Hiring Quality Teachers: The Devil Is in the Details

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Increasing and persistent criticism regarding the effectiveness of our schools continues to emerge from all sectors of our society (Carnine, 2000; Hanushek, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007; West, Gabrieli, Finn, Kraft & Garieli, 2014). A consistent focus of that criticism has often been the quality of our teachers (Boyd, Hamp, Loeb, Ronfeldt & Wyckoff, 2011; Brown, Bay-Borelli & Scott, 2015; Donaldson, 2011; Harris, 2010; Regan & Hayes, 2011). While research has helped to clarify the characteristics of effective teachers (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001; Loeb, Kalogrides, Demetra & Beteille, 2011; Ziebarth-Bovill, Kritzer & Bovill, 2013), many school administrators are concerned about being able to identify teaching candidates with those characteristics during the hiring process (Clement, 2009, 2013; Engel & Finch, 2015; Gutierrez, 2013; Sawchuk, 2011; Trujillo, 2013).

Given the time constraints and responsibilities of school administrators, the teacher selection and employment process occurs quickly and involves a relatively restricted amount of information and data. How to conduct this process both efficiently and effectively has been the subject of considerable research that has examined such factors as the interview process, prior experience of candidates, formal and informal testing, observation, teacher artifacts, and administrator perceptions and observations (Ebmieir & Ng, 2005; Harris, 2010; Ingle, 2011; Naper, 2010).

One area that has received increasing attention in the past several decades is the value and use of professional portfolios as a tool for identifying teacher candidates who possess the characteristics of an effective teacher (Boody, 2009; Fox, White & Kidd, 2011; Martin-Kniep, 1999; Moss, 2008; Ndoye, Ritzhaupt, & Parker, 2012; Salsman, Denner, & Harris, 2002; Stemmer, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Strudler & Wetzel, 2005, 2008). The perceived value and emphasis on the portfolio has increased in recent years as a result of new and emerging technologies that are providing more creative ways for teacher candidates to convey and showcase their skills and accomplishments for prospective employers.

However, the portfolio as an effective tool for identifying high-quality teachers has not been addressed extensively in the literature. Far more has been studied and written about the types of portfolios, the process of developing and evaluating portfolios, and their use in self-reflection and in the accreditation (Barrett, 2000; Carney, 2002; Evan, Daniel, Moss, 2008; Ma & Rada, 2006; Mikovch, Metze, & Norman, 2006; Milman, 2005; Oakley, Pegrum & Johnston, 2013; Reese, 2004; Takona, 2003). Studies conducted on the use of portfolio in the teacher employment process have indicated mixed advantages and disadvantages (Boody, 2008; Mosley, 2005; Strawhecker, Messersmith, & Balcom 2008; Temple, Allan & Temple, 2003; Theel & Tallerico, 2004).

Although previous studies have indicated that teacher educators believe portfolios to be of use in the employment process, many of them also believe that principals tend not to review the portfolios of

applicants. Boody's 1997 study indicated that principals often do not use portfolios in the hiring process even when they have the opportunity to do so. Wetzel and Studler (2006) noted in their case study that "…it was often reported that EPs (electronic portfolios) were not viewed by principals or district personnel" (p. 23). On the other hand, Achrazoglou, Anthony, Jun, Marshall, and Roe (2002) reported that, according to their national survey, "Seventy-nine percent of respondents stated that a job seeker's eportfolio can be a significant selection tool along with references, credentials, transcripts, resume' and cover letter, and interviews" (p. 20).

While the design and use of professional portfolios is a common practice in most teacher education programs (Lin, 2008; Pardieck & McMullen, 2005; Strudler & Wetzel, 2012), it is unclear from the literature if they are perceived by school administrators as an effective tool for identifying high-quality teachers during the interview and employment process. Anecdotal reports suggest that there may be a conflict between the perceptions of teacher educators and school administrators regarding the value and use of portfolios in making teacher hiring decisions. If such a conflict does exist, understanding the nature of the conflict and how it might be resolved may enable the professional portfolio to become a more useful and valuable tool in the teacher employment process.

Purpose

This study was intended to determine if there are differences in how teacher educators and school administrators perceive the use of portfolios in hiring teachers and how their use could be improved. It was designed to answer the following questions:

1) How do teacher educators and school administrators differ in their perceptions regarding the value and use of portfolios in the teacher employment process?

2) How can portfolios become a more useful tool in the teacher employment process?

Method

To help answer these questions, we developed a survey instrument using PsychData (www.psychdata.com). We included a variety of item formats in the instrument, including ranking, rating, multiple choice, and short answer, depending upon the nature of the item. The final survey item was an open-ended response item that allowed participants to provide any comments or observations related to the use of portfolios in the teacher hiring process. We developed two surveys with PsychData, one for school administrators and one for teacher educators. Both surveys were almost identical, with only minor wording differences on several items.

In anticipation of a relatively low percentage of respondents in the study, a large pool of potential participants emerged. We used university and school district websites, attendance lists from professional conferences, and state education agencies to compile a list of email addresses of teacher educators from universities in Texas, Georgia, South Carolina, Missouri, and Illinois and another list of the email addresses of practicing school administrators in the same states. We sent an email request explaining the purpose of the study, along with a link to the online instrument.

Results

A total of 127 teacher educators and 41 school administrators responded to the survey. We compiled into frequencies and percentages the responses to each survey item; we then analyzed the responses in regard to the study's two research questions.

One of the survey items consisted of a list of six sources of information to determine how well a teacher candidate would do in the classroom. Teacher educators and school administrators were asked to rank how useful they perceived each source of information to be. We determined a total value for each item based upon the relative rankings provided by respondents. The number of respondents (NR) ranking an information source (S) as 1 was multiplied by 1, the number ranking it as 2 was multiplied by 2, and so forth, to obtain a total value (TV) for that source (S1: NR X 1 + NR X 2 + NR X 3….= TV). We then used this total value to determine the overall ranking for each item.

Table 1

Perceived Importance of Various Sources of Information Regarding Teaching Candidates

Ranking	Teacher Educators	School Administrators
First	Direct experience with or observation of candidate	Direct experience with or observation of candidate
Second	Face-to-face interview	Face-to-face interview
Third	Professional portfolio	Informal conversations with others about candidate
Fourth	Letters of reference	Professional portfolio
Fifth	Informal conversations with others about candidate	Letters of reference
Sixth	Cover letter and resume	Cover letter and resume

As can be seen in Table 1, both school administrators and teacher educators viewed direct experience with, or observation of, the candidate to be the most important source of information in the teacher employment process. There appears to be an understanding that the most direct, actual, first-hand knowledge an administrator can have regarding the candidate's teaching knowledge and skills, the more confidence they will have in employing that candidate.

There was also agreement between the two groups regarding the face-to-face interview as the second most important source of information to determine the quality of teaching candidates. Portfolios are also seen as an important source of information, but here school administrators and teachers educators split with teacher educators, viewing portfolios somewhat more important than school administrators viewed them. School administrators also saw value in informal conversations with other individuals regarding a candidate's teaching ability, but teacher educators did not perceive that as useful, ranking it five out of the six possible information sources.

Respondents were also given a list of nine factors used in making teacher hiring decisions and asked to rank the items in terms of importance. The rankings for the two groups of respondents was determined as it was for the data in Table 1. The number of respondents (NR) ranking a factor (F) as 1 was multiplied by 1, the number ranking it as 2 was multiplied by 2, and so forth, to obtain a total value (TV) for that factor (F1: NR X 1 + NR X 2 + NR X 3….= TV).

Table 2 provides additional support to the conclusions based on Table 1. As indicated by this table, school administrators and teacher educators viewed the personal interview to be perhaps the most important factor in employing high-quality teachers. According to both school administrators and teacher educators, how teacher applicants respond to direct questions regarding teaching, as well as their ability to think, communicate and present themselves, carries tremendous weight in the hiring process.

Table 2

Importance of Factors Considered in Teacher Hiring

Ranking	Teacher Educators	School Administrators
First	Personal Interview/Direct Observation	Personal Interview/Direct Observation
Second	Amount and Type of Previous Teaching Experience	Amount and Type of Previous Teaching Experience
Third	Information from Previous Teacher Employers	Information from Previous Teacher Employers
Fourth	Reputation of Teacher Preparation Program	Personal Characteristics
Fifth	Personal Characteristics	References from University Professors
Sixth	Portfolios	GPA in Education Classes
Seventh	References from University Professors	Portfolios
Eighth	GPA in Education Classes	Reputation of Teacher Preparation Program
Ninth	References from non-education employers	References from non-education employers

Note: Other items receiving responses: college GPAs, resumes, references from non-education employers

Second in importance was the actual experience an applicant has had as a teacher. According to respondents in both groups, those involved in hiring teachers want to know if an applicant has actually demonstrated that he or she is an effective teacher. The third most important factor identified by both groups, as seen in Table 2, is closely related to the second item. Employers want information from those who have actually observed the applicant and have knowledge of his/her teaching skills.

From this point, school administrators and teacher educators differed somewhat. Perhaps not too surprisingly, teacher educators placed the reputation of the teacher preparation program as fourth in importance, while school administrators placed the candidate's personal characteristics (personality, dress, demeanor) in that spot, with teacher educators ranking personal characteristics somewhat lower in fifth place. Neither group of respondents placed much importance on the portfolio as a factor in the hiring process, with teacher educators ranking it sixth and administrators placing it in seventh place. Both groups perceived some value of the portfolio in making teacher hiring decisions, but not as much as more direct factors. Other factors identified on the survey and ranked by both groups of respondents as lower in importance included the grade point average, resume, and references from an applicant's non-education related employment. An interesting observation from this table is that teacher educators perceived their own recommendations as less important in the hiring process than school administrators perceive them.

From this study, it seems that portfolios have some, although limited, value in the employment process for teachers. But what aspects of the portfolio are seen as the most valuable and useful? Table 3 sheds some light on this question.

Table 3

Perceived Importance of Various Portfolio Items

Ranking	Teacher Educators	School Administrators
First	Ability to individualize instruction	Ability to individualize instruction
Second	Teacher understands content	Teacher understands content
Third	Thoroughness of lesson plan	Thoroughness of lesson plan
Fourth	Innovative lesson planning/Focus on state curriculum standards (tie)	Focus on state curriculum standards
Least important	Consistent format for the lesson or unit plan	Consistent format for the lesson or unit plan

As can be seen in this table, teacher educators and school administrators were in agreement regarding the most important aspects of the various components of a professional portfolio in the employment process. Both groups believed that evidence regarding the teacher candidate's ability to individualize instruction is the most important thing they want to see in the portfolio, with evidence of the candidate's understanding of his or her content ranked second by both groups. And while both groups wanted to see that the candidate can develop a thorough lesson plan, neither group expressed a belief that the lesson plan should follow a specific structure or format. This may be due to school districts having their own structure and format for lesson plans that new teachers are taught how to use.

Respondents were also asked to respond to five items regarding the relative perceptions of school administrators and teacher educators of the frequency with which portfolios are used in hiring teachers, how much weight they are given, and the interaction between schools and teacher preparation programs in the portfolio process. The perceptions of school administrators and teacher educators were very similar on most of these items. Both groups agreed that the majority of schools do not require portfolios as part of the teacher hiring process and only a relatively small percentage reported a preference for teacher portfolios in hiring new teachers. The majority of both groups seemed to agree that, in general, those individuals making hiring decisions in schools do not really care whether prospective teachers provide a portfolio. It appears evident that school administrators and teacher educators did see some value and use for portfolios in making teacher hiring decisions.

School administrators and teachers did agree that portfolios are given some weight in hiring decisions, although that weight is not particularly great, and it is clear that portfolios are a relatively minor consideration in the employment process. Table 4 indicates that teacher educators appeared to be even more negative than school administrators in regard to how much weight is given to teacher portfolios. More than twice as many teacher educators, percentage-wise, perceived portfolios as having little or no weight in the hiring process. Another observation that can be made from the data in Table 4 is the seeming disconnect between school administrators and teacher educators regarding the input school administrators have had in the use of teacher portfolios. Administrators overwhelming

perceived their input to be fairly negligible, while teacher educators saw administrators as having substantially more input into the development and use of portfolios.

Table 4

Perceptions Regarding the Use of Portfolios in the Teacher Hiring Process

Question	School Administrators		Teacher Educators	
Do schools prefer that prospective teachers provide a portfolio?	Required:	0%	Required:	4%
	Preferred:	20%	Preferred:	15%
	Neutral:	73%	Neutral:	68%
	Other:	7%	Other:	13%
How much weight do you give the portfolio in the hiring process?	Great deal:	3%	Great deal:	15%
	Equal:	17%	Equal:	37%
	Some weight:	58%	Some weight:	38%
	Little:	22%	Little:	10%
In the past five years have you seen an increase in newly graduated teachers submitting a portfolio?	Significant:	29%	Significant:	15%
	Some:	42%	Some:	37%
	Same:	24%	Same:	38%
	Decrease:	5%	Decrease:	10%
How much input have school administrators provided to local universities regarding the use of teacher portfolios?	Great deal:	0%	Great deal:	4%
	Some:	6%	Some:	29%
	Little input:	15%	Little input:	37%
	None:	79%	None:	30%
Are universities in your area promoting the development and use of portfolios for their teacher education students?	All are:	9%	All are:	17%
	Most are:	50%	Most are:	43%
	Half are:	21%	Half are:	26%
	Most aren't:	21%	Most aren't:	14%

Note: For the first question school administrators listed "Do not have time" under the "Other" category and teacher educators listed "Don't want them" under the "Other" category.

The open-ended item of this survey yielded some interesting and useful insights into the teacher employment process and the role that the professional portfolio plays in that process. As noted earlier, school administrators and teacher educators shared similar views and perception in a number of areas but also revealed some unique observations based on their different experiences with portfolios. Some teacher educators responding to the survey considered portfolios helpful in giving prospective teachers a slight advantage in the employment process as illustrated by the following comment,

> "I believe portfolios are useful tools for the employment process especially with a narrowing of the field of applicants."

This value was also shared by a number of the school administrators responding to the survey. As several school administrators noted,

"Portfolios help give the interviewer a sense of what the teacher has done in the classroom. I think it also gives a frame of reference for the interview."

"A portfolio would help us to know what level that person would be able to proceed once she/he has been assigned a classroom."

This perception was also echoed by some teacher educators,

"I see portfolios as a benefit to the teacher candidate in that it gives them language and examples by which they can answer interview questions. If they can talk the benchmarks of the portfolio, they will make an impression with the principal and/or grade level team."

As one school administrator pointed out, the portfolio can serve as a valuable complement to the interview process.

"Portfolios are a nice addition to a strong interview as evidence of things (hopefully) heard and discussed in the interview process."

However, portfolios are not considered useful as a standalone component in the interview or employment process.

"Portfolios are a great tool, when the candidate can speak to the document. It is not the document that presents a person, yet it can help to indicate the level of instruction, knowledge and practice that they have received in preparation for the classroom." (school administrator)

While many respondents to this survey had a number of reservations about the value, and limits, of portfolios in the employment of teachers, many also saw some very definite benefits in using portfolios in the preparation of teachers. An important advantage noted by both administrators and teacher educators was the role of portfolios in self-reflection.

"Portfolios are important for self-reflection. Portfolios are valuable for novice teachers in developing a comprehensive model of their work and prework." (school administrator)

"Portfolios are vastly overrated as a tool for hiring (my opinion). They are good, however, as a tool for fostering reflection and thinking about lesson planning." (teacher educator)

"We do not use our portfolio as an interview portfolio. It is a progress portfolio, providing a context for the teacher candidate to reflect on personal professional development." (teacher educator)

"The portfolio is a way for the candidate to reflect upon their teaching and also to explain it to the rest of the teaching community." (teacher educator)

Other than as a vehicle for self-reflection, respondents also identified several other benefits of portfolios for teacher candidates, including a means for prospective teachers to demonstrate their ability to use technology and to showcase their writing and organizational skills.

Discussion

In regard to the first question posed by this study, teacher educators and school administrators are fairly close in their perceptions regarding the value and use of portfolios for hiring teachers. Both groups perceived the portfolio as being somewhat useful but viewed it as a more indirect tool in the employment process and less valuable, behind more direct measures such as observations of teaching performance, personal interviews, and quality of pervious teaching experience. In regard to the second question, study results yielded some helpful information to increase the value and use of portfolios in identifying and selecting effective teachers.

One important conclusion from this study is how closely teacher educators and school administrators agreed in regard to the various aspect of the teacher hiring process. There is often a perceived disconnect between practicing school administrators and education professors, who are often seen as residing in an "ivory tower," out of touch with what goes on in real schools. While that perception may be debatable, according to this study, it does not seem to hold true in regard to the process for hiring high-quality teachers.

The findings of this study also indicate that school administrators and teacher educators agreed the most important aspects of the employment process for new teachers are those that allow those doing the hiring to have direct and reliable information regarding a candidate's teaching ability. While both groups acknowledge the usefulness of portfolios in accomplishing that, both saw portfolios as only one of several tools to be used in teacher employment decisions. In this regard, the present study was in agreement with Achrazoglou, Anthony, Jun, Marshall, and Roe's 2002 study in which 79% of their participants viewed a portfolio as a useful tool for teacher employment, along with other tools such as references, credentials, transcripts, resume and cover letter, and interviews.

What is interesting is that the value and usefulness differs depending on whether we are talking about school administrators doing the hiring or teacher candidates being hired. In terms of those doing the hiring, respondents in this study perceived portfolios as helping employers get a better overall picture of teaching applicants. Respondents also reported that portfolios can help give school administrators a frame of reference when interviewing candidates and can also assist in reviewing and evaluating candidates after the interview process is completed.

One conclusion that could be drawn from this study is that teacher applicants may derive more value from portfolios than do those who are involved in hiring teachers. Respondents in this study noted the value of portfolios in helping prospective teachers reflect on their abilities and skills and to anticipate and organize answers to possible interview questions. In this regard, the portfolio can be an excellent tool for teacher applicants in preparing for job interviews.

This agrees with other writers, such as Milman (2005), who noted the value of a portfolio in helping applicants develop self-confidence in their teaching skills. Another value of the portfolio as indicated by this study is that it can provide applicants the opportunity to distinguish themselves from the applicant field by the type and quality of their portfolio items, and by using the portfolio to highlight their strengths as a teacher. This agrees with Boody's (2009) finding that "…a major value of portfolios

for students is that they can help close the sale and showcase their skills. It can help tell a story to the interviewers" (p. 69).

Respondents in this study perceived teacher portfolios as being high in technical quality in that they were well-organized and used media and technology attractively and effectively. They reported that portfolios were, in general, pleasing in appearance and usually impressive in their design and format. However, respondents did not necessarily see that as a positive factor. Respondents reported a certain sameness or "cookie cutter" appearance to many portfolios that, while technically attractive, did not necessarily give them confidence in the portfolio's accuracy in documenting the applicant's teaching ability.

This was a common perception expressed by both school administrators and teacher educators in the study. This is consistent with Theel and Tallerico (2004), who found that the principals in their study perceived a "sameness" in the content and format of portfolios presented by teaching applicants. Theel and Tallerico also reported that principals were skeptical of how well portfolios reflected the teaching ability of applicants. This study also found that to be a major concern of school administrators in regard to portfolios of teacher applicants.

Respondents in this study identified several problems with the use of portfolios in the hiring process and several barriers to their effectiveness. The one problem mentioned most often was the one discussed above, the skepticism regarding portfolios' accuracy in demonstrating the applicants' actual teaching skills and ability. The fact that applicants self-select items for the portfolio and can structure and present it in a way that puts them in the best possible light creates doubts among hiring personnel regarding the confidence they can place in the portfolio.

Another significant problem identified was that of time. Both teacher educators and administrators see the time required to view portfolios as a major barrier to their value. School administrators are very busy people, and the process of interviewing and hiring teachers is limited by serious time constraints. This makes it difficult for administrators to give more than a cursory review of applicants' portfolios. This was consistent with what other studies have revealed about the use of portfolios in the hiring process (Allan & Temple, 2003; Strawhecker, et al., 2008).

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations we can make based on the results of this study, and those recommendations have implications for school administrators, teacher educators, and teacher candidates.

Teacher Educators
1. Teacher educators should work with their students regarding the portfolio's place in the employment process. Rather than be a separate, standalone component, it should be integrated throughout the hiring decision. For instance, some respondents reported that the real value of the portfolio is in how well the applicant could articulate what the portfolio says about his or her teaching skills. By not focusing on just the development of the portfolio but also on how to use the portfolio, teacher applicants may be able to increase the value of the portfolio as an employment tool.
2. Teacher educators should focus more time and energy on assisting their students in developing portfolio items, as well as other documentation, regarding their teaching knowledge and skill.

Perhaps this can be accomplished by having teacher education students spend more time in actual classrooms, on either a paid or volunteer basis, to develop references, relationships, and artifacts to assist prospective employers in gaining an insight into their teaching skill.

3. Teacher educators should also invite involvement and participation from local school administrators in designing the format and content of the professional portfolio developed by their teacher education students.

Teacher Candidates

1. Teacher candidates can reduce the amount of time it takes school administrators to view portfolios by carefully selecting for the employment portfolio only those items that ensure more efficient use of the administrator's time. Teacher candidates should consider designing various versions of their portfolios for specific purposes, including a version focused on those items, issues, and formats most useful and beneficial to school administrators.
2. Teacher candidates should spend more time discussing, describing, and otherwise articulating for school administrators what various portfolio items say about their teaching ability.
3. Teacher candidates may be trying a little too hard to impress prospective employers with their creative and technological wizardry. They should, instead, focus on accurately documenting their teaching skills and ability in the simplest way possible.

School Administrators

1. School administrators should consider being more explicit and consistent regarding the specific types of information they want teacher candidates to provide as part of the hiring process.
2. School administrators should assist teacher education programs in developing information, training, and experiences for teacher education students to better articulate and demonstrate their teaching ability as part of the teacher hiring process.
3. School administrators should consider restructuring their teacher employment steps to allow opportunities to analyze evidence and information regarding the teaching ability of candidates. Perhaps a multi-tiered process could be used that would consist of a screening phase where school officials would first review professional portfolios before moving candidates to the next stage of the hiring process.

While not perceived as valuable or useful as more direct indicators of teacher quality, the professional portfolio can be an effective tool in the employment of effective teachers if it is developed, presented and utilized appropriately. The importance of identifying and employing quality teachers for our schools is not likely to diminish in the coming years. It is incumbent on teacher educators and school administrators to work together to develop a teacher selection process that is both efficient and successful in employing the best teachers possible. By knowing the characteristics of effective teachers and understanding how to identify teaching candidates who possess those characteristics, we can ensure a future for our children and our nation that is rich in promise and opportunity.

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