Principal Selection: A National Study of Selection Criteria and Procedures

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Abstract

Despite empirical evidence correlating the role of the principal with student achievement, researchers have seldom scrutinized principal selection methods over the past 60 years. This mixed methods study investigated the processes by which school principals are selected. A national sample of top-level school district administrators was used to investigate their practices when selecting principals. Results of this study indicated top-level school district administrators are inclined to select principals who possess four attributes: communication skills, student-centered orientation, people skills, and curriculum and instruction knowledge. Top-level school district administrators attempt to identify these attributes primarily through subjective methods. However, if student achievement is a primary objective of K-12 education, the methods of selecting school principals should be commensurate with that objective.

Key Words

principal selection, administrator selection, student achievement, human resources

Over 60 years ago Greene (1954) believed principal selection would improve in the future as the role of the principal expanded bringing new and improved methods of selection. Subsequently, researchers have reported little to no change in principal selection methods since the 1950s (e.g., Flesher, 1956; McIntyre, 1974; Palmer, 2014; Wendell & Breed, 1988).

With public schools demonstrating an inclination toward status quo processes and cultures (Frias, 2014) and empirical evidence that a principal has an effect on student achievement, researchers have questioned why many school districts still rely on methods that are unsystematic.

As stated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (1971) "Much is known about the effective procedures that may be followed by a school district embarking upon a course of action designed to aid in the selection of a principal. Unfortunately, too frequently, little of what is known is put to use" (p. 22).

The focus of this mixed methods study was to investigate how top-level district administrators select principals and, more specifically, to answer the research question: Which selection criteria and procedures are used to evaluate school principal candidates during selection?

The research question was developed based on a review of principal selection research spanning over 60 years. While results of this study indicated top-level school administrators use several selection criteria that may be helpful in selecting school principals, the primary procedures used to select school principals are the least predictive and least reliable of methods available to assess candidates during selection processes.

Top-level school district administrators should review, and possibly change principal selection processes within their districts to ensure the most capable leaders are hired, as these principals will certainly have an impact on student achievement.

Review of Literature
The principalship and student achievement
Since the 1970s, education researchers have sought to determine if a correlation exits between the principal and school success and student achievement.

Despite the complexity of researching antecedents and consequents of student achievement (Heck, 1992), researchers have provided empirical evidence that school leadership has an effect on student achievement (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Gullatt & Lofton, 1996; Hallinger & Heck 1996; Heck, 1992; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Gullatt and Lofton (1996) found a principal's ability to govern, collaborate, and organize instruction was critical to student achievement.

A study by Waters et al. (2004) suggested that an increase in the ability of school leadership directly translated to empirical student achievement gains within schools. Conversely, they also reported a "differential impact" where leadership shortcomings translated to missed student achievement gains.

The role of the principal is a critical component of student achievement; therefore, the selection criteria and assessment methods used to select principals is a salient issue in the student achievement discussion.

Selection criteria, then and now
The purpose of selection criteria has been described both in early and more recent

principal selection literature as a function to differentiate candidates (e.g., The American Association of School Administrators, 1967; Kwan & Walker, 2009).

The American Association of School Administrators (1967) provided a strongly worded statement regarding the use of criteria in separating "outstanding" candidates from "incompetent" and "ordinary" ones (p. 34). The criteria purportedly used to assess principal candidates have changed dramatically over time and appear to focus more on educational leadership and less on ascriptive characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender).

Since the 1950s, selection criteria have ranged from gender, age, race, religion, marital status, and trivial personal habits to quantifiable attributes that affect student achievement (e.g., Waters et al., 2004).

In recent years, the ability to build relationships and leadership were among the top traits sought in school principals (Alkire, 1995; Palmer, 2014). Rammer (2007) studied principal selection in Wisconsin and found superintendents believed the 21 leadership responsibilities developed by Waters et al. (2004) were important for assessing candidates. Despite the importance of selection criteria to select principals (Cornett, 1983), Parkay and Armstrong (1987) believed districts ignore criteria in the principal selection process.

"Fit"
The term "fit" as a principal selection criterion appears to have been first used by Baltzell and Dentler (1983), although Kahl (1980) described the same phenomena as "local tailoring" a few years earlier. Baltzell and Dentler (1983) defined "fit" as "interpersonal perceptions of a candidate's physical presence, projection of a certain self-confidence and assertiveness, and

embodiment of community values and methods of operation" (p.7).

The use of "fit" appears to have endured throughout principal selection literature as it has been mentioned numerous times (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Baron, 1990; Blackmore, Thomson, & Barty, 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Grummell, Devine, & Lynch, 2009; Kwan & Walker, 2009; Palmer 2014; Walker & Kwan, 2011). The use of "fit" by principal selection researchers often invoked the proliferation of homosocial reproduction in school districts (Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Grummell et al., 2009); however, some researchers have deemed "fit" as a logical necessity (Baron, 1990; Kahl, 1980).

Selection procedures
Interviews are the most commonly used method within the principal selection process (Anderson, 1991; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kwan, 2012; Palmer, 2014; Rammer, 2007; Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Wendel & Breed, 1988). However, the shortcomings of interviews within principal selection are well known (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Hogan & Zenke, 1986; Kwan & Walker, 2009; The American Association of School Administrators, 1967).

According to Levine and Flory (1975), interviews serve the purpose of allowing selectors to gather and interpret relevant information from candidates. Yet, despite their ubiquity, interviews have minimal predictability of success and validity (Hogan & Zenke, 1986), even when highly structured (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013). Baltzell and Dentler (1983) concluded the majority of interview questions they encountered throughout their study were unanswerable in terms of providing any type of

candidate appraisal. Furthermore, in research conducted by Rammer (2007) regarding 21 leadership responsibilities, superintendents had almost no specific procedures for eliciting information about any of the 21 leadership responsibilities they felt were important to consider when selecting principals.

Decisions and merit
Selection decisions are a source of consternation for researchers as they have found the "best" candidate often is not selected. Baltzell and Dentler (1983) reviewed the hiring practices of numerous school districts during their study and found selectors frequently disregarded the most-qualified candidate due to spurious reasons.

Blackmore et al., (2006) and Gronn and Lacey (2006) reported that merit within principal selection had been minimized in favor of reproducing a prototypical administrator who would maintain the status quo. In addition, Palmer (2014) reported relationships between selectors and candidates, "in-house" hiring, gender, and "fit" are factors that often override merit in selection. However, Baltzell and Dentler (1983) and Palmer (2014) also found evidence of merit-based hiring and exemplary practices in their studies.

Methodology
A mixed method design was used to investigate criteria and procedures used by top-level school district administrators to select school principals. Mixed method studies strengthen research by using both qualitative and quantitative methods in lieu of either method separately (Creswell, 2009).

A mixed method approach was used to triangulate the level of importance top-level school administrators placed on specific procedures used to select school principals.

Data analysis
Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data analysis was done using coding techniques associated with constant comparative method.

Two coders analyzed the qualitative data and, by comparing results at several different intervals during data analysis, an inter-coder reliability of at least .80 was established.

According to Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007), the use of multiple coders allows reliability of the data to be tested. Furthermore Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) assert the use of multiple coders is an essential component of establishing validity in qualitative studies.

Participants
The criterion for selection of participants was to be either a superintendent or a school district human resource manager. State education school directories along with county and district school websites across the Unites States were used to obtain 12,229 superintendent email addresses that included superintendents from each of the 50 states.

E-mail addresses were incorporated into a spreadsheet, assigned a unique numerical value and selected for this study using a random number generator. Superintendents were asked to forward the survey to their chief human resource officer if they were not able to complete the survey. The survey was sent to 4,031 participants with 114 surveys being returned for a 2.8% response rate. Participant demographic data are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics by Percentage of the Sample (n=114)

Variables	Percentages	Variables	Percentages
Position		Age range	
Superintendent	79.8	55 years and older	48.2
H.R. Asst. Supt.	3.5	46-54 years	36.0
H.R. Director	1.8	35-45 years	15.8
Other	14.9	< 35 years	0.0
Gender		Years as top-level administrator	
Male	68.4	1-5	32.9
Female	31.6	6-10	23.5
Race-ethnicity		11-15	23.5
Caucasian	93.0	16-20	6.0
African-American	3.5	21 or more	14.1
Hispanic	3.5		
Other	0.0		
Highest degree			
Doctorate	45.6		
Master's	54.4		

Instrument

The researcher, in conjunction with an expert panel consisting of two top-level district administrators having doctoral degrees and familiarity with principal selection, developed the instrument used in this study.

The instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by another panel consisting of three top-level district administrators and two university professors of education familiar with human resource practices.

Revisions were made based upon feedback from the review panel. The instrument consisted of one checklist question, four open-ended response questions, and 13 Likert-scale questions. Participants were asked Likert-scale questions such as "How important is a candidate's résumé in making a hiring decision for principal," and open-ended questions such as "How do you define educational leadership as an attribute you look for in a school principal?"

Results
Selection criteria and procedures
Participants listed nearly 150 desired attributes for school principals. The most common attributes were communicator (56 responses), student-centered (40 responses), people skills (34 responses), curriculum and instruction knowledge (32 responses), and integrity (22 responses). The top 12 responses are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Attributes top-level school district administrators seek in school principals. This figure illustrates the top 12 attributes study participants sought in school principals during selection.
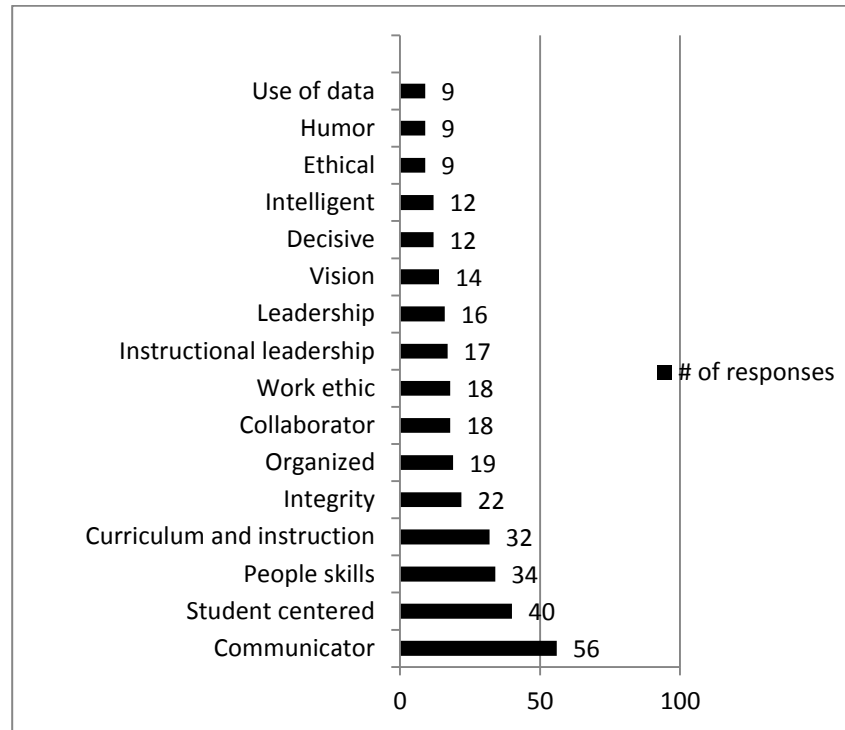
Participants chose procedure(s) they use to select school principals from a checklist that included nine of the most common procedures noted in the literature. Results of the procedures participants use to select principals are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Procedures top-level school district administrators use to select school principals. This figure illustrates how many participants indicated they used each respective method listed.
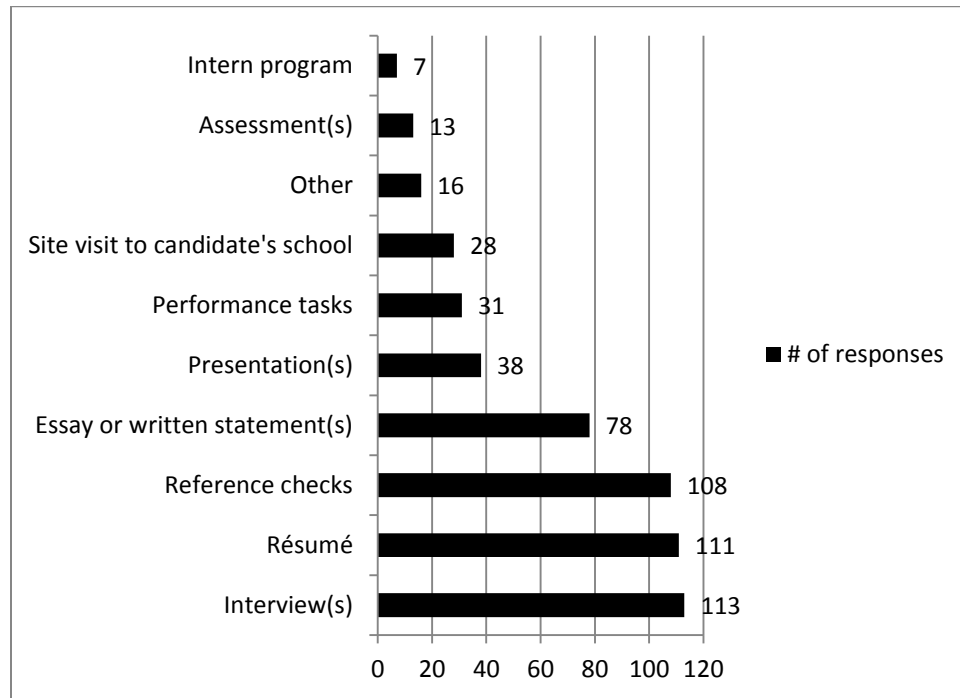
An open-ended response question following the procedure survey item allowed participants to describe any other procedure(s) they use that were not on the checklist. Most of the participants indicated they used interviews (113, 98.3%), résumés (111, 96.5%), and reference checks (108, 93.9%) to select school principals.

The use of an essay or written statement was noted by a large number of participants (78, 67.8%). Participants noted 18 other procedures used to select principals such as meetings with stakeholders, site visits, one-on-one conversations, and the use of the Gallup Principal Insight Assessment.

Within the survey, participants were also asked to indicate on a four-point Likert-scale the importance of seven of the nine most commonly used procedures to select principals. Most participants indicated interviews (111, 97.3%) and reference checks (108, 94.7%) were important or very important procedures.

Reviewing résumés (82, 71.9%) and the use of written statements (79, 69.2%) were seen as important or very important by a large number of participants. Participants viewed performance tasks, written assessments, and presentations as less important. Results for Likert-scale procedure survey items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Responses to Procedure Survey Items by Percentage (n=114)

Survey Item Topic	n	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Interview	114	81	30	3	0
Reference checks	114	84	24	6	0
Résumé	114	43	39	31	1
Written statements	114	33	46	27	8
Performance tasks	114	30	34	24	26
Assessments	114	19	36	34	25
Presentations	114	11	27	37	39

Fairness within principal selection

Participants answered several wide-ranging questions on a four-point Likert-scale regarding their selection processes. Few participants (26, 23.0%) believed it was important or very important to hire principals from within their districts.

Over one-third of participants (43, 37.7%) indicated they selected principals from outside of district often or very often.

Most participants (109, 95.6%) indicated they were likely or very likely to select the best candidate if the candidate was from a district other than their own. Most of the participants (108, 94.7%) described their overall hiring process for selecting principals as fair or very fair.

Less than one-third of participants (36, 31.6%) described their district-wide administrative teams as having a general prototype. Finally, most of the participants (109, 95.6%) described "fit" as important or very important when making a hiring decision a principal vacancy.

Definitions of educational leadership

Participants described 51 different aspects of education leadership within their definitions. The most reported aspects of educational leadership were curriculum and instruction knowledge (23 responses), having the ability to motivate others (19 responses), and a student-centered focus (17 responses).

Figure 3 depicts the 11 most common aspects that define educational leadership according to participants of this study.

Figure 3. Aspects of educational leadership.
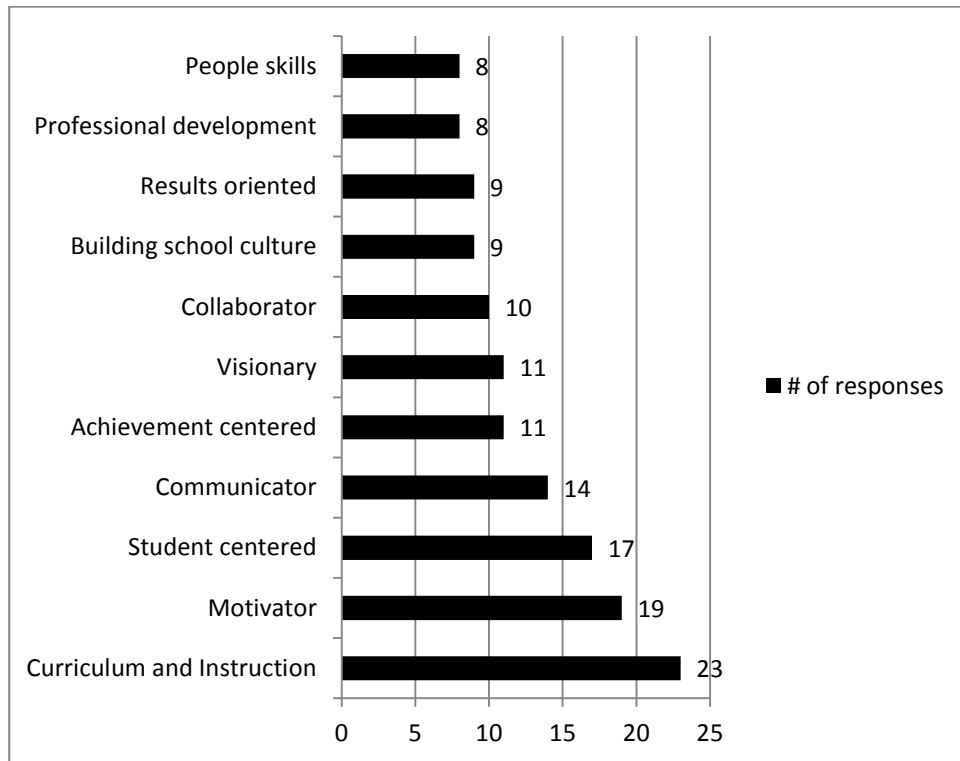
Innovative selection practices

In one open-ended question, participants were asked to describe any processes they considered to be innovative when selecting principals. Forty-six participants described procedures they believed to be innovative, and some of these responses included several different procedures. Sixty participants did not respond to the question, and five participants indicated their district did not use innovative procedures.

The most common innovative procedures noted were performance tasks (13 responses), interviews with stakeholders (8 responses), and site visits (4 responses). The participants also provided examples of performance tasks, which included analyzing data and reporting findings or strategies to a mock panel, conducting a mock teacher evaluation and reporting the results to a mock panel, and preparing and delivering a professional development activity to a small group. Some participants mentioned interviews with stakeholders and included panels comprised of students, parents, community members, and teachers.

Site visits were mentioned by several participants and included observing the candidate at their current site, or at the school site where they were applying for the position, and engaging in a range of activities such as meetings, evaluations, or question and answer sessions with stakeholders.

One other practice a participant described as innovative was using Google to find additional information regarding the candidate.

Conclusions
Which principal selection criteria are important?
Selection criteria top-level school district administrators seek in school principals include attributes that are important for a school principal to possess (e.g., communicator, student- centered, curriculum and instruction expertise).

The large number of attributes noted by participants demonstrates school districts' diversity of needs and the complexity of the principalship, as the position requires many attributes to be successful. One attribute participants seldom mentioned was the ability to raise student achievement. However, three participants specifically mentioned student achievement in the corresponding survey attribute item.

Also, raising student achievement was mentioned 11 times within the survey item for defining educational leadership. Whether or not school districts specifically seek candidates that can raise or sustain student achievement requires further study.

Principal candidates that may possess the top 12 attributes found in this study (i.e., communicator, student-centered, people skills, curriculum and instruction expertise, and integrity, etc.), along with an ability to raise or sustain student achievement, could be excellent school principals.

However, two obstacles may diminish the chances of these attributes being identifiable in a particular principal candidate: (a) the candidate's inability to demonstrate the attributes and (b) the school districts' inability to objectively assess for the attributes.

Subjective and unreliable methods
The procedures participants used to select school principals should be of concern not only to top-level school district administrators but also to the public at large. Despite school principals' empirical and anecdotal importance to a school's success, school districts appear to persist in the use of the least reliable and least predictive methods to select school principals.

Top-level school district administrators considered interviews, reference checks, and résumés as the most important principal selection procedures in use. Interviews are especially well known within principal selection literature to have major shortcomings (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Hogan & Zenke, 1986; Kwan & Walker, 2009). Even if an interview is highly structured, this minimally increases the reliability (Hogan & Zenke, 1986).

The American Association of School Administrators (1967) considered reading candidate horoscopes to be as valid and reliable as reviewing candidates' submitted materials (e.g., reviewing resumes and recommendation letters). Using subjective methods creates a reliance on intuition as the primary assessment for evaluating principal candidates.

The use of selector intuition in the hiring procedure is extensively noted within principal selection literature (e.g., Gronn & Lacey 2006; Morgan, Hall, & Mackay, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Rammer, 2007; Wendell & Breed, 1988). With student achievement at stake, the use of sixth sense assessments should be abated and more objective procedures implemented.

Objective and reliable methods

Assessments, when developed, used, and interpreted appropriately, result in high levels of objectivity and reliability, especially when designed with psychometric rigor.

Organizations have used assessments when making hiring selections since World War I. Acceptance of assessments for hiring in business organizations grew during the 1940s and 1950s, becoming widespread in the 1970s (Guest & Meric, 1989).

That school districts have not adopted assessments in the principal selection processes is curious considering the need for greater objectivity and reliability.

This finding is especially curious considering assessments were used to select principals during the 1950s (Greene, 1954) and were becoming more popular in the late 1960's (The American Association of School Administrators, 1967).

However, the finding that participants in this study reported at least some use of assessment is cautiously promising, although the psychometric rigor of these assessments is unknown.

The documented use of performance tasks within principal selection spans many decades. While a performance task can be as subjective as other processes (e.g., interviewing and reference checks), school districts could develop objective performance tasks for use in principal selection to increase the rigor of their selection processes.

The use of assessments and performance tasks by top-level school district administrators to select school principals requires further study.

Merit-based selection

Merit-based selection within principal selection research has been noted as an important issue since the 1950s. Results of this study indicate that most participants believed their processes are fair or very fair.

Only a small percentage of participants indicated their selection processes are somewhat fair, a surprising admission from top-level school administrators. Selectors' perceptions that their processes are fair or that they hire based on merit are not substantiated by principal selection studies that examined the principal candidates' perceptions (e.g., Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer, 2014). Palmer (2014) posited that research on selectors' perceptions tend to paint selection as fairer than research soliciting the perceptions of candidates, even when soliciting the perceptions of current school principals.

Another interesting finding in this study was that only a small number of participants indicated it was important to select principals from within their districts, and only a small number indicated a general prototype of administrator throughout their districts. Yet, almost all participants described "fit" as an important attribute in selection.

These perspectives appear to be contradictory, as "fit" typically describes congruence between candidates and selectors. Results of this study raise more questions regarding the use of merit-based principal selection practices. Whether or not principal selection is a merit-based process warrants further study.

Educational leadership defined

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) sought to determine how top-level school district administrators defined *educational leadership* in a national

study; however, a specific definition was not found. Participants in Baltzell and Dentler 's (1983) research defined *educational leadership* as a term that included several characteristics: curriculum and instruction knowledge, motivator, student-centered, communicator, achievement-centered, having and carrying out a vision, collaborator, able to build school culture, results oriented, professional development expertise, and people skills.

Participants in the current study also noted the same attributes in one of the survey items. These attributes may help in identifying what makes a principal successful, thereby contributing to a definition *educational leadership* and helping school districts to narrow their selection criteria.

Also, objective procedures could then be designed to evaluate these criteria. Aligning procedures with objective evaluation of desired selection criteria to improve principal selection should be a high priority for top-level school district administrators.

Experimenting with objective methods
Ash et al. (2013) thought one obstacle to implementing research-based practices in principal selection was the variation of contexts. However, this view of principal selection is problematic, as it diminishes the potential for change.

In 2007, Rammer made a long overdue plea for school districts to reform principal selection in ways that were similar to recommendations made by other researchers over the last 30 years (e.g., Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer, 2014). Results of the current study indicating school districts rely on subjective principal selection practices are consistent with the findings of other research

investigating principal selection (e.g., Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer, 2014).

Experimentation might be the only way to improve school districts' principal selection processes, as districts may be entrenched in subjective hiring practices.

The most common innovative practices noted by participants in this study are promising for the future of principal selection, although, these practices must be empirically evaluated. Australian researchers, Wildy, Pepper, and Guanzhong (2011), developed a performance task that incorporated fairness, and had good construct validity and robust reliability.

Several performance-based tasks involving "real-world" scenarios were used to assess candidates. Rigorous scoring procedures were developed to ensure fairness, and scorers had to undergo bias reduction training and follow strict procedures during the process. The Wildy et al. (2011) performance task appears to be one of the only empirically tested methods in principal selection literature over the last several decades.

School districts and universities should consider collaborating to design objective methods and assessments, as university faculty would likely possess the knowledge and expertise to develop assessments with psychometric rigor (The American Association of School Administrators, 1967).

While some school districts have been found to have exemplary practices in principal selection (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Palmer, 2014), this study and the literature indicate subjective practices prevail (Palmer, 2014; Rammer, 2007). If principals are vital for school success and student achievement as

researchers have reported, the methods used to select school principals must be improved. School districts should judiciously work to develop objective methods for principal selection in order to better accomplish the primary purpose of K-12 education, student achievement.

Author Biography

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