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Assessing teacher qualities and the teacher interview

Abstract

The teaching profession has not established what qualities should be sought or measured in a teacher application to distinguish one applicant from another. Nor has it implemented a valid, reliable selection system (Smith, 1980). During the past 15 years public schools have moved from a position of recruitment of enough teachers to fill the classrooms, to one in which limited vacancies provide an opportunity to use quality procedures. Teacher vacancies which occur in every educational organization due to turnovers, promotion, and the creation of new positions, present important organizational decision situations. Teacher selection is one of the most important administrative tasks that face the educational administrator.

ASSESSING TEACHER QUALITIES AND THE
TEACHER INTERVIEW

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by
John J. Stevens
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The Teacher Interview

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During the past 15 years public schools have moved from a position of recruitment of enough teachers to fill the classrooms, to one in which limited vacancies provide an opportunity to use quality procedures. Teacher vacancies which occur in every educational organization due to turnovers, promotion, and the creation of new positions, present important organizational decision situations. Teacher selection is one of the most important administrative tasks that face the educational administrator.

Despite the lack of validated selection instruments administrators of the 1980's are still looking for procedures which yield the best results. A review of literature on teacher selection/interviews reveals desired qualities/characteristics in personnel, the interview methods used to determine the presence of the qualities, and how effective these methods of interviewing are.

Teacher Characteristics/Qualities

What qualities are necessary for effective teaching?

Research has shown that good predictors of future success as

a teacher include performance as a student-teacher, communicative skills, and key personality traits. Contrariwise, academic credentials (beyond that of a successfully completed teacher education program), physical appearance, I.Q. scores, national teacher examination scores, and individual philosophies of education are believed to have little or no relevance to later teacher success (Kahl, 1980). According to Charles Thompson, director of an educational service agency in Atlanta, the first clue to a potentially successful teacher can be drawn from a person with a successful past (1979, p. 40).

William McHugh, elementary principal at Elkader, Iowa, uses a qualification checklist to bring uniformity to the selection process. Teaching candidates are rated on a scale of 1-5 on the following characteristics: enthusiasm, poise, knowledge, experience, references, educational background, and adaptability. McHugh stresses that care must be taken to ensure that all applicants are treated equally.

Paul Schumann (1977), director of student teaching in Los Angeles, seeks applicants who possess a background of working with youth. Applicants who do not possess some experiences as a camp counselor, scout leader, church youth sponsor, or parks and recreation leader should be questioned closely,

says Schumann, regarding their interest in youth and desire to teach (p. 63).

Professor B. R. Johnson, of the University of Cincinnati, conducted a survey of 104 Ohio administrators to ascertain if a core of characteristics of effective teachers can be determined. Professor Johnson found agreement ranging from 70-90% on the importance of items such as appearance, verbal skills, and emotional balance (1976, p. 283).

Dr. Paul Brimm, University of Northern Iowa, recommended that employers use a profile sheet to ensure that no criterion is overlooked or inappropriately weighed in the screening process. Teacher characteristics measured by the profile sheet include teacher preparation, teaching experience, leadership, and recommendations (1978, p. 36).

In an effort to establish the characteristics of effective teaching, extensive research has been conducted by Selection Research Inc. Selection identified 23 theme areas such as mission, empathy, individualized perception, and listening. The Omaha Public Schools undertook a similar three-year study, termed Project EMPATHY, to determine the qualities of good teachers. They, too, arrived at "life themes" but only identified nine themes they believed valid. Interview questions revolve around: (1) relationships, (2) democratic orientation, (3) rapport drive, (4) empathy, (5) student

orientation, (6) acceptance, (7) ethics, (8) student success, and (9) work and professional orientation (Thayer, 1978).

John Drake contends that the total individual must be assessed and emphasis should be placed upon understanding the uniqueness of an individual rather than evaluating sameness to others. The implication is that the interviewer knows best the idiosyncrasies of the community, the educational philosophy of the school district, the attributes desirable to maintain staff balance, and any special skills necessary for the subject or grade level to be taught. These factors are formulated into a job specification for each position which then becomes the central focus of each interview to follow (Engels & Fredrichs, 1980).

Research suggests that there is no firm consensus or pattern of characteristics which yield effective teaching. The behavioral characteristics of effective teachers are almost too complex for generalizations (Greene, 1971).

The teacher selection process typically includes a review of academic credentials, personal references, and recommendations, plus various tests and inventories, but the personal interview continues to be the most common approach (Kahl, 1980). After the general screening of teacher applicants has narrowed the field, the stage is set for the interview. R. N. Hall and A. M. Vincent reported from their

research that school administrators rely heavily upon the interview (Greene, p. 137). The interview is the most universally relied-upon method, but it is also the most diverse and varied facet in the selection process. Among the various interview modes and techniques utilized by administrators are the structured and unstructured interviews, group interviews, team interviews, and teacher perception instruments.

Interview Mode

The most popular interview approach by practitioners and researchers alike is the structured interview. In a re-evaluation of published research, Beach described Mayfield's findings that structured interviews provide a higher inter-rater reliability than other interview forms, provide greater opportunities for interviewees to talk, cover intended material consistently, and help interviewers withhold judgment until the close of the interview (Beach, 1980). Typically the candidates are rated in the areas of initiative, capability, knowledge, and personality. Pellicer and Muller (1981) believe that the structured interview should group questions into four categories: (1) relationship with kids, (2) relationship with colleagues, (3) relationship with parents/community, and (4) instruction techniques (p. 493). The structured interview may be a simple checklist format or

a more sophisticated approach. In the checklist format the candidate responds to questions and receives a score on the answers (Linkert-type); 1-poor to 5-excellent. Some systems use a 1-10 scale. James Ferguson, principal at Southeast Junior High School, Iowa City, Iowa, provides a checklist of 100 questions to ask potential teachers. The interviewer is encouraged to adjust questions to fit the vacancy and the interview (1983, pp. 118-120).

Candidates who score high on the checklist may advance to the more sophisticated stages of the interview process. The candidate may be asked to teach a 20-30 minute lesson. The administrators would rate the lesson on performance variables, including pupil responses, participation, and instructional objectives and techniques.

Immediately following the lesson, each candidate was interviewed by the administrative team. The interview was an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions and explain decisions they had made during the performance evaluation. According to superintendent Richard Caliendo, the more sophisticated interview allowed a more complete assessment of the candidates' personalities. A rating form was utilized to qualify observations (1986, pp. 22-26).

The most common type of interview through 1970 was the unstructured interview (Benjamin, 1969). The unstructured

interview, known as the in-depth interview, was a technique aimed at a specific goal or purpose, but not with predetermined questions. Unstructured interviews allow more individuality, but there is little reliability/validity. How do you know if the answers are good or just meeting with the interviewers biases? Serious questions must be raised when "personality factors" may be more important than knowledge in determining whether or not a novice teacher receives a position (Browne & Rankin, 1986). Intuition will always be a part of the selection process, but the goal is to leave less and less to subjective assessment. The schools who implement the unstructured mode of interviewing in the AEA 1 area agree upon five common questions: (1) personal opinion/background, (2) discipline, (3) ability to get along well with others, (4) teaching style, and (5) educational experience.

Another interview approach is the Individual Perception Instrument. The Teacher Perceiver Interview (TPI) and the Project EMPATHY Instrument utilize a well-rounded set of questions to predict teacher success. The popularity of these instruments rests on such attributes as low cost, ease of administration, consistency from interview to interview, and objectivity. Mickler and Soloman report that administrators realize the critical need for a research-based method of selecting the best teacher from an abundant applicant

pool. Through systematic research Mickler and Soloman found the predictive efficiency sufficient enough to justify further investigation (1985, pp. 339-345).

The TPI and EMPATHY instruments use open-ended questions. Responses are evaluated as correct or incorrect. TPI uses Opts.-incorrect and 1 pt.-correct/EMPATHY uses + for positive, - for negative, and 0 for neutral responses. The interviewer is seeking a teacher who can articulate why teaching was selected over other vocations, perceive situations from a student's point of view, individualize instruction, be a good listener, and employ creative approaches to teaching.

Differing degrees of success can be observed among teachers with equal intelligence, training, and mastery of subject matter. There is considerable support in the initial review of literature for the premise that self-understanding, openness, job satisfaction, flexibility, empathy, and appreciation of children may have more impact on teaching effectiveness than degrees, certification, test scores, and college grade point averages (Mickler & Soloman, 1986).

Group Interviews

The group interview is an approach primarily used by industry. In group interviews several teaching candidates would be assembled for a group discussion. Seated around or behind the group of interviewees are the administrators who

observe and assess the candidates as they engage in a round table discussion. The candidates are assigned a certain topic and allowed a prescribed amount of time for discussion. Churden (1976) reported that the group interview saves time, facilitates assessment of initiative, poise, aggressiveness, tact, leadership, adaptability, and the ability to get along with other factors (p. 132).

Team Interviews

William Owen, superintendent of the Valley Community School District, feels that although the team evaluation interview takes more time it is superior because the team is less likely to miss the key aspects of a candidate's personality or potential as a single interviewer.

Greene notes that the personality of the interviewer often is a strong influence or determiner in selection. Greene recommends using a committee interview to avoid potential interviewer bias (1971, p. 137).

Many districts utilize the school board as the interview team. Nicholas Fischer, a principal in Key West, Florida, insists that parents can play a valuable role in the selection process. In Fischer's school, parents are full partners in the selection process (1981, p. 442).

Bill Cink, Vernon Middle School Principal, Marion, Iowa, states that staff involvement in the selection of new faculty

members offers many benefits to the school: sense of professionalism, pride, morale, and helps to achieve better balance.

The idea that the school belongs to the community lends itself to the team interview approach.

Administrative Implications

There does not seem to be a discernible pattern of qualities which can conclusively be equated with good teaching. Administrators should not compare an applicant to some universal ideal but view the candidate as an individual for the skills and attributes he or she would bring to the job. The community's personality, school district philosophy, faculty needs, and the specific skills needed for the position should be matched to the candidate.

The structured interview would best clarify and verify the candidate's unique skills, attributes, and suitability for the position.

The team approach provides the most comprehensive selection process. The composition of the team depends upon factors (i.e., administrative preferences, nature of the position, district size), but the administrative team and school board will make the final decision.

Schools need to have an adopted policy for selecting teachers and administrators. Each individual school district

must decide for itself what qualities they want their teaching staff and administration to possess.

Administrators should be encouraged to seek training in teacher selection/interview strategies. As Virginia Quiring puts it, "Interviewing in this sense is an art at least as difficult as learning to play a musical instrument, but where the instrument is one's self" (1981, pp. 24-28).

Administrators must be concerned with improvement of instruction and instructional time begins with recruiting a competent staff (Wilson, 1982).

Review of literature recommends the use of the five
interview procedures listed below:

Structured--using the same set of questions for each candidate.

Each interview is rated/compared to the other.

Non-structured--not using a predetermined set of questions
for all candidates. Questions geared to fit each
individual candidate. Intuition is key!

Group--two or more candidates are questioned simultaneously.

Candidates discuss selected topics while the interviewer
observes.

Team--team interviews involve more than one interviewer.

Combinations of administration, school board, teaching
staff, citizens' advisory, are common team interview
partners.

Teacher Perception Instruments--research-based method

employing open-end questions, the answers to which,
their developers believe, are strong predictors of
teacher success.

Review of literature supports the structured interview coupled
with the team approach. The chart on the following page
illustrates the interview styles of the 2-a, 1-a, a schools
in the A.E.A. 1. To my surprise two of the five areas were
totally void. The non-structured interview is still very
popular and the team approach is not in vogue.

A.E.A. 1 SCHOOLS

SCHOOL	STRUCTURED	NON- STRUCTURED	GROUP	TEAM	TPI
ALLAMAKEE	X			Principal & Supt.	
CENTRAL (ELKADER)*	X			Principal & Supt.	
DECORAH		X		Principal & Supt.	
EASTERN ALLAMAKEE	X			Principal & Supt.	
EDGEWOOD-COLESBURG	X	X		Principal & Supt.	
FREDERICKSBURG	X			Principal & Supt.	
GARNAVILLO	X	X		Principal	
GUTTENBERG		X		Principal & Supt.	
HOWARD-WINNESHIEK	X	X		Principal	
M-F-L*	X	X		Principal & Supt.	
MAQUOKETA VALLEY		X		Principal & Supt.	
MAR-MAC	X	X		Principal & Supt.	
NEW HAMPTON	X	X		Principal	
NORTH FAYETTE*	X			Principal	
NORTH WINNESHIEK	X			Principal & Supt.	
OELWEIN		X		Principal	
POSTVILLE*	X	X		Principal	
RICEVILLE	X	X		Principal	
SOUTH WINNESHIEK*	X			Principal, Teachers, & Supt.	
STARMONT	X			Principal	
TURKEY VALLEY	X	X		Principal	
VALLEY*	X	X		Principal	
WEST CENTRAL*	X			Principal & Supt.	

X = UTILIZED

* = CONFERENCE SCHOOL

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