

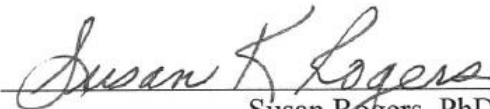
**An Examination of District Leaders' Practices and Processes for Hiring Elementary
Principals**

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Abstract

Choosing an effective school principal is one of the most significant decisions a superintendent or school board can make, as new leadership can propel a district forward in meeting its goals (Elmore & Burney, 2000). This qualitative study was designed to explore the qualities, characteristics, qualifications, and experiences, as well as the skills and competencies that district-level leaders seek in elementary principals. Also examined in this study were other factors influencing hiring decisions for elementary principals and the processes employed in the hiring of elementary school principals. The researcher interviewed 11 district-level leaders. Superintendents who participated in the study were from districts across Kansas, including three participants from large-sized school districts, four participants from medium-sized school districts, two participants from small-sized school districts, and one participant from a very small school district. Three key findings from the interviews highlight a predominant emphasis on sought-after attributes in elementary principal candidates. Notably, instructional leadership and the cultivation of relationships, with a particular emphasis on effective interpersonal skills, especially in communication, emerged as central themes. Additionally, there is a noticeable shift toward placing an importance on social-emotional learning and behavioral strategies, introducing added intricacy to the diverse skill set anticipated from elementary principals. Furthermore, the study's findings elaborate on the processes involved in hiring an elementary principal from the perspective of a district-level leader in Kansas. The findings of the study have implications for both district-level leaders involved in the hiring of elementary principal candidates and the candidates themselves. Elementary principal candidates are encouraged to prioritize their leadership experience

with a strong focus on instructional leadership, while district-level leaders should create an interview process that allows candidates to both explain and demonstrate how they will balance instructional leadership within their daily routines as an elementary principal. Additional research is needed to explore the perspectives of other stakeholders discussed within the study. Multiple perspectives can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the hiring process, potentially uncovering additional criteria that influence decisions and fostering inclusive practices in the selection of elementary principals.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my mom, Cathy; grandma Betty; and my daughters, Evalyn and Nora Joe. They have been my biggest supporters since long before I started this journey. Their encouragement has meant the world to me, and I could not have done it without them.

I also want to thank Ben Love and his son Corbin. Ben, you entered my life at the inception of this journey and endured every long night and weekend as we navigated the workload as a party of five. It has not always been easy, but day after day, you have shown up and put my needs before your own, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

A special thanks to every educator who has shown up for kids day in and day out. Our work is hard and many times without the thanks deserved. Please take this as the thank you that you all deserve daily. You are the profession that creates all other professions, and that is not to be taken lightly.

Always remember, “If you hear a voice within you saying, you are not a painter, then by all means paint... and that voice will be silenced.” -Vincent van Gogh

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Elmore and Burney (2000), choosing an effective school principal is one of the most significant decisions a superintendent or school board can make, as leadership can propel a district forward in meeting its goals. Leithwood et al. (2004) stated that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). The role of a principal has become multifaceted. Stronge and Xu (2018) suggested that today’s principals concentrate on building a vision for their schools; establishing learning communities; and ensuring the quality of curriculum, instruction, and assessment implemented in the school building with an eye on what is and what changes may come. Furthermore, Stronge and Xu (2018) stated that among other responsibilities, accomplishing these essential school improvement efforts requires gathering and analyzing data to determine needs and then monitoring instructional programs to determine if the identified needs are addressed. Hiring a building principal with the qualities and characteristics to move forward with these efforts is important in the 21st century elementary school.

Egalite et al. (2021) found strong evidence that principals significantly impact student achievement. The researchers analyzed data from North Carolina schools and found that replacing a principal with one who has above-average performance, defined as scoring respectively at the 75th percentile of effectiveness, prospectively could lead to a 2.9 percentile point increase in student achievement in reading and a 3.7 percentile point increase in math. Egalite et al. (2021) also indicated that principal turnover negatively

impacts student achievement, with students experiencing lower test scores and higher absenteeism rates when a principal departs from the position.

Background

According to Hallinger and Heck (1996), research from the 1970s identified the important role principals play in school-improvement efforts. In the 1980s, the focus of education reform shifted to improving student achievement through standards-based education. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) in the *A Nation at Risk* report called for higher academic standards and greater school accountability. The higher academic standards required building leadership to support the effort in America's schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The growing demand for enhanced academic achievement among students in the United States prompted a series of educational reforms. These reforms encompassed legislative acts such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which introduced the Common Core Standards. The reforms culminated in the most recent initiative in 2015, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which serves as the federal law setting the framework for K-12 education throughout the United States. It includes several provisions to improve accountability, promote standards-based education, enhance teacher and principal effectiveness, and provide funding for education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). ESSA places a significant emphasis on the role of principals in school improvement and student achievement. Specifically, ESSA requires states and school districts to develop plans that outline how they will support and develop effective school leaders, including principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2024), "Leadership is critical and we

need more strong leaders. Virtually no schools have improved without talented leadership” (p. 3).

According to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE, 2023), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan for Kansas was approved in 2018 by the U.S. Department of Education. To support the ESSA plan, KSDE (2020) developed Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership PreK-12. According to KSDE (2020), the Kansas Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership PreK-12 are adapted from the National Educational Leadership Preparation Program Recognition Standards (NELP); the NELP standards are aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (2015). The PSEL include:

- Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values
- Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms
- Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
- Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students
- Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel
- Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff
- Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community
- Standard 9. Operations and Management
- Standard 10. School Improvement

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) stated

The Standards embody a research- and practice-based understanding of the relationship between educational leadership and student learning. Improving student learning takes a holistic view of leadership. In all realms of their work, educational leaders must focus on how they are promoting the learning, achievement, development, and well-being of each student. The Standards reflect interdependent domains, qualities and values of leadership work that research and practice suggest are integral to student success. (p. 3)

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) articulated, “At the core, students learn when educational leaders foster safe, caring and supportive school learning communities and promote rigorous curricula, instructional and assessment systems” (p. 4). KSDE (2020) took the lead from The National Policy Board for Educational Administration and developed standards for Kansas building leaders. Kansas Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership PreK-12 include:

Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement

Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms

Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness

Standard 4: Learning and Instruction

Standard 5: Community and External Leadership

Standard 6: Operations and Management

Standard 7: Policy, Governance, and Advocacy

According to KSDE (2020), the standards were established to ensure effective leadership in its institutions. These standards serve as guidelines for educational leaders, such as

principals and superintendents, to promote high-quality leadership practices and improve educational outcomes.

According to the Kansas Commissioner of Education's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Teacher Vacancies and Supply Final Report (2016), a quarter of newly appointed principals in Kansas resigned from their positions within the initial three years, while the national average stood at approximately 20%. This finding underscores the necessity for districts to provide principals with ongoing professional development and support.

According to KSDE (2022a), Kansas comprises 677 elementary schools, collectively accommodating an estimated 223,000 students. Among the student population, males make up 51.3%, while females constitute 48.7%. Racially, most students (62.5%) identify as White, followed by Hispanic students at 21%, and African Americans represent 6.7% of the population. Economically disadvantaged students qualifying for free or reduced lunch make up 43.2% of the total number of students enrolled in elementary schools, while 56.8% are non-economically disadvantaged. Migrant students constitute 1.9%, with the remaining 98.1% identified as non-migrant. Furthermore, KSDE (2022a) indicated that 9.2% of the population consists of English Language Learners (ELLs), leaving 90.8% as non-ELL students. Regarding disabilities, 16.1% of Kansas students have disabilities, while 83.9% do not. Kansas has a 95% rate of fully qualified elementary teachers within their respective service areas.

Kansas has implemented initiatives to support and enhance the capabilities of elementary principals upon their hiring within the state. KSDE (2024) has established criteria for obtaining a building leadership license. According to KSDE (2024), the school leadership licensure requirements include the following:

1. Education: The applicant must have a master's degree or higher from an accredited institution of higher education.
2. Teaching Experience: The applicant must have a valid Kansas teaching license and at least two years of successful teaching experience in a K-12 setting.
3. Principal Preparation Program: The applicant must complete an approved principal preparation program that includes coursework and field experiences in instructional leadership, school improvement, data analysis, personnel management, fiscal management, school and community relations, and ethical and professional leadership.
4. Assessment: The applicant must pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA), which is a computer-based exam that assesses your knowledge and skills in the areas of instructional leadership, school culture, and operations management.
5. Application: The applicant submits an application for principal licensure to KSDE, along with all required documentation, such as transcripts, teaching experience verification, and SLLA results.

KSDE (2022b) established supportive measures for all new school leaders licensed under an initial license. The state requires each local education agency to provide all new principals an initial license with a year-long state approved mentorship program. According to KSDE (2022b), the school leadership license requirements include the following:

- The program provides practical application of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium and Kansas professional standards.
- The program must include mentor selection criteria and training.
- The program provides one year of structured, intensive support for the new leader.
- The program must include a mechanism in place to evaluate the mentoring program.

Statement of the Problem

Inequity in principal selection is a long-standing issue that can prevent the most-qualified candidate from obtaining a principalship (Palmer et al., 2016). According to Lettre and Campbell (2016), principal hiring practices nationwide frequently lack the rigor, thoughtfulness, and data necessary to select the right talent (p. 1). Despite the available literature regarding the qualities or characteristics and qualifications or experiences of effective school principals, there is limited understanding of the specific qualities and characteristics prioritized by Kansas district-level administrators when hiring elementary principals. Therefore, the researcher sought to examine the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, other influential factors, as well as the decision-making process, that Kansas district-level administrators consider when choosing candidates for the elementary principal positions. This deeper understanding could assist Kansas district-level leaders in selecting elementary school principals, potentially leading to more significant educational outcomes for all students.

Purpose of the Study

The researcher aimed to explore the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies district-level leaders look for in elementary principals; other factors that influence hiring decisions for elementary principals; and processes used in hiring elementary school principals. The first purpose of this study was to determine the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies that district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals. The second purpose of this study was to determine the other factors that influence hiring decisions for elementary principals. The final purpose of this study was to explore the processes district-level leaders use in hiring elementary school principals. This researcher conducted interviews with Kansas district-level administrators from multiple locations across the state, gathering qualitative data through these interviews with district-level leaders. The collected data was subsequently analyzed to provide answers to the research questions.

Significance of the Study

Since 2000, there has been limited research on this topic. The findings of this study have the potential to expand the existing literature about the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies district-level leaders look for in elementary principals, other factors that influence hiring decisions for elementary principals, and processes used in hiring elementary school principals. Additionally, the findings of the study have the potential to help inform the selection processes for elementary principals in Kansas. Identifying criteria and factors that district-level administrators use to determine the best fit for hiring an elementary

principal can also contribute to a better understanding of the selection process and inform the development of more effective hiring practices. Furthermore, the findings might offer insights into the qualities and competencies valued in educational leadership, which can inform leadership development programs for aspiring educational leaders. Through this exploration of the perspectives and preferences of district-level administrators, the researcher aims to contribute to the literature on educational leadership and offer recommendations for effective strategies for selecting qualified elementary principals in Kansas.

Delimitations

Delimitations are “self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 134). The delimitations identified by this researcher were:

1. The participants were limited to district-level administrators in Kansas, and the findings may not be generalizable to other states.
2. The focus of this study pertains to the factors associated with the hiring of elementary principals, and the findings may not be applicable to other educational leadership positions.

Assumptions

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) defined assumptions as “the postulates, premises, and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of the research” (p. 135). The following assumptions were made in this study:

1. The district-level administrators who participated in the interview responded honestly and freely to the questions asked by the interviewer.

2. The interpretation of the interviews accurately reflected the perceptions of the district-level administrators.
3. Participants have had sufficient experience and knowledge in hiring and working with elementary principals.

Research Questions

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), research questions (RQs) “provide a framework for understanding a phenomenon” (p. 192). The following questions guided the research:

RQ1

What qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies do district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals?

RQ2

What other factors influence hiring decisions for elementary principals?

RQ3

What process do district leaders use in hiring elementary school principals?

Definition of Terms

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), the definitions are significant terms key to this study. The following terms are defined in this study:

Characteristic

The APA (2023) defined characteristic as a particular feature or quality of a person, animal, or other units of interest, especially any enduring qualities or traits that define an individual’s nature or personality in relation to others.

Competency

According to Steiner (2013), competency is defined as a pattern of thinking, feeling, acting, or speaking that causes a person to be successful in a job or role.

District-Level Administrator

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2023) indicated that “district-level” administration is defined as superintendents and central administration staff under the direction of a school board” (para. 1).

Elementary Principal

The Wallace Foundation (2016) defined an elementary principal as the educational leader of an elementary school, responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the school, setting the instructional vision for the school, and ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education that prepares them for success in higher grades and beyond.

Qualities

The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defined quality as the essential character or nature of something.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided the reader with background and foundational knowledge regarding the necessity to explore the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals. The significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research questions, the definition of terms, and the organization of the study were also found in this initial chapter. In Chapter 2, a review of the existing literature related to the

qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals; other factors that influence hiring decisions for elementary principals; and what process district leaders use in hiring elementary school principals is found. Chapter 3 provides a description of the methods and research design used for this study. In Chapter 4, the study results are presented. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, the findings related to the literature, and the conclusions.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, other influential factors, as well as the decision-making process that district-level leaders consider when selecting candidates for the role of elementary principal. The chapter is divided into two sections: First, an overview of effective leadership in elementary education, including the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies that district-level leaders seek in hiring an elementary principal. The second section is an overview of the decision-making processes used by district-level leaders when selecting an elementary principal, including the criteria used to evaluate candidates, the selection methods employed, and the involvement of key stakeholders in the decision-making process. Ascertaining the factors that district-level leaders consider important when hiring for an elementary principal position can provide valuable insights into the hiring process and procedures.

Effective Leadership in Elementary Education

Research regarding the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and competencies or skills of effective principals within the public educational system exists. However, there is limited research specifically at the elementary level. Dearmin (1957) conducted a qualitative study involving interviews with eleven elementary school principals. The principals had diverse backgrounds in terms of length of service and the type of school they were leading. The primary aim of the study was to determine qualities of leadership that are both useful and practical for elementary school principals.

Dearmin's (1957) findings revealed several key aspects related to supervision. First, principals were deemed responsible for planning an annual in-service training program tailored to the immediate needs of their school and faculty. Second, a solid understanding of the curriculum for each grade level was essential for guiding and assisting teachers in delivering an educational program. Third, visitation by the principal required subsequent conferences to exchange ideas and strengthen the school's educational program. Fourth, support from the principal to teachers should only be provided upon request or when necessary. Lastly, the principal's responsibility extended to training substitute teachers and acquainting new teachers with their duties.

Regarding administration, Dearmin (1957) found that principals should provide classified (non-licensed) personnel with a list of expected duties. Establishing efficient office procedures was crucial to allocating 50% of the principal's time for supervision. Ensuring that each child is assigned to a classroom based on their needs, maintaining easily accessible books and supplies, and planning public relations initiatives were highlighted as important administrative aspects. Additionally, Dearmin (1957) found that principals were responsible for the welfare of all children, and a high degree of cleanliness was expected.

Dearmin (1957) also delved into the realm of school law. Principals were urged to work closely with teachers to uphold the educational program prescribed by state law. Dealing with issues beyond the responsibility of the classroom teacher, training student teachers without jeopardizing the existing educational program, and maintaining a first aid program for the well-being of the student were highlighted as important obligations. Building a sense of respect and responsibility among students, promoting teachers'

mental health through leaves of absence, and ensuring the safety of students were also identified as critical responsibilities. In summary, Dearmin emphasized the multifaceted role of elementary school principals, encompassing supervision, administration, and adherence to school law. The findings provided valuable insights into the practical and necessary leadership qualities required for effective elementary school leadership.

Dalton (1997) employed a research design integrating descriptive and inferential statistics to explore the perceptions of superintendents and elementary principals concerning the relative importance of visionary and management leadership characteristics for effective principals. The Effective Principal Characteristics Survey, a revised version of the Principal Assessment of Supervision, served as the instrument for gathering data. Superintendents and elementary principals in Pennsylvania comprised the sample for Dalton's study.

Dalton's (1997) results revealed a noteworthy consensus between superintendents and elementary principals, as both groups shared identical perceptions regarding the importance of visionary leadership characteristics (articulating a future view for the school and providing a strategic plan to achieve that view). Conversely, both groups considered management leadership characteristics (completing the day-to-day tasks required for safe, orderly, and efficient school operations) relatively unimportant. A similarity in responses emerged, with a high percentage of agreement among superintendents and elementary principals on visionary leadership statements and a corresponding disagreement on management leadership statements.

While both groups in Dalton's (1997) study perceived a significant difference in the importance of visionary versus management leadership characteristics, the findings

indicated a unanimous valuation of visionary leadership over management leadership characteristics. Both superintendents and elementary principals assigned a higher value to qualities such as long-range planning, a proactive approach, innovation, collegiality, teaming, and mentoring. Conversely, characteristics like task completion, reaction to events, short-term planning, maintaining current practices, hierarchical relations with staff, and supervision of staff performance were deemed less crucial for effective principal leadership. Dalton's results emphasized the shared appreciation for visionary leadership characteristics and the diminished importance placed on management leadership characteristics among both superintendents and elementary principals.

In 2002, Brower conducted a study focusing on the leadership proficiencies preferred by superintendents in the hiring of elementary school principals for new and existing schools. The population sampled for this research encompassed all superintendents of public school systems in Indiana, out of which 231 responded to the leadership proficiency survey (Brower, 2002). The survey instrument employed was adapted from one published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1990, intended to evaluate proficiency areas such as leadership behavior, communication, group processes, curriculum and instruction, performance and evaluation, and managerial and organizational skills (Brower, 2002).

Brower (2002) aimed to discern if there was a discrepancy in superintendents' perceptions of preferred leadership proficiencies when hiring principals for new versus existing elementary schools. To achieve this, the study posed key questions concerning whether specific leadership proficiencies were preferred for principals initiating new

schools, for those replacing administrators, and whether there were notable differences in the proficiencies identified as preferred in these two contexts (Brower, 2002).

Brower (2002) identified significant findings through the analysis of survey data, leading to the rejection of the first two null hypotheses, which stated that there are no preferred leadership proficiencies for principals hired for new schools and those replacing existing administrators. Superintendents expressed a preference for proficiencies other than managerial and organizational skills. However, the third hypothesis was not rejected, indicating no perceived significant difference in leadership proficiencies for the two types of hires. Brower concluded that superintendents placed less importance on managerial and organizational skills compared to other proficiencies such as leadership behavior, communication, and curriculum instruction, among others. This insight suggests that superintendents may need to revise hiring documents and interview questions to reflect the preferred proficiencies, ensuring a focus on the more critical categories identified in Brower's research.

According to Pont et al. (2008), "the level of schooling has been found to influence the type of leadership practices required" (p. 27). Additionally, Pont et al. (2008) stated that variations in school levels or contextual factors carry significant implications for how leadership practices are applied. According to Hull (2012), while the critical functions of a school principal have remained unchanged over the years, the principal's essential role has shifted dramatically. Stein (2016) stated, "In the world of public-school education everything depends on good leadership" (p. 1). Additionally, Stein (2016) indicated that "to become more competitive with their global counterparts, American schools need to be led rather than managed" (p. 2). According to Fullan (2002),

“the successful execution of changes that result in sustained enhancements in student performance depends on principals who possess the skills to navigate the intricate and swiftly evolving educational landscape” (p. 16).

Beauchamp and Parsons (2012) conducted a qualitative study focusing on administrators in five highly effective elementary schools, aiming to comprehend the role of school principals in facilitating collaborative environments and their impact on creating optimal learning opportunities for students. The initial data collection involved staff providing written responses to questions centered around the school’s conducive environment for teaching and learning. Interviews were then conducted with teaching staff members and educational assistants who were interested in participating in the second phase of data collection (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012).

Beauchamp and Parson’s (2012) primary focus was to identify the successful behaviors and actions of administrators that contribute to highly effective elementary schools. Through data analysis involving transcription, note-taking, and organizing written responses into themes, 10 main themes emerged from the data synthesis across the five elementary schools. The identified themes encompassed various aspects of successful leadership within these schools: knowledgeable principal, trusting and respectful principal, caring and safe environment fostered by the principal, disciplined and decisive principal, emphasis on unity and community within the school, positive leadership demonstrated by the principal, high expectations set by the principal, awareness and encouragement of innovations, common language and shared vision within the school, and effective communication practices of the principal (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012).

Conclusions drawn from Beauchamp and Parsons's (2012) findings indicate a core set of practices integral to successful leadership. The core set of practices included setting directions, developing people, and effectively responding to challenges and opportunities in diverse educational contexts. Furthermore, the research highlighted the indirect yet influential nature of principals' impact, emphasizing the importance of their role in developing teachers' efficacy in curriculum and instruction, fostering a shared purpose, and creating conducive conditions for effective teaching and learning (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012).

Callahan conducted a study in 2017 to understand the attributes Texas superintendents in the Region 15 Education Service Center valued when hiring and evaluating principals for high-performing schools. The study replicated earlier work by Rammer (2007) and drew on a framework established by Waters et al. (2004). With a response rate of over 50% from the superintendents surveyed, Callahan (2017) explored the various skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities considered critical for effective school principals. The research was guided by questions aimed at interpreting how superintendents align with the 21 responsibilities of school principals identified by Waters et al. (2004), the processes used to assess these responsibilities in potential candidates, and which clusters of these responsibilities were prioritized during the hiring process (Callahan, 2017). According to Waters et al. (2004) 21 principal leadership responsibilities include culture; order; discipline; resources; curriculum, instruction, assessment; focus; knowledge of curriculum, instruction, assessment; visibility; contingent rewards; communication; outreach, input; affirmation; relationship; change agent; optimizer; ideals/beliefs; monitors/evaluates; flexibility; situational awareness; and

intellectual stimulation. Callahan's (2017) findings for the first question indicated a consensus among superintendents that communication skills are paramount, rating it as the most important responsibility, while intellectual stimulation was deemed least important. The findings suggest a prioritization of principals' ability to foster robust communication within the school environment over stimulating academic and theoretical discussions (Callahan, 2017).

Regarding Callahan's (2017) second research question, superintendents described using passive assessment methods such as interviews, application reviews, and reference checks. Interestingly, the study found commonality in the assessment of certain responsibilities across all three methods, highlighting the importance of traits like visibility and knowledge of curriculum in the selection process (Callahan, 2017). Callahan's (2017) third question's findings mirrored Rammer's (2007) study, emphasizing the superintendents' unanimous agreement on the importance of communication. This aspect, along with five other responsibilities, consistently appeared in the top-rated categories, indicating a shared understanding of key principal responsibilities across different geographic regions and studies (Callahan, 2017). In conclusion, Callahan's (2017) research corroborated the findings of Rammer (2007), with both sets of superintendents from Texas and Wisconsin recognizing communication as the principal responsibility when hiring school principals. These findings highlight the universal importance of communication in school leadership and suggest a potential benchmark for superintendent practices in the hiring process.

Characteristics or Qualities

Muhlenbruck (2001) conducted a descriptive qualitative study aimed at understanding the factors influencing the hiring of elementary principals in large-sized school districts in Iowa. Muhlenbruck surveyed members of the Iowa Association of School Personnel Administrators, with 44 respondents completing the survey and 12 individuals engaging in interviews. Muhlenbruck addressed two primary factors: outlining the characteristics most appealing to educators when hiring elementary principals in large Iowa school districts and describing the typical hiring processes within these districts while assessing changes over time. Key findings from the study revealed four major themes: (a) an emphasis on valuing and respecting others, (b) a requisite understanding of school operations, (c) meeting licensure requirements and possessing relevant experience, and (d) fitting into the organizational culture (Muhlenbruck, 2001).

Muhlenbruck (2001) advocated for further investigation into the Iowa school administration to incorporate multiple forms of assessment when screening potential elementary principal candidates. They proposed that administration investigate the perceived advantages and disadvantages of assessment instruments. Additionally, the researcher suggested that district leaders reflect on their usage or lack thereof, aiming to enhance the current hiring processes of elementary school principals (Muhlenbruck, 2001).

Ballard (2002) conducted a quantitative study focusing on the processes utilized by Texas superintendents in selecting principals for public schools. Ballard investigated the perceptions of superintendents regarding selection processes, committee composition, sources of information utilized in the selection process, expected candidate attributes, and

the roles and tasks deemed crucial for successful principals. Additionally, demographic characteristics such as district size (rural, urban, suburban), gender, and tenure in superintendency were examined in relation to superintendent expectations for principal candidates (Ballard, 2002).

Findings from Ballard's (2002) study indicated that a majority of responding superintendents expressed a preference for candidates with prior experience within their respective school districts despite recommendations suggesting a disconnect between this preference and best practices. Additionally, the composition of principal selection committees primarily included superintendents, building administrators/coordinators, teachers, and parents, with minimal involvement from school board members, personnel directors, assistant superintendents, and area directors/coordinators. Notably, the majority of participating superintendents were from small rural areas, potentially impacting the availability of personnel for critical administrative roles (Ballard, 2002).

The respondents to Ballard's study included 602 (85.1%) male and 105 (14.9%) female superintendents. Research question nine investigated gender-based differences in responses to survey items among Texas superintendents. Analysis revealed that female superintendents were more likely to strongly agree on the commitment to attracting minority candidates for principalship and the performance of needs assessments before hiring principals. They also tended to include teachers on principal selection committees and emphasized the importance of personal characteristics such as responsibility and resilience in candidates. Similarly, female superintendents expressed stronger agreement on the multifaceted roles and tasks expected of principals, including assuming responsibilities as personnel supervisor, building manager, district office liaison, and

change facilitator. However, there were no significant differences in responses regarding sources of information between male and female superintendents. In conclusion, Ballard's research sheds light on the selection processes employed by Texas superintendents, identifying areas where practices may not align with recommended standards and underscoring the need for further investigation to enhance the understanding of superintendent perceptions and practices in selecting effective school leaders.

Connelly (2008) stated that effective principals are transformational and identified that those principals:

- look at data and analyze trends, gaps, and insights,
- understand the job requires new levels of public relations and better marketing of school goals and achievements,
- create conditions and structures for learning that enable continuous improvement of performance not only for children but for adults in the school community as well,
- must be the lead learners in their schools, and
- are caring advocates for the whole child. (p. 2)

The Wallace Foundation (2013) studied what effective principals do that ripple through classrooms and boost learning, especially in failing schools. The findings suggested that five pivotal practices seem central to effective school leadership. Elementary school principals must possess the necessary qualities to support their schools through the implementation of the following five practices:

1. shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
2. creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
3. cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
4. improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. (The Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 4)

Competencies or Skills

When defining the role of the principal, an emphasis has been placed on a wide range of skills outlined as necessary to be an effective instructional leader. Lashway (2002) noted that the principal must possess certain skills to carry out the tasks of an instructional leader: interpersonal skills, planning skills, instructional observation skills, and research and evaluation skills (p. 3). Egalite et al. (2021) concluded that strong principals mastered three overlapping domains of skills: instruction, people, and organization. Additionally, Egalite et al. (2021) stated, “Effective principals draw on all three sets of skills to engage in the behaviors or practices that drive a successful school” (para. 8).

O’Malley (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study focusing on the process of selecting elementary school principals within urban school districts. The researcher utilized a mixed-methods design to examine how urban superintendents identify,

recruit, and hire capable elementary school principals. The study's population consisted of urban superintendents of elementary and unified school districts in California, with a sample size of 69 superintendents for the quantitative segment of the research (O'Malley, 2012). The purpose of the study was to understand the superintendents' criteria for hiring elementary school principals, strategies employed to attract high-quality principal candidates, and the specific processes utilized in selecting and hiring successful elementary school principals.

O'Malley's (2012) findings revealed several factors influencing superintendent decisions in selecting principals. These factors included preferences for principal candidates with backgrounds encompassing elementary teaching experience, prior administrative roles, and advanced degrees from reputable universities. Additionally, superintendents sought candidates demonstrating strong interpersonal skills and exceptional instructional leadership qualities. Moreover, districts offering competitive salaries and boasting a record of success were better positioned to attract top-quality principal candidates. Lastly, meticulous application screening, comprehensive reference checks, and robust interview processes were identified as crucial in identifying and hiring the most suitable principal candidates (O'Malley, 2012). In the conclusions drawn from the study, O'Malley highlighted the crucial role of principals in the success of school districts, emphasizing the substantial impact effective elementary school principals have on student achievement. Despite existing research on effective districts, schools, and principals, critical gaps in the literature persist, suggesting a need for further exploration and inquiry (O'Malley, 2012).

Qualifications or Experiences

The qualifications for the elementary principal role have evolved, shifting from clerical and managerial to what we now identify as an instructional leader. McKee (1948) stated, “There has long been a need for an understanding of the part the principal should play in the modern elementary school” (para. 4). Additionally, McKee noted that the elementary principal cannot be an “ex officio clerk to effectively serve as a principal neither can the principal do justice to his many varied responsibilities if he is merely a headteacher” (p. 218). McKee’s research in 1948 began to outline qualifications an elementary principal should encompass. In 2023, the same discourse is being had. Every state has established specific requirements for obtaining a building leadership license. In Chapter 1, the researcher outlined the qualifications required to become an elementary principal in Kansas, with many other states sharing similar qualifications. Anderson and Reynolds (2015) stated, “All 50 states and the District of Columbia have adopted principal licensure standards intended to ensure that candidates have the knowledge and skills to perform tasks necessary for the school to be successful.” Apart from the fundamental requirements, school districts frequently consider the experiences of candidates for the elementary principalship.

Elementary Teacher Perceptions

Schernikau (1991) conducted a qualitative study involving between-group and within-group comparisons among elementary school teachers based on various factors such as sex, experience, grade level, and school size. The primary aim was to identify the leadership qualities that elementary school teachers preferred in their principals. The survey instrument, Teacher Perceptions of the Leadership Qualities of an Elementary

School Principal, was developed by the researcher to measure teachers' preferences regarding the qualities they deemed most important in their immediate supervisors.

The sample for Schernikau's (1991) study consisted of 200 public elementary school teachers within school districts in Nebraska. The purpose of the study was to compare the perceptions of selected elementary school teachers regarding the leadership qualities they most preferred in an elementary principal. The key findings highlighted seven major areas of importance for the role of the elementary school principal: management skills, staff relations, community relations, personal characteristics, professional responsibilities, student relations, and curriculum program. Notably, staff relations emerged as a critical area, with items related to trust-building, positive relationships, and support being highly ranked by all groups (Schernikau, 1991).

Schernikau's (1991) findings revealed that male teachers, while equally concerned about communication skills as females, preferred a more forceful and authoritative leadership style, as evidenced by their emphasis on a firm discipline policy. Less experienced teachers prioritized visibility, orientation for new staff, and promoting parent involvement, reflecting a more idealistic perspective. As teachers gained experience, their focus shifted to practical issues such as planning time, goal clarity, and involvement in decision-making.

Schernikau (1991) reported that the preferences of rural and urban teachers were influenced by their teaching environments. Rural teachers emphasized organizational skills and adherence to school district policies, while urban teachers favored items related to planning time and staff involvement in decision-making. School size demonstrated a direct relationship with geographical location, with smaller, rural schools prioritizing

personal relationships with students and larger, urban schools focused on pragmatic choices such as planning time and workload consideration.

Russel (2023) conducted a study that partially replicated Schernikau's (1991) research, focusing on descriptive statistics. Russel examined the desired leadership qualities of Nebraska elementary teachers and their interest in becoming a principal. The population included Nebraska educators in Grades K-8, with a sample of 168 (82.35%) female participants and 36 (17.65%) male participants, indicating gender-based variations in the preferences for leadership qualities. The average years of experience for the participants in the study were 15.8 years, with notable variations in the years of experience among participants.

Russel's (2023) findings revealed that creating a positive school climate emerged as the top choice for 2023 respondents, while it ranked fourth in Schernikau's 1991 study. Notable differences in desired qualities were identified, with the 2023 results placing more emphasis on creating a positive school culture and addressing administrative aspects compared to the 1991 results. Gender-based variations were highlighted, with both genders valuing certain leadership qualities, but differences in the ranking and emphasis on these qualities existed. Consistent themes in desired leadership qualities included creating trust with staff, fostering a positive school climate, providing planning time for teachers, and being considerate of employee workload. Differences in the rankings were observed based on district size, indicating unique needs and priorities for each district. Russel (2023) made recommendations for Nebraska school districts to focus on professional development initiatives that addressed trust-building, positive climate, and adequate support for teachers' planning instruction. These recommendations were

developed to enhance leadership qualities within the educational context, aligning with the evolving priorities and expectations identified in the study.

Decision-Making Processes for Selecting Elementary Principals

Stern (1975) conducted a qualitative descriptive survey research study focusing on the recruitment and selection of elementary principals in public school districts. Data were collected from 37 national and 71 state education-oriented and non-education-oriented organizations and 21 college and university professors of educational administration. Additionally, input was sought from the presidents of local elementary principals' associations or local administrators' associations in 27 public school districts.

Key findings from Stern's (1973) study revealed noteworthy insights into the practices of school districts. Notably, 50% of respondents nationwide reported the existence of written school board policies guiding superintendents in the selection of elementary principals. Systematic procedures designed to facilitate the identification and selection of the best candidates were reported in 72.7% of the responding school districts. Preferences for candidates with 0-6 years of teaching experience were indicated by 54.5% of respondents, while 86% suggested equal preference for candidates of both sexes. (Stern, 1973)

In a study conducted by Baltzell and Dentler (1983), the process of selecting American school principals was examined. This study was divided into two phases. The first phase concentrated on delineating and characterizing the prevalent practices in the selection of principals. Employing a case-study methodology, the researchers arranged field research teams to "conduct in-depth investigations into the selection processes of 10 randomly chosen, geographically diverse school districts, each with student enrollments

exceeding 10,000” (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983, p. 2). This phase of the study was instrumental in providing a detailed landscape of the principal selection criteria and methods used across various districts.

One of the key findings of Baltzell and Dentler’s (1983) study was the uniformity in the basic requirements for principal candidates across all districts. These requirements included a minimum of a BA or BS degree, at least three years of classroom teaching experience, and state certification as a principal. The findings further revealed that educational qualifications varied, ranging from 6 to 20 hours of college credits in educational administration to more advanced qualifications like a master’s degree in the field, sometimes accompanied by a practicum or an internship. Four out of the 10 districts restricted their criteria to state certification; others demanded additional qualifications, such as master’s degrees or specific coursework in specialized areas like special or bilingual education and curriculum.

However, Baltzell and Dentler (1983) noted a significant gap: there was often no explicit connection between the vacancy and the eligibility criteria. Specifically, there was a lack of emphasis on experience relevant to the specific grade levels of the vacancy or on criteria pertinent to educational leadership skills. Furthermore, Baltzell and Dentler (1983) uncovered a critical issue in the selection process: the lack of specific criteria led to an overreliance on subjective notions of fit or image. In almost every district examined during Phase 1, the concept of a good principal or a top candidate was deeply ingrained. Yet, these perceptions were frequently based on subjective assessments of a candidate’s physical presence, confidence, assertiveness, and alignment with community values and operational methods. This reliance on localistic notions raised concerns about the

objectivity and effectiveness of the selection process. Many educators, as highlighted in the study, acknowledged the need for more refined selection criteria, especially in the areas of educational leadership skills (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). There was a pronounced demand for improved methods for conducting behavioral or performance assessments of candidates. The influence of the local context was so pronounced that any proposed alternative selection methods needed to be flexible and adaptable to fit the unique needs and values of each district.

Karol (1988) conducted a study of the comprehensive examination of the criteria used by Arizona superintendents in hiring principals for elementary schools. This research specifically targeted superintendents of districts with a minimum of 500 students. The purpose was to “clarify the decision-making process in selecting principals, focusing on the criteria that enhanced a candidate’s chance of being hired” (Karol, 1988, p. 12). The study was structured around key research questions, delving into various aspects of the selection process. These questions explored the attributes of candidates that were positively or negatively perceived by superintendents, the emphasis placed on different criteria, and the ultimate decision-making factors in the final interview stage.

Schmitt and Schechtman (1990) reviewed studies on the selection of school administrators. The authors “employed a two-stage process for identifying pertinent literature assessing selection techniques for elementary and secondary school principals” (p. 231). Their investigation revealed a scarcity of articles specifically focused on evaluating methods for selecting school administrators. However, the literature offered numerous descriptions of the selection process (Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990). The primary sources for school administrator candidates were identified as college placement

offices and existing district employees. Additionally, the researchers emphasized the importance of certain qualities deemed significant for administrators, with “humanism” ranked as the most crucial, followed by previous experience and knowledge of administrative theory. Regarding screening factors, the most critical elements were the personal interview, application form completion, and possession of professional placement credentials (Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990).

The conclusions drawn from Schmitt and Schechtman’s (1990) literature review suggested a notable absence of documented procedures governing the selection process for assistant principals or principals vying for building administrator positions. The authors noted that the principal selection process is often influenced by cultural, political, and economic factors. Moreover, in many instances, Schmitt and Schechtman (1990) stated that “the applicant pool for principalship vacancies is determined by the school board or mentors of candidates” (p. 237), who may perceive it as the opportune “time” for the applicant to commence administrative experiences. Consequently, the process for selecting principals and assistant principals appears to lack systematic procedures and remains highly influenced by various external forces (Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990).

Alkire (1995) conducted a study focusing on the criteria and procedures used by Ohio school districts in the selection of beginning elementary school principals during the 1992-1993 academic year. The research methodology involved surveying 78 school districts in Ohio, identified through lists obtained from the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Principals. Of these, 50 districts responded to the survey (Alkire, 1995). The researcher aimed to explore the characteristics sought by superintendents prior to hiring elementary school principals,

screening procedures employed during the selection process, and the specific traits or characteristics leading to the rejection of candidates for beginning elementary principalship roles (Alkire, 1995). Key findings from Alkire's (1995) study highlighted the significance placed on professional and personal characteristics related to human resource management, emphasizing attitudes toward others, interpersonal skills, and leadership potential as primary criteria considered crucial in the selection of elementary school principals. Conversely, less importance was attributed to factors such as marital status, age, performance in professional examinations, college GPA, or the institution from which a degree was earned (Alkire, 1995).

Alkire (1995) emphasized three main areas integral to the superintendent's process of recruiting and hiring elementary school principals: selection criteria, screening procedures, and factors contributing to candidate rejection. Leadership skills and human resource management emerged as the predominant themes. Notably, qualities like a positive attitude toward others and strong human relations skills were identified as the most crucial factors, emphasizing empathy and building support connections, supportive work environments, and emphasizing teamwork within elementary schools. Moreover, the most critical factor leading to the rejection of candidates for elementary principalship was identified as a "lack of enthusiasm" (Alkire, 1995).

The New Teacher Project (TNTP, 2006) conducted a comprehensive study to address the challenges faced by urban schools in hiring quality principals. Utilizing interviews, observations, resume reviews, surveys, and literature reviews, TNTP explored principal selection processes "in seven school districts, two university-based leadership programs, and four district-affiliated or national school leadership programs" (p. 2). The

central research question aimed to uncover strategies for overcoming obstacles to hiring quality principals in urban schools.

TNTP (2006) identified “a shortage of high-quality principal candidates, low applicant-to-hire ratios, reliance on internal candidates, and a lack of dedication of resources for recruitment” (p. 2). Flawed selection processes were found to contribute to the shortage, with late vacancy notifications and administrative inefficiencies further hindering effective hiring. TNTP emphasized the struggle of urban school districts in hiring the best principals due to a shortage of qualified candidates and inconsistent selection processes.

Palmer (2014) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the criteria, selection procedures, and fairness perceptions in the principal selection processes among K-12 public school principals in California, excluding single-school districts, charter schools, and specialized schools. Utilizing purposive sampling, Palmer initially identified 7,386 public school listings and principal email addresses, which was further narrowed down to 5,840 for the actual population. The sample comprised 221 participants, yielding a response rate of 3.8%, with 18 participants selected for follow-up interviews.

Palmer’s (2014) key findings revealed that leadership, relationship-building abilities, experience, communication, and alignment with district values (“fit”) were prominent selection criteria reported by participants. Common procedures included “interviews, resume submission, reference checks, second interviews, and essays or written statements, while less common practices included site visits, performance tasks, presentations, and written tests” (Palmer, 2014, p. 210). The researcher identified “three

distinct hiring cultures within districts—merit-based, mixed, and other—raising concerns about fairness and the potential for less-qualified candidates to be selected based on factors like relationships and fit” (Palmer, 2014, p. 207).

Palmer (2014) emphasized the potential consequences of decisions not based on merit, particularly in student achievement. “The need for enhanced selection procedures aligned with specific criteria” was underscored (Palmer, 2014, p. 108). “The fairness of principal selection was deemed questionable” (Palmer, 2014, p. 112) based on participants’ experiences and perceptions, as well as the identified hiring cultures within districts. Recommendations included further exploration of hiring cultures within school districts, their impact on selection processes, and the congruence between hiring cultures and selection procedures. Palmer proposed that these aspects merit continued investigation to ensure fair and effective principal selection processes for the benefit of students and educational leadership quality.

Work (2019) conducted a phenomenological case study to explore principal selection practices and the preparedness of assistant principals, as reported by district leaders in a Mid-Atlantic suburban school district. The study focused on eight district leaders, with a diverse sample reflecting varying levels of participation in assistant principal-to-principal interviews. The participants were categorized based on the number of interviews, revealing that 50% had engaged in over 21 interviews, 25% in 10-15 interviews, 12.5% in 15-20 interviews, and another 12.5% in six-10 interviews. Work aimed to address key questions regarding district leaders’ perceptions and experiences concerning the principal selection process.

Work (2019) identified key themes through survey data, interview transcriptions, and follow-up emails. These themes encompassed the application process overview, the concept of fit, local issues, training, considerations for internal and external candidates, implicit bias, and recommendations. Sub-themes emerging from interview data included the dynamics between principals and assistant principals, the natural cut-off phenomenon during interviews, the influence of principal-makers on assistant principal preparation, the number of candidates, home-grown leaders, and the reliance on intuition during principal selection.

The natural cut-off phenomenon, which is the identification of three to four standout candidates during the interview stage, has emerged as a crucial aspect of principal selection (Work, 2019). District leaders consistently referred to this phenomenon, emphasizing its significance in shaping group discussions and suggesting it as a potential criterion for identifying desirable traits in candidates (Work, 2019). Furthermore, the theme of fit was explored, including district fit, community fit, and principal fit. District leaders highlighted the critical role of an assistant principal's current principal in preparing them for the principalship, underscoring the importance of this mentoring relationship (Work, 2019).

Work (2019) suggested that codifying principal selection processes and recognizing the contextual nature of assistant principal preparation could benefit school districts. The findings offer insights into areas influenced by implicit bias, and school districts may leverage principal-makers to enhance leadership development programs. The hope is that this research provides valuable insights for school districts seeking improvement in their principal selection practices and the preparedness of assistant

principals, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of school environments for all students.

Loney (2023) examined the strategies implemented by educational leaders for the appointment of principals who exhibit transformational leadership skills, specifically for schools characterized by low performance, high turnover, poverty, and a significant minority population in urban areas of central Texas. This exploration was conducted through semi-structured interviews and an intentional selection of participants. Loney's sample included nine educational professionals: four individuals serving at the district level and five principals, all from urban school districts.

Loney's (2023) research questions guided the data collection and analysis processes, focusing on the inclusion of the meaning of fit in principal selection, differences in principal hiring practices for transformational leadership, unique characteristics in hiring practices for urban campuses, and perspectives of current or former principals regarding their fit as transformational leaders in challenging urban contexts. Key findings revealed that "district leaders were unfamiliar with the four themes of person-environment fit" (Loney, 2023, p. 130), which consequently led to the exclusion of these themes in the identification, recruitment, selection, and placement of high-potential candidates for low-achieving urban central Texas schools. Despite incorporating a leadership program for principal recruitment by one district, it was not perceived as a pipeline to the principalship. Additionally, campus principals expressed concerns about generic interview questions lacking specificity related to transformational leadership, while district leaders identified key transformational characteristics such as

relationship-building, educational leadership ability, collaboration, and success in raising student achievement as important in hiring decisions (Loney, 2023).

Using fit alone is not feasible for finding the best principal candidate, a transformational and instructional leader, because the protocol does not allow the interviewer to hear the candidate's heart. Having the freedom to integrate other interviewing techniques that force the applicant to pull from within to tell a story of their abilities is necessary to choose the correct person. (Loney, 2023, p. 135)

Passmore (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore the experiences and perspectives of current elementary school principals in California with the hiring process. The research design involved an explanatory-phenomenological methodology, integrating both survey and interview methods. The population included current elementary kindergarten through eighth-grade principals, with 165 participants who agreed to participate in the study. The research problem centered on whether principal candidates had the opportunity to display the necessary skills during the hiring process and, if not, how school organizations could ensure the selection of the highest-quality administrators (Passmore, 2023). The primary purpose of the study was to understand the alignment between the self-reported skills of principals and the skills displayed during the hiring process.

Key findings from Passmore's (2023) study revealed that "principals rated themselves highest for relationship skills and visibility" (p. 77). Passmore's (2023) findings aligned with the "increased emphasis on these skills during performance tasks, mock scenarios, and behavioral events by districts" (p. 77). Passmore identified inconsistencies between the skills stated by individuals and those they demonstrate

during recruitment, suggesting a misalignment in the emphasis placed on certain competencies by school leaders and their districts. Candidates for school leadership positions tended to exhibit a broader range of skills when they actively sought out or crafted their own opportunities to showcase their abilities (Passmore, 2023).

The interviews conducted by Passmore (2023) with three principals further enriched the study, yielding recommendations for more district utilization of performance tasks, increased opportunities for hiring committees to interact with candidates in less structured manners, and training for hiring committees to better align with community needs. Passmore emphasized the need for intentional hiring procedures and tasks to evaluate principals effectively, with recommendations for performance tasks and mock scenarios. Principals also stressed the importance of intentional design in the hiring process and highlighted concerns about hiring committees, proposing training to align committee decisions with community needs.

Summary

This literature review provided a general overview of district-level leader's selection of elementary principals while highlighting the evolving nature of the role and emphasizing the importance of visionary leadership qualities. Effective principals are now seen as transformational leaders who can communicate effectively, foster a positive school environment, and manage instructional programs adeptly. The decision-making process for selecting principals is multifaceted, involving considerations of a candidate's fit within the school's culture and their potential as transformational leaders. Historical and recent studies have highlighted the use of varied criteria and procedures, with a

recurring emphasis on leadership and human resource management skills. The methodology used for this study is explained in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Methods

The focus of this study was to investigate the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, other influential factors, as well as the decision-making process district-level leaders employ when selecting candidates for the role of elementary principal. The researcher aimed to investigate their perceptions of the factors influencing district-level administrators' hiring processes and identify the criteria they use to determine the best fit for the position. These factors include the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills and competencies, and the decision-making process that district-level administrators consider when selecting candidates for the role of elementary principal. This chapter includes a description of the research design, setting, selection of participants, sampling procedures, and instruments. Additionally, explained in this chapter are the data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher's role, and limitations of the study.

Research Design

This study involved the use of a qualitative research design. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). The specific design was phenomenological research using interviews to collect data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that phenomenological research involves gathering participants' perceptions about a phenomenon.

Setting

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), in this section, the researcher “describes and justifies selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem” (p. 13). The setting of the study was Kansas. At the time of this study, there were 725 elementary schools in Kansas, collectively accommodating an estimated 223,000 students (KSDE, 2022). Kansas is comprised of urban, suburban, and rural school districts, with rural districts being the most predominant (Rural Health Information Hub, 2020). The setting of Kansas allowed the researcher to access a wide range of district locations and sizes.

Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Patton (2014) stated that purposeful sampling brings light to the questions within an information-rich study. The purposeful sampling strategy was used based on the predetermined participant characteristics: (a) identifies as a Kansas district-level administrator, and (b) occupies a role responsible for hiring elementary principals. The intent was to find 10 district-level administrators to participate in the study, but if saturation was not met, others may have been interviewed.

Instrument

The instrument employed in this study was an interview script designed to ensure consistency in the questions asked (see Appendix A). Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explained, “The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say” (p. 91). The researcher drafted interview questions (IQs) in alignment with the study’s research questions. “Qualitative researchers often use open-ended interviews. Typically, these are semi-structured scripts—that is, some questions are

developed in advance and some are developed as the interview progresses based on participant responses” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 192). The semi-structured interview consisted of 12 questions with the potential for further responses as prompted by the researcher.

To address the three RQs, 12 IQs were developed. The first four IQs and the follow-up (FU) questions are aligned with RQ1: What qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies do district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals?

- IQ1. What key qualities or characteristics do you consider important when selecting elementary school principals?
- IQ2. Can you describe any changes or shifts in the qualities or characteristics you look for in principal candidates over time?
 - FUIQ2: What factors influenced these changes or shifts?
- IQ3. What specific qualifications or experiences do you prioritize in potential principal candidates?
 - FUIQ3A: Describe any changes or shifts in the qualifications or experiences you prioritize in potential principal candidates.
 - FUIQ3B: What factors are included in these changes or shifts?
- IQ4. What skills or competencies do you consider crucial for success in an elementary school principal role?
 - FUIQ4A: Describe any changes or shifts in the skills and competencies you consider crucial for success in an elementary school principal role.
 - FUIQ4B: What factors influenced these changes or shifts?

The next four IQs and their FUs are aligned to RQ2: What other factors influence hiring decisions for elementary principals?

- IQ5. What balance, if any, do you look for between the requirement for instructional leadership and the various managerial responsibilities when conducting your selection process?
 - FUIQ5. Can you share an example or specific approach you have used in assessing candidates' ability to effectively balance instructional leadership and administrative responsibilities during the selection process for elementary school principals?
- IQ6. In what ways are the professional standards for educational leaders addressed when conducting your selection process?
- IQ7. What criteria or benchmarks do you use to screen and shortlist candidates for further consideration?
 - FUIQ7A. Could you provide some examples of specific criteria or benchmarks that you typically utilize when screening and shortlisting candidates for further consideration?
 - FUIQ7B. Could you explain how these criteria or benchmarks align with the desired qualities and qualifications you seek in elementary school principals?
- IQ8. How do you assess a candidate's fit within the school community and culture?
 - FUIQ8A. What specific methods or strategies have you found effective in gaining insights into the candidate's compatibility?

- FUIQ8B. Are there any key indicators or aspects that you prioritize in determining a candidate's alignment with the school community and culture?

The last four IQs and their FUs align with RQ3: What process do district-leaders use in hiring elementary school principals?

- IQ9. Describe the overall process and steps involved in selecting and hiring an elementary school principal.
- IQ10. How do you involve other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, or community members, in the principal hiring process?
- IQ11. How do you gather feedback from stakeholders involved in the selection process?
 - FUIQ11. How does this feedback inform your decision-making?
- IQ12. What challenges or obstacles, if any, did you face during the hiring process
 - FUIQ12. How have you addressed them?

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), peer examinations contribute to increased reliability and strengthen the validity of IQs in research. The peer examination is achieved by involving colleagues or expert panelists who possess impartial perspectives to critically examine the IQs in the study. For this study, two retired superintendents served as expert panelists. Both expert panelists were provided the IQs to ensure alignment with the research questions and provide additional feedback to the researcher regarding their interpretation of the questions.

Panelist A offered feedback concerning the FU question for IQ3. Given that this question was formulated to elicit specific information aligned with IQ3's objectives, it was concluded that the original FU question should be retained due to its direct relevance to IQ3. Additionally, Panelist A contributed to the refinement of the questionnaire by suggesting two grammatical adjustments to FU questions 3B and 4A. Panelist B advised that the questions were appropriate in their current format and recommended no changes.

Data Collection Procedures

Before the interviews with the participants were conducted, an Institutional Review Board form was submitted to Baker University for approval to conduct the study. Institutional Review Board approval was granted on October 31, 2023 (see Appendix B). The researcher collected potential participant names and email addresses through the Kansas Education Data Reporting System. KSDE Data Central is a public reporting system on the KSDE website designed to provide access to a wide array of reports for public consumption. These reports encompass building report cards, demographic information, and assessment data.

Before the interviews were conducted for the study, the researcher held a mock interview with one of the expert panelists. The mock interview provided an opportunity for peer feedback and validation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The mock interview allowed the researcher to gain experience in collecting qualitative data. The interviewee selected was a retired Missouri superintendent who had hired elementary principals. After the mock interview was conducted, the researcher received feedback from the interviewee. The feedback included suggestions for the interview setting when conducting interviews in a digital format. Additionally, the mock interviewee discussed

the researcher's mannerisms and suggested ways to engage participants in conversations, allowing them to elaborate on their explanations.

Potential participants were contacted through a solicitation email (see Appendix C) outlining the research questions and participant criteria. If district-level administrators were interested in participating in the study, they were asked to respond directly to the email. Participants were informed that the researcher would ensure their anonymity, as each would be assigned a unique code number to safeguard the participant's identity.

After receiving responses to the solicitation email, a follow-up participant email (see Appendix D) was sent to the selected participants. The participant selection process involved tracking responders in an Excel spreadsheet based on the order of their responses. After identifying all participants, they were categorized into groups in the spreadsheet based on the size of their respective groups. These categories ranged from large to very small according to the order of their responses. From each group range, the participants were selected for the study. For the study, 11 participants were selected as the initial participant group and one alternate participant was identified.

The chosen participants then scheduled their interviews using the Calendly application. All interviews were conducted on a digital platform using Google Meets unless otherwise agreed upon by both the interviewer and interviewee. Upon setting the interview time and location, the researcher sent a Google Meets invite to the participant, restating the time and providing a link for the interview.

An informed consent form (see Appendix E) was provided to each study participant and collected before the interview. The informed consent form consisted of an outline of the research and required a signature from the participant to be involved in the

study. By signing the consent form, participants understood that they could opt-out at any time during the process, ensuring that participation in the study was completely voluntary. Once the consent was received via email, it was saved in a confidential file. Additionally, the Kansas Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership PK-12 (see Appendix F) were included in the participant email for reference during the interview, if needed.

Interviews were completed and recorded using a recording application on the researcher's iPhone, and the recorded interviews were downloaded and identified by a number. The researcher uploaded the recording into Trint (audio transcription software). Consistency was maintained across all 11 participants as they were asked the same initial questions. A transcription was sent to each of the participants for accuracy review. Before moving forward with the process, each participant was given a chance to review the transcript and offer feedback on the accuracy of their statements. After obtaining final approval of the transcripts from the participants, the transcripts were securely stored electronically as digital files, along with the interview recordings.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Synthesis is about recasting the information gathered in the analysis into a new and different arrangement- one that is coherent, logical, and explicit (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). The researcher utilized a process adopted from Creswell and Creswell's (2018) process of data analysis.

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis.
2. Read and look at all the data.
3. Start coding the data.

4. Generate a description and themes.
5. Represent the description and themes. (pp. 268-270)

The researcher initiated the data analysis process by transcribing the interviews using the Trint Software. Upon completing the transcription, a member check was conducted to ensure the accuracy of the collected data. The member check involved sending the transcriptions to the participants and requesting them to review the content for accuracy. Once all participants confirmed the accuracy of their respective transcriptions, the researcher proceeded to analyze the findings. This analysis involved reading and interpreting the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research outcomes.

The researcher began coding and organizing by categorizing and identifying patterns that emerged using an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher took the transcripts through a rigorous coding process. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) state, “coding allows you to return to the data you want to inspect, interrogate, revisit, and reinterpret” (p. 343). Once all transcripts were coded, the researcher could compare the segments and codes to identify similarities and differences and look for patterns, connections, or emerging themes among the codes. This process involves continuously comparing new segments with previously coded ones to refine and revise the codes. Once common themes and patterns emerged from the data, the researcher identified higher-level themes and concepts, which allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data and comprehensively interpret the findings. The researcher moved to the final step of the five-step process. As stated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “Qualitative data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the masses of data collected”

(p. 327). The researcher took the findings, synthesized the information, and created comprehensive study results.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

According to King and Stahl (2020), in a qualitative study, the researcher must show reliability and trustworthiness in the results, and this is done by establishing four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. The researcher ensured credibility by previewing the IQs with an expert panel to review alignment with the research questions. Based on the expert panel feedback, two slight modifications to FU questions 3B and 4A were made for grammatical accuracy. A clear record of all interview transcripts, notes, data analysis protocols, and coded findings was kept in a password-protected file to support reliability.

Researcher's Role

As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), “Particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study” (p. 260). The researcher conducting this study considered her current role within the Kansas building-level leadership system and her future goals within the building-level leadership system. At the time of the study, the researcher served as a principal at a specialized day school in a Northeastern Kansas public school district. The researcher had been an elementary assistant principal for six years and a head principal for a specialized day school for one year. The researcher held a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on curriculum leadership and building administration and was a doctoral

candidate in educational leadership at the time of this study. The researcher engaged in reflexivity. According to Patnaik (2013), reflexivity refers to “the constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution/influence/shaping of inter-subjective research and the consequent research findings” (p. 4). The researcher’s background and experiences posed a risk of introducing bias into the study. The researcher attempted to remain unbiased and impartial throughout the research process and acknowledges that past work experiences could lead to bias in this study.

Limitations

Limitations are factors beyond the researcher’s control within this study. The limitations were:

1. The researcher could not control factors and other experiences that might have influenced how the participants responded.
2. In this study, the interviews were conducted digitally, which introduced the possibility of varied interpretations of the responses and body language observed in the recorded interviews. The reliance on digital mediums may have affected the researcher’s understanding and perception of the interviewees’ cues and nonverbal communication.
3. The district-level administrators’ experience and exposure to hiring decision-making processes may have differed among individuals, leading to potential variations in their understanding and approaches to the hiring process for an elementary principal position.

Summary

Chapter 3 of this study encompassed the research methods utilized. The methods included the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis approach, considerations of reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher's role, and the study's limitations. Chapter 4 includes the results of the analysis of the transcripts.

Chapter 4

Results

The first purpose of this study was to determine the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies that district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals. The second purpose of this study was to determine what other factors influence hiring decisions for elementary principals. The final purpose of this study was to explore the processes district-level leaders use in hiring elementary school principals. The study's findings possess the capacity to enhance the selection procedures for elementary principals in Kansas. By uncovering the criteria and factors employed by district-level leaders in assessing the optimal candidate for elementary principal positions, the research findings can also foster a deeper comprehension of the selection process, thereby guiding the refinement of more efficient hiring practices.

The researcher chose district-level leaders to participate in the study. Eleven superintendents from Kansas joined the study, three participants from large-sized school districts, four participants from medium-sized school districts, two participants from small-sized school districts, and one participant from a very small school district. Pseudonyms, participants 1-11, were used to identify those who were interviewed to protect their identity. Table 1 offers a more detailed analysis of the district sizes associated with each participant.

Table 1*Participants and District Size*

Participant	District Size
Participant 1	Large
Participant 2	Medium
Participant 3	Medium
Participant 4	Large
Participant 5	Medium
Participant 6	Medium
Participant 7	Small
Participant 8	Large
Participant 9	Small
Participant 10	Very Small
Participant 11	Medium

The district size for the participants ranged from 9,092 to 107. See Table 2 for the ranges for the school districts labeled large, medium, small, and very small. School districts were located across Kansas, with three in the northeast region, two in the southwest region, two in the southeast region, two in the south-central region, one in the north-central region, and one in the Kansas City region. Table 2 outlines district classifications by enrollment size.

Table 2*District Enrollment and Size*

District Size	District Enrollment Range
Large	1,700 or more
Medium	600-1699
Small	301-599
Very Small	300 or less

Findings

The following sections contain explanations of the themes extracted from the qualitative analysis of interview responses, highlighting specific qualities, qualifications, experiences, competencies, and skills desired by district-level leaders for elementary principal candidates. As well as additional factors and hiring processes guiding their decisions. The researcher developed 12 IQs from three research questions to gain insight from the participants.

Finding 1: District-Level Leaders' Preferred Attributes

Upon reviewing the responses from the 11 participants in the study, common themes emerged for Finding 1. The themes were categorized into three topics: characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies. These themes provide insights into the priorities and preferences of district-level leaders when selecting elementary principals, offering a comprehensive understanding of the desired attributes sought in potential candidates.

Qualities or Characteristics. There were two key qualities or characteristics that six of 11 participants identified as an attribute they look for when hiring an elementary principal. The first key quality or characteristic identified was instructional leadership. Participant 5 stated,

I think that with the activities and different things that are going on in middle schools and high schools, that a different set of skills can be important, but can also help hide some of the weaknesses, in the areas that I think the elementary school principal needs to be the strongest in. And so, the instructional leadership at the elementary school is just so critical.

This statement suggests that middle and high schools may require a different set of skills than elementary schools require. These skills might compensate for weaknesses that elementary principals can afford to have, highlighting the critical importance of instructional leadership in elementary schools. The second key quality six of the 11 district-level leaders mentioned was the ability to build relationships with staff and students. Participant 7 stated, “I think the main thing is that you have to start looking for somebody who’s going to be able to build relationships with everybody, because that’s the key to everything.” Additionally, participant 3 remarked,

It’s got to be somebody that really is good at building relationships with both staff, students and parents and somebody that is very flexible because, as an elementary school principal, you may have a calendar laid out as to what your day is going to look like, and that will more than likely change within the first 15 to 30 minutes.

This statement suggests that a crucial aspect of selecting someone for an elementary principal position is that the person can establish positive relationships with everyone involved. Participant 3's statement implies that building strong relationships is fundamental to success in various aspects of the role.

The predominant shared theme among participants, with seven of 11 district-level leaders concurring, underscores the importance of interpersonal skills, specifically in effective communication. Participant 2 stated, "And then obviously communication, it's a terribly important thing with patrons, with the parents, with other administrators, sometimes with the district office, sometimes with the Board of Education and the teachers. Communication is extremely important." This response suggests that effective communication is paramount in fostering positive relationships and ensuring success in the role of an elementary principal and is a necessary attribute for someone in this position.

In addition to the previously stated findings, the results showed that three out of 11 participants indicated flexibility and adaptability as desired qualities and characteristics as well as sound ethics in decision-making. Participant 7 stated,

Primarily, so that they're successful would be that they're ethical, right? You want them to be able to make decisions that are in the best interests of people that are within the law, who, you know, can function and navigate through board policy and district handbooks and things like that.

This district leader's response emphasizes the importance of making decisions that are not only legally compliant but also align with ethical standards, as an important quality or characteristic of an elementary principal.

Participants 4 and 11 indicated the desire for a problem solver. Participants 4 and 7 stated that analytical thinking was important, and participants 4 and 10 discussed the need for an elementary principal to be empathetic. Regarding additional qualities or characteristics, single participants also mentioned being a servant or visionary leader, being student-centered, showing integrity, and being confident or team-oriented.

Shifts. In terms of shifts in the qualities and characteristics that district-level leaders currently seek in elementary principals, there has been an evolution over time in their hiring practices. Four of 11 participants emphasized the evolving importance of principal candidates possessing a robust understanding of social-emotional learning theory and behavioral strategies for elementary-aged students. These district-level leaders highlighted the necessity for today's principals to demonstrate a strong working knowledge in these areas compared to previous years. Participant 7 stated, "You want them to be able to build relationships, understand trauma, and be responsive to trauma-informed care. They need to speak proficiently about how to navigate behaviors and just those social-emotional things going on with kids." Participant 11 went on to add, "Especially at this point in time with elementary students, an understanding of current theories around trauma-informed instruction, social-emotional learning, early childhood behavioral techniques are something elementary principals need."

A shift in hiring practices was another concern district-level leaders addressed, as five of 11 participants spoke about their potential bias. These five participants alluded to the fact that the pool of candidates is smaller than ever, requiring them to consider less leadership experience than they have in the past. Participant 1 emphasized the shift by saying,

I would say that what has changed for me is I am looking for less experience or requiring less experience. I was previously able to get a candidate that may have had a couple of years of assistant principal experience, which now is hard to find due to the shallow pool.

Participant 10 stated similar sentiments saying, “Not necessarily, other than the candidates we get seem to have less experience, so they haven’t been able to practice those as much as I’d like to see, but those are who we have.” According to participant 9, “There’s just a lack of numbers, a lack of experience. It’s been a problem, especially the last I’d say six to seven years.”

It became evident during the current research that there has been a notable shift in hiring practices, particularly concerning the level of leadership experience sought in candidates. With the current shortage of qualified candidates, leaders are increasingly open to considering individuals with less experience than previously required. This shift underscores the challenges faced by hiring committees in finding suitable candidates amidst a limited pool of applicants.

Qualifications or Experiences. In reference to qualifications or experiences that district-level leaders prioritize in elementary principal candidates, eight of 11 spoke to instructional leadership experience. They can demonstrate valuable skills and experience not necessarily in a leadership role within a building but within any role from which the candidate is transitioning. Participant 5 stated, “The instructional leadership part of that is one of the big ones.” Similarly, participant 4 articulated, “We definitely want the individual to be an instructional leader.” Expanding on this, Participant 7 continued, “You want somebody who is proficient at being an instructional leader, who understands

how to analyze data, who understands, you know, maybe doesn't know all the standards, but knows how to access the standards." The eight district-level leaders' collective stance underscores the paramount importance of instructional leadership experience for prospective elementary principals.

Six out of 11 participants emphasized the importance of prior leadership experience as a priority attribute for an elementary principal. According to Participant 5, "I am usually looking for somebody that has a good track record as a teacher or as an administrator. The candidate having a little bit of administration experience is helpful." Participant 1 stated,

One experience I want is, do you have experience in building leadership prior to this? And for me, I don't need it to be at the same level, not just in the principal ranks, but have you been a PLC leader, BLT, or whatever, three letters you're your building uses for leadership roles.

Additionally, Participants 7, 8, 9, and 10 said that they prioritize a candidate who described themselves as a continuous learner. Participants 1, 7, and 10 identified that they prioritize previous elementary teaching experience in elementary principal candidates. Two of the 11 participants look for a strong knowledge base for social-emotional learning theory. Furthermore, singular responses for prioritized qualifications or experiences included an understanding of student behavior, effective communication skills, strong teaching background, the ability to engage in collaborative leadership practices, and specific licensure.

Skills or Competencies. Five of the 11 district-level leaders identified two skills or competencies they consider crucial in an elementary principal. Participants 2, 5, 7, 9,

and 11 spoke to the ability to effectively communicate as crucial. Participant 11 expressed,

I think they must be competent in communication. That looks very different for a lot of different people. And then you don't have to communicate the same way as I do, but you must be competent in communication with people.

Furthermore, Participant 4 remarked, "We definitely want them to be an effective communicator and be able to have conflict resolution when dealing with the public."

Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 emphasized that the crucial skill or competency they deem necessary for an elementary principal is the ability to build relationships. Participant 6 stated,

I want to know how their working relationship was with their other teachers, with their colleagues, how they treat the cooks, how they treat the custodian. Because as an administrator, you have to work with all of those people and they're all important.

Participant 6 stated,

I want to know, first off, those skills of how do they work with people, how do they work with kids? Because if you can't build trust and rapport with your teachers and staff, it's going to be a very uphill climb for you."

Participants 2, 7, 8, and 11 emphasized the significance of research-based instructional practices as a crucial skill. Moreover, Participants 2, 7, 9, and 10 underscored the necessity for collaboration skills, while Participants 4, 7, 8, and 9 highlighted the importance of data-driven decision-making abilities for an elementary principal.

Participant 7 articulated,

They need to be okay in taking risks and taking a chance and being decisive because you can slow play some things for a while, but at some point, you got to make a decision, right? I think just that main ability to make good informed decisions and not do it solely on your own.

Participants 1, 2, and 11 noted that a knowledge of behavioral strategies is crucial.

Participant 1 elaborated on this need when stating,

But I think we have to focus more on the managerial piece, and I'm talking specifically on behaviors. And I'm not going to say that instructional leadership is going to be forgotten. But it may need to take a backseat right now while getting some of these other pieces in place. So, if I don't have well-managed classrooms, if I don't have classrooms with the best management, then good teaching and learning is probably going to be secondary anyway.

Similarly, Participant 2 stated, "As a principal, I worked with kiddos who had made some negative behavior choices in the classrooms. I always felt like it was my job to teach them how to do things a little bit differently." These statements underscore the crucial importance of behavioral strategy skills for an elementary principal.

Furthermore, two of 11 participants mentioned that elementary principal candidates need to understand social-emotional learning practices and the skill of using an equity lens, with Participant 7 stating, "You need to have an equity lens, always, no matter what your demographics are." Moreover, single participants identified skills and competencies, such as flexibility, active listening, situational awareness, and an understanding of growth and child development.

Finding 2: Other Factors That Influence Decisions About Hiring Elementary

Principals

In addition to characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, the researcher delved deeper into other factors influencing hiring decisions for elementary principals. These factors involved a deeper investigation into the balance between instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities. The researcher also examined the methods employed to assess a candidate's ability to effectively manage the equilibrium between instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities in the role of an elementary principal by asking, "What balance, if any, do you look for between the requirement for instructional leadership and the various managerial responsibilities when conducting your selection process?"

Balance. The researcher queried the participants about balance, specifically asking, "What balance, if any, do you look for between the requirement for instructional leadership and the various managerial responsibilities when conducting your selection process?" In response, five out of 11 participants highlighted that they expect elementary principal candidates to be able to speak to and address the challenge of balancing instructional leadership and managerial tasks. Two of 11 participants spoke to the balance, by expressing they focus primarily on the instructional leader. Participant 5 explained,

The management of the schools, I would say, has decreased in importance.

Recently, the instructional leadership focus has increased. I would say that managerial responsibility is still there, but there's been a shift to more need for instructional leadership, especially as we look at managing our educational

programs and the different things that we do more so at the primary level. It's just really a lot more about instructional leadership. If there's management issues and like for facilities, I can find people to help with that. I can find companies in our communities that can come in and help with the heating and cooling system, or secretarial work can be done, whatever that is as far as management goes. But I don't have anybody else really to go to for instructional leadership except the principal.

Participant 1 expressed that they focus on balancing teams based on the need but with the goal of being a 50/50 split, specifically stating,

The ideal is a person that's got the perfect balance. But knowing that that doesn't always land in your lap, what I'm looking for dovetails well with a firm belief in mind, which is the right bus, right seat. If I'm hiring with an assistant principal, and I know what they have as far as skill sets, I may not look to duplicate that. I may look to compliment that instead. I kind of liken it to a football coach. I don't stick to the same offensive plays year after year after year. Rather, I try to shift my offense to the personnel that I have.

Participant 2 spoke of a 40/60 balance expressing,

I've always tried to put more importance on the administrator being an instructional leader. I have worked very hard to be an instructional leader, but the managerial stuff will-- It'll chew you up and spit you out if you're not careful. I am still not sure if I manage my world as well as I should from the perspective of delegation. It's good to have the ability to delegate some of those managerial tasks to some of your secretarial staff or others, but you don't want to delegate all

of it. I'd like to see my principals be instructional leaders. Pay attention to the best practices and quite a bit of attention to the latest research that might be out there. I would say 40/60 in terms of managerial versus instructional leadership.

Further explaining the necessity and difficulty of balancing instructional leadership and managerial responsibility, Participant 8 stated,

This is where theory and practicality collide. I would like instructional leadership to be 80% to 90% of the time, and the other 10% or 20% is the managerial. The reality of the position is you hope that you can get a 50/50 balance. The managerial stuff that you have to do is making sure kids are safe, making sure that all the things that come on our plate are taken care of, things that maybe we don't have control over but we have to deal with. The balance between it is hard, but that's why I have to constantly remind our administrators, and I have to constantly remind myself as well that we have to make instructional leadership a priority.

Interview Methods. Throughout this phase of the interviews, the researcher probed further to develop a clear understanding of the desired balance by asking participants to provide specific examples of what they believe the balance should be or what they would want it to be. Additionally, the researcher inquired about how participants elicit the specific responses they are looking for during an interview setting. Seven out of 11 participants provided insight into the specific approach or method they employ to assess a candidate's ability to balance instructional leadership and managerial tasks. Their approaches during the interview process were similar. Specifically, Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 11 said that they engage candidates using probing

interview questions designed to present scenarios involving both instructional leadership and managerial responsibility. Participant 8 elaborated on their process,

I tend to use what I would call a lot of hypotheticals or scenarios. I may throw a scenario out that basically explains how you get all this stuff thrown at you at once, how do you prioritize and so forth. I tend to ask scenario or hypothetical questions based on that. I'll have managerial types, and I'll also have educational leadership pieces. I want to see how they prioritize, and as they're going through it, then I'll probe more, or I'll throw a kink in it. And they say, hey, I'm going to take care of this first because it's instructional, and then I say, but a person that just came in is now causing a big scene in the front of the office. We like to say that they're hypothetical, but almost every scenario that we use is not hypothetical. It is something that we've dealt with before.

Furthermore, Participant 7 conveyed that they offer a candidate the chance to share their experience in balancing by requesting specific examples during the interview. In contrast, Participant 1 prefers to provide opportunities for candidates to engage in informal or strategic interactions with various stakeholders directly linked to instructional leadership or managerial responsibilities. These interactions will give candidates a platform to articulate their processes and strategies, which can then be discussed in the follow-up interview team meeting.

The Use of Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. The researcher engaged the district-level leader participants in discussing how they use the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders when interviewing an elementary principal candidate. The researcher asked, "In what ways are the professional standards for educational

leaders addressed when conducting your selection process?” Seven out of 11 participants shared a similar practice of using these standards. Participants 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11 expressed similarly that the standards are addressed throughout the questioning process, although they are not specifically emphasized during the interview. Participant 7 elaborated,

I think they're inherently just in us as administrators. So, like the equity, the vision, the mission, you know, those types of things we've all been about. We understand, through our master's level program and doctoral programs you've learned them, and you've seen them. They're kind of ingrained in us. But can I name them all, no. Do I look at those standards when I'm writing interview questions? Not necessarily. I'll tell you when you build your questions and you look at your process for hiring, it shifts and changes on you depending on the position that you are hiring for.

Comparably, Participant 8 shared,

I would say that, yes, they are addressed, but they're not directly addressed. Meaning that if I were to compare the list of leadership standards to the questions I write, I'm covering everything in them. Because, when you get into this and it's so ingrained in what we do. We don't need the list right in front of us to be followed during an interview. But I do think you have to follow the list when creating questions because it's going to help you make sure you cover all the standards in the interview.

Participant 10 provided similar remarks, emphasizing the use of reference checks to also determine how well the elementary principal candidate aligns with the leadership standards. Participant 10 articulated,

Yeah. Indirectly through question time. We do probe and check on ethical decision-making. How well the candidate will collaborate with students and teachers. Also, with the families. We also ask the references about those things, like their comfort working with data, what sort of social-emotional support they've provided in the past.

In contrast, four of 11 participants said they do not look at or consider the professional standards for educational leaders when conducting their selection process. Participant 3 remarked, "No, they aren't. I mean, you expect somebody that's interviewing for that type of position to follow those and adhere to them." Participant 5 stated, "I really haven't looked at them. Usually, what we have done is an assessment of our building and our building needs, try to use that as the guideline for hiring our candidates."

Criteria or Benchmarks for Screening. All participants were asked about the criteria or benchmarks used to screen elementary principal candidates for further consideration. Nine out of 11 participants highlighted previous experience as a benchmark they seek in elementary principal candidates. Additionally, eight out of 11 participants heavily rely on references from previous employers to determine whether they want to move forward with an elementary principal candidate. Participant 11 explained,

Experience is a big one. What have they done in the past? Are they a brand-new administrator? Do they come with some experience? We typically have some sort

of questions that come along with that. Sometimes I'll use references to help me shortlist. I also look at how long they've been places. So, if this is a person doesn't spend more than two years in any given place, I'm concerned. I'll look at that. Is that because we've moved from teacher to maybe assistant principal to maybe principal? Have they moved up? Is that what we're doing, or are we just bouncing around everywhere? I also, again, use my contacts.

Participant 10 also spoke similarly, stating, "You know, I look for excellent references and experience." Participant 9 echoed the same sentiments, saying, "References are the first thing we look at."

Four out of 11 participants mentioned that, during the interview phase, they have specific criteria they look for in elementary principal candidates, particularly focusing on their performance in the interview, and their performance determines how the candidate progresses forward in the process. Participant 7 elaborated by explaining what they wanted to see during that interview, specifically,

First, are they comfortable? I'm looking for somebody who's personable. Are they? Or do I feel like they're just giving me an answer? Are they being genuine? You can tell just by their demeanor. I tend to joke. I tend to say some funny things and try to lighten the room. Are they adapting to that? Are they able to do that, too? Are they able to build that personal relationship with the people in the room? Are they making eye contact? Are they addressing the person? If I have a team of people, are they looking at the teacher who's asking the question, or are they addressing just to me?

Participant 10 spoke about involvement in the interview process for elementary principal candidates. This district-level leader detailed the approach, highlighting a team-based method, and specifically mentioned, “I have a committee of teachers that interview with me. They ask questions and interact with the candidates. Throughout this interaction, the team focuses on pre-identified criteria to facilitate the candidate’s progression.”

Use of Benchmarks or Criteria Tools. Six out of 11 participants explicitly mentioned using tools such as rubrics and rating scales to assign numerical values, weights, or scores to elementary principal candidates, with the aim of providing a clear assessment of the leading candidates. The district-level leaders then discussed their ability to shortlist candidates based on the obtained scores and ratings. Participant 7 elaborated on their process, stating,

I’ve used rubrics before. We’ve usually created the rubrics ourselves. We maybe have adapted them from things that we found online, but they are adapted to fit what we are looking for in the principal candidate. I have also used a rating scale. I’ve done both. I’ve done like a four-point scale and then a five-point scale. The interview team rates the candidates’ answers to the questions. We all have the questions that every candidate goes through. We rate the candidates based on the pre-determined criteria from each person’s perspective. And figure out how the candidate rates overall. The ratings serve as a guide for the candidates as they progress through the interview process.

Participant 11 said the team uses a similar process, explaining,

My committee typically rates people. I have one through five in the areas of like instructional leadership and managerial duties and some of those kinds of things.

I've also done it by rating the individual question, so each question has a rating scale that will be added up to equal a total score. I'm going to score them, and we're going to have a number, and that's going to tell me who the front-running elementary principal candidates are. This process helps if I'm struggling with two candidates, so I can compare individual question scores and overall scores to determine who the best candidate would be based on the current needs of the school I am hiring for.

Participant 8 explained a personal process, elaborating on how they tailor the weight of their questions based on the specific needs of the building. Participant 8 further explained the process,

We have a rubric, and I try to make the rubric where they total 100 score. The team all uses the same rubric to score the candidates. When the interviewing is done, I may have two leading candidates or two that are close. And my rubric numbers may show that applicant A is better than B by my rubric score. Another system I use is to tally the candidates as I interview and rate my top runners just from my own perspective before getting a score from the rubric. As each candidate is interviewed, I continue to add a tally mark to the front runner, second up, etc. At the end of all the interviews, I will add up the tally marks for a total as well as the rubric for a total. At the end, if it's five people, I have a 1-5 tally for each candidate. What it does is if there's questions as we're discussing with a candidate, we'll go back to the rubric. This information helps with our discussion. Once done with the discussion of ratings, we look at the numbers, and I will tell

the team what the numbers are telling us. From there I will either look for a consensus or agreeance on the candidate, or we go back for more discussion. Four out of eleven participants did not explicitly discuss the use of a scoring tool to support the decision-making process when hiring elementary principal candidates.

Assessing Fit. Ten out of 11 participants expressed a similar approach in assessing the fit of elementary principal candidates within the school's community and culture. Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 explained that they create questions that allow the candidate to articulate their belief and philosophy to look for alignment with the building culture and climate. Participant 11 described using a team interview approach to determine fit, stating,

Part of that is just actually visiting with them. You can meet somebody and talk to them, and kind of know where their personality fits. You can determine from that whether that's going to be a good fit for a building.

Similarly, Participant 10 explained, "My interview team asks questions and interacts with the candidates, and they're the ones that tell me if it's a good fit or not for the school."

Participants 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 mentioned taking their elementary principal candidates on school walkthroughs. During this process, they specifically observe the interactions between the candidate and school personnel to help determine if the candidate is a good fit. Participant 1 explained the process, stating,

In a very informal setting, you're also able to see some of their persona come out. What I've done in the past is we would have another person assigned to be their tour guide for the day. What I really like doing is, if the age level allows, having kids give them tours of the building. I can't do that with first graders as well as

you can, let's say fifth graders. But if you structure it correctly, you can have some good kid leaders. Student leaders can be able to interact with that candidate as well. I'm looking for these points of interaction. I can go back, and the secretary, who wasn't on the interview committee, didn't have a formal list of questions but may be able to give me just as much, if not more bountiful amounts of feedback from just their five- or ten-minutes' worth of interaction.

Participant 4 spoke about a similar process, saying,

We have them go and visit the campus. We make sure that they know what they're getting into. Sometimes, we have more than one campus open. Say, you're going to get your opportunity to be here, out of A or B. I look for the better fit.

Participant 8 expressed the challenge of ensuring the right fit, stating,

If you took everything away, what is it? Who are they? What do I perceive that the fit is going to be? That is by far the biggest quality that we need to try to find out. It's also sometimes the hardest.

Participants 1, 2, 4 and 7 discussed that they look to references to help them assess a candidate's fit for an opening. Participants 2, 3, and 11 explained that they involve staff by sending a pre-survey to gauge what it is they are looking for in an elementary principal. The diverse approaches shared by the participants, encompassing purposeful interview questions, immersive school walkthroughs, and the inclusion of staff input, collectively underline the multifaceted and dynamic process employed in assessing the fit of elementary principal candidates within the unique context of each school's community and culture.

Finding 3: Processes Used in Hiring Elementary School Principals

The researcher inquired about the hiring process from all participants, and each outlined a structured approach with specific steps for attracting applicants for elementary principal positions. Notably, the processes described by all participants shared a similar approach regarding a multi-step approach that goes through posting a position, screening the candidates, and a tailored interview process involving a committee for feedback.

Participant 1 provided a thorough explanation of the process,

We're going to post the position... Next is to advertise ... What I will tell you has changed recently, and this is again just the changing of the times. Is this intentional marketing or intentional... cherry-picking of candidates? Gone are the days of applications pouring in You want to allow for a good time frame of applications... balance that with a competitive job market. You need to have a good screening process. Screening is where you cannot waste time... I know that we all focus on the selection part of the process, but I would argue that the screening component is equally as important... I let the candidates know... what that day is going to look like. I have a committee selected We give the committee the opportunity to come up with a common set of questions. We facilitate a leader for each segment... I do not facilitate... Yes, the decision is ultimately mine. I would say the final piece... I don't take any type of formal vote. We set up a Google form... list the candidates' strengths, list candidates' weaknesses... It's very open-ended. The form allows anonymity for our parents and staff. Very rarely were there candidates that did not align... What I tried to

avoid was this idea that this is going to be a popularity vote... Final candidates will then interview with district leadership.

Stakeholder Input and Feedback. All participants discussed the final candidate selection when speaking about the overall selection process; however, they had differing views on how stakeholder input and feedback are gathered and used to help inform the hiring decision. Participants 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10 discussed that the ultimate decision for selecting and hiring the elementary principal candidate is a team decision. Participant 3 elaborated by stating, “There’s always a team. I won’t interview without at least three on my team.” Participant 3 continued by explaining,

I’m only one vote on the team. I can override, but that doesn’t set or send a good message to the team. For example, my gut kept saying no, no, no to a candidate.

But the team said yes, yes, yes! So, I’m like, okay, we’ll give it a shot.

In contrast, Participants 1, 4, 7, 8, and 11 all spoke to the final decision being theirs. The four participants used a committee in their overall selection process but also affirmed that the ultimate decision is that of the superintendent. Participant 8 stated, “ultimately, I get feedback from everybody. We fill out rubrics and stuff, but they know ultimately, I get the final decision.” Sharing similar sentiments, Participant 7 mentioned,

You just have to be super careful about who you have on the committee and why you have them on there. You need to be very clear about what the process is. I think if you’re very communicative and transparent, have a lot of clarity, and give the opportunity to provide feedback, a committee approach works, but I’m ultimately making this decision.

Stakeholder Involvement. As mentioned in the stakeholder input and feedback section, all participants used a committee or team approach during the interview phase of the selection process. To gain further clarity on how the selected committees were utilized, the researcher asked participants how they involved other stakeholders in the elementary principal hiring process. Participants 1, 2, and 9 spoke to involving community members and parents through informal meet and greet opportunities. Participant 9 said, “For the principalship, we hosted the staff with a get-together, including the PAC, our PTO. It would just be, come and go, greet and meets, and then a follow-up conversation with them.” Similarly, Participant 2 stated, “Once in a great while, I might ask a parent or patron of a site council to go to eat a meal with the candidate, but typically that’s going to be teachers as well.” Much like Participant 9 indicated, there would be a follow-up conversation to gain feedback from the social interaction.

In contrast, Participants 4, 6, 10, and 11 stated they did not involve stakeholders outside of their school district system in the elementary principal selection committee. Participant 11 articulated further,

I’ve seen parents sit in on committees. I haven’t done that. Part of the reason I don’t is because they aren’t bound by the same confidentiality rules. We’re interviewing lots of people, especially if there’s an in-house person. The conversations that we’re going to have around those candidates need to be confidential, so that worries me a little bit when there’s not one of our own people. We try to involve parents in other ways.

Likewise, Participant 6 explained,

No, I usually don't. The reason I don't is because of confidentiality. Parents don't understand that what is said in the interview needs to stay in the interview to an extent. One of the downfalls of involving other people is that if you don't pick their candidates, then that's a strike against you. This is especially for the person that's going to get it, because I want those teachers and staff to start pumping that person up to the rest of the staff and faculty.

Participants 1, 7, and 11 engage parents through surveys to gather insights on their preferences for the selected elementary principal candidate. Similarly, Participants 1, 2, 5, and 11 employ surveys to gather staff input and preferences on the desired qualities of the elementary principal candidate. The research suggests that the input from stakeholders is crucial as it provides valuable perspectives and preferences, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the community's needs and expectations, and ultimately guiding informed decision-making processes.

Challenges or Obstacles. Nine out of 11 participants identified challenges and obstacles. These participants pointed out that obtaining qualified licensed candidates is currently a challenge. In connection with that sentiment, 5 out of 11 participants spoke about the struggle of having experienced applicants. Participant 2 expressed,

Just the number of candidates is probably the biggest challenge. I am making sure you put a good brand out there in terms of what our school system is all about. This could encourage more people to apply for a position. But really, just that shortage of strong candidates is probably the biggest issue in any of our hiring processes right now.

The same thoughts were shared by Participant 1, who stated, “I mean, it goes without saying the candidate pool has certainly shrunk.” This response was also echoed by Participant 11, who articulated, “Getting enough applicants. It didn’t used to be a problem at all.” Participants 1, 3, 7, 9, 10, and 11 also spoke to the competition they faced with other districts throughout the state as a challenge or obstacle. Participant 10 explained,

Well, just finding the licensed candidates is a challenge. Unfortunately, with the size of our district, it’s a low-paying position. We are fairly remote. Well, literally one of our schools is on the highway in the middle of nowhere. You know, there are two dinky towns in the district, and that’s it. It’s a depressed economic region. It really is. It’s just not everyone’s first choice where to live. And if we hire you, you probably will not live in the district.

Similarly, Participant 9 expressed,

Years ago, you had so many candidates to pick from. Now you don’t. Now you’re going against other school districts that need the same thing you do. Now you’re hiring the right person, and you’re fighting them off from another school district who are fighting over them. That’s one of the things; it’s kind of dog-eat-dog right now. And I think that’s where the challenges are. You’ve got to make decisions quickly, not like it used to be. You’ve got to be very specific to what you’re looking for. That’s the biggest obstacle I see right now.

Participant 5 spoke about bias, stating, “You may be overlooking a good candidate because of your own biases.” The challenges and obstacles discussed in the research

communicate the multifaceted difficulties encountered in recruiting candidates for elementary principal positions in our current context.

Summary

An analysis and explanation of the three key findings from the interviews reveal a predominant emphasis on instructional leadership and relationship-building skills in elementary school settings. Effective interpersonal skills, especially communication, emerged as a central theme, underscoring their vital role in fostering positive relationships. The evolving landscape in hiring practices was evident, with a discernible shift towards valuing social-emotional learning and behavioral strategies, adding complexity to the multifaceted skill set expected of elementary principals. The interview methods commonly employed included probing questions and hypothetical scenarios to assess candidates' ability to balance responsibilities. Screening processes involved a focus on experience, references, and specific interview performance criteria. The understanding of professional standards for educational leaders was embedded within the interview process. Commonalities across participants highlighted a multi-step process involving posting positions, candidate screening, and a tailored interview process with committee feedback. The research findings underscore the complexity of the hiring process and emphasize the crucial need for adaptable strategies to navigate current challenges in recruiting elementary principals. Presented in Chapter 5 are a comprehensive summary of the study, the findings related to the literature, and the conclusions.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

Chapter 5 is organized into three major sections. The first section contains the study summary, including an overview of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, a review of the methodology, and major findings of the study. The second section reviews the findings related to the literature. The final section of the chapter comprises the conclusions, including the implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Study Summary

This study was designed to examine the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, other influential factors, as well as the decision-making process that Kansas district-level administrators consider when choosing candidates for the elementary principal position. This section provides an overview of the problem and purpose of the study. This section concludes with a review of the methodology and the major findings.

Overview of the Problem

Inequity in principal selection is a long-standing issue that can prevent the most qualified candidate from obtaining a principalship (Palmer et al., 2016). According to TNPN (2006), nationwide principal hiring practices frequently lack the rigor, thoughtfulness, and data to select the right talent. Despite the available literature regarding the qualities or characteristics and qualifications or experiences of effective school principals, there is limited understanding of the specific qualities and characteristics prioritized by Kansas district-level administrators when hiring elementary

principals. Therefore, the researcher sought to examine the characteristics or qualities, qualifications or experience, skills or competencies, other influential factors, as well as the decision-making process, that Kansas district-level administrators consider when choosing candidates for the elementary principal positions.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The first purpose of this study was to determine the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies that district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals. The second purpose of this study was to determine what other factors influence hiring decisions for elementary principals. The final purpose of this study was to explore the processes district-level leaders use in hiring elementary school principals. Collecting qualitative data using interviews allowed the researcher to analyze statements from district-level leader participants on their perception of sought attributes and the process they use when hiring an elementary principal. District-level leaders from several locations across the state made it possible for the researcher to address the three research questions.

Review of the Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative approach for the study. The specific design was phenomenological research using interviews to collect data. The researcher aimed to understand the participants' perspectives as they relate to the research questions. Kansas district-level leaders were interviewed for this study. After approval from the institutional interview board, the researcher reviewed the list of Kansas superintendents found on the Data Central webpage. Purposive sampling was used in this study to determine participants with the following characteristics: (a) identifies as a Kansas district-level

administrator, and (b) occupies a role responsible for hiring elementary principals. Once participants agreed to participate in the study, an interview was conducted using the Google Meets video conference platform. The semi-structured interview consisted of 12 questions with the potential for further responses as prompted by the researcher. After the interviews were conducted, they were uploaded into the Trint software to be transcribed. The researcher and the participant reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and approval. Once the researcher received approval from the participant, the transcript was analyzed by the researcher and coded by hand, using an Excel spreadsheet to help make meaning of the responses to the IQs.

Major Findings

Three major findings were found in the current study. The analysis of the transcripts revealed that the primary attribute desired in elementary principal candidates is the ability to be an instructional leader. District-level leaders expressed the necessity for an elementary principal candidate with a strong understanding of elementary-level content, particularly in early literacy and numeracy.

Within finding 1, the findings revealed an emphasis on instructional leadership and cultivating relationships within the context of elementary school environments was a sought-after attribute of an elementary principal candidate. Participants discussed the necessity for elementary principal candidates to have experience in the classroom and a focus on creating an environment that supports effective teaching methods and enhances student learning outcomes. This leadership approach involves working collaboratively with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to develop and implement strategies that improve instructional practices, curriculum development, and assessment methods.

The second notable finding that emerged as a central theme of the study was the need for elementary principal candidates to possess effective interpersonal skills, particularly in communication. Participants emphasized the indispensable role that elementary principals play in fostering positive relationships. The emphasis on fostering positive relationships was accompanied by a shift towards emphasizing social-emotional learning and behavioral strategies, introducing added intricacy to the diverse skill set expected from elementary principals.

The third notable finding of the research was that the most frequently employed interview methods involved probing questions and hypothetical scenarios to assess candidates' ability to manage responsibilities effectively. Screening procedures focused on evaluating experience, checking references, and applying specific criteria for interview performance. Professional standards for educational leaders were consistently integrated into the interview process. Shared elements among participants emphasized a multi-step procedure comprising position posting, candidate screening, and a customized interview process with committee feedback. The current finding underscores the complexities inherent in the hiring process and highlights the crucial necessity for adaptable strategies to address the current challenges associated with recruiting elementary principals.

Findings Related to the Literature

The interviews revealed three primary findings regarding district-level preferred attributes in elementary principal candidates. Participant responses underscored the paramount importance of instructional leadership and effective interpersonal skills, particularly communication, emphasizing their crucial role in cultivating positive

relationships within elementary school settings. Similarly, Dalton (1997) denoted a significant consensus between superintendents and elementary principals on the importance of visionary leadership characteristics. The Wallace Foundation (2013) identified five key practices crucial for effective school leadership: shaping a vision based on high standards, creating an education-friendly climate, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes for school improvement. Additionally, humanism was pinpointed as the most crucial quality for administrators, followed by previous experience and knowledge of administrative theory (Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990). Alkire's (1995) research identified leadership skills and human resource management as key themes, with qualities like a positive attitude and strong human relations skills being crucial. The research highlights the importance of empathy, building support connections, fostering supportive work environments, and emphasizing teamwork within elementary schools. The interviews illuminated that district-level leaders' preferences for elementary principal candidates align with the broader educational leadership landscape, as depicted in the literature review. The current research and the review of literature emphasize the crucial importance of instructional leadership, effective interpersonal skills, and relationship-building in cultivating positive school environments and contributing to overall success within elementary school settings.

The participants emphasized the importance of candidates' proficiency in encompassing skills such as data analysis and access to educational standards. This finding aligns with Karol's (1988) finding, which highlighted superintendents' preferences for candidates with a comprehensive understanding of curriculum and

program development, teaching, learning, leadership, assertiveness, interpersonal skills, and professional experience. Communication and relationship-building skills were consistently emphasized in the findings of the current study, which support the findings of Callahan (2017) and Rammer (2007), as both groups of superintendents in Texas and Wisconsin acknowledged that communication was the primary responsibility in selecting school principals. Additionally, the recognition of behavioral strategy skills with an emphasis on social-emotional learning practices. No research was found related to the emphasis on the qualification of social-emotional learning theory or understanding of student behavior.

Participants in the current study shared their perspectives on the task of balancing instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities in the role of an elementary principal to achieve an optimal balance, with a heavier weight toward the instructional leader, but emphasizing the underlying understanding that the managerial responsibilities are equally as important, and if not skillfully targeted, can take over as the majority. Dearmin (1957) found that principals should provide classified personnel with a list of expected duties. Establishing efficient office procedures was crucial to allocating 50% of the principal's time for supervision, which aligns with what the current findings showed as a typical achievable goal. In more current research, Brower (2002) concluded that superintendents placed less importance on managerial and organizational skills compared to other proficiencies such as leadership behavior, communication, and curriculum instruction, among others, which were supported by the findings of the current study.

The concept of fit was introduced when discussing criteria and benchmarks during the interviews. Baltzell and Dentler (1983) uncovered a critical issue in the

selection process: the lack of specific criteria led to an over-reliance on subjective notions of fit or image. In almost every district examined during phase one of the Baltzell and Dentler (1983) study, the concept of a good principal or a top candidate was deeply ingrained. Additionally, in Baltzell and Dentler's (1983) findings, many educators acknowledged the need for more refined selection criteria, especially in educational leadership skills. Drawing a parallel to Baltzell and Dentler's findings, the current study found that a candidate's fit was determined during the interview process and was emphasized as necessary to ensure a candidate's beliefs and philosophies align with the overall culture and climate of the school. The current study found that a common interview technique was to take an elementary principal candidate through a process to determine fit using team-based interviews and informal interactions with the candidates during campus walkthroughs based on feedback from stakeholders who interacted with the candidates during that process. The dynamic approach in evaluating fit is the method most district-level leaders use to ensure their teams are able to engage and that the candidate is the right person to hire to fit within the specific context of each school's community and culture.

Furthermore, in the context of emphasizing stakeholder input and feedback, Ballard (2002) discussed the utilization of committees in principal selection. These committees primarily consisted of superintendents, building administrators/coordinators, teachers, and parents. Additionally, Passmore (2023) recommended increased district utilization of performance tasks, providing more opportunities for hiring committees to interact with candidates in less structured atmospheres and implementing training to align hiring committees better with community needs. The current study's findings reveal the

prevalence of team-based interviews and scenario-based performance task practices, ensuring that candidates were assessed for their suitability in leading the respective school building.

In this study, participants were queried about challenges or obstacles encountered in the hiring process. The overwhelmingly consistent response revolved around the scarcity of elementary principal candidates possessing the essential qualifications—specifically, being licensed, qualified, and experienced. In the current study, at the time the researcher conducted the literature review, the research was not focused on procurement challenges regarding elementary principal candidates. In the current study, participants alluded to the limited pool, making hiring the right fit for the position an ever-growing challenge and an ongoing concern in hiring practices.

Conclusions

This qualitative study was designed to explore the characteristics, qualities, qualifications, experience, skills, and competencies considered by Kansas district-level administrators when selecting candidates for the elementary principal position. The investigation extends to encompass other influential factors in addition to delving into the decision-making process employed by these administrators. This section of the study is dedicated to offering insights into implications for action, providing recommendations for future research, and presenting concluding remarks.

Implications for Action

The findings from the current study provide evidence for the implications for action by district-level hiring teams and aspiring elementary school principals. By examining the requirements of the elementary principal role, the findings shed light on

the indispensable qualities that can contribute to effective school leadership. As the key findings are explored, it becomes evident that they serve as a guide for shaping hiring processes and empowering candidates to align with the evolving priorities in educational leadership.

Regarding district-level hiring teams, the findings revealed a consensus regarding the predominant leadership characteristics or qualities, emphasizing the candidate as an instructional leader first. The findings support the critical importance of having an in-depth understanding of the instructional fundamentals within an elementary school, including the understanding of grade-level standards, instructional theory, and instructional practice strategies to yield results for an increase in academic performance. The study's findings underscore the importance of elementary principal candidates demonstrating strengths in relationship-building and communication. Consequently, district-level leaders should design interview settings incorporating simulation exercises, peer panels, and engagement techniques. This approach ensures that candidates can display their ability to effectively engage with the school community, express how they align with the school culture and climate, and demonstrate how they can enhance the overall leadership strengths and atmosphere of the school they aspire to lead.

In addition to the elementary principal interview process, district-level leaders can enhance their professional development practices and opportunities. This shift aims to ensure that current building leadership members and newly hired individuals can continue to strengthen or acquire the skills they seek. Districts should provide ongoing professional development opportunities, such as developing and reinforcing

communication skills, focusing on social-emotional learning theory practices, and incorporating behavioral techniques and strategies.

When pursuing the role of elementary principal, candidates are encouraged to prioritize their leadership experience with a strong focus on instructional leadership. Elementary principal candidates should actively seek opportunities to integrate instructional leadership into their daily responsibilities and make it a primary focus. Candidates should also aim to lead in various capacities within their school, enhance their understanding of content expectations, and adopt a holistic approach to support students and adults through theory-based practices, emphasizing effective communication and relationship building.

Elementary principal candidates should leverage their understanding of data analysis and highlight their effective approach to meeting students' needs based on a comprehensive understanding of those needs. Additionally, candidates should actively seek opportunities to highlight experiences that demonstrate flexibility and adaptability through proactive best practices. Emphasizing communication and relationship-building capabilities, they can provide insights into their current engagement with various stakeholders, incorporating feedback to inform their practices. Demonstrating proactive approaches to problem-solving and effective delegation of responsibilities will exhibit their ability to balance the diverse facets of elementary principal leadership, serving as a strength when pursuing a position.

As concerns rise regarding the shortage of licensed and experienced elementary principal candidates, those aspiring to such roles should, now more than ever, actively expand their leadership practices within their current positions. With the candidate pool

dwindling, it becomes imperative for prospective leaders to proactively seek mentorship, engage in targeted professional development opportunities, and contribute to relevant projects. By doing so, they not only enhance their qualifications but also demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement, aligning themselves with the experiences district-level leaders seek. This proactive approach ensures their readiness to effectively address the diverse needs of both adults and students within the buildings they may potentially lead.

Recommendations for Future Research

Ongoing research is essential to comprehensively understand the ever-changing characteristics, qualities, qualifications, experience, skills, and competencies that Kansas district-level administrators prioritize when selecting candidates for the elementary principal position. Three specific recommendations are outlined to describe how the study could be enhanced in the future for replication, offering valuable insights into potential avenues for refining the research design, expanding the scope of the investigation, or addressing limitations identified during the current study.

The first recommendation is to incorporate a quantitative component, resulting in a mixed methods study. By employing a structured survey to systematically collect statistical data on the characteristics, qualities, qualifications, experiences, skills, and competencies sought by district-level leaders in elementary principal candidates, this approach would significantly enhance the understanding of district-level leaders and elementary principal candidates. The comprehensive insights gained from this mixed methods study would illuminate the evolving priorities over time, offering candidates valuable information to align with the expectations of the role.

The second recommendation is to target a larger population of participants. The study was limited to district-level leaders from Kansas. Expanding the participant group geographically could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the preferences, expectations, and trends in hiring practices for elementary principal candidates. This broader scope may allow for a more refined analysis and identification of commonalities or variations across educational contexts. Additionally, it could enhance the study's potential to contribute valuable insights that are applicable to a wider range of educational settings, thereby increasing the overall impact and relevance of the research findings.

The third recommendation is to explore the perspectives of other stakeholders discussed within the study. The researcher mentioned incorporating input from various stakeholders and emphasized the utilization of team interview processes and informal visits to gain insights into potential elementary principal candidates during the interview process. In a future study, it is recommended to explore the perspectives of varied stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and community members, in the hiring process for elementary principals. Understanding the expectations and preferences of various stakeholders could offer a more comprehensive view of the qualities and factors considered crucial in selecting elementary school leaders. By incorporating multiple perspectives, future research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the hiring process, potentially uncovering additional criteria that influence decisions and fostering inclusive practices in the selection of elementary principals.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the findings of the current study, district-level leaders seek candidates who are well-versed in the day-to-day operations of a school and possess a background and evidence-based strengths in instructional leadership, interpersonal communication, and the ability to build and foster positive relationships with stakeholders, both within and outside of the academic setting. As emphasized by district-level leader participants, leaders find themselves seeking elementary principal candidates with a deep understanding of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care practices. This shift in the criteria for candidate consideration has emerged in response to societal shifts and changes in recent years. The hiring process for elementary principal candidates will require them to demonstrate, through various methods, how they will serve students, teachers, and other stakeholders daily. Elementary principal candidates must be prepared not only to discuss their leadership pedagogy but also to illustrate how they intend to implement their methodologies through firsthand accounts, using informal interview methods employed by the district hiring team. District-level leaders identified a hiring crisis for highly qualified elementary principal candidates across Kansas. To combat the hiring crisis, districts must address the challenges identified in the study to strengthen their pipeline of incoming elementary principals. Such efforts enhance the likelihood of obtaining and retaining the caliber of elementary principals Kansas district-level leaders seek.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Questions

- IQ1. What key qualities or characteristics do you consider important when selecting elementary school principals?
- IQ2. Can you describe any changes or shifts in the qualities or characteristics you look for in principal candidates over time?
- IQ3. What specific qualifications or experiences do you prioritize in potential principal candidates?
- IQ4. What skills or competencies do you consider crucial for success in an elementary school principal role?
- IQ5. What balance, if any, do you look for between the requirement for instructional leadership and the various managerial responsibilities when conducting your selection process?
- IQ6. In what ways are the professional standards for educational leaders addressed when conducting your selection process?
- IQ7. What criteria or benchmarks do you use to screen and shortlist candidates for further consideration?
- IQ8. How do you assess a candidate's fit within the school community and culture?
- IQ9. Describe the overall process and steps involved in selecting and hiring an elementary school principal.
- IQ10. How do you involve other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, or community members, in the principal hiring process?
- IQ11. How do you gather feedback from stakeholders involved in the selection process?
- IQ12. What challenges or obstacles, if any, did you face during the hiring process?

Appendix B. IRB Approval Letter



Baker University Institutional Review Board

October 31, 2023

Dear Lisa Cross and Susan Rogers,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at skimball@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4563.

Sincerely,

Scott Kimball, PhD
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Jiji Osiobe, PhD
Tim Buzzell, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix C. Participant Solicitation Letter

Dear Kansas District-Level Leader,

Today, I am requesting your valuable assistance in contributing to my doctoral research at Baker University. The focus of my study revolves around gathering insights and information from Kansas district-level leaders regarding the characteristics, skills, experience, training, and qualities that are considered when selecting candidates for the role of elementary principal.

To facilitate this research, I am seeking your participation in an interview. The interview can be conducted through various means, including video-conferencing using Google Meets, Facetime, or in-person, depending on your personal preference. I understand the importance of safeguarding your work hours, so I am willing to schedule an interview outside of your regular workday or workweek, depending on your preference. All information shared during the interview, including your identity and school district details, will be kept strictly confidential. To further protect your privacy, I will assign a unique number identifier to your data if it is utilized in my study. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed using an audio recording software. To ensure the validity of your statements, I will send you the transcript post-interview and allow you an opportunity to make any additions or corrections to your responses. Your participation is completely voluntary. Additionally, you may opt out of any questions to which you are not comfortable responding or discontinue your participation at any time. The time estimated to complete the interview is approximately 30-60 minutes.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please do not hesitate to contact me using the information provided below. Additionally, if you have any questions or require further clarification about this request, please feel free to reach out, and I will be more than happy to assist you. Alternatively, you can contact my major advisor, Dr. Susan Rogers, at srogers@bakeru.edu or 785-230-2801. Your willingness to participate in this study is greatly appreciated, and your input will contribute significantly to advancing our understanding of the selection process for elementary principals in Kansas. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Lisa Cross
Baker University Doctoral Student
913-485-2958
LisaMCross@stu.bakeru.edu

Appendix D. Participant Letter

Dear [Participant's Name],

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your interest in participating in my study on the characteristics, skills, experience, training, qualities, and decision-making process that are considered when selecting candidates for the role of elementary principal. As we move forward with the interview process, I am attaching the consent form that contains essential information about the study and the interview. Before we proceed with the interview, I kindly request you to review the consent form carefully and provide your signature where required. Your signed consent is crucial for ensuring ethical research practices, and I appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

I have attached a copy of the interview questions and the Kansas Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership PK-12 document. Reviewing these documents in advance will help you prepare for our discussion and will ensure that we make the most of our time together during the interview. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study, the consent form, or the scheduling of the interview, please feel free to reach out to me.

Your participation in this study is invaluable, and I truly appreciate your time and dedication to contributing to academic research. Thank you once again for your interest and willingness to participate. I look forward to our upcoming interview and the insights you will bring to my research.

To facilitate the scheduling of our interview, I have included a link to my Calendly below. This link will allow you to choose a time slot that best suits your availability. If the provided options do not work for you, please do not hesitate to let me know, and I will accommodate an alternative time.

Calendly Link: <https://calendly.com/lisamcross/virtual-interview-slot>

Best regards,

Sincerely,
Lisa Cross
Baker University Doctoral Candidate
913-485-2958

Appendix E. Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

If necessary, the researcher is willing to answer any questions prior to you signing this form.

Research Study Title: An Examination of District Leaders' Practices and Processes for Hiring Elementary Principals

Purpose of the Study: The first purpose of this study is to determine the qualities or characteristics, qualifications or experiences, and skills or competencies that district-level leaders look for when hiring elementary school principals. The second purpose of this study is to determine what factors influence hiring decisions for elementary principals. The final purpose of this study is to determine the process district-level leaders use in hiring elementary school principals. Interviewing Kansas district-level administrators from several locations across the state allowed this researcher to collect data to answer the research questions.

Potential Risks of Participating: None anticipated

Potential Benefits of Participating: The findings of the study have the potential to help inform the recruitment and selection processes for elementary principals in Kansas. Identifying criteria and factors that district-level administrators use to determine the best fit for hiring an elementary principal can also contribute to a better understanding of the selection process and inform the development of more effective hiring practices. Furthermore, the findings might offer insights into the qualities and competencies valued in educational leadership, which can inform the development of leadership development programs for aspiring educational leaders.

Compensation: None

Confidentiality: The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Participants' identities will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information will be used.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Right to Withdraw from the Study: Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Time Commitment: The time estimated to complete the interview is approximately 30-60 minutes.

Whom to Contact with Questions about the Study:

Lisa Cross (Email: LisaMCross@stu.bakeru.edu; Phone: 913-485-2958)

Dr. Susan Rogers, Associate Professor, Baker University (Email: srogers@bakeru.edu; Phone: 785-230-2801)

Agreement: I have read the consent procedures described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study consent procedures and have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

**Appendix F. Kansas Preparation Program Standards for Building Leadership
PK-12**

The Kansas Building Leadership preparation standards are adapted from the Building Level National Educational Leadership Preparation Program Recognition Standards (NELP); the NELP standards are aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) standards.

Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to collaboratively lead, design, and implement a school mission, vision, and process for continuous improvement that reflects a core set of values and priorities that include change process, data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community.

Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to understand and demonstrate the capacity to advocate for ethical decisions and cultivate and enact professional norms.

Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote and advocate for the social emotional well-being of each student and adult, and promote the current and future success of each student and adult, by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture.

Standard 4: Learning and Instruction Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by adapting and applying emerging knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to evaluate, develop, and implement coherent instructional leadership, including: leading change; curriculum; instruction; assessments; support systems; technology integration; and data systems.

Standard 5: Community and External Leadership Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to engage, communicate, and intentionally collaborate with families, community members, business leaders, and school personnel in order to strengthen student learning, support school improvement, and advocate for the needs of their school and community.

Standard 6: Operations and Management Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by adapting and applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to lead change, improve management, communication, technology, school-level governance, and operation systems to develop and improve data-informed and equitable school resource plans and to apply laws, policies, and regulations.

Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by adapting and applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to build the school's professional capacity, engage staff in the development of a transformational collaborative professional culture, and improve systems of staff supervision, evaluation, support, and professional learning.

To access the full document, please visit:

<https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/TLA/Program%20Standards/Building%20Leadership%20Standards%20final%2006-09-2020.pdf?ver=2020-06-15-165643-683>