis, 1992).

Novice teachers are often reluctant to seek help for fear of appearing incompetent, doing everything in their power to convince those around them that everything is fine when quite the contrary is true. Principals and other administrators may be shocked to discover just how much trauma novice teachers actually experience.

The following nine factors were identified based on our experiences working with large numbers of preservice teacher candidates and first-year teachers. We began with the question "Who would we hire, and why?" and attempted to work backward to identify the factors that would guide us in identifying and selecting those best suited to teach at the secondary level.

1. Be aware of traditional preparation programs for secondary teachers.

In most states, secondary teaching candidates receive considerably less teacher preparation than elementary candidates. This is because of the belief that most of the secondary candidate's college career should be devoted to the academic discipline he or she will teach. In Texas, for example, the typical secondary candidate takes only five education courses plus student teaching as formal preparation for his or her lifelong career.

Many principals assume that applicants have received ample preparation to teach when, in fact, their preparation is really quite minimal. Principals with whom we place teacher education students for observation and field experiences are genuinely surprised to learn that the students have taken so few courses and will not be taking many more before student teaching.

This is a problem that cannot be solved easily at the university level. Most states have a cap on the number of hours that can be required

for an undergraduate degree. In most cases, academic departments are understandably quite protective of their turf and unwilling to surrender any of "their" hours to the school of education. The prospective employer should understand exactly what the applicant's preparation program entailed and, more important, be realistic about the limitations of this preparation program.

2. Seek the applicant who was prepared through a more heavily field-based program.

Teacher preparation programs nationwide are becoming more field-based. This means that a larger portion of the program is being delivered in public school settings through collaboration with public school educators. At the present time, some universities offer only a field-based program, some do not offer a field-based program, and some offer both and allow the student to select which route to take.

A popular type of field-based arrangement is the field-based block. In a block, the teacher education candidate is enrolled in several education courses (usually 9–12 hours of coursework) and the student and the professor(s) spend 2–3 full days per week together in a public school setting for the entire semester.

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A number of advantages for the prospective employer result from this arrangement. The candidate who has completed a field-based program will have had considerably more experience working with real students in real schools. Teacher candidates develop a learner orientation to teaching that is more effective than the traditional content orientation. Second, the faculty members who work with these teacher candidates will have had extensive opportunities to observe how they interact with students and peers in the school environment. Field-based faculty members consistently report that many strengths and deficiencies show up in the field that would have not been detected in a traditional course on the university campus.

In the selection process, the prospective employer should clarify whether the candidate participated in a field-based program and should talk directly with the candidate's field-based faculty members about their experiences with the candidate in the public school setting.

3. Consider carefully the strengths of the applicant who has middle level and even elementary preparation.

High school principals are finding that some of their best teachers come to them from the middle level. It has become increasingly common

for a district that has instructional concerns about a high school to transfer in a principal from a middle level school, who is allowed to bring some key faculty members along. In addition, middle level principals often prefer elementary-prepared teachers to high school–prepared teachers because it is easier to build a teacher's depth of content knowledge than it is to change a content-oriented teacher to a learner-centered teacher (Mandeville and Johnson, 1996). This view is consistent with the experience of one of the authors, a high school principal, that one of her best teachers came from the elementary level. The common thread underlying this phenomenon is probably not the teachers themselves but how they interact with students.

As we learn more about teaching, it is becoming increasingly clear that learning is a "constructing" process through which students connect new information to their prior experiences (Bransford, 1979; Brooks and Brooks, 1993). To be most effective, the teacher must hook into the prior experiences of the students and create an opportunity for them to connect a new experience to what they already know.

These are the approaches used at the elementary and middle levels. At these levels, teachers tend to have a better understanding that teaching is not just about what the teacher does, but also about what the students do. The administrator or site-based team interested in employing teachers with this more constructivist view of teaching may wish to seriously consider those applicants with middle level and/or elementary experience.

4. Appreciate the benefits of age and maturity when employing teachers, especially those for secondary schools.

Common sense would indicate that a somewhat older person might do better working with high school students than someone in his or her early 20s, and the experience of most administrators supports this supposition. One reason for this, of course, is that students tend to concede more authority to someone who is more than just a few years older than they are. This may not be the only or even the major reason, however, that older individuals tend to do better working with adolescents.

If you consider the field of adult development, the ages of 20–30 tend to be about such issues as separating from parents, becoming financially independent, finding a significant other, and developing an adult identity (Sheehy, 1974; 1995). Haberman (1984) suggests that these are important "self" issues and that the very essence of teaching is being able to "put aside self and nurture the development of another human being." His view is that the demands of teaching are basically incompatible with the developmental needs of the young adult and are much more easily achieved by those who have already mastered most of the "young adult milestones."

5. Recognize the "cost" associated with assigning a heavy cocurricular load to the novice teacher.

This factor relates to the previous factor concerning the age and maturity of applicants. It is often believed that younger applicants are more willing to take on the demanding cocurricular assignments that are frequently a factor in hiring decisions.

While novices may be willing to take on these responsibilities, they are probably not the best persons to do so. Because many of the cocurricular activities are so highly visible, the novice teacher may attend to these at the expense of planning for quality instruction. If there is a pep rally on Friday morning, for example, the cheerleader sponsor may need to stay late into the night to make sure the gym is decorated, and may then walk into an English class Friday morning unprepared to teach. From an educational standpoint, most cocurricular responsibilities should probably be assigned to teachers with at least three or more years of experience.

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6. Understand the power of predisposition in shaping experience and behavior.

As human beings grow and develop, attitudes and values are shaped into predispositions that affect how we experience the world around us (Adler, 1959; 1969). How an individual perceives reality is largely influenced by the predisposition that he or she brings to the situation. This explains why two individuals can have a common experience yet reach totally different conclusions about that experience.

After spending a semester in an inner city high school, for example, one person may conclude that diversity is a good thing and students from different backgrounds bring unique strengths to the classroom. Another person with a different predisposition may conclude that "these kids are hopeless and you can't teach them anything."

Teacher candidates will bring differing predispositions about working with adolescents that will influence their experiences with their students. Those who consider adolescents to be fascinating creatures to teach and from whom to learn, and those who consider adolescents to be the enemy, will each likely find evidence to support their predisposition. Prospective employers should listen carefully for the candidates' predispositions, as they can be powerful predictors of how these candidates will view their experiences with students and how they will teach and interact with students.

7. Consider the candidate who has both the foundation and the expectation for on-the-job learning.

Most experienced educators realize they learned most of what they know about teaching from on-the-job experience. This continued learning process can be facilitated or hindered by the expectations the novice has for his or her teaching experience and continued learning. Novices who believe they already possess what it takes to be effective with all students are destined to go through a period of denial and disillusionment before they begin the important process of learning from day-to-day experiences and interactions with students and colleagues.

The candidate who is both optimistic and realistic about the difficulties ahead, on the other hand, will be far ahead of the game. Prospective employers should seek the candidate who understands that learning to teach is a career-long process and that each individual must take responsibility not only for learning from day-to-day experiences but also from formal professional growth opportunities.

8. Look for obvious and subtle ways to enhance the diversity of your faculty.

Many schools develop a strong sense of community and camaraderie among the faculty, and this is certainly a desirable goal. It is important, however, to examine whether this has occurred because of effective team-building experiences or because most members of the faculty are simply very much alike. If the latter is the case, this faculty is likely to be most effective with students who are from backgrounds highly similar to their own and less effective with students who come from dissimilar backgrounds.

It is human nature to be attracted to persons who are most like ourselves. In an interview, these are the persons with whom we will be most at ease. The school will probably be stronger and do a better job of serving a wide variety of students, however, if we look for opportunities to enhance faculty diversity both in the obvious domains of ethnicity and culture, and in less obvious areas such as political views, interest in the arts, international experiences, etc.

9. Plan to support the novice teacher by assigning a trained mentor.

Even the most qualified and best prepared novice teachers will need support in their first year of teaching. Many schools assign a mentor or buddy teacher to assist the novice, but unless the mentor has received formal preparation in how to assist the novice teacher, it is unlikely that ongoing, systematic assistance will actually occur. Unless the mentor has had formal training, not only do novice teachers fail to get the type and degree of assistance they need, but mentors report being very uncomfortable.

A comprehensive training program for mentors will include such topics as the underlying rationale for teacher induction, stages of teacher development, observation and conference skills, and mentoring strategies (Odell, 1990). Frequently, mentor training is coordinated at the district level and it becomes the job of the campus leader(s) to make sure an appropriate mentor is selected for each novice teacher in time to participate in district training opportunities. If no such training is available districtwide, other avenues such as regional education service centers, professional organizations, or private educational consultants can be explored to secure the training needed for mentors.

Those involved in hiring decisions should realize their job is not complete when the contract is signed by the novice; the novice will need support throughout the first year from a mentor who is willing to fulfill this important role and has also had formal preparation in how to support and assist novice teachers.

Conclusion

The selection of those who will teach our students is among the most important and difficult decisions that educators face. Any process to select those individuals best suited to do something as dynamic and encompassing as teaching will necessarily also be highly complex and multi-faceted.

This article has suggested nine factors that should be carefully considered along with more standard selection criteria in the process of hiring novice teachers to staff secondary schools. The complexity of teaching and the importance of the teaching act demand that we use every tool available to select the very best. The young people we serve deserve nothing less. ***~B***

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