

Teacher Selection and Interview Portfolios: Principals' Perspectives

by
Ronald K. Theel

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Abstract

Teacher Selection and Interview Portfolios: Principals' Perspectives

The major research questions for this study were: (a) What forms do teacher interview portfolios take? (b) What meaning do school principals make of these portfolios? (c) How, if at all, are teacher portfolios being used by principals in deciding whom to hire?

This was a case study using qualitative research procedures. The study was situated in the hiring policies and practices of Central City School District from 1995 to 1999. Semi-structured interviews of 18 k-12 principals and 4 key informants were primary means of data gathering. Document analyses supplemented interview data.

Findings

Interview portfolios typically consisted of lesson plans; photographs of projects, activities, and teacher-student interactions; and supporting examples of classroom practice. Statements of educational philosophy, credentials, letters of reference, transcripts, and other background information were also included.

Most principals viewed portfolios as a way for candidates to express their educational beliefs, illustrate skills and methods, and supplement the

interview with examples from applicants' experience. Principals expressed a desire for more evidence of having used the portfolio development process as a means of reflection and introspection.

Overall, interview portfolios were not key contributors to principals' hiring decisions. The reasons for this varied. Some principals mentioned time constraints during interviews. Others expressed skepticism that portfolios provided meaningful evidence of candidates' teaching ability and people skills.

Propositions

Propositions and implications for future research center on portfolio format and assessment criteria, authenticity and self-knowledge, selection interview procedures, teacher preparation, teacher recruitment and hiring, and information management in Central City School District. Perhaps one of the most valuable benefits of the portfolio process lies in the development of a new norm for the profession: placing discussion and debate about what constitutes "*good teaching*" into a public forum.

TEACHER SELECTION AND INTERVIEW PORTFOLIOS:
PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES

by
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DISSERTATION

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Approved

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Date _____

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[Committee Approval Page]

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The General Problem

Hiring qualified teachers is one of the most important steps toward providing a sound education for students. The teacher-selection process is a critical task that faces the educational administrator on a routine basis (Bolton, 1969). Educational institutions have placed great importance upon selecting teachers whose mission is to develop positive, caring, and meaningful growth experiences with their students. To this end, it has become increasingly important for educational administrators to attract, recruit, select, and retain talented teachers. Selection is a form of evaluating an individual's capacity or potential to succeed at a task (Applegate, 1987). Cruickshank (1986) observed "short of the search for the Holy Grail, there hardly has been a human quest more persistently and doggedly pursued than the hunt for the 'good' teacher" (p. 1).

According to Bolton (1969), the decision to select a teacher from a number of applicants is the "culmination of a series of preliminary decisions which constitute the selection process" (p. 329). The selection of teachers is so crucial to the quality of the educational program that it seems obvious this decision should be made with all due care.

Hiring a candidate on the basis of his or her potential for good teaching is too complex an activity to be assessed solely by means of an interview. Additional techniques are needed to determine whether a candidate's knowledge is reflected in appropriate teaching behavior. One such technique that is currently becoming more widespread is the teacher interview portfolio (Wolf, 1996). This term may be defined as a compilation of information about a teacher's practice (Wolf, 1996). An interview portfolio can include a variety of samples such as lesson plans, videotapes of instruction, the teacher's written descriptions of actual lessons, and annual evaluations. Such artifacts are often accompanied by a short statement or caption, which identifies the item and explains the context in which it was created. According to Wolf (1996), the portfolio should carefully and thoughtfully document a set of accomplishments attained over an extended period of time. The process should be ongoing and conducted in consort with colleagues and mentors. One of the objectives of this study was to look at whether or not this innovation is making a difference in terms of providing meaningful information upon which school principals may base hiring decisions.

The Background of the Problem

Prior research on portfolios has focused primarily on information that a portfolio provides about a teacher candidate, how portfolios should be structured, and what they should contain (Boody & Montecinos, 1997; Fulmer, 1995; Gibbs, 1998; Wisnor & Ellefson, 1995; Wolf, 1991, 1996). Scant research has been done regarding the usefulness of a portfolio in an interview for a teaching position or on school administrators' perspectives regarding such material (Boody & Montecinos, 1997; Gibbs, 1998).

One of the challenges of my research was to explore this topic qualitatively. I was reluctant to reduce people to numbers and to lose the richness of context. Through qualitative interviews and document analysis, I sought to find out how, if at all, the use of teacher interview portfolios was affecting school principals' thinking concerning the teacher-selection process. Thus, a qualitative approach best served as the method to answer my research questions. I was seeking to gain insight into how teachers were hired and if portfolios had played a part in the decision-making process.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based upon qualitative research. The data collected were rich in description of people, places, and conversations. My research questions were devised to investigate topics in all their complexity and in

“*context.*” Context may be understood as the specific set of properties (including social, cultural, and political) that pertain to an event. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined context as “the particular set of conditions within which action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon” (p. 101). I was concerned with understanding human behavior from the subjects’ frame of reference. I sought to uncover how principals developed the perspectives they held regarding teacher selection through the use of portfolios.

In this exploratory case study, I examined the introduction of teacher interview portfolios into the selection process through semi-structured interviews of school principals, an informal survey, and document analysis of interview portfolios and District teacher-selection policies and procedures. My research into this area sought to distill an understanding of practice from the point of view of school principals.

Specific Purpose of Study and Research Questions

More specifically, my purpose was to determine how teacher interview portfolios were used in the decision-making process of teacher selection. My research questions were:

- What forms do teacher interview portfolios take?

- What meaning do school administrators make of these portfolios?
- How, if at all, are teacher portfolios being used by administrators in deciding whom to hire?

Initially, the focus of my research was on interview portfolios. What emerged, however, over the course of this study was broader in scope. This initial focus on interview portfolios expanded and my research eventually became based upon grounded theory. The principals became units of analysis. They shared their views regarding other elements of the teacher selection process including the gate-keeping role of Central Office, delays in the budgetary process, and other factors affecting teacher selection in the District. Thus, the study revealed much about principals and their perspectives on these issues.

I acknowledge that some principals may have been using my own “insider” status (I, too, served as a principal in Central City School District) as a channel to convey their concerns to Central Office. My study afforded them anonymity and perhaps principals felt a degree of “openness” about sharing their true feelings.

Research Methods

A case study approach served as the overall framework for my research. The study was situated in the hiring policies and practices of Central City School District from 1995 to 1999. Semi-structured interviews of kindergarten through 12th grade principals at the building level served as one means of data collection. During the course of these interviews, 2 of the 18 principals interviewed mentioned that they had recently hired teachers primarily due to the favorable impression made by those candidates' portfolios. I spoke at length with these two newly-hired teachers. Additionally, an informal survey was given near the conclusion of each interview in an attempt to determine each interviewee's ranking of teacher-selection criteria (see Appendix A) and where applicants' portfolios fell within those rankings. The results of these brief surveys provided additional topics for discussion within the interviews.

Document analysis of applicants' interview portfolios and District selection policies and procedures were also included. This "methodological triangulation," according to Stake (1995), increased my confidence in my interpretations. According to Stake, when researchers employ "multiple approaches within a single study, we are likely to illuminate or nullify some extraneous influences" (p. 114). In this study, the multiple approaches involved an informal survey, interviews, and document analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

I designed and used an interview guide that included a list of questions or topics for exploration during the interview. I field-tested the guide with a purposeful sample of six public school principals (two each from elementary, middle, and high schools).

According to Goetz and LeCompte (1984), individuals selected for the study must be appropriate for the purpose of the research. I selected school principals from Central City School District with a wide range of backgrounds regarding grade level, experience, age, gender, and race.

I made the first determination regarding which principals to interview based upon a document analysis of Central City School District personnel records from 1995 to 1999. I examined requests from building principals to interview teacher candidates during these years. Building principals submit such requests to their respective Divisional Directors: elementary, middle, or high school. I began by interviewing principals from those buildings that had the greatest number of such requests in anticipation that the interviews would yield richer data. Interviewing principals of buildings who may have only hired one or two candidates during this time frame could have wasted valuable time.

I decided to interview only building principals and not assistant principals or administrative interns. My rationale for doing so emerged from

the realization that principals play a key role in the interview process. In addition, final approval or disapproval for hiring teachers ultimately rested with the principals. I purposefully selected Central City School District principals in an attempt to provide a cross section of this group in terms of age, experience, grade level, race, and gender. My goal was to have the group that I interviewed reflect the diversity of the principals in the District.

Data Analysis

I began with an examination of data that had been heard and extracted concepts and themes that described the interviewees' world. I then decided what areas would be examined in more detail. This preliminary analysis revealed how to redesign questions to focus on central themes as the interviewing progressed. After the interviewing was complete, I began a more in-depth analysis of what my interviewees revealed. By utilizing this process, I was able to discover additional themes and concepts to build an overall explanation.

I followed Rubin and Rubin's (1995) series of steps in the process of data analysis after data collection. As a starting point, I placed in one category all the material from all interviews that addressed one theme or concept. I then compared material within the categories to look for variations and nuances in meanings. I next made a comparison across categories to discover connections between themes. My goal for such an

analysis was to be able to share with others what my interpretation meant for policy-making, practice, and comprehending the social world of the participant.

Summary

In summary, data collection techniques shared the common purpose of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. To build grounded theory, I looked for general statements about relationships among categories of data. My research into this area sought to distill an understanding of reality from the point of view of school administrators. I sought to gain insight into the teacher interview process and teacher interview portfolios in a specific urban school district. Such an examination of practitioners' viewpoints hopefully will assist with filling the void in the published research presently available.

The organization of this dissertation is as follows:

- Chapter 1 introduces the dissertation focus and methods.
- Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to this focus.
- Chapter 3 describes the research methods and context of the study.
- Chapters 4-6 discuss findings.

- Chapter 7 presents conclusions and implications of the study for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

I begin this chapter with an overview of different types of portfolios including interview, performance, and program portfolios. A discussion of the benefits and concerns of using portfolios follows. I conclude the chapter by reviewing research studies concerning the employment interview, group interview, and educational setting interviews. Additionally, I examine content and structure of the employment interview. Against this backdrop, interview portfolios may be viewed as an additional means of obtaining information to make hiring decisions.

Definition and Format of Portfolios

Interview Portfolios

Fulmer (1995) defined the interview portfolio as a “summary of courses, experience, achievements, awards, service, interests, and recommendations fleshed out by student work samples” (p. 12). The primary purpose of such a portfolio is to gain entry into the next door—to obtain an initial teaching position.

Similarly, Boody and Montecinos (1997) suggested that an interview portfolio represents what the candidate considers to be exemplary work; it can provide measures of performance and a concrete basis for insightful

interviewing. These researchers also offered illustrations of the value of a portfolio's components in making hiring decisions.

For example, lesson plans included as part of an interview portfolio offer insight into a candidate's comprehension of the relationships between content, teaching strategies, and assessment as well as the overall ability to design a lesson. Through reviewing items such as student work samples and pictures of learning centers and bulletin boards, the interviewer can gain insight into the quality of the candidate's materials and activities.

An in-depth review of grade level and subject assignments can offer the interviewer a sense of the strengths and weaknesses a candidate may bring to a school. By asking candidates to comment on the positive and negative aspects of those experiences, the interviewer can glean the candidate's level of reflectivity and ability to assume responsibility for both positive and negative student outcomes (Potthoff & Carroll, 1996).

Field experience evaluation summaries revealed to the interviewer what university supervisors thought of the candidate's ability to perform in the classroom. Such summaries can prompt a series of questions designed to assess how well the candidate interacts with other educators.

The portfolio may also contain a videotape of student teaching. Through viewing a videotaped lesson, the interviewer can gain a sense of