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Principal hiring practices: stories the principals tell

Yu-Hsin Lin

University of Iowa

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PRINCIPAL HIRING PRACTICES: STORIES THE PRINCIPALS TELL

by

Yu-Hsin Lin

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
Educational Policy and Leadership Studies (Educational Leadership)
in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Carolyn L. Wanat

ABSTRACT

In an era in which school principals' jobs are much more complex and demanding than they were a few decades ago, the increasing challenges of the position have affected principal recruitment and selection efforts by school districts nationwide. Moreover, the rapidly increasing rate of principal retirements has exacerbated the problem of a shortage of qualified candidates for principal positions. As a result, it is important to explore current principals' perspectives on how best to attract and retain qualified prospective applicants during the hiring process.

In this case study, 16 principals and associate principals from both public and independent schools in three states described their experiences, their reasons for applying for a principalship, and their perspectives on the application process. They also gave advice and recommendations for both administrators of hiring processes and for future applicants. One-on-one qualitative interviews with a pre-established interview protocol were conducted as the sole data collection method.

Three primary research questions were investigated: How do school principals perceive the existing principal recruitment processes? How do school principals perceive the processes used by the school districts to select them? To what extent do job descriptions, as currently written, systematically cover the realities of the duties of incumbent principals?

From analysis of the interviews, the researcher chose to focus on four main topics that emerged from principals' perspectives on the hiring process: (a) the decision to pursue a principalship and searching for openings, (b) going through the process, (c) personal reactions to the process, and (d) recommendations. These topics were compared and contrasted with relevant research reported in the literature to generate the following four major results of the present study.

First, standardized and structured interviews not only helped decision making but also won applicants' trust. Second, hiring processes were generally similar to what

previous research suggested. Third, deficiencies in hiring processes that were first identified a number of years ago continue to persist. Finally, whether applicant pools are shrinking appeared to be an open question.

These findings contribute to the very limited research that has thus far examined principal hiring practices from the perspectives of school principals, and have allowed suggestions to be made for possible areas of improvement in principal hiring processes.

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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century world, where students must be competitive, the role that a school principal plays is essential not only to the day-to-day functioning of a school, but more importantly, to the task of preparing the youth for the future. Principals are expected to be learners, leaders, mentors, supervisors, managers, politicians, and advocates for all of the children in their schools (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Such complex and demanding work responsibilities appear to be contributing to a shortage of applicants for school principal positions (Normore, 2004; Whitaker, T., 2003). Moreover, with the continuing recognition of the importance of the school principal's role and the retirement of many "baby-boomers," a shortage of school principals appears to be an ongoing issue throughout the United States (Copland, 2001; Cusick, 2002; Guterman, 2007). The reported shortages and the concerns with recruiting sufficient numbers of motivated, qualified candidates make it important to study the factors that affect recruitment and selection of K-12 principals. The following sections will describe the background for this research, the research purpose, rationale, problem statement, limitations, the definition of terms, and organization of the dissertation.

Research Background

Principals play a vital role in the overall success of a school with regard to student achievement (Anderson, 1991). This section will discuss the increasingly complex and demanding role that principals must fulfill and how these increasing demands might contribute to a shortage of qualified applicants applying for principalships. Separate subsections will address the role of school principals and the urgent need for qualified applicants.

Changing Role of School Principals

Principals make a difference in student achievement. As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009) stated, "There are no good schools in this country without good principals." ("Education Secretary Arne Duncan Joins NBPTS in

Launching National Board Certification for Principals,” para. 2). Effective principals have an impact on instructional and organizational reform and, most importantly, on student achievement. In *School Leadership that Works*, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated that principal and teacher effectiveness account for nearly 60% of a school's impact on student achievement.

Research has provided evidence that the role of school principals has changed significantly over the past few decades (Beck & Murphy, 1993). Matthews and Crow (2003) identified four major elements that have contributed to this changing role. The first element is the continuing growth of cities and the coinciding changes in the school population. With the influx of minorities and the compulsory education laws passed at the end of the 20th century, nearly all school age children have enrolled in schools, with the result being a much more diverse school population. The second element is the requirement for state principal certifications; although essential today, principal certifications were not required by all states until the 1950s. Since that time, all individuals preparing to become a principal have had to check their state's requirements to ensure that their preparation program fulfills the necessary criteria. The third element that helped to shape the contemporary role of the principal is the establishment of professional associations. These have played an important part in improving professional development both for individuals already in principalships and for those interested in becoming principals. The final element identified by Matthews and Crow (2003) as being significant for the emergence of today's principalship is the freeing of the principal from teaching duties. This important change has allowed principals to concentrate on supervising classroom teachers, which in turn has resulted in “instructional leadership” becoming one of the most important characteristics that principals need to possess today.

As Bredeson (1993) noted, “The traditional roles of principals and other educators in schools are changing and will continue to be reshaped, redefined, and renegotiated as restructuring occurs” (p. 34). Today's principals face more complex expectations in part because today's parents are more knowledgeable and critical of

the educational status quo (Normore, 2004). It is generally accepted that a successful principal should be able to create a collegial environment in which teachers feel supported and encouraged to reach and teach every child, while building strong relationships with parents, families, and communities so that all available resources can be used effectively (Mulford, 2003).

A number of professional boards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 1996; National Board of Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 2009; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2002) have identified effective school leadership characteristics and provided detailed performance standards for principals. The following are the three national standards that are well known and followed by state departments of education nationwide.

The CCSSO (1996) created the first national set of standards known as Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC) that identify knowledge, dispositions, and performance that a school leader ideally should possess. According to the ISSLC standards, a school administrator should be an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by sharing his or her vision of learning with the school community; leading instructional change; creating an excellent learning environment; collaborating with the community; promoting fairness; and responding appropriately to legal, ethical, and social issues.

The NPBEA (2002) suggested that educational leaders must have highly developed communication skills to work effectively with diverse groups, must keep learning and exercising their judgment and wisdom, must integrate a variety of perspectives in order to solve problems, and must be sensitive to ethical issues when making decisions.

Finally, in the document “National Board Certification for Principals: Redefining Educational Leadership for the 21st Century” released by the NBPTS in 2009, a number of core propositions for accomplished educational leaders were outlined. These include a focus on instructional leadership, an ability to develop a culture of learning, and an awareness of ethics and equity issues.

The common themes among these standards are the recognition of the importance of instructional leadership, organizational change and community involvement, the principal's essential role in school management, and the principal's ability to deal with sensitive ethical issues. These comprehensive standards and propositions offer a common vision of the characteristics that school leaders should possess to be effective in today's schools. Clearly, a principal's position is a highly demanding one that requires the individual to be skilled in multiple areas, and as detailed below, the challenges of the position have affected principal recruitment and selection efforts by school districts, regional education boards, and state departments of education nationwide (Whitaker, K. S., 2003).

Urgent Need for Qualified Applicants

The increasing demands of the principal's job and the high retirement rate of the baby boomers have resulted in a shrinking pool of qualified applicants. Effective recruitment and selection of school leaders therefore has become, and continues to be, one of the more challenging human resource functions within the educational field (Farr, 2004; Pounder & Young, 1996; Whitaker, K. S., 2003). According to a survey conducted by the Educational Research Service, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, there is increasing difficulty in finding qualified principals; half of the school districts participating in the survey reported a shortage of qualified candidates for such positions (Cooley & Shen, 1999; Whitaker, K. S., 2003).

The rapidly increasing rate of principal retirements is exacerbating the problem. In some states, more than half of school leaders will shortly be eligible for retirement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Based on the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2010, of the approximately 10,690 public school principals who left the profession in 2008, 4,850 (45%) did so through retirement. Thus, a focus on attracting and selecting high-quality applicants for administrative positions is especially important.

Collectively, today's school principals are responsible for creating and developing outstanding learning environments for students, teachers, and the surrounding communities. Given the shrinking number of applicants and the projected increasing need for highly qualified school principals, it is important to explore current principals' perspectives on how best to attract and retain qualified prospective applicants during the hiring process.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate incumbent school principals' perceptions about the recruitment and selection processes currently used to identify and employ principals. The research explored principals' personal experiences, sought feedback about the employment procedures used when they were hired for their principalships, and focused both on how effective these procedures were in terms of attracting and selecting applicants and on how job descriptions affected the applicants' willingness to apply for principalships.

Research Questions

The primary research questions that guided the research in this qualitative study were:

1. How do school principals perceive the existing principal recruitment processes?
2. How do school principals perceive the processes used by the school districts to select them?
3. To what extent do job descriptions, as currently written, systematically cover the realities of the duties of incumbent principals?

The answers to these questions allowed the researcher to explore possible areas for improvement in current selection and hiring processes.

Rationale

Increased demands are being placed on principals in public schools; these demands include improving both student academic achievement and community engagement. These changing demands on principals appear to have resulted in a

degree of hesitation on the part of applicants who would otherwise be well qualified to pursue a principalship. Given that much research has been conducted on the role that the principal plays in the success of a school and the characteristics of principals that can affect student achievement, studies that investigate whether there are features of the hiring process that might deter interest in applying for the position of school principal are worth attention.

A number of studies of principal hiring practices have already been performed (Farr, 2004; Weber, 2009), but these have all been conducted from the point of view of school superintendents. Studies focusing instead on the perspectives of the principals, however, are scarce, despite the fact that, as noted above, such studies could help to identify problems with hiring processes. This study therefore chose to explore the personal experiences of incumbent school principals regarding the recruitment and selection processes that they experienced before they were offered their positions. Interviewing such principals – some of whom also had opportunities to experience the other side of the process by serving on hiring committees – has made it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. In particular, an effort to understand school principals' perceptions of the recruitment and selection process has resulted in a number of implications for future research and human resource practices. These include suggestions for altering the hiring practices to better facilitate recruitment and selection, as well as shifting the focus of future research to determining factors that might better attract applicants to principalships.

Limitations

This research was designed as a qualitative interview study. Unlike quantitative research that seeks to generalize results to an entire population, qualitative research usually studies only a few sites or individuals in order to collect deep, extensive details about each subject (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the experiences of only a small number of selected school principals were studied in this research. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in three states and, by definition, involved only principals who had been successful in the hiring process. Thus, the results and analysis of this

study are applicable to the subjects who participated in the study even though findings are not generalizable statistically, the themes in the research merit consideration in other hiring processes.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used for the purposes of this study:

Recruitment: Recruitment is the process by which organizations seek applicants for potential employment (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2010). The purpose of the recruitment process is to establish a pool of candidates that meet the needs of the school system; it focuses on strategies for attracting and retaining qualified persons for the specific position available (Webb & Norton, 2009).

Selection: Human resource selection identifies the most qualified applicants for employment. Selection refers to the process by which an organization attempts to identify applicants with the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), and other characteristics that will help the organization achieve its goals (Noe et al., 2010).

Job description: A job description is a list of the tasks, duties, and responsibilities (TDRs) that a job entails. TDRs are observable actions that make it possible to determine how well an individual meets a job's requirements (Noe et al., 2010). In addition, a job description provides information about the school and the school district where the vacancy exists (Webb & Norton, 2009).

Screening: Screening is a step administered early in the selection process that has the purpose of making an early cut from which a smaller number of applicants will proceed to a later or final stage of selection (Ployhart, Schneider, & Schmitt, 2006). Screening could involve a brief interview or an applicant data match, depending on the specific district's usual practice and the number of applicants in the applicant pool (Webb & Norton, 2009).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in the following manner. Chapter One has discussed the background, purpose, research questions, and significance of this research. Chapter Two will discuss the relevant literature on the current working

conditions of school principals, the continuing need for high quality principals, and the administrative processes used to hire school principals. Chapter Three will present the design and methods that were used to investigate the participating principals' personal experiences of the hiring processes. Chapter Four will report the research findings and will discuss the most common and important themes identified in the interviews. Chapter Five will conclude the study with a summary, an analysis, and recommendations for improving principal selection practices and for future research on principal recruitment and selection.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hiring a new principal can significantly affect the vitality and student achievement rates of a school (Clifford, 2010). Second only to the quality of instruction provided by the teachers, school principals are the most significant school-related contributor to what, and how much, students learn at school (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Choosing an effective school principal is therefore one of the most important decisions that a superintendent or school board can make, as new leadership can provide a significant opportunity to push a district forward in meeting its goals (Elmore & Burney, 2000). However, many school districts report that recruiting and selecting new school principals are challenging (Farkas, Johnson, Foleno, Duffett, & Foley, 2000). The literature addressing current principal employment processes will be described in this chapter both to provide background and to illustrate the gap in the field that led to the research presented in this dissertation.

This chapter will include two sections. The first section is a discussion of the working conditions of, and the need for, school principals. This section will begin with a discussion of the important role that school principals play in the successful running of a school. Next, some of the challenges and potential rewards of being a school principal will be presented. Finally, the deterrents that discourage qualified applicants from applying for principalships will be discussed.

The second section will focus on principal hiring processes. It will examine current recruitment and selection practices and will describe research that has focused on identifying effective hiring systems. The central theme of this section will be the discrepancies between current hiring processes and potentially more effective hiring systems that have been suggested by research.

Working Conditions and the Need for School Principals

This section will discuss the demanding yet important job of today's principals. In addition, it will examine the possible reasons that might discourage qualified

applicants from applying for administrative positions despite the growing shortage of principals. Specific subsections will address the importance of principals, the challenges and rewards of the job, and the increasing responsibilities that deter applicants.

Importance of the Principal

Empirical studies have long established a relationship between the leadership provided by a principal and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). Researchers have shown that principals can contribute to student performance in a general sense by setting the overall direction of the school and by nurturing and developing its faculty and staff (Leithwood et al., 2004). In a more specific sense, however, principals can influence student achievement directly by (a) being involved in the design and implementation of the instructional program (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009), (b) ensuring the participation of teachers in decision making (Lashway, 2003), (c) developing a school culture that is supportive of learning (Carter, 2000), and (d) making data-driven decisions (Carter, 2000). Research has identified 21 key areas of responsibility for today's principals; among these, school leadership has been rated the most important as it correlates strongly with student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Research has also indicated that school principals heavily influence the working conditions of teachers and directly affect the ability of school districts to attract and retain talented teachers (DeAngelis, Peddle, Trott, & Bergeron, 2002).

Based on the above research, there is a general belief that good school principals are the foundation of good schools and that without sound leadership from a principal, efforts to raise student achievement are unlikely to succeed (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Norton, 2002-2003). Contemporary school principals' leadership responsibilities include not only the traditional task of managing students, staff, and school grounds, but also deep engagement in instructional and community issues (Whitaker, K. S., 2003). Because school principals matter, issues in current employment conditions and hiring processes that may discourage well-qualified

applicants from seeking principals' positions need to be examined and improved.

Challenges and Rewards of a Principalship

As mentioned in Chapter One, national statistics relating to principal turnover and decreasing supplies of qualified applicants to replace vacancies have indicated that principal turnover has reached proportions that merit concern. One possible explanation for the growing shortage of principals is that the job is simply not attractive. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) conducted a study of the working conditions and concerns of principals in Virginia with a particular focus on the principals' experiences and perceptions of the growing shortages of well-qualified applicants for principal positions. To obtain a view of the principalship through the eyes of current practitioners, an anonymous survey was designed and mailed to 4,237 principals and assistant principals at a mix of school levels throughout the state. A total of 1,543 completed surveys were received, including paper surveys and electronically submitted surveys; this constituted a respectable response rate of 38%. The results were reported under five general headings: preparation for the principalship, conditions of employment, problems or issues in the field, the changing role of the principal, and supply and demand.

In DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study, the two most noticeable items reported by principals on the condition of their employment was the length of their work week and their salaries. In the survey, 84% reported working more than 50 hours per week. Nearly one-third reported working 50 to 54 hours per week, and an additional 25% reported working 55 to 59 hours per week. A further 16% indicated that they worked 60 to 64 hours and 12% reported working 65 or more hours per week. It is interesting that the reported working hours generally increased with the level of schooling. Despite these long hours, principals reported that their salaries had not increased in correspondence with the growing expectations of their job. Nearly half of principals who participated in the study reported that salary increases had lagged behind those of teachers in the past 5 years. Ten percent said that they had received no raise at all in the past 4 years.

In the same survey, the participating principals were asked to identify barriers that discourage qualified people from pursuing principalships. The vast majority believed that the stress of the job (91%) and the long working hours (86%) were the primary barriers, followed by low pay and expanded accountability, which accounted for about two-thirds of the principals' responses. Other barriers, including increasing demands upon the work life of the principal, increasing time constraints, lack of parent and community support, and lack of respect from students, were identified as factors that deterred applicants from applying for the position (DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

These results echoed those found in an earlier survey performed prior to the Principals' Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC, in July 2000 (Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000). When organizers asked conference participants to identify the major challenges that discourage a person from pursuing a principalship as a career goal, 90 principals from a diverse collection of school districts listed the following five issues: the changing demands of the job (including increased accountability, responsibility for raising students to high standards without adequate support, legal and special education issues), low salary, long working hours, lack of parental and community support and negativity of both the media and the public toward schools, and a lack of respect from students (IEL, 2000).

In their study, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) also asked the participating principals to think of individuals they knew who held principal licenses but who did not currently hold a building-level administrative position and to speculate as to why that was the case. One-half of respondents said the job was unattractive due to the long hours or stress of the job. However, nearly one-half thought the person was not well suited for the position, either because of an inappropriate disposition or temperament. Other dynamics such as a lack of local opportunities for someone who was place-bound and low pay were also factors. These findings suggest the potential importance of more strategic hiring practices that identify and select the best fit for the schools with principal vacancies. Topics regarding strategic hiring practices will

be addressed in the second half of this chapter.

Related research suggests that the challenges of doing a principal's job can be traced to a mixture of organizational, environmental, and personal issues (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Researchers (Cooley & Shen, 1999; Winter, Rinehart, & Munoz, 2001) have identified several complex factors that might impact applicants' decisions to pursue a principal's position. Howley, Adrianaivo, and Perry (2005) further divided these factors into two categories that they labeled "disincentives" and "incentives." Disincentives to applying for a principal's job include the increasing complexity of the position, a high level of stress, a perceived lack of support from other members of the educational community, salary levels that are inadequate for the level of responsibility, long hours, the negative impact of the principal's job on family life, and hiring practices that privilege some applicants over others. Interestingly, despite all these challenges, when asked whether they would still become a principal if they could choose again, the vast majority (88%) of participating principals in DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study responded that they would.

Whatever the factor that makes principals continue in their careers, it does not appear to be financial; instead, the rewards seem to be primarily intrinsic to the job. When asked to identify the sources of their professional satisfaction, 85% of the principals who participated in DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study cited the rapport with students as the largest source of satisfaction, followed by relationships with teachers, peers, parents, and community leaders. Few principals were very satisfied with their salaries or with the amount of time that they put into the job; likewise, few were satisfied with the support system in place for new administrators. Instead, relationships – with students, teachers, parents and community leaders – were at the heart of what made the principalship rewarding. In spite of the challenges, the vast majority of principals reported that they would become principals again given the same opportunity.

Howley et al. (2005) summarized other relevant studies on principal satisfaction and identified a number of factors as incentives that were considered as challenges by

DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003). The incentives identified by Howley et al. (2005) for becoming a principal included the opportunity to make a difference for students, the ability to influence the direction of the school, the challenge of increased responsibility, the opportunity to implement new ideas, and financial advantages. The differences between the categorizations made by Howley et al. (2005) and by DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) – for example, whether salary levels constitute an incentive or a disincentive – may stem from differences in the participants and in salary levels across various states. An additional factor that affects a prospective applicant's (usually a teacher's) willingness to seek an administrative position in a particular school district was identified by Hooker (2000) as community attractiveness, which encompassed community wealth, student performance, and teacher quality.

Increasing Responsibilities Deter Applicants

The overwhelming responsibilities, extensive time commitments, and unrealistic expectations associated with the job of principal have made many reluctant to aspire to such a position. The fact that the job appears to many to be an impossible one means that many qualified applicants are not making administrative positions their career choice. In particular, those educators who already hold administrative licenses are not applying for positions, and fewer educators are pursuing licensure (Clifford, 2010; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Walker, 2009). As mentioned in Chapter One, rising shortages in principalship applications are beginning to be reported around the country. The retirements of school administrators from the Baby Boom Generation, coupled with increased job complexity, rising standards, and greater demands for accountability, have led to increased numbers of administrative vacancies nationwide. Many principals are reporting that the expanded job description is simply not doable (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Walker, 2009).

The data in the literature therefore reveal a profession under considerable stress. The role of the principal has been expanded to include significant responsibilities both for the instructional leadership of schools and for children to meet high academic standards. At the same time, principals are spending more time coping with student

behavior problems. The managerial tasks of principals have also been expanding, but without sufficient resources being provided to accomplish them (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Shen & Crawford, 2003; Walker, 2009). Although instructional leadership clearly should be a priority for principals (Leitner, 1994), the incongruence between what instructional leaders want to do and what they have time to do has serious consequences for school leaders and their efforts to improve both student and teacher performance (Walker, 2009).

The common message in all of the previous research on the expanding demands of the job is that one person cannot possibly meet all of the expectations of the building principal. As was noted in DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study, principals need assistance with both the instructional and the managerial aspects of their job if they are to meet the expanded expectations; in particular, they require the help of assistant principals and support staff. It is therefore important that the duties of principal be reexamined and new strategies implemented to improve their working conditions and to allow them to focus on teaching and student learning (Norton, 2002-2003).

School districts and policymakers need to recognize the extensive responsibilities of principals and the real time constraints under which they must operate. Rather than insisting that principals become superleaders with expanded responsibilities, perhaps it is more realistic and strategic to define the principal's role more narrowly (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Although the implementation of technology and outsourcing of some work responsibilities may help reduce the work demands on school principals, the job description of the school principal must be reevaluated for the purpose of assessing needed changes in work responsibilities and determining the fit between the candidates for principalships and the positions (Norton, 2002-2003). Only then will the principalship be able to tap the available educational expertise and once again become an attractive career path for those with the leadership capabilities to ascend from the teaching ranks (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Principal Hiring Process

Given that the problems and barriers to enticing people to apply for principalships have been examined, the review can now focus on the recruitment and selection process so that issues that might influence the effectiveness of principal hiring can be examined. This second section, therefore, will examine two topics: current recruitment and selection practices, and the literature on what constitutes the most effective hiring systems. Within the latter topic, five issues will be discussed in detail: vacancy announcements, job descriptions, effective recruitment practices, the use of interviews as a selection method, and the role of the hiring committee.

Examination of Current Hiring Practices

Research suggests that some practices implemented by principal hiring committees may hinder the chances of selecting the best candidate (Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Sessa, Kaiser, Taylor, & Campbell, 1998; Spanneut, 2007). Among all the selection approaches, interviews are the most widely used decision-making step in school principal selection procedures, in spite of recognized weaknesses in this approach (Baker & Spier, 1990). Interviews consist of obtaining more information about a candidate from their responses to pre-established questions. It is the most time-consuming part of the hiring process, and yet there may be no general agreement on what constitutes a good response to the questions posed. Smith (2009) suggested that the “look-fors” must be identified in advance; otherwise major discrepancies may surface later in the process. More discussion will be presented regarding what researchers suggest can be done to improve selection interviews in the later section describing effective hiring systems.

Although some measures (e.g., assessment centers, or methods that use multiple assessors and multiple structured methods, including in-baskets, tests, and work samples) have been developed to enhance the scope of interviews, few have linked the information gathered from those sessions with determining whether alignments exist between the philosophies of the candidates and the culture of the schools and districts in which the vacancies exist (Spanneut, 2007). Because of the limitations of

interviews, many states now test prospective principals and invoke an assessment phase. These tests can range from requiring a candidate to make a formal presentation on a topic such as improving student learning, to viewing a video of a teacher lesson and writing an evaluation. However, the predictive power of the available testing instruments for the subsequent job success of a principal is still unclear (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Other challenges to hiring stem from processes that school districts use in selecting new school principals. The selection process for principals is more public than the selection process for teachers, often involving the community as well as parents (Smith, 2009). The district office and superintendent are intimately involved because the principal, besides being the leader of the building, also becomes a member of the district leadership team.

Principal hiring procedures usually begin with establishing the goals of the recruitment process and end with the final selection and assignment. A total of seven steps are generally involved: (a) developing or reviewing and modifying job descriptions and duties, (b) advertising and/or recruiting, (c) screening applications, (4) identifying applicants for interviews, (d) checking references and backgrounds, (e) conducting initial and final in-person interviews, and (f) selecting finalists and notifying the unsuccessful candidates (Gilvar, 1992; Morford, 2002; Rebore, 2012; Smith, 2009; Spanneut, 2007; Webb & Norton, 2009; Whaley, 2002).

After the human resources planning process identifies current and future staffing needs, the next step is to recruit qualified personnel (Rebore, 2012; Webb & Norton, 2009). Many personnel systems focus on the selection process; however, if the right people are not recruited to the applicant pool in the first place, it is difficult, if not impossible, to properly select them. As Smith (2009) noted: "Recruitment is not so much about the numbers of applicants as it is about the number of quality applicants who match the criteria" (p. 38). When a school district wishes to communicate that it has a vacancy, it usually places a formal advertisement. The content of an advertisement should be dictated by the job description and criteria to be used in

selecting the most qualified candidate for the position. An effective advertisement must therefore accurately reflect the major responsibilities of the position and the minimum qualifications that an individual must possess to be a viable candidate for the job (Rebore, 2012; Webb & Norton, 2009). It is also important for a school and district to put some thought into an attractive portrayal of what the school and its surrounding community have to offer a candidate (Smith, 2009), given that community attractiveness will also be one of the considerations when an applicant determines whether to apply for the principalship (Hooker, 2000).

Selection is a complex process, and selection decisions are made at several stages within the process. The selection process can be thought of as occurring in three stages. In the initial or screening stage, the objective is generally to narrow a pool of applicants to a smaller number of plausible candidates. This stage is usually achieved by simply reviewing the resumes and the application forms because this can eliminate unqualified applicants quickly and cost effectively (Webb & Norton, 2009). The second stage involves more intensive assessment that is intended to sort applicants into categories such as highly desirable, desirable, and minimally qualified. This stage often involves administering more labor intensive and thus more expensive procedures, such as interviews, to a narrowing pool of candidates (Rosse & Levin, 1997). The third stage involves a final check on candidates who are selected as finalists. This may include even more expensive and time-consuming procedures, such as conducting reference and background checks or follow-up interviews to select the candidate who best matches the criteria set forth in the personnel requisition (Rosse & Levin, 1997; Smith, 2009).

In the existing principal hiring processes, superintendents play a critical role because their judgment and opinion usually affect the school's success. According to Hooker (2000), superintendents "initiate, implement, or delegate decisions about organizational structures to use in personnel decision making and typically make the final recommendation on which candidate to hire as a building-level administrator to their school board" (p. 184). When hiring a principal for a school district, most

superintendents and school boards establish committees that are commonly composed of central office personnel, teachers, classified staff, parents, and community members to evaluate applicants and recommend candidates for hire (Muhlenbruck, 2001; White & White, 1998).

In DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study on the subject of filling vacancies, participating principals were asked what issues are considered in selecting individuals for administrative positions. They identified prior experience and the strength of letters of recommendation as the two most important factors that they would consider. The quality of the degree, on the other hand, was considered less important when selecting possible candidates for a position. Although school boards make final hiring decisions, hiring committees are responsible for ensuring the appropriate match between school principals and local school/community culture (Clifford, 2010).

According to research, some hiring practices should be avoided to prevent school districts from making themselves unattractive to applicants or from making ineffective hiring decisions. During the initial recruitment phase, districts should avoid blindly searching without first analyzing their organization's needs and establishing job descriptions that reflect those needs (Sessa et al., 1998); districts should avoid allocating inappropriate time and funding for recruitment (Hollenbeck, 1994); finally, they should avoid recruiting only within the district or within neighborhood districts (Anderson, 1991; Normore, 2004). Research also suggests that districts should avoid the following practices during the selection process: failing to clarify the role and responsibilities of the selection committee (Clifford, 2010; Spanneut, 2007; Whaley, 2002); disregarding relevant data and selection criteria, such as national/state standards and assessments (Schlueter & Walker, 2008); being insensitive to the fit between the candidate and the whole district beyond the person-position fit (Clifford, 2010); and lacking a standardized procedure to make the best use of the information collected on candidates (Spanneut, 2007; Whaley, 2002).

Effective Hiring Systems

Researchers have suggested modifications to the processes of recruitment and selection to ensure that school districts are attracting future principals and hiring the right candidates for the positions. In particular, an effective hiring system must allow the school to measure or distinguish differences between applicants. Rosse and Levin (1997) outlined three key principles that are a part of effective hiring systems:

1. The system should be based on a clear understanding of the employee attributes required for success. A hiring system that begins by focusing on attributes rather than hiring tools (e.g., work samples, interviews) avoids the mistake of relying too much on the latter simply because the hiring committees are comfortable with them. A helpful technique for choosing the right hiring tools based on the employee attributes considered most important is to develop a Performance Attributes Matrix, which lists the critical knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes identified from job descriptions listed in the rows of a matrix, and the various hiring tools that might be used to identify those attributes listed in the columns of the matrix.
2. The system should utilize a “portfolio” of assessment or screening tools that the hiring committee can choose from. When deciding what hiring tools should be used to measure preselected attributes, hiring personnel must consider which tools match the attributes identified in the Performance Attributes Matrix and the order in which such tools will be used.
3. Screening or assessment tools should be selected based on their accuracy, practicality, fairness, and legality. The most obvious standard for evaluating hiring tools is accuracy, or how well the procedure actually assesses the job-related attributes that the hiring committees are seeking in applicants. Once the accuracy of the hiring tools is determined, the final choice among those tools will be based on the additional criteria of practicality of use (e.g., time, cost, and difficulty of use), applicants’ reactions and perceived fairness, and legal considerations. (p. 106)

Based on the three key principles identified by Rosse and Levin (1997), an effective hiring process should begin long before a vacancy announcement is made and should continue through the time when the new leader is welcomed into the organization (Clifford, 2010). The hiring process should be specific with regard to the expectations of the position, the selection criteria, and the responsibilities of the hiring committee. The rest of this section will examine vacancy announcements, job descriptions, effective recruitment practices, interviews as a selection method, and the role of hiring committee.

Vacancy announcements

Anderson (1991) recommended that districts create vacancy announcements that are specific to the particular school that the principal will be leading. The unique characteristics of a school may attract candidates particularly qualified and interested in the position. A general vacancy announcement will not describe a school's special characteristics, but a vacancy announcement tailored to the school will attract the right leadership style and personal characteristics and, as a result, enhance the person-organization fit, which may in turn facilitate success for both the principal and the district (Anderson, 1991; Mello, 2006).

Job descriptions

Job descriptions should not only describe the position and the duties and responsibilities associated with it but also provide information about the school and the school district in which the vacancy exists (Webb & Norton, 2009). Before making a good hire, school districts need to know what they are hiring for. They also need to determine which skills and personal attributes will be a good fit with the requirements of the principal job and the school with the vacancy. To define the job and its requirements, *Harvard Business Essentials* (2002) suggested that the hiring committee needs to understand (a) the primary responsibilities and tasks involved in the job; (b) the background characteristics in both education and experience needed to perform the job; (c) the specific personal characteristics required, for example, strong interpersonal skills; and (d) the key features of the organization's culture (pp. 2-3).

When the position's requirements have been defined and understood, hiring committees are ready to create a job description. A job description is a profile of the job, the job's essential functions, reporting relationships, hours, and required credentials (*Harvard Business Essentials*, 2002). This description will make it possible for hiring committees to explain the job both to potential candidates (as a vacancy announcement) and to the committee members themselves who may be using it to help identify promising candidates. Although job descriptions may already be written for a principal position, they should be reviewed or reevaluated to ensure that they remain valid in terms of accurately and completely describing the job to be done and the context in which it is performed. The reevaluation should then provide a clearer profile of the type of individual who will be successful in the job (Rebore, 2012). It is obviously important to link the interests, abilities, and personality traits of potential candidates to how such individual characteristics will be challenged in the position (Rebore, 2012). As *Harvard Business Essentials* (2002) explained, "the right education + the right experience + a compatible personality = a good fit" (p. 8). Not every applicant will have the personal characteristics necessary to be successful in this situation. The more accurate and current the job description is, therefore, the better the chance of locating a good fit for the position will be (Webb & Norton, 2009).

Job descriptions provide the details necessary for the recruitment and selection processes, as well as the performance expectations included in the appraisal procedure (Noe et al., 2010; Webb & Norton, 2009). Theories of practice that are found in official policies and job descriptions are often too general and abstracted from day-to-day practice, providing overly rationalized portrayals of ideal practice in which the challenges and uncertainties of dynamic action that principals face everyday are smoothed over (Brown & Duguid, 1991). To gain insight into real in-use leadership practice, it is probably best to understand a task as it is revealed from the perspectives of the practitioners. In addition, the knowledge, expertise, and skills that the school leaders bring to the execution of the task also will help prepare and update job descriptions that are more reflective of principals' daily work (Spillane, Halverson, &

Diamond, 2001).

Examination of relevant literature indicated that valid job descriptions are one of the major approaches to principal evaluation (Thomas, Holdaway, & Ward, 2000). Stufflebeam and Nevo (1993) concluded that systematic evaluation of potential principals and current principals is necessary throughout the principals' careers for the following reasons: (a) Candidates for principalships need to be evaluated to determine whether they possess the necessary aptitude and competence, (b) their suitability for particular principalships needs to be ascertained, and (c) individual performance needs to be assessed to determine whether principals are meeting predetermined expectations and whether they deserve special recognition (p. 25).

The evaluation approach, based on valid job descriptions, has been recommended by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Thomas et al., 2000). Job descriptions should focus on what principals are expected to do in their role. Evaluation is then determined by the discrepancy between actual and expected performance. However, as Stufflebeam and Nevo (1993) noted, using generic job descriptions that fit all or most school principals generally but not specifically could lead to many locally invalid performance evaluations. To maximize the function of job descriptions in evaluating either potential principals or incumbent principals, therefore, job descriptions must go beyond the generic descriptions that fit most principals and take into account the local context and individual school priorities. Stufflebeam and Nevo (1993) further suggested that state education departments and school districts should collaborate to clarify the role of the school principal. They also recommended that researchers develop instruments to better assess principals on variables related to their jobs. In summary, job descriptions that provide a valid basis for assessing principal performance must be customized to the particular principal's job and kept up to date.

Effective recruitment practices

Smith (2009) suggested that school districts recruit widely, efficiently, and legally to avoid being unattractive to applicants and to avoid making ineffective hiring

decisions.

First, considering the fact that good instructional programs rely on having high quality staff members, Smith (2009) suggested that schools should seek out only highly qualified personnel to fill positions in order to maintain high quality organizations. In doing so, district administrators must change their frame of reference and processes to seek out the perfect match for each and every individual job opening, instead of looking for generic qualities like “a middle school” principal.

Second, since personnel costs make up 75% to 85% of the typical school district budget (Webb & Norton, 2009), the filling of a position costs a district a substantial amount of money, but failing to do it well usually costs even more. It has been estimated that the cost of a bad hire is over 10 times the annual salary of a second-level administrator (Davila & Kursmark, 2005). A bad hiring decision not only costs in monetary terms, it also costs in lost effectiveness for staff and students. Keeping this in mind, Smith (2009) suggested that schools and districts should plan carefully in order to hire well the first time.

Finally, to recruit legally, it is important that applicants be treated equally, honestly, and fairly. As mentioned earlier in section describing hiring tools, the use of such tools is perceived as being an appropriate basis for making hiring decisions when they show substantial job-related fidelity. Smith (2009), therefore, suggested that a clear hiring system and procedure, when established, should be followed to avoid problems both legally and ethically. In addition, he further recommended that the hiring committees must be careful not to allow personal biases, such as similar-to-me (i.e., selecting applicants who possess qualities similar to the interviewer), to adversely affect the recruitment process.

Interviews as a selection method

Although the application form provides some insight on candidate qualifications, interviews provide committee members with a more holistic view of candidates (Clifford, 2010). Therefore, interviews, even in view of known limitations (e.g., unstructured interviews have low reliability and validity) are the most widely used

decision-making step in school principal selection procedures (Spanneut, 2007). Interviews when appropriately structured are high on both reliability and validity, moderately practical, well accepted by the applicants, and not likely to have adverse impact (Rosse & Levin, 1997). Other researchers agree on the strength of structured interviews and support the idea that there are differences in reliability and validity between unstructured and structured employment interviews (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004; Taylor & Small, 2002). After testing data from prior meta-analyses, Schmidt and Zimmerman (2004) found that when both types of interviews were job related, unstructured interviews had a reliability of .78 whereas structured interviews had a reliability of .89. Even though both values are high, structured interviews still perform better than unstructured interviews in terms of being free of measurement error. In terms of validity, structured interviews have a coefficient of .4 whereas the value for unstructured interviews is only .14 (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004; Taylor & Small, 2002).

Thus, interviews can be used as an efficient and practical method for measuring the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required for the principal position to make either an early screening decision about an applicant's acceptability or a later selection decision. Given that schools are prone to use the interview approach, which can be effective when well structured, it may be worthwhile to learn from researchers' suggestions and research results to learn what else can be done to improve or to develop effective selection interviews. Several researchers have made recommendations for better interview use (Cook, 1988; Gatewood, Feild & Barrick, 2008; Ployhart et al., 2006). Those recommendations can fall into the following four categories: provide a good job description, be standardized and structured during the interview process, train the interviewers, and use panel interviews.

Provide a good job description. The importance of a specific and accurate job description in hiring processes has been addressed in the previous section. However, it cannot be overlooked when developing an interview as a method for selecting principals. According to Cook (1988), interviewers working from a good job

description tend to agree with each other more often, pay less attention to irrelevant information, and are less likely to make up their minds too quickly. Because a good job description usually comes from a thorough job analysis, it provides a whole picture for the hiring committee on the position's requirements. Decision makers can use it to design job-related questions that address important KSAs for job knowledge, social interaction, personality, and habitual behaviors (Gatewood et al., 2008). Furthermore, it can be used to identify the "fit" between the candidates and the organization. In addition, basing the interview questions on the job descriptions can keep the questions focused on job-relevant behaviors and processes (Ployhart et al., 2006) and avoid unnecessary risk of law breaking from asking inappropriate questions.

Be standardized and structured during the interview process. All reviews agree that using structured interview methods for gathering, recording, and interpreting applicant suitability information gives more reliable and accurate results. Structured interviews can include the interview per se and the interviewer's judgment. Depending on the nature of the job and purpose of the interview, a high degree of structure can be demonstrated on interview questions, evaluation or interviewer judgments, and rapport building (Gatewood et al., 2008). Interview questions should focus on job-related behaviors. To maintain consistency, all candidates should be asked identical questions that are derived from a job description and predetermined by the same interviewers (Gatewood et al., 2008; Ployhart et al., 2006). Evaluation standardization includes using rating scales or checklists and summing scores across multiple dimensions (Gatewood et al., 2008; Ployhart et al., 2006). Rapport building involves getting to know each other at the beginning of the interview (Gatewood et al., 2008) and explaining to applicants the nature of the interview, why it has to be structured, and the roles and responsibilities taken by the applicant and interviewer (Ployhart et al., 2006).

Train the interviewers. The primary purposes of interviewer training are instructing the interviewer what to look for, how to look for it, and how likely he/she

is to miss it before conducting the interview. Interviewers can be warned of common sources of bias and inaccuracy, and taught how to conduct the interview and use rating scales efficiently (Cook, 1988; Ployhart et al., 2006). Some critical interview skills, such as accurately receiving information, critically evaluating information, avoiding errors in evaluating information received, and being aware of interviewers' own behaviors in the interview, should be included in an interviewer training program (Gatewood et al., 2008). After attending training sessions and acquiring interview skills, most interviewers are able to show the results of reducing common rater errors, enhancing reliability of interview judgments, and fostering more sophisticated questioning strategies (Gatewood et al., 2008).

Use panel interviews. Research has proved that interview validity is increased either by standardizing the interview or by relying on multiple interviewers arriving at independent evaluations for each candidate (Gatewood et al., 2008). To conduct a more effective and accurate interview, the interview panel should make an independent set of ratings and reach consensus to provide a final panel rating to be used for the ultimate hiring decision (Ployhart et al., 2006). Interviewers who are selected for the panel should represent demographic diversity to minimize unwanted bias. In small school districts where using interview panels may not be possible, developing multiple dimensions for each interview question can help maintain the validity level (Ployhart et al., 2006).

Besides using information collected from the context of interviews to assist with making selection decisions, research suggests that data obtained from elements during the candidates' on-site visit should also be considered as integral interview components (Clifford, 2010). Because principals work in school buildings, observing candidates in those settings while selection determinations are being formed may provide further decision-making data. Linking information gathered from interview sessions with observations of how candidates interact with the staff, students, and culture of the school buildings in which the vacancies exist may provide interviewers/decision makers with additional insights about how candidates may

actually behave as school leaders (Clifford, 2010; Spanneut, 2007). Moreover, the significance of principals being able to recognize and assess school culture has been reported. According to Deal and Peterson (1999), the connection between effective leadership and school culture is clear: “To be effective, school leaders must read and understand their school and community culture” (p. 86).

The role of hiring committees

Also important for a high-quality selection process in a school district is the need to be strategic, organized, and purposeful. Those who will be involved in the screening of applicants, the creation of interview questions, the selection of interview committee members, the decision on whether to use employment tests, and the questions that will be asked while conducting reference and backgrounds checks should all be determined ahead of time. The committee chair is responsible for ensuring that members understand selection criteria and consistently review applications (Clifford, 2010). Smith (2009) suggested that the role of the selection committee members should include the following:

- understand the job description of the position to be filled,
- ensure a fair and just process,
- develop the selection criteria aligned with the job description,
- make sure key questions are addressed where appropriate,
- be an active and respectful team member,
- be solution oriented,
- endure confidentiality of the candidates and team members, and
- recommend three candidates unranked to the superintendent. (p. 76)

The match of candidate to position must be decided by individuals who understand both the specific needs of the position and the characteristics, education, and experience of the chosen applicant. Anderson (1991) suggested that the more emphasis is placed upon these aspects of the selection process, the more likely the screening process is to select high-quality candidates.

Summary

Choosing a new leader is not an easy task for any organization, and the complex work of schools has made principal selection even more challenging to school districts. This chapter has described the challenging working conditions and hiring as

a process with a number of key steps. Although the above review focused on what school districts should do to select the best candidates for a position, further investigation is needed to identify if there is a significant gap between best practices as suggested in the research and what school districts actually do to select candidates for a principalship. This also leads to the need for this present study to contribute to the gap in current literature. In the next chapter, the researcher will describe the research method used to examine the perspectives and obtain feedback from school principals about current principal recruitment and selection policies as well as practices and the extent to which they are consistent with recommendations in the literature.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study was an investigation of incumbent school principals' perceptions of the principal hiring processes. The study focused on the perceptions of school principals of the employment procedures used when they were hired for the principalship, and specifically on how the existing recruitment and selection procedures as well as job descriptions affect the whole principal hiring system. To fulfill the purpose of this research, the study was designed as multiple-case study research (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Data were collected from principals in three states, two in the Midwest and one in the South. One-on-one interviews between the researcher and the selected school principals were conducted as the primary source of data for the study. This chapter will present the research design and study methodology. First, the benefits of using multiple-case design and why it was appropriate for this study will be explained in the research design section. Next, the research procedures regarding participant recruitment, participants' characteristics, and data collection will be described in detail. In the data analysis section, the process by which data were coded and analyzed will be discussed. Finally, research ethics will be considered at the end of this chapter.

Research Design

This study used qualitative methods to investigate the experiences and perceptions of school principals. A multiple-case study design was conducted to explore their perceptions of the hiring procedures. By interviewing principals, the researcher intended to hear principals' stories about their personal experiences and feedback on recruitment and selection processes before they were offered their current positions. A case study therefore was particularly appropriate for this research because the method is suitable to describe a program or policy and can easily enable the inclusion of rich details to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon from the participants' points of view (Trochim, 2001). Stake's (1995) statement about the essence of case studies provides a theoretical base for this study design:

For the most part, the cases of interest in education are people and programs. Each one is similar to other persons and programs in many ways and unique in many ways. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories....we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn. (p. 1)

In this study, a group of school principals from various sizes of school districts in three states were selected to share their experiences and perceptions about principal recruitment and selection practices. The researcher listened to their stories and examined them thoroughly to discern differences and similarities. Finally, some potential implications were drawn from comparisons of the results of the present study with previous research.

Yin (1994) defined the descriptive case study as a case study that obtains information on the particular features of an issue. The present study could therefore be specifically labeled as a descriptive case study because detailed descriptions of the principals' perceptions about the hiring procedures were examined. Moreover, the unit of analysis or case in this study was the personal experience of the hiring process of the participating school principals. Even though each case was studied thoroughly, multiple cases were needed in order to obtain a broad range of different perspectives in the research findings (Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2001; Yin, 1994). Studying many cases also allowed the researcher to establish core concepts and themes that best represented the similarities and differences among principals' perspectives.

Participant Recruitment

In this study, school principals who the researcher thought would represent diverse perspectives were invited to participate. Data were collected through qualitative interviews using a protocol (Creswell, 2007) that incorporated a semi-structured and open-ended approach, conducted face-to-face either on the participating principals' campus or via Skype (an online video chat program). The interviews were recorded with the prior consent of the participants, and verbatim transcriptions were produced for subsequent coding and data analysis. The transcribed

data were then organized for further analysis using codes generated by the researcher during the early stages of data collection.

The following sections will focus on the earliest stage of the research procedure: participant recruitment. The discussion will begin with the process of determining sample size and will follow with participant identification before discussing the strategies used for gaining access and building rapport. Finally, a detailed description of the participants will be presented.

Sample Size Determination

To increase the likelihood that the findings would reflect either similar or contrasting perspective patterns on the same topic, information from multiple cases was gathered. Multiple cases not only provide deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases but also strengthen the validity and stability of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). When considering how many cases were necessary to provide confident analytical results, the researcher had to think about the primary purpose of the study. Moreover, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), a study with more than 15 cases can become unwieldy and should probably be devised as a survey instead; thus, a goal of approximately 15 participants was set for this study. To ensure a sample of 15, invitations were sent to a somewhat higher number of candidates to ensure that there would be sufficient participants in case some principals declined to participate.

Participant Identification

Given that quite different hiring processes and practices might be implemented in different school settings and districts, the researcher intended to discover how varied the incumbent principals' experiences might be. The researcher was interested in interviewing principals who had been hired recently. It was thought that newly hired principals would recall their experiences of the recruitment, selection, and hiring processes in greater detail. The researcher also was interested in listening to experienced principals who had served on search committees for other principals or who had interviewed and served as principals in more than one school. It was thought

that experienced principals would provide a broader perspective on the recruitment, selection, and hiring process. Finally, the researcher was interested in differences, if any, that existed in public and independent school processes. Therefore, she sought and secured interviews from newly hired and experienced principals in public and independent schools in districts of various sizes. All interview participants were originally contacted using a nomination process with assistance from a senior professor of Educational Leadership. Three participants were nominated by other principals who were participants of this study.

Gaining Access and Building Rapport

After principals agreed to participate, the researcher sent them a consent letter approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of having participants review a consent form prior to the commencement of the data collection process was to enhance their understanding of the nature of the study and help reduce their concerns about the risks of participation (Creswell, 2007). A copy of the consent letter is included in Appendix A. In studies of this kind, participants usually need to review and sign the form; however, in this study, participants' signatures were considered unnecessary at the IRB's suggestion because it might make them vulnerable to an identity leak in the unlikely event of the forms being mislaid. Therefore, by replying "yes" to the invitation, the participating principals were informing the researcher that they understood the purpose of the study and agreed to be one of the participants. In total, 16 principals completed the agreement procedure and became participants in the study.

Prior to the actual interviews, the researcher attempted to establish a degree of rapport with her participants by sending them a list of the primary interview questions. Some participants thought it was helpful for them to know what questions they were going to be asked beforehand. They were not only able to respond more fully to the questions, but also felt more comfortable being interviewed. To prevent the participants from being over-prepared and therefore scripted, however, they were not

provided with the researcher's list of possible follow-up questions. The list of primary interview questions is attached in Appendix B.

Participant Characteristics

Interviews were conducted with principals in three states. Participants were school principals and associate principals who worked at all school levels (elementary, middle, and high) and in different school settings (public and independent). Out of the 16 participants, 11 were principals from 10 different districts, two were associate principals, also from different districts; finally, three were heads of school at different independent schools. Of the 13 public school principals, four were from elementary schools, four were from middle schools, and five were from high schools. The three heads of school worked in different school types: one worked in a K-12 school, another worked in a K-6 school, and another worked in a high school. Five of the 16 principals had just been offered the position at the time they were interviewed by the researcher, four were experienced principals who had been principals for more than 5 years, and the other seven principals had served in their positions for between 1 and 4 years. The most experienced principal had served for 19 years. Four of the 16 participants were female, and 3 were African American males.

Data Collection

Data were collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 1 hour. The interviews were conducted at participants' convenience either at each school principal's work site or on Skype. The interview questions were based on the order of a regular principal application process and were listed accordingly.

By using in-depth interviews, the researcher who was also the interviewer intended to elicit responses about participants' experiences and attitudes regarding the principal hiring process. In this section, the following topics will be discussed: the use of the interview as the data collection method; how the interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim; and finally the pilot studies.

Use of Interviews

Data for this study were collected by interviewing each participant. Interview questions evolved from a review of the literature to discover interview topics that would help answer the research questions. The researcher searched the literature on school principals and generated ideas for questions from the existing and possible problems of hiring principals described in the previous research. After the questions were developed, they were polished through a group discussion process under Dr. Yarbrough's supervision before they were used for the pilot study and the present study. Students who attended Practicum in Program Evaluation reviewed the questions and commented on them. Dr. Yarbrough helped organize those comments and made final suggestions to strengthen the validity of the interview questions.

Thirteen primary interview questions were asked of the participants. Follow-up questions also were developed for each primary question in case a further probe was needed. Except for the first question, which was asked to understand participants' experiences of being a principal, the rest of the interview questions could be grouped in six categories. To help the participating principals recall their stories, those questions and categories were created based on the order of incidents that principals would encounter when they were applying for a position. The first category was position awareness, which focused on how the participants learned of job opportunities. The second category was deciding to apply and applying, which covered motivations to apply for principalships and descriptions of hiring processes. The third group of questions, being selected for an interview, included questions regarding the participants' perceptions of interview questions and procedures. The fourth category, being offered the position, included questions that required participants' self-evaluation to be able to answer. The fifth category was accepting the position, which focused on the last stage before officially becoming the principal. The last category, closing questions, covered an overall evaluation of the hiring process and additional comments regarding both the hiring process and this study that participants would like to contribute. The interview questions asked participants about

successful experiences; however, participants also discussed application processes in which they were not successful. The completed version of interview questions is attached in Appendix C.

Interview Procedures

Before each interview began, the researcher conveyed the nature of this study and answered participants' questions. The researcher also reminded the participants that the interviews would be recorded given their permission and that they were free to ask the researcher to stop recording or suspend the interview.

All interviews were then recorded using a digital voice recorder while the researcher took some quick notes in case the audio recording did not work. Although most of those field notes were incomplete because it was difficult to ask questions and take notes at the same time, the notes helped to organize the researcher's thoughts on items such as information about starting the interview and ending the interview, and thanking the respondent. The researcher was also able to record the interviews conducted on Skype by using a free downloaded Skype recording program – PowerGramo.

The researcher hired a transcriptionist to help with transcribing the interviews. To avoid unwanted ambiguities, the researcher shared a list of terms (see Appendix D) with the transcriptionist to help him become familiar with the ideas of the present study, and also for him to refer to when he encountered unfamiliar terminology (Poland, 2002). The researcher checked the accuracy of every interview transcript to make sure the transcripts were correct and ready to be coded.

Pilot Studies

To gain research experience and reduce the possible field issues that might be related to the researcher's ability to deal with the participants' unexpected behaviors and reactions to sensitive issues, practice through pilot studies was necessary. Through the pilot testing, the researcher had the opportunity to refine the interview questions and procedures before the main research was conducted.

Two pilot interviews were conducted. The first one was with a female associate who was a friend of the researcher and a principal in a high school that was not included in this study. She provided suggestions on the interview questions and helped the researcher build confidence. The second pilot interview was conducted with a retired female principal who had 19 years' experience as an elementary school principal. This time the researcher's advisor attended and observed the pilot interview. After the pilot interview was conducted, the participant and the advisor provided feedback. These two valuable experiences helped the researcher practice her interview skills and revise some of the interview questions so they would not be leading but would elicit in-depth answers.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were the procedures of transforming raw data into categories and concepts, which involved creating codes, coding, and writing up results. In this study, data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software. The researcher read and reread the interview transcripts several times to search for patterns within the interviews and to find common themes, ideas, or concepts. A coding system was developed to group, sort, compare, and synthesize the participants' responses into common themes, ideas, or concepts. This section will discuss the data analysis procedures that were implemented for this study.

Code Development and Coding Process

The coding strategy used in this study was open coding technique as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). They defined open coding as "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (p. 101). To manage and organize data more efficiently, qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, was used for the coding and data analysis in this study. During the open coding process, the transcribed data were closely examined and constantly compared line by line. The relevant sentences (quotes) were selected/highlighted and then were assigned to their codes by using the "open coding" function in the analysis program. The codes were generated prior to or

during the coding process based on the events, happenings, objects, and actions or interactions in the participants' comments and in the interview questions. In addition, codes that shared the same concept or topic were grouped together as a family by using the "family" function in the ATLAS.ti program. Finally, the data were outputted in the "codes-primary-documents-table" and "all codes with quotations" formats for further analysis.

Writing up Results

When the coding process was completed, 64 codes and 604 quotations were created and selected and were ready to be analyzed. The researcher then chose the strategy to organize the codes and to select the codes for later written discussion. Given that the purpose of this study was to examine the participating principals' stories during the process of being hired, ordering the data from the initiating incident to final consequence seemed to be an appropriate strategy. When the codes and their accompanying quotes were arranged in chronological order, double procedures based on numeric frequency were used to select the strong and important items from the data base for content analysis and pattern detection. The numeric frequency of items could be found easily in the "codes-primary-documents-table." In the first round, codes were selected by how many times they appeared in the interviews. The researcher set a cutoff point at 15 tallies. Codes that showed up 15 times or above were eligible for the next procedure. In the second round, codes that were chosen from the first round were selected again by how many respondents answered or referred to them. Codes that had comments from more than eight (out of 16) participants, thus reaching a response rate of more than 50%, were selected. Only those quotes with their accompanying codes that met the double standards were used to write the final results. As a result, from a complete list of 64 codes, 15 codes were used to develop the findings.

Research Ethics

The researcher made every effort to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner and that the results were trustworthy. When approaching and involving

participants, the researcher ensured that all participants were notified and had an understanding of the data collection method and agreed to their use by giving them an IRB approved consent letter (see Appendix A). The letter included a brief description of the purpose and procedure of the research; the expected interview duration; and a statement of any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences associated with participation. The participants were not pressured to answer any questions if they did not feel comfortable with them. A statement that participation was completely voluntary and could be terminated at any time was provided to ease the participants' anxiety and increase their motivation for participation. In addition, they were informed that the audio recording and notes taken during the interviews would be transcribed without using their names. The researcher also constantly checked every step in this study to make sure that the step met the requirements of IRB. Even though a transcriptionist was hired, the researcher was very careful about not displaying names of the participants when sharing the audio files with him. To avoid missing data because of computer problems, the researcher backed up copies of computer files. To meet ethical standards, all audio recordings and interview transcripts will be destroyed when the research is completed (Beyea & Nicoll, 2000).

Summary

This chapter described multiple-case study design and data analysis procedures. First, the strategies used to recruit a sufficient number of participants to meet the goal of multiple-case design and the purpose of this study were described. The next section was a detailed discussion of data collection procedures, including the design of interview questions, the use of interviews, and the pilot studies that prepared the researcher for the main study. The section to follow explained the data analysis, which covered code development and the coding process, as well as how the codes were selected to compose the written research findings. Finally, the researcher discussed ethical concerns and ways to avoid them. In next chapter, the main research findings will be presented.

CHAPTER IV

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand current school principals' perspectives on the principal hiring process by examining their own experiences. To obtain the stories of the participating principals, this study was designed as a multiple case study. Data were collected via one-on-one interviews conducted by the researcher with each participant.

The interview questions were designed so that the participating principals could talk freely about their own experiences. The data collected through the interviews were organized based on the research questions. This chapter will present the results in the following four sections: (a) deciding to pursue a principalship and searching for openings, (b) going through the process, (c) personal reactions to the process, and (d) recommendations.

Deciding to Pursue a Principalship and Searching for Openings

The first basic issue addressed was the motivation to pursue a principalship. To this end, questions such as the following were put to the participants: "What made you decide to apply for the principalship?" "How did you learn of this job opportunity?" "Was there anything you wish you could have seen on the job description?" These questions were asked in an attempt to determine the factors that influenced participants' decisions during the hiring process.

Participants varied in their level of experience as school principals at the time the researcher interviewed them. A few of the participants were recently hired. Most had been in the position for several years, whereas some principals had administrative experience for more than 10 years. In spite of differences in experience, school levels, and even school settings (public versus independent), the participants were all able to recall their initial motives for pursuing careers as school principals, and – in the case of the principals with prior experience – were also able to remember their reasons for applying to lead another school. Since their responses were often different from one

another, the researcher decided to treat separately those participants who had made the leap from being a teacher to being a principal from those participants who were already principals but who had to move to another school.

From Teacher to Principal

Almost all participating principals recalled that they felt ready to be principals after a few years of teaching. They wanted to be able to influence more than just the students in their classroom. These were initial motives to apply for a principalship. It seems that principals realized that being an administrator was what they really wanted to do at some point, and when the opportunities opened up, they were ready to move forward to the greater educational world. They came to the new level of their career not only prepared but with vision. One principal shared the incentive to become a principal:

I guess it's just the career move to do something differently. When I became a teacher, I was interested in administration from the very beginning. Both of my parents are actually retired teachers with thirty-plus years' experience, so I knew enough about education and I knew enough about they had bad administrators and good administrators, and I knew how much difference a good administrator makes compared to a bad administrator. And I had a pretty good feeling that I think I would make a good administrator. So, going into teaching, I knew that was something I wanted to pursue.

Although they had similar reasons for deciding whether to pursue the career, participating principals had personal reasons to choose a particular school or school district. Some chose to wait until a position opened at a familiar place, which might have been the community where they grew up, the school from which they graduated, or the building where they previously taught. One principal shared a particular preference:

I am actually a teacher in the district that I am going to be a principal, so I was aware of some of our current administrators moving on, so I was watching pretty carefully for the opening. Our district publishes all of the openings on the district's website, so I saw an internal posting form before it was in the [local newspaper] for example. I had been watching for quite a while to be ready for it when an opening to happen.

Although some chose to take advantage of internal sources through some sort of district connections, some sent out their resumes to many different places to look for an opportunity. One participant talked about how this job searching strategy worked:

I kind of sent resumes out over the Midwest. My wife and I both grew up in [this state], but weren't really tied down there by any means, so we decided to send them out, and this opportunity came open, and they gave me an interview and I am where we go. Basically there are state's sites that post the job from anywhere in the state. And I kind of looked up the demographics and where it was located, and if I thought it sounded good, I did more research and I sent my application out to where it needed to be sent to.

In addition to district connections and random job searching, some participants claimed that what made them decide where to go was more of a family decision. Some chose a certain area because they had to move with their spouse, some were considering the schooling of their children, and some simply wanted to be close to their family, and it just so happened that their targeted district had an opening and they got the job they wanted. Here is an example of a principal who chose to stay in a certain area because of family ties:

Number one, my husband and I wanted to stay in this area. Number two quite frankly was a job that was opened. I knew about [our school district], but honestly was looking for a job that I wanted to be close. And originally, my ultimate goal was to get a job at [a larger city]. And at this point, I am so happy with our district that I would not consider leaving our district.

For those participants who were pursuing their first principal positions, looking for openings online seemed to be the most common way to become aware of the available positions if they did not hear the news from their own district. This was also true of those participants who were already principals but who were looking for positions in other schools. In recent years, all position postings and application processes have gone online either on district websites or state websites, although some school districts still use newspapers as broadcasting media. This is a significant change. According to some very experienced principals, newspapers were the most important media around 10 years ago for people looking for job opportunities. One principal shared that he used various sources to learn of job opportunities:

I kind of looked in a variety of spots when I was looking for jobs, so most of the jobs I had learned about were online, just like [Education Jobs] or [Searching Firm] is another popular site for jobs, and then the [local newspaper] is kind of the standby as the largest newspaper in the state. You know, they always post, and that was another place that I had found out about it. So, I had heard about it through a couple different sources.

For another principal, searching openings online seemed to be the only method he used:

By looking online. I've always been looking, because once I was doing my dissertation, it was advised that I don't seek employment just to make sure I get through my dissertation. So, I didn't, but I was just keeping my eyes open so once I got close to being done, I started to look, and I saw a position opened up at [my building], and I said, you know what, let me try this.

However, in some independent schools, the job search process is more commonly approached the other way around, that is, instead of being open for applicants to apply for the position, the hiring committee of the school will approach candidates proactively either directly or through for-profit search firms. For people who are interested in becoming a head of school in an independent school, getting a teaching position in the school first or uploading a resume to the school's cooperating search firm is probably a more efficient method. One participant who was the head of school in an independent school recalled how she was approached by the former head of school:

So the former head of school at [this school] called me and asked me to go to coffee, and over coffee he said that he was leaving but that I should really consider applying for this position.

Here is an example of the cooperation between an independent school and a search firm:

There are a couple of different search firms that independent schools use to try to recruit diverse faculty and administrators of color as well. So that's where my new job found me.

When asked if the job description had affected their decision to apply for a principalship, most of the participants agreed that this was just a part of their preparation, and usually the content of the job description was very vague. The participating principals tended to spend more time doing research on the district or school they were interested in as a whole, instead of relying on the job description to help them understand what the job duties and responsibilities were going to be when they were hired. One principal stated that he paid more attention to the location and staff of the school rather than to the job description before he decided whether to apply for a position:

So, the decision to apply is probably based on some of that information in job description, but more on location for me and getting to know the people. And a lot of times, if the administrative team functions well, you wouldn't hire someone just because they matched the job description. You hire them because they're a strong individual, and then we all sat down as a team once I was hired and really looked at our duties and responsibilities once I was hired to see what would be a good fit.

Despite the fact that the participating principals placed little importance on the job description, they nevertheless felt that it provided valuable insight into how the hiring school district's administrative team worked. The job descriptions showed how much time and effort the administrative team was willing to spend outlining what they were looking for in their ideal applicant. One participant shared his perspectives on how a job posting provided insights into the position's host district:

You can definitely tell even by the job posting kind of what their mentality is. Some job postings just have a web-link to go to their website. Some have a very short description and the application process is very simple. Some have very lengthy job descriptions and the application process is very, very complex. And I think that does tell a story about what the district or what the administration maybe is currently like. So, that does tell a story about the situation you're going into, and you are judging a book by its cover, but in this case, I'd imagine it's probably pretty accurate.

Another interesting fact was also pointed out by some participants, which was the difference between large and small districts/schools in terms of their job postings. Small districts usually try very hard to attract more applicants by writing an interesting job posting, whereas larger districts tend not to pay too much attention to that issue. One principal pointed out that smaller schools tend to use job postings as a way to promote the school:

A lot of times, in the job posting, the school will do a good job of describing-interestingly, a small school, lots of times in the job postings will end up selling themselves more than they're selling the position, all of the things they're doing to try to attract more applicants, whereas the bigger schools, they're not as concerned about doing that, they're more like, "This is what the job's going to look like for you," and not worried about selling themselves because they already think they're going to have a large enough pool to choose from.

Overall, people who want to apply for a principal position are not just concerned about what the job description says or what they heard from other people about the particular job; instead, if they feel they are ready for the position, when the time is right and the place is right, they will go for it no matter what. The job description, therefore, is just part of the picture.

From Principal at One School to Principal at Another

After a few years experiencing the leading role in a school, some principals thought about moving to another school to fulfill the next goal in their careers. Some common reasons prompted the participating principals to consider a move. The first reason was promotion. Some of them had started their careers as an assistant or associate principal. With a few years of preparation in the position, they had grown professionally and were ready for an even bigger challenge, that is, to lead a school on their own. Therefore, when a principal position opened up, they decided to apply. One participant shared what motivated him to move from an assistant principal position to a principal position:

As an assistant principal, your job duties are narrower and you tend to have less scope and less autonomy in the direction you want to take the school, so I wanted to be the principal rather than the assistant principal.

The second common reason to change positions was moving to somewhere preferable. Given that this was not their first principal position, they were more determined to get what they really wanted and were able to choose their move based on the reputation and location of the school district and the level of the school. One principal mentioned that a desire for a change in school environment was the reason he wanted to move to another school:

I thought that the particular school was a good fit in my opinion. I thought it was a good fit for me. I wanted to move. I was a middle school principal, and I wanted to be elementary. So it was the change in scenery that attracted me, the location of the school, and the size of the school that attracted me as well. So, those three things are basically what made me decide to apply.

Another principal thought that being able to work in a district with a good reputation was a significant incentive:

I think the opportunity that was presented in a district I knew was a great district and to be able to move up into something that follows is almost a no-brainer not to give it a shot.

The third reason, being asked to move, which is a little unusual in most public school districts, is actually very common in some larger school districts and independent schools. When this kind of policy is implemented, an official or formal hiring process is not always necessary. Instead, the superintendent or the Executive

Directors of Administrative Personnel of a district calls in a preferred principal, someone who has been doing well and someone who they think would be a good fit, and offers the individual a new job in another school within the district directly without conducting a formal hiring process. One principal described his experience of being assigned to lead another school:

In [my district], you know, it's a pretty large district. So, when there's an opening in a position, sometimes, rather than going through a formal hiring process, if they see someone who they think would be a good fit, they just ask them, "Would you like to move over into this position?" And in this case, that's what happened. I was the intermediate school assistant principal, associate principal, and there was an elementary school opening, and rather than going through the whole hiring process for someone new, they just said, "[name], we think you would be good at that position as a principal. Are you interested?" And I said yes, and they just moved me over.

Unlike in public school districts, where formal hiring processes are bypassed only when principals are rotated within the district, this streamlining of the process appears to be more common in independent schools because they tend to recruit qualified candidates directly and proactively. Independent schools usually find their future heads of school by working with search firms or by selecting someone who the hiring committee might have known for a long time, that is, either a teacher of the school or, in the case of one of the interviewees, a former head of the school. One such head of school recalled how he was approached and how he then decided to return to be the head again:

And in 2002, I decided I would take all that knowledge and establish my own school. And so, we worked together and founded [this new school]. And so while I was there, the people at the school I started here kept calling and said, "Won't you come back? Won't you come back? We want you to come back and work at our school again." But I was very determined that I would make [the new school] a success, so I stayed at that school for four years when I decided I wanted a change, and that's when...But I came and visited the school then and they were talking and encouraging me very much to come back, so I decided to accept the offer to come back and be the head.

When it came to searching for available positions, even if this was for the participating principals' second or third position as principal, the ways that they became aware of the position were still very similar to those used when they were looking for their first principalship. If they were just transferring within their own districts, then getting news from internal sources was probably the most reliable and

easiest way to hear of possible openings before they were officially announced. For example, one principal mentioned that he knew his predecessor was leaving the position before this news was officially posted:

Well, certainly I was an elementary school principal here in our district, and I just became aware that this job was coming open. There was a significant news story about the former principal, my predecessor, who was going to be taking a different job and moving on, so I knew the job was going to be open. And sure enough, the job ended up being posted, that at some point it will be posted on the district's website, and that's when it becomes an open job, and that's when you apply and you go from there.

However, if for any reason they decided to move to another school district or even to another state, searching for openings on official websites or search companies' websites was the most common method of finding openings. One principal described how and where he found job opportunities online:

Most of the jobs-this job opportunity and all the jobs I applied for-I discovered on the state department of education, they run a website with teaching jobs and administrative jobs, and then a for-profit company, and that's where this job was actually posted, was on there. So, pretty much I'd say ninety percent of my searching was done online.

Given their prior experience as school principals, the participants seemed to have known the duties and responsibilities well enough that they did not need to spend too much time reading the job description when they were applying for another principalship. Rather, they all agreed that it is just not possible to list every duty and responsibility on a job description. Therefore, it is very important that individuals applying for a principal job know the school/district thoroughly and understand the school's needs and expectations so they can estimate if they have the background and experience to move the school forward. One principal suggested that instead of relying on job descriptions to learn the job duties, a better strategy would be to research the school online:

A principal's a principal, and they're going to have certain responsibilities regardless of where they're at, so I think what's just as important is not what's written down on that job description but knowing the district and knowing what demands will be placed on you and what the priorities are depending on all those different stakeholders: what the parents expect, what the stakeholders expect, the fellow administrators, and the students, of course.

Even though job description did not play an important part in the hiring process, there was still some information that some participating principals wished they could have found in a job description. In particular, some applicants based their decision on whether to apply on the job description and therefore wanted to know in advance if they would be responsible for the duties that they really wanted to control before they applied for the position. For example, one principal described what he wished had been available in the job description:

I would really want to know what a principal's job was in terms of hiring, because in some school districts, HR hires the people and then they assign them to schools. And the principal's maybe, they don't have much input. If I were going to another school, and they said the principal does not do that, I would be worried, because I want to have control over, I want to have a big say over who's going to be in my building. So, that is...that would be one thing that I would want on the job description.

Compared to their first time applying for the principalship, principals were more determined and knew how to reach their career goals when it came to their second or third applications. The participating principals all expressed confidence and autonomy in making the decision to move to another school.

Going Through the Process

After the participants had decided to pursue a career as a principal, multiple challenges still awaited them before they were hired. This section examines the objective details of the hiring process they experienced and describes some similarities and differences both in terms of the process and in terms of what the districts were looking for in a good principal.

To understand the steps that the participants took to become a principal, questions such as "What did the process look like?" and "What do you think that the hiring committee was looking for?" were asked. Since participants were from various school types, differences among their answers were expected. Despite this, there were commonalities in their answers. The results are examined in four parts: (a) overview of the application process, (b) interview scheduling, (c) interview questions and structure, and (d) fit for the hiring committee.

Overview of the Application Process

The following summarizes what the participating principals experienced. The process started with an online application, was followed by submission of paper-type materials that were requested by districts, and then was succeeded by follow-up processes that varied from district to district. The paper materials that districts requested from the applicants varied. The most commonly requested materials were cover letters, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and lists of references. In addition to these, some districts asked applicants to write essays on a few open-ended subjects, such as philosophy of education and vision of school education. One unusual difference among the participants' experiences was whether online test taking was used as one of the screening methods to decide who advanced to the interview stage. Among the 16 participants, 11 experienced online application processes that asked only for basic information about the applicant (e.g., years of experience, educational background, etc.); an additional two reported that they also had to answer more probing questions or complete a short essay to finish the online application process.

Some districts called references and completed reference checks before they even called applicants for an interview. Some invited the qualified candidates for an interview and then completed the reference checks afterwards. Interview schedules varied dramatically from district to district. Some districts scheduled the interview as short as 30 minutes; other districts scheduled a much longer interview, which might take the applicants up to 2 days. The number of interviews that the applicants completed before they were hired also varied from one to three interview visits. The next section will discuss more details about how interviews were scheduled in different school districts.

Interview Scheduling

Most of the time, participants completed two face-to-face interviews, one with the committee or the building team (usually on site), and another with the superintendent only. This common procedure was true of all school settings and regions. One principal shared how his two face-to-face interviews were scheduled:

I applied, they called, they said, “Your first interview is going to be on this date.” I went in for that one with the committee. They called me back, said “We’d like to have an interview with you and the superintendent.” [He] and I interviewed, and then a few days later-so, it was two face-to-face interviews, with the committee and then just with the superintendent.

The building team usually consisted of teachers, parents, staff, representatives from the central office, and sometimes students depending on the school level. One participant stated:

There’s the building team and then the district team. So, the building team consisted of five or six teachers in this district and the HR director from downtown came down and worked with them.

Although most of the participating principals described a common interview procedure with two visits, some experienced a more extensive interview process that included three or more interviews. Such a thorough procedure was especially common in larger school districts because principals there were expected to work with more administrative staff. One principal recalled that there were five interviews before he was offered the position:

I had an interview here at [this school] with a large group of teachers, parents, and a representative from the central administration. And then after that interview I went to the central office and had an interview with the district central administrative team. So, like the assistant superintendent, curriculum director, director of special education, those types of people at the central administrative level. And then, you met with the superintendent. And then, they called a couple of people back for final interviews that were just one-on-one with the superintendent.

No matter how different the interview process was among districts or how many interviews the participants had to complete, the one-on-one interviewing with the superintendent was usually the last step before being hired.

Interview Questions and Structure

Most of the participating principals agreed that a typical interview included four types of questions: (a) general background questions, (b) behavioral (experience-based) questions, (c) situational questions, and (d) job-relevant knowledge questions. Many of these questions were addressed working with the district administrative team, working with fellow teachers, and improving student achievement. Some districts also provided interview questions according to the six

administrative standards (ISLLC), so each standard had certain questions that were tailored to it. Overall, the interview questions covered three major topics: instruction (including how to improve student achievement), leadership style, and decision making. The following are detailed descriptions and examples of each type of question.

General background questions: Almost every participant reported that the very first interview question they were asked was a variant of “Tell me a little bit about yourself.” Although interviewers asked this question with different wordings, the ideas they tried to elicit from the interviewees were very similar.

Behavioral questions: Hiring committees often asked questions that were focused on how applicants dealt with past situations that would be similar to those they might face in the future, so that they could gauge the applicant’s likely disposition if they were to encounter such situations. Although these questions were mostly about teaching experiences, they sometimes could be quite challenging as one principal observed:

Some of the toughest questions are “Tell us an example of a time that you failed, and what did you do?”

Situational questions: The participating principals were often given hypothetical situations to consider and were asked how they would react. These questions were usually asked in the following way: “What would you do if this happened?” The hypothetical situations usually covered the interactions between applicants and various groups of people (e.g., students, teachers, and parents) when some difficult issues arose. For example:

A lot of this is hypothetical situations: “How would you handle a parent who was upset about a grade?” “How would you handle a student who comes in and is complaining about another student bullying him?”

Job-relevant knowledge questions: The participating principals reported that as the interviews progressed, the questions became more specific in terms of data. These questions could be data-driven, covering such issues as student enrollment or school programs. The participants had to have a thorough knowledge of the school to which

they were applying for the hiring committee to consider them the right person for the job. The following are some examples of job-relevant knowledge questions:

There were categories that you know big one would be handle on instruction and the academic part of that, so you really really need to know that and have a good overall picture what's expected in that particular setting. In my case it was elementary, pre-K setting, so I needed to know instructionally what was expected to be taught and to be learned at that setting.

I remember them asking me a very interesting question which was "what do you think your job is?"

Even though there might be some different types of questions, the way that interviews were conducted among districts had a lot in common according to the participants. Their interviews, except for the ones with superintendents, were all very structured; questions were scripted ahead of time and were asked of everyone. Even the follow-up questions were structured. In contrast, interviewing with the superintendent seemed to be very conversational and less formal. One of the participants described it well:

They were definitely scripted, and they did not go off the script. The only time that was not all scripted out was when I was meeting with the superintendent by ourselves. He kind of just kept asking more and more, but the rest with the other people that were scripted. I even had the questions in front of me, so I could follow along with them.

To summarize, most of the participants encountered four different types of questions during their interviews: general background questions, behavioral questions, situational questions, and job-relevant questions. Despite having to respond to these different questions, most of the participants agreed that they liked the fact that the questions were well structured and scripted ahead of time.

Fit for the Hiring Committee

Interviews provided an opportunity for the hiring committee not only to assess whether the candidates were qualified to be a principal but also to determine if there was a certain individual who was able to lead that particular school. As the participants recalled, each school was facing its own specific issues or had particular missions to fulfill at the time they were hired. Therefore, looking for someone who would be a good fit for the community and the school seemed to be the most

important responsibility of the hiring committee. Based on the participating principals' stories, how the hiring committee defined "fit" was generally determined by what type of situations the school was facing.

One common situation was that the committee was looking for someone who was willing to come to a school that was facing difficulties, such as a decline in enrollment or high turnover rate for school principals, and they needed someone to turn the situations around. The following are two participants' stories. The first principal was hired to address decreasing enrollment, and the second principal was hired given the situation that the school had five different principals in the past 5 years:

This is a school that's small and maybe even shrinking in size, and they're nervous about having their doors shut and being forced to go with another school. And so I proposed to them, I said, "You can either hope for the best and then hire someone else who's going to do normal things, or you can hire someone who's going to bring change and become a lighthouse to area schools, so they can look at you and say, "Wow, they're doing it the right way. We want to do what they're doing." So, I think that was kind of the future that they got excited about, and they saw my vision for them and thought it might be a good fit to go that way.

I could kind of read through that one pretty quickly, and they were trying to see how long I planned on sticking around. And there'd been some turnover in that building with different principals, so I know that was something they were looking for was longevity.

A second situation was that of a very stable school where finding a principal to maintain the tradition of a good reputation seemed to be the most important consideration of the hiring committee. As two principals stated in their interviews, one believed that he was hired because the hiring committee saw his willingness to maintain the tradition of the school, while the other principal was hired because he possessed a skill set that fit the school's mission statement.

I think at [this school] they were looking for somebody that understood the great tradition of this high school and that was willing to make a commitment to help keep that going into the future.

He actually said that to me, he said I am looking for someone who has that skill set because that's part of our mission statement. You know having this diverse community and celebrating diversity so we want to make sure that we are living in our mission as fully as we can.

A third common situation was that the district was looking for someone who was innovative to bring in new vitality to a school that was already doing well. Candidates who understood the school's needs for change and were able to bring a new vision to the school were more likely to be selected. As a few participants stated:

They have some teachers that want to do some innovative things but maybe haven't had the leadership or haven't had the structure in place to do that. So, I sold myself as that kind of a change agent and that's what's getting them excited.

They knew I had experience with middle school and high school-actually, more high school up to this point in my career-and so they really wanted to know what I knew about that age and how I felt that they could best be reached and educated socially and academically. They talked about involvement and participation in extra-curricular as far as how visible would I be at those types of events and also what I could do to promote student involvement in extra-curricular and the value I had in that.

By understanding the process that each participant experienced to become a principal, the researcher found district uniqueness in every stage of the process. It was usually the school district's decision on how they wanted the process conducted and what specific profile they were searching for. Given the differences between each school district's particular needs, numerous commonalties nevertheless existed in terms of the format of the process.

Personal Reactions to the Process

After going through the process and being selected as a school principal, participants were able to comment on the process in terms of its effectiveness, fairness, and attractiveness. "Do you think the process works in terms of being able to choose the right person for the position?" "Was there anything you did not expect in the process?" These were some of the questions that the participants answered in the interview with the researcher. By answering these questions, they were able to recall some very interesting first impressions of the hiring process they experienced. Some of them found the place they wanted to work immediately after they entered the building. Some of them experienced an unusual interview process. Also, some of them were able to judge the hiring process, especially those who had the opportunity to be on the other side, that is, on a hiring committee themselves.

To study some of the participating principals' afterthoughts about the process, the following three topics will be discussed in this section: (a) eureka moment, (b) hiring process impressions and evaluation, and (c) surprises.

Eureka Moment

In the interview between the researcher and the participating principals, "fit" was mentioned many times. Every participant claimed that he or she found themselves as a good fit not only being a principal but also working well with the building and the community. Although many participants did not feel this way until they started doing the job, some of them had the feeling at a very early stage. One of the participants recalled how he felt at the time he entered the building:

When I first walked in, I liked the way it was set up. This building is so positive in what it can do and what it has done.

Besides the first impression about their future building, some participants agreed that the interview was also a good opportunity for applicants to determine whether they would mesh. It was not just the school district that was interviewing them; they were also interviewing the district. During the process of answering and asking questions, some participants became more certain that the particular school was where they wanted to work, and they were confident that they were going to be successful and make a good impact on the community. Here are some examples of how the participants determined that it would be a good fit for both sides:

I think, yeah, that was even evident in the interview that I could tell it was going to be a fun place to work, but it was also a place of high expectations, so I think that's going to be a good place to be, when your expectations for yourself are high, but you also have fun with what you're doing on a daily basis.

I always ask questions about what their vision for the future was. And that was a question for me to really see if we matched.

I am a very opinionated person, I know what I want, I know how I want to get it, and I am going to go for it, and if that's not the type of the principal you want, don't hire me. I am not somebody you know that sits and waits for somebody to ask for my opinion. I want to make sure that not only did they want me but did I want them.

Some participants might not have such a strong feeling of fit during the hiring process, but when they started the job and the longer they stayed at their position, the

stronger the feeling that they were affirmed. This fit feeling usually came from three sources according to the participating principals: (a) people with whom they worked, such as the superintendent and staff; (b) the population composition of the community, such as affluent population or high percentage of low-income families; and (c) district policy, such as instruction oriented or leadership rules. The following is one example:

I am so happy with our district that I would not consider leaving our district. The more I know about our district, the more I love it. It is a growing district, but we still have that small town feel. We have the opportunity as an administrative team to sit down with the superintendent every week, where we talk about instruction, we walk through classrooms and do those things that can't happen when you are in a district where you've got 20 elementary principals.

The discussion of whether there would be a good fit between the schools and the participating principals was mentioned several times during the interviews even though this topic was not originally designed by the researcher as part of the interview questions. No matter when they discovered the feeling of fit, it was apparent that the fit feeling accounted for a considerable portion of the principals' perspectives on the hiring process.

Hiring Process Impressions and Evaluation

Most of the participating principals had positive reviews of the hiring process they experienced and acknowledged the time and efforts that the hiring committee contributed to make the process fair and effective. The most frequently mentioned strengths of the process were (a) formalized and standardized process and (b) multiple interview groups or multi-step interview process.

Participants reflected that the process was formalized and standardized in the way the requirements were listed on the job posting, and as mentioned in the previous section about interviews, everyone was asked the same questions and even follow-up questions as well. All these features together won the participants' trust that they believed that the process they experienced worked well. One participant mentioned:

I just think maybe the whole process in itself is a strength, just because it's professional. They treat you well, and everybody is offered the same opportunity. It's not as if you go into an interview and some people are asked some questions and one candidate's not asked those same questions. It's very fair the way that it's done.

The other common strength that was mentioned by the participating principals was having great representation on the interview committee. Participants were able to talk with different groups of stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and students, during the interviews. By experiencing multiple layers of interviews, instead of just one interview with one person, the participants felt that they were supported by different people when they were hired. This fact helped them gain confidence when they started their job.

I believe so, and the reason I believe so is that there are so many people involved in the process. I think if it was just the superintendent doing one interview with the candidate and making a decision, I don't think it would have worked. I think it would be flawed. But the fact that you interview with different people, and at different stages, I think that makes it work.

I really appreciated the fact that the panel was made up of a wide representation of stakeholders, because of the fact that I felt that if I was selected out of that group, then I had the support of those different people.

One interesting fact is worth mentioning. Participants seemed to be split on their perspectives on having multi-hour interviews. Those who had experienced them felt very tired at the time, but they were still able to appreciate the importance of a multi-hour interview. They agreed that a good way to really know an applicant was to schedule the interview for the entire day, especially when combined with good interview questions and some social events, such as lunch or dinner with other applicants and the committee. Some participating principals recalled that they had to be consistent and genuine in what they talked about and how they acted to avoid giving wrong impressions. The following quotes show some examples of how the participants valued the multi-hour interview.

I think that is a great way to vet out people, because if you think about it, when I first say I went to a five-hour interview, most people are like, "Oh, uh, no..." And I'm like, hey, if you didn't really want to be an administrator, then this is not for you. So, it shows your fortitude, it shows your perseverance, meeting and talking with all those people will get you primed up for that job. I don't think in an hour they could have gotten as much in-depth analysis of who I am.

Strengths, I think with having a really long day, you get to know the person really well, especially with the social part in there when you have time for lunch.

In contrast, those who had just one very short interview and then were hired were concerned about the decision that the committee made after such short contact with

applicants, although they were very happy and grateful that they were offered the job without experiencing a lengthy process. One of the participants talked about her concerns.

For me it was nice, because I wasn't having to fret for more than an hour, but also one of the questions that I had is you know I am thankful I can get the job but how much do they really know about me in 45 minutes to an hour, especially since I am an outsider coming in.

Some of the participating principals agreed that the process was not perfect.

Complaints about the process mostly focused on (a) lack of unified application processes between different schools, (b) repetitive and lengthy application processes, and (c) the set elimination criteria for choosing next-stage applicants.

The lack of a unified application process was the complaint that was most reported by the recently hired principals, especially by those who had applied for several positions. They understood that school districts tried to tailor the process to meet each school's unique needs. However, they reported that it was frustrating to prepare different documents for different districts even though the districts were all in the same state. They wished the state had a single website with more unified application processes. As one principal stated:

It's not very homogenous. It's so scattered all over the place. There's, you know, different applications and they want different things, and some of it's online and some of it's not, and every single time you applied somewhere, it was different. Every single time you interviewed somewhere, it was different. I can't even tell you how many hours I spent writing these essays and filling out these applications and then getting my cover letters figured out for this district and then getting it sent out.

In addition to the different processes among districts, some participants complained about the redundancy of the process. Compared to the previous complaint, which was more about the format of the application process, this one was more information relevant. This complaint was mostly about applicants providing similar materials multiple times at different stages of the process. One of the participants recalled his experience as follows:

There were some application processes that were so lengthy that I felt like I was repeating things. They would ask you for a resume and cover letter, but there was this whole long, lengthy application process, but a lot of the information was just repetitive. That seems awfully redundant and frustrating at times.

The other drawback of the process was the elimination criteria that determined which (and how many) applicants advanced to the next stage. This was only mentioned by the participating principals who had the opportunity to serve on hiring committees themselves. According to these participants, the use of the elimination criteria, although useful for saving time in selecting promising candidates, might also have eliminated some good candidates from consideration. Two principals mentioned their concerns about this issue:

Weaknesses of the hiring process were first of all, as an administrator I think there are times that people don't... so there are good people out there, they are just for whatever reasons when I looked through their resumes, just didn't get picked for the interview.

I'm thinking more as somebody who hires people, because it... It's not perfect, I mean I have to make judgment calls, it's tough sometimes to say, you know, you can see somebody who has lots of experience and a resume with not a lot of experience.

Overall, the hiring processes were highly valued by the participating principals, in spite of the few concerns that were reported. The most commonly favored features of the process were fairness, standardization, and multi-layer interviews, while the complaints about the hiring process were mostly about redundancy, disunity, and the criteria used to eliminate applicants.

Surprises

When asked if there was anything that happened in the process that they did not expect, most of the participants recalled some unexpected situations that were either unusual or pleasant. Those surprises came mostly from an unusual interview process or format. The following are some examples:

I had one interview where they had what they called a meet-and-greet where they gave me a table to stand by and they put me in a common area, but it wasn't close enough to where the kids were, so people had to go out of their way to talk to me and it was kind of as the school day was getting out. And so, everybody's wanting to go home, and I was expected to stand out there for almost an hour. And it was awkward and weird and I felt so out of place and uncomfortable. So, that was beyond strange.

It was a not usual circumstance, but I am slightly surprised by just how the whole thing ended up working out. I was surprised first none of the internal candidates were interviewed in the first round, and I was surprised in the second round it was only the external candidates were interviewed. And so just that process was a little bit interesting.

Some of the participants were also surprised when other applicants were scheduled for the interview on the same day and at the same time. Some participants could see who the other applicants were when they switched interview stations; one participant even reported that the district had all the applicants sit together and have lunch.

Oh another part that [this district] does is they have three different people that were interviewing on the same day, so I would see the other interview people as I kind of going through their stations.

Maybe just one, that was the only thing that surprised me. It surprised me that they had me do the lunch with the other candidates, that I wasn't that expected.

In addition to the surprises that occurred during the process, a few of the participants were surprised that they were hired, especially those who came from other districts or had little administrative experience. Here is an example:

So once he started calling the references, I thought "oh this may be happening," and sure enough, he called and offered me, and yeah I was surprised. I didn't really have a whole lot of any experiences. Yeah I was surprised. I knew I had done well in the interview, I knew that, but you never know who else, who did what, so...

In conclusion, the participating principals' personal reactions to the process seemed to have a positive relationship to their feelings of fit. If they had positive experiences, they were sure that they wanted to work in the school, and the opposite was true as well. Their comments on the process that they experienced were mostly very positive, although some drawbacks were reported. Some negative issues were unique to certain schools, and sometimes the strengths that were reported by some of the participants were reported as weaknesses by others.

Recommendations

The fourth section of this chapter is all about recommendations to improve the process. The participating principals were asked to offer advice both to people conducting the hiring process and to people who might be interested in becoming a principal. After going through the process and being offered a principal position, participants all had constructive ideas about how to build a more applicant-friendly hiring process and how future applicants might excel in the current hiring process.

Thus, this section will be presented in the order of the following two topics: (a) possible changes to the process and (b) advice to future applicants.

Possible Changes to the Process

Participants seemed to have divergent opinions on what they would change about the hiring process that they experienced. Although a few of them were very satisfied with the process and did not think that any changes were necessary, the rest of the group made suggestions based on their own experiences. Their recommendations fell into three major areas: recruitment, selection, and the entire system.

Recruitment, according to the definition in Chapter One, usually starts when a job is posted and ends when the hiring committee is ready to examine the qualifications of the applicants. Suggestions about this stage of the hiring process focused on how to attract more qualified applicants. One method that might help school districts achieve that goal is to plan ahead of time and start the process early in the year. The participating principals thought this might improve the applicant pool in terms of quality and quantity. As one principal suggested:

I think somehow or another, making it happen earlier, because I think qualified applicants are looking very early in the year. You're going to get those strong candidates in February who are organized, thinking ahead, and ready to go.

In addition to starting earlier, participants also recommended that school districts try to increase the size of applicant pools by marketing the district or, in the case of independent schools, working with a search firm. The following quotations presented examples for each school setting.

I think it's a bigger thing of marketing our district really well so that people want to come here, and I think our superintendent now is really trying to get that done, and has hired a marketing professional to give us a good brand so that people say, "Oh, I've heard about this school district. I'd like to work there."

I think it would be really great for them to go back to work with a hiring agency for an independent school. I think then they can increase the candidate pool.

Participants agreed that there should be ways that the hiring committee could get to know the candidates better when making the final decision other than interviews and reference checks. Two principals suggested that using social media might be a good way to know somebody holistically. However, they also warned that this method

should be used cautiously to avoid unnecessary misjudgment based on the revelation of the applicants' private information. One principal discussed how social media might help the hiring committee to know applicants better:

I would like to, you know, with Google and Facebook and things like that, I would like to know more about the whole person sometimes, not just their academic side. I would get a better profile of the candidate than just what they want to tell me. I would be able to see their network of friends, and the things that they like to do, and to see that I have somebody that's interested in a variety of things. I would like to get to that information easier than having to call individuals.

The other popular recommendation that the participating principals wished the districts would use to determine which candidate should be offered the position was visits to the applicant's current school. This idea is similar to the use of social media; however, instead of trying to understand candidates' lives outside of their profession, site visits focus more on being familiar with the work that the candidates have been doing. There might be some difficulties to overcome, but participants were very optimistic that site visits could potentially yield a lot of relevant information. As one principal stated:

The only thing that they could have done, possibly, that I've heard of being done would be site visits. I suppose they could have sent people out to the other candidates' home schools, go talk to people, again, are you just going to take someone's word for it in the interview and call the people they get to choose as references, or go out and find if there's more to the story? So, that might be something I'd add, which would be-with the finalists, if you got it down to two or three finalists, to find the time to maybe do a site visit and talk to people.

In addition to the suggestions they made about specific stages of the hiring process, participants recommended changes to the entire process. Some participants, imagining themselves as superintendents, said they would start by learning about good practices in other districts. Here is an example.

I'd probably want to learn more about what do other districts do. What are some good ideas? I'd want to learn what are considered to be the best practices in the field of interviewing principals, and I'd want to find out what are other districts are doing, what's worked really well, and build the best process possible. It's definitely worth the time, I'll tell you that.

Some participating principals wanted to see the process changed so future applicants would not encounter the negative experiences that they had. Most of them would prefer a unified process within a district, and if possible, they would prefer that

the district describe the process ahead of time. This would enable applicants from other areas to make appropriate travel plans.

I think just the application process should be unified, and then tailor the interview process-however you want to interview somebody, and whatever groups you want to create to interview them, and however that process that looks and however many people you interview..., I think that's pretty well left up to the district.

If I had to change something, I would have liked to the guy who would have posted things saying "this is how the interview process will be," or if I could have got an email or phone call saying this is how we are going to end up doing it. It would have been nice if I didn't have to travel so much.

Participants made suggestions about the hiring process based on their own experiences when they were asked about things that they would change in the process. Although divergent ideas were presented, those recommendations contributed mostly to the practices in recruitment, selection, and the entire hiring system.

Advice to Future Applicants

The most common suggestions among these participants can be sorted into three main aspects: (a) knowledge about the district, (b) preparation, and (c) tips to survive the interviews.

The first and also the most common advice from the participating principals to future applicants was to make sure that they had done the research and homework on the district. Even before going into the process, applicants should find out as much information as they possibly can about the community, the school, and the particular position that they are interested in. Information, such as the school culture, the school report card, and the population, can be gathered from the district website, the state Department of Education website, media articles, et cetera. Doing so not only helps applicants determine if a particular school will be a good personal fit for, but also helps them prepare for the subsequent process, such as the interviews. Some of the participants further suggested that applicants use the collected data to tailor their responses on the application to what the district needs and even make a plan to sell themselves in the interview. The following are some examples of the advice.

Obviously you want to research the district or the school. If it's the school you're applying to, cater your answers to the strengths of that, like I said. If

it's an urban district, cater your answers to your experiences working with an urban population, and if it's highly affluent, cater your answers to that.

Number one is what I said about taking the time to do research. Find out as much as you can about that school. Talk to as many people as you can. Find out what their needs are, their strengths are, their needs are, and what they're looking for.

When talking about how to prepare for the application process, participants all agreed that the earlier the better after applicants have decided to apply. One of the participants started his preparation even before the position was posted. Participants felt that the advantage of starting early is that applicants have more time to organize the materials and have someone proofread their applications before they send them to the district. Participants noted that making sure all the materials are presented well and are updated before being uploaded was important.

Prepare. I started preparing...I was very organized, I kept absolutely everything, so I have one file on my computer that has forty different cover letters in it, and I wrote different cover letters. But I did all that back in November or December. I kept my resume updated. And so, the things that I could control, I made sure that they were very well succinct I guess to save myself some time later on. And that allowed me then okay, so there's a job posting. Now I can focus on what they want as opposed to my resume and that kind of stuff, that stuff was ready to go.

In addition to having materials well organized, participants felt that applicants needed to prepare themselves with the right attitude especially when it comes to applying for their first principal job. The participating principals suggested that applicants should persevere even though they may be facing a lot of rejections because they do not have prior administrative experience. Instead of passively waiting for a particular opening, being open-minded about all the possibilities and being willing to take some risks were strongly suggested to future applicants as well. Two principals suggested that applicants should have their attitudes ready:

Pretty much what I think: be open-minded about many different jobs. Don't wait for the one perfect job and then apply for that one. I'd look and apply for many jobs; I'd go to many job interviews, and even if you don't think it might be the right fit, go and find out.

I think it's very important to take some risks. Not everything works out, right? You know go to it, figure out how to make it great, and then go from there.

It seemed that finding resources online was very helpful in terms of preparing applicants for the situations they might face in the real interview. Almost every

participant looked for examples of interview questions online and went through the example questions either by themselves or by having mock interviews with their colleagues or spouses in preparation for the interview. One principal talked about how he prepared for the interviews:

One would be, you can go online and you can find a million examples of interview questions and, but you can find tons of interview questions, and I'd print them all out. And just go through in your head, what would you say to that one, what would you say to that one? Have those things in your head so you don't have to make things up. So that's huge, have that ready to go.

The advice to future applicants as to how they should act during an interview was the same from all participating principals. The most important thing for applicants to do is to be genuine. Applicants should show the committee who they really are instead of pretending to be the person that they think the committee would like. The consequences of doing the latter would be a bad fit for both the district and the applicant. As one principal stated:

Don't try being somebody you are not, you [have] to be yourself. You [have] to just say "here this is me" and have them decide whether or not that's somebody they want. And on the first sight of it, you need to be sure it's a job you want. You do not want to be an administrator when you don't have a good feeling, because that's your career.

In addition to being honest, participants also suggested that applicants should organize their answers to sell themselves to the committee. Future applicants should try to be personal, show their passion, and offer some personal information that might make them stand out instead of just answering the questions in a standard way. One participant mentioned the importance of weaving personal information into the interview responses:

Sell yourself, because at some time in the interview process you have to weave in who you are as a person and not just give responses to the question, if that makes any sense. So at some point, if they ask you a question about your management style, for instance, so you want to talk about your upbringing-if there's something exciting about your upbringing that's different from anybody else, that's unique, you want to weave that into your answer so that they'll remember you. So, you want to give them something that will make you stand out from everybody else, regardless of what that is, and tie that back in to the question that's been asked.

As mentioned in the previous section, it was not just the district interviewing the applicants; the applicants were also interviewing the district to determine if this

job was a good fit for them. Therefore, the final suggestion from the participating principals was that future applicants should make sure they know the nature of the job for which they are applying and make sure their needs will be met before they accept the offer. One principal stated the idea well:

I think one of the most important things is to really be sure that your main goals are met. When you are in an interview or when there are multiple options for you, it's important not to be swayed by the fact the people want you to come to that place and to take that job. I think that's very important to know that your needs are being met, and this job is helping meet those personal and professional goals that you have.

The participating principals were passing on their successful experiences to future applicants. Suggestions focusing on things to do before going into the process and during the process were provided for future applicants to excel in the hiring process.

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of the factors that influenced the participating principals' decision-making process when they decided to pursue their first principalship or another principal position. Topics then transitioned from participants' motivations to objective facts about the hiring process. Some similarities and differences in hiring processes were compared among school districts and between public and independent schools. The third section was about participants' reactions to and afterthoughts on the hiring process, including their first impressions and their evaluations of the process, and the surprises they experienced during the process. Finally the chapter closed with recommendations from the participating principals on how to build a better hiring process and what future applicants could do to make themselves stand out from the competition.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study explored the personal experiences of principals who had applied for and obtained principalships. Through interviews, participants described their experiences, their reasons for applying for a principalship, and their perspectives on the application process, and gave advice and recommendations for both administrators of hiring processes and future applicants.

The final chapter of this study will include the following sections. The first section will summarize the findings. The second section will provide analysis by comparing the major themes to those drawn from the research literature. The third section will suggest implications for future research and practices.

Summary of Findings

Participants from various levels of experience as school principals told their stories of being hired. By analyzing the interviews, the researcher chose to focus on four main topics that emerged from principals' perspectives on the hiring process: (a) deciding to pursue a principalship and searching for openings, (b) going through the process, (c) personal reactions to the process, and (d) recommendations. Following is a summary of these four topics.

Deciding to Pursue a Principalship and Searching for Openings

For those principals who were pursuing their first principal positions, personal reasons played a significant role in deciding whether and where to apply for a job. Since it was their first leap from being a teacher to being a principal, they tended to spend more time researching the job than those principals who were moving from one school to another. For the latter group of principals, the reasons for seeking another principalship were career oriented. Whether moving at will or being asked to move, their prior experiences helped them express confidence and autonomy about their new career goals. Though anticipated in the study's research questions, participants did not

rely on job descriptions when seeking a position.

Going Through the Process

Each school district's unique needs and traditions determined how application processes were designed. Despite the fact that every school might be facing different situations at the time they were hiring new principals, some commonalities in hiring processes between different school levels and school districts were found.

Commonalities could usually be found in the order of the application processes, whereas required materials, interview schedules, and the particular qualifications that the schools were looking for usually varied.

Personal Reactions to the Process

When asked to share their afterthoughts about the application process, participants reported that "fit" was the secret ingredient to satisfaction. The feelings of fit, whether occurring during the hiring process or after they actually started the job, seemed to be a major determinant of principals' satisfaction with both the process and the position itself.

Principals' comments on the hiring process itself were mostly very positive. They favored features such as standardized interviews and the opportunity to meet with multiple interview groups, both of which showed the fairness and formalization of the hiring process. The few negative issues that were mentioned included unpleasant surprises and the lack of a unified application process among districts; however, the uniqueness of each school district accounted for most of the latter inconsistencies.

Recommendations

After having successfully experienced the application process, principals were able to share their perspectives not just as applicants but also as administrators. They made suggestions to people administering the hiring process to help them create a more effective and attractive hiring system. Recommendations included changes to the current recruitment and selection practices, such as marketing the school and using social media as a supporting selection method. In addition to recommendations for the hiring system, suggestions also were given to people who might be interested

in becoming a principal. Preparation in all aspects seemed to be the key to success. Participants all agreed that the time investment in researching the school seeking a principal would eventually lead to securing a position.

Analysis

In this section, some key findings of the present study are compared and contrasted with relevant research reported in the literature. Each subsection will start with a brief description of prior research and follow with a summary of the findings of the present study. Each subsection will close with a comment to indicate whether there was agreement or disagreement between previous research and this study. Four main topics are analyzed: interview structures, steps of the hiring process, deficiencies in hiring processes, and shrinking applicant pools.

Interview Structures

Standardized and structured interviews help decision making and win applicants' trust. As mentioned in Chapter Two, previous research has shown that interviews are the most widely used method for selecting candidates (Spanneut, 2007; Baker & Spier, 1990). In addition, prior studies have shown that structured interviews tend to have greater reliability than unstructured ones; when conducted appropriately, they tend to be freer of measurement error and are therefore more likely to yield accurate selection results (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004; Taylor & Small, 2002; Rosse & Levin, 1997). In the present study, the participating principals agreed about the importance of interviews in the selection process and recognized the value of standardized processes and structured interview questions. In particular, the latter aspects helped create a sense of trust for the applicants in the process. Although participants in this study supported the conclusions of previous research regarding the accuracy and reliability of structured interviews, it is important to remember that the participants were successful applicants and, as a result, were perhaps more likely to view the interview format favorably.

Steps of the Hiring Process

Hiring processes were generally similar to previous research. Previous research

(Gilvar, 1992; Morford, 2002; Rebore, 2012; Smith, 2009; Spanneut, 2007; Webb & Norton, 2009; Whaley, 2002) reported that principal hiring procedures typically consisted of the following steps: (a) developing, reviewing, or modifying job descriptions and duties; (b) advertising and/or recruiting; (c) screening applications; (d) identifying applicants for interviews; (e) checking references and backgrounds; (f) conducting initial and final in-person interviews; and (g) selecting the successful candidate and notifying the unsuccessful candidates. In the present study, the hiring procedures in most cases were similar in outline to what previous studies suggested, although small variations were made to meet each school's particular needs. The most commonly reported difference among school districts was the number and length of interviews. Some principals participated in one interview while other principals had several interviews before they were offered a position. The length of interviews also varied from 45 minutes to a series of 1-hour interviews over 2 days. Despite these specific differences, the overall format of the hiring processes described by the participants interviewed in this study was mostly consistent with previous research findings.

Deficiencies in Hiring Processes

Deficiencies in hiring processes that were first identified a number of years ago persist even today. Previous researchers considered proper recruitment to be the most important issue and therefore recommended that vacancy announcements and job descriptions be specific and tailored to reflect the uniqueness of the particular school in order to attract applicants who were particularly qualified and interested in the position (Anderson, 1991; Mello, 2006; Rebore, 2012; Webb & Norton, 2009). Smith (2009) reported that the number of applicants did not always equal the number of quality applicants who matched the criteria. Tailored job descriptions were recommended to school districts in the hope that they would help to recruit the right people to the applicant pool before the selection process began (Pounder & Young, 1996; Smith, 2009).

The present study, however, showed a disconnect between these research recommendations and actual practice. The participating principals' experiences suggested that in most cases, school districts did not seem to pay much attention to the content of vacancy announcements and job descriptions, which were usually very general and sometimes quite vague. Moreover, according to the participating principals, school districts' use of more tailored job descriptions did not affect the principals' decisions to apply. Instead, principals tended to apply for a particular position when they felt ready and when an opening happened to be available. Interestingly, only a few of the principals reported that they considered themselves the right fit for a particular school or community based on the information provided in the vacancy announcement. When searching for opportunities, especially for their first principalship, a few principals applied for every job that was available. Overall, the findings of the present study on this issue diverged from previous research recommendations.

Shrinking Applicant Pools

Schools nationally have reported concerns about shrinking pools of principal applicants because of the increasing demands of the job (Farr, 2004; Pounder & Young, 1996; Whitaker, K. S., 2003). However, whether applicant pools are shrinking is an open question according to this study. The principals who participated in this study recalled that hiring in some areas of the nation seemed to be very competitive, with at least 100 other candidates applying for each position. This suggests that a shrinking applicant pool may not be a nationwide issue; at the very least, it suggests that it was not an issue in those districts where principal hiring was described as very competitive. Although the present study did not specifically address the issue in detail, it seems likely that applicant pool sizes will depend on a district's location.

Implications for Future Research

Viewing hiring processes from principals' perspectives continues the discussion about recruitment and selection. Their perspectives provide valuable information to apply to future hiring research. This section suggests areas for future research, which

include recruiting more female principals, understanding the concept of fit, exploring reasons and motivations for principals who choose to remain or leave positions, and extending the research parameters to include regions that were not covered by the present study.

Female Principals' Perspectives

Women, unfortunately, were under-represented in this study. Participants were predominantly male principals, especially at the high school level. Future studies may try to achieve gender balance by recruiting more female principals. Many topics, such as motivations to become a principal and personal reactions to the process, can then be compared based on gender differences. Some additional issues related to gender may be addressed and resolved. For example, elementary school principals are predominantly women, whereas high school principals are usually men. Whether this is because more men apply for high school principalships and more women apply for elementary school principalships, or whether the hiring processes at these schools tend to select for men and women respectively, is a topic that could be addressed in a gender-balanced study with equal numbers of male and female participants.

Feelings of "Fit"

Given that "fit" seemed to a large extent to account for principals' satisfaction with the hiring process and their job, future research may focus on principals' definitions of fit, its effect on the hiring process, and its effect on principals' performance after they are hired.

In addition to the feeling of fit, principals also mentioned their prior failed job application experiences. Principals speculated that they did not get job offers if they were not a good match with the school's needs. They reported feeling that they were not a good fit during the interviewing process, and therefore they were not surprised that they were not offered the job. Participants reported accepting the first offer they received, and no one reported that they had turned down a job offer because they thought they would not be a good fit with that particular school. Future research should examine this issue to determine if applicants eliminated themselves during the

process because they did not feel they fit, or if the hiring committee also agreed that those who were not selected would not be a good fit. This would involve interviewing not only applicants but also hiring committees. Research that examines principals' and hiring committees' perspectives on fit would help clarify this complex but important concept.

Motivations and Reasons to Stay or to Seek a New

Position

Principals could be broadly separated into two groups: one group who continued to seek positions in different schools every few years and another group who never considered leaving the school at which they were first hired. Future studies may look for motivations and reasons that cause principals to make frequent moves among schools or to stay at one particular school until retirement. Moreover, the respective advantages and disadvantages of these two actions for students and schools are worth examination. Consideration of these issues may contribute to retention of a larger number of principals in one position for longer periods of time.

Hiring Practices in Other Regions

Data collected in this study were primarily from principals in small and medium size school districts and in the Midwestern states of the United States. However, it is possible that every school district and state has its own method to conduct principal hiring, and inevitably principals in different areas of the nation might experience processes unique to the area. Therefore, future research should focus on the same issues as those examined in the present study but instead interview principals from different regions (e.g., coastal states and large urban school districts) to identify similarities and differences in hiring practices.

Implications for Practice

Implications for practice to improve the quality of hiring are intended for policy makers, school districts, and educational leadership training programs. In other words, the ultimate goal is that school districts will be able to recruit more quality applicants by having an attractive and effective process and selecting the best candidate for a

particular principal position. The following recommendations focus on three areas: (a) increasing applicant pools, (b) building a universal application process, and (c) developing alternative selection methods.

Increasing Applicant Pools

As indicated in the literature, only a pool of high quality applicants can increase the possibility that hiring committees will select the best candidates for specific positions (Smith, 2009). To attract more highly qualified applicants, creating a tailored vacancy posting and job description is very important based on researchers' suggestions (Rebore, 2012; Webb & Norton, 2009). Additional strategies that school districts can use to increase their applicant pools are marketing the district and working with search firms. When marketing themselves, school districts can make themselves attractive to potential applicants by showing them the benefits of working for the district. Given that community attractiveness is one consideration when an applicant determines whether to apply for a principalship, it is important for a school district to give an attractive portrayal of what the schools and surrounding community have to offer an applicant (Hooker, 2000; Smith, 2009). Districts also can work with search firms. When the school's needs are well communicated, the search firm can then recommend quality candidates.

Building a Universal Application Process

Principals, especially those who were in their first principal positions, favored a unified application process. However, it could be difficult to implement a statewide process when school districts want to specify their districts' unique qualities. Possible ways that policy makers may consider for making the application process universal within a state are as follows:

1. Set up a state-based online application system for applicants to upload requested materials (e.g., resumes, philosophy of education, and recommendation letters). This is essential for a unified application process to be successful.

2. Where possible, set a deadline for schools and school districts to report the vacancies for the next academic year to the State Department of Education. The Department can then announce the job postings along with tailored job descriptions on their websites.

School districts will still be responsible for conducting their own hiring practices. The major difference of the proposed scheme will be that the most repetitive parts of the process (e.g., filling out the application forms and uploading requested materials) will be minimized.

The above suggestions constitute only broad ideas for building a unified application process within a state; they are based on recommendations made by principals interviewed in this study and provide a starting point for further development by policy makers.

Developing Alternative Selection Methods

Although interviews are commonly used as a selection method and are well accepted by interviewees, interviews provide limited information about applicants. Principals suggested that hiring committees look for additional selection methods that could be used in conjunction with interviews. Perhaps surprisingly, a suggestion made by a number of participants was for hiring committees to utilize social media (e.g., Facebook) as part of the background check to discover how people live outside of their academic lives. A second suggestion was for hiring committees to visit final candidates at their current schools to see how they work with people. Using alternative or supplemental selection methods will give hiring committees more information and help them better understand candidates as a whole and thereby choose candidates who best fit the position.

Conclusion

Understanding principals' experiences during the application process has potential significance for policy makers, school districts, and educational agencies for developing more effective hiring practices.

Policymakers, school districts, and educational administration training programs can gain better insight into factors affecting recruitment, selection, and even retention of school principals. As research provides more information, future principals will be able to understand what expectations and challenges they may face during the hiring process and when they start their careers. This study will allow policy makers to identify patterns in how principals' perspectives affect their employment.

APPENDIX A
CONSENT LETTER

EMAIL SUBJECT LINE: Research study about principal hiring practices

Date

Dear [NAME],

Thank you for your interest in our research project “Principal hiring practices: Stories the principals tell.” The purpose of this research study is to investigate incumbent school principals’ perceptions about current recruitment and selection processes used to identify and employ principals. The study will particularly focus on principals’ personal experiences and the feedback they provide about the employment procedures related to the process of being hired for the principalship.

We are inviting you to participate in this research study because you are currently a school principal. Approximately 20 people will take part in this study at the University of Iowa.

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last for approximately one hour and will not be longer than one and a half hours. We will ask you to complete a semi-structured interview with questions from six categories: position awareness, deciding to apply and applying, being selected for interviews, being offered the position, accepting the position, and closing questions. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and limit the information provided on any topic. The interview will be recorded by a digital voice recorder.

In addition to answering the interview questions, you may also provide any relevant documents that will help complete your answers. The interview will be scheduled and conducted at your school building or on Skype at a mutually convenient time.

To help protect your confidentiality, we will identify your interview responses and audio recordings with a number and not your name. We will not keep a link between the study number and your identifying information. We will remove all identifying information when making a transcript of your interview and replace the names of persons, groups, or locations with a pseudonym. All study materials including field notes, audio recordings, and interview transcriptions will be transformed into computer files that will be password protected. All recordings and interview transcripts will be destroyed when the research is completed. If we write a report about this study we will do so in such a way that you cannot be identified.

There are no known risks posed by participating in this study, and you will not benefit personally. However, we hope that others may benefit in the future from what we learn as a result of this study.

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you otherwise qualify.

If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact: Yu-Hsin Lin at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or my advisor, Dr. Carolyn Wanat, at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the Human Subjects Office, 105 Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, 600 Newton Rd., The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242-1098, (319) 335-6564, or e-mail irb@uiowa.edu. To offer input about your experiences as a research subject or to speak to someone other than the research staff, call the Human Subjects Office at the number above.

If you consent to participate in the study, please send an email to me at yu-hsin-lin@uiowa.edu with your agreement and your preferred method of communication. I will contact you to schedule a time for the interview.

If you do not wish to participate in this study, thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Yu-Hsin Lin
Principal Investigator
Educational Policy and Leadership Studies
College of Education
The University of Iowa

APPENDIX B
PRIMARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been a school administrator?

Position awareness:

2. How did you learn of this job opportunity?

Deciding to apply and applying:

3. What made you decide to apply for this job?

Most people have no idea what it's like when you apply for a principalship.

4. Could you describe the process so a novice person like me could understand the process (the way you experienced)?

Being selected for interviews:

5. What was the next step once you submitted your application?

6. Can you tell me some of your interview answers?

7. How well do you think the interview questions worked in terms of being able to choose the right person for the position? (In what way? Through what way?)

Being offered the position:

8. Do you believe you were hired for what you are actually doing on the job?

Accepting the position:

9. Did you have a chance to get your questions answered?

Closing questions:

10. Overall, how would you evaluate the hiring process?

11. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

12. Are there any questions that I didn't ask, and you think I should have asked you?

13. Is there anything you'd like to ask me about?

Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and to share your stories with me. What we are going to talk about today is your feelings and thoughts about principal recruitment and selection. I would like to ask you some questions about the processes you experienced as an applicant while being recruited and selected as a principal on your current campus. May we run the recorder? Please feel free to turn it off anytime if you are saying something you don't want to be recorded. [Invite the interviewees to take notes and let them control the recorder.] The recording will be later transcribed, and it will not be heard by anyone other than me and a transcriptionist.

Before we start, do you have any questions? [Answer any questions and test the recording equipment before the interview begins.] Thank you again for making time for this research in the middle of your very busy schedule. First of all,

1. How long have you been a school administrator?
 - a. Where did you have those jobs?
 - b. What were your job titles?
 - c. How long have you been a principal on current campus?

Let's focus on the hiring process that you have been through.

Position awareness:

2. How did you learn of this job opportunity?
 - searched on the internet
 - a friend told me
 - colleagues recommended
 - others

Deciding to apply and applying:

3. What made you decide to apply for this job?
 - a. Was there anything about the recruitment and selection process that encouraged you to apply for this job?
 - b. Did you know any information about this school district prior to your application?
 - c. Have the actual duties of the job matched what the job posting described?
 - d. What made you think it was a desirable job?
 - e. Did the job turn out to be what it was as you were applying for?

Most people have no idea what it's like when you apply for a principalship.

4. Could you describe the process so a novice person like me could understand the process (the way you experienced)?
 - a. What steps did you actually go through?
 - b. Is there a timeline for applying/ interviewing?
 - c. How long did the entire process take?
 - d. Did you know in advance how long the hiring process would take? When did you find out?

Being selected for interviews:

5. What was the next step after you submitted your application?
 - a. What do you think they were really looking for that you could demonstrate?
 - b. How do you think you were selected for an interview?
6. Can you tell me some of your interview answers?
 - a. What did you think the questions would be?
 - b. Did they give you interview questions/guide beforehand?
 - c. Were the questions you were asked structured or did it sound as if the questions were asked randomly by the person asking them?

7. How well do you think the interview questions worked in terms of being able to choose the right person for the position? (In what way? Through what way?)
 - a. How did the interview function?
 - b. Do you remember anything specific about your own interview?
 - c. How did you think the interview questions aligned with the job descriptions?
 - d. How did you think the interview questions helped you show what you can do that advanced yourself? Can you give an example?
 - e. Did you know who the interviewers were (superintendents, principals, teachers)?
 - f. Do you think you brought anything valuable to the interview that was not listed in the job description?

Being offered the position:

8. Do you believe you were hired for what you are actually doing on the job?
 - a. What did you not expect?
 - b. Why do you think they offered you the job?
 - c. Do you believe you were hired for what you are actually doing on the job?
 - d. How has your understanding of what the job is changed since the interview?
 - e. Are your qualifications well aligned with the job?

Accepting the position:

9. Did you have a chance to get your questions answered?
 - a. Did you get a better understanding of what the job was?
 - b. Were you able to get a better understanding of your fit with the job and the school district?

Closing questions:

10. Overall, how would you evaluate the hiring process?

- a. If you could change anything in the hiring process, what would it be?
- b. Can you give any feedback with regard to how the district's hiring process was for a candidate?
- c. Are there any parts of the current hiring process that you think would prevent your district's schools from attracting qualified applicants to the profession?
- d. If you could change anything in the hiring process, what would it be?
- e. What are some strengths and weakness of the current hiring practices?
- f. What recommendations would you make?
- g. What policies would you like to have seen regarding the hiring/interviewing process?

11. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

12. Are there any questions that I didn't ask, and you think I should have asked you?

13. Is there anything you'd like to ask me about?

Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time.

APPENDIX D
TERM PHRASES

Table D1. Term Phrases

<p>A apply applicant pool application (form) attracting accommodation assessment center assistant principal</p>	<p>N</p>
<p>B background investigation benefits</p>	<p>O on-the-job training (OJT) organizational culture overtime pay</p>
<p>C candidate career certification communication skill compensation competency</p>	<p>P pay grades pay structure performance evaluation personnel selection planning preparation program primary duty principal problem solving</p>
<p>D decision making demonstration discrimination district policy manual district websites</p>	<p>Q qualifications qualified applicants</p>
<p>E employee employee referrals employer employment external recruitment</p>	<p>R recruiting effectiveness recruiting advertising/methods recruitment referrals resumes retention role plays</p>
<p>F feedback final job offer and acceptance fit</p>	<p>S school district school board screening candidates selection site-based management staffing strategic planning student achievement superintendent</p>

Table D1 (cont)

G gender discrimination	T teacher Title VII of Civil Rights Act training transfer turnover (rate)
H human resource(s) halo effect	U
I incentives increased job responsibilities initial screening in-service training internal recruitment interpersonal skills interview	V
J job descriptions job posting	W wages
K knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes (KSAs) knowledge-based pay	X
L leadership location pay differentials	Y
M match mentoring motivation	Z

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