

Getting the best – Assessing candidates for the post of principal of a school

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategies used by recruiting bodies to assess potential candidates for the post of principal of a school in order to get the most suitable person for the job. A quantitative methodology is used to identify *what* recruiters seek in applicants. The expectations that recruiters have when assessing applicants can be seen as a form of proxy for the elements they consider would constitute a successful principal. Data were collected from school supervisors who had served as selection panel members. The findings confirm a four-factor set of expectations sought from applicants; these are *Generic Managerial Skills, Communication and Presentation Skills, Experience and Credence, and Religious Affiliation and External Connection*. The findings contribute to an understanding of what is expected of school Principals. An understanding of the selection criteria may also inform policy makers and practitioners and so improve the selection of the best potential candidates.

Introduction

Widespread recognition of the importance of the role that principals play in the functioning of effective schools has generated a flow of research into effective school leadership. However, there have been few attempts to look at how school leaders are selected (Blackmore, Thompson & Barty, 2006). With a view to bridging this gap, a large-scale study on the recruitment and selection of principals in Hong Kong has been undertaken, and some of the findings on what is expected of applicants are reported in this article.

Related Literature

The literature related to the selection of leaders in educational settings, however, is described by Hooker (2000) as “anecdotal, unpublished, and atheoretical” (p.183). Roza (2003) is one of the few scholars who investigated the attributes sought in potential principals by school superintendents. She reported that the criteria were built around “ability to motivate staff and hold them accountable for results” and “ability to execute a school improvement strategy”. In addition, she found that the school superintendents also valued applicants who had experience in leading professional colleagues, conflict resolution, curriculum and resource utilization. Based on these criteria, 80% of the 83 school superintendent respondents in her study indicated that finding qualified people to serve as school principals was either a moderate or a major problem.

In a more recent study, Rammer (2007) identified 21 responsibilities pertaining to the criteria used in selecting principals and asked 200 school superintendents in Wisconsin (USA) to indicate their degree of agreement with each of the items on a 4-point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Based on a frequency count aggregating “strongly agree” and “agree”, he reported that the five criteria considered to be the most important in the selection of principals were, in order of importance, communication, culture, outreach, focus and visibility. His respondents indicated that they encountered difficulties in finding suitable

candidates who possessed these ideal attributes. Rammer (2007) further reported that 56.2% of these school superintendent respondents indicated that they did not have “any systematic, intentional, or purposeful means” (p. 74) of determining whether candidates possessed any of the ideal attributes when hiring principals.

Methodology and Findings

Respondents

School superintendents (they are called school supervisors in Hong Kong) in all aided and DSS secondary schools in Hong Kong were included in the study. Ninety-three school supervisors (a response rate of 29%) responsible for around 200 secondary schools in Hong Kong (40% of the total school population) responded to the questionnaire. A summary of the respondents' profiles is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of Respondent Profiles

<i>Gender</i>				
Male (76.3%)	71	Female (23.7%)	22	
<i>Major Occupation</i>				
Education 26 (31.7%)	Private Sector 16 (19.5%)	Charity 4 (4.9%)	Religious 22 (26.8%)	Public Sector (other than education) 14 (17.1%)
<i>Years of experience as school supervisor</i>				
Less than 1 1 (1.2%)	1 - 4 23 (27.1%)	5 - 9 (21.2%)	18	More than 10 43 (50.6%)
<i>No of school(s) served</i>				
1 school 30 (35.3%)	2 schools 23 (27.1%)	3 schools 13 (15.3%)	4 or more schools (22.4%)	19

Measures

An instrument consisting of 22 items was developed specifically to identify the criteria used by school hiring bodies. These four criteria were *Generic Managerial Skills*, *Communication and Presentation Skills*, *Experience and Credence*, and *Religious Affiliation and External Connections*. The respondents were asked to indicate, using a 6-point scale, their perception of the degree of importance of the items.

Analysis and findings

A confirmatory factor analysis was run to validate the four-factor structure, which yielded the following goodness of fit indices $\chi^2=161.08$ ($d.f.=112$), $RMSEA=.070$, $CFI=.95$ and $NNFI=.93$ suggesting a good fit of the data. All reliability alphas of the scales were within a satisfactory range (from .726 to .913). The factor structure and item statements are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Factor Loadings of the selection criteria and interview process structure

Construct	Reliability	Item Loading (λ)	Item Description
Selection Criteria			
Generic Managerial Skills	.913	.92	Interpersonal skill
		.82	Ability to lead change
		.89	Decision making skill
		.80	Emotional stability
Communication and Presentation Skills	.862	.84	Ability to convince the interviewers of his/her strengths during interviews
		.90	Ability to handle difficult questions during interviews
		.82	Ability to lead the interviewers to focus on his/her strengths during interviews
		.59	Presentation and articulation during interviews
Experience and Credence	.863	.85	Experience in external school review; Experience in school-based management
		.68	Experience in student counselling; Years of experience as vice-principal
		.64	Current school enjoys a good reputation; Previous principal's endorsement
		.76	Experience in curriculum design; Creativity and innovativeness
		.83	Social networks in the local educational community; Involvement in professional association
Religious Affiliation and External Connection	.726	.44	Personal involvement in a church
		.17	Religious affiliation
		.60	Personal connections with the school sponsoring body
		.84	Connection to Education Bureau officials

The means for the four criteria were computed. As shown in Table 3, the degree of importance for each, indicated by the school supervisors in order of importance, are *Generic Managerial Skills* (Mean=5.5147), *Communication and Presentation Skills* (Mean=4.5668), *Experience and Credence* (Mean=4.3763), and *Religious Affiliation and External Connection* (Mean=3.3388).

Table 3 Means and Standard Deviations of the four Criteria

	Mean	S.D.
Generic Managerial Skills	5.5147	.73604
Communication and Presentation Skills	4.5668	.70779
Experience and Credence	4.3763	.66904

Religious Affiliation and External
Connection

3.3388

1.13894

Discussion

The findings confirmed that the four main criteria that school supervisors used to assess applicants for the post of principal were *Generic Managerial Skills*, *Communication and Presentation Skills*, *Experience and Credence*, and *Religious Affiliation and External Connection*, in that order of importance. Of these four criteria, only *Experience and Credence* is directly related to teaching and learning activities in schools but it was not considered by the respondents as being as important as *Generic Managerial Skills* and *Communication and Presentation Skills*. This finding appears to support the concern of Brooking, Collins, Court and O'Neill (2003) that current education reform pressures are pulling principals away from a role as educational leader to one of administrative manager since recruiters take into account also the applicants' non-educational general skills in addition to their experience in school-specific activities.

The school supervisors expected potential principals to be able to maintain “*emotional stability*” and be conversant with “*interpersonal skills*”. These findings may be more significant in Hong Kong where a high value is placed on relationships and harmony in schools and society. In an environment of educational reform, such as currently exists in Hong Kong, the principal can easily come to be viewed as someone who seeks to destroy harmony in a school by introducing various initiatives for change and forcefully demanding the compliance of teachers (Kwan, 2009). It is thus understandable that those school supervisors who place great importance on maintaining the ingrained cultural values of harmony would place a higher value on interpersonal skills.

The significance attached to the two skills factors (management and communication skills) may give rise to uncertainties in the selection of a suitable candidate. Unlike the assessment of the candidates' experience and credence, which can be based on firm documentary evidence, the evaluation of their management and communication skills is often subjective and ambiguous. Since the written documentation supplied by applicants in their application portfolios can at best provide only a partial picture of their communication and presentation skills, the selection interviews are considered to offer the best opportunity for assessment of these skills. However, the likelihood of the most suitable candidate being selected hinges on the knowledge, predispositions, skills and experience of the interview panel members. As school supervisors in Hong Kong come from a range of backgrounds, such as the business community, or as notable members of the community in other domains (in this study only 31.7% had an education-related occupation), they may not be fully aware of the challenges confronting school principals in a system that is in the throes of a reform process. Such a lack of understanding and awareness of school operations may result in them making inappropriate decisions. It would be appropriate, therefore, for policy makers to consider organising information sharing sessions on educational issues for school supervisors.

Although *Religious Affiliation and External Connection* was ranked the least important of the four assessment criteria, it is worth consideration as it has not been discussed in previous studies. This is also the only criterion that stimulated different reactions from respondents from different backgrounds. This factor has particular significance in the Hong Kong context because education had generally been entrusted by the colonial government to the church

and charity organisations in order to reduce expenditure (Tam, 1995) and its development owes more to the support of these bodies than to government assistance (Tang & Bray, 2000).

The reliance on this criterion for assessing candidates can nevertheless serve an instrumental purpose. Given that management and communication skills cannot be readily and objectively assessed in interviews, knowledge of a candidate's connection with, and involvement and performance in, affiliated religious bodies would seem to be a reliable alternative source of information for the school supervisors when making selection decisions. Accordingly, preference is often given to a "known" candidate from the same religious affiliation or school sponsoring body. The advantage of not delving into the "unknown" is that it ensures continuity and stability. However, it may also inhibit the possibility of change and innovation that could be brought in by "outsiders" who have a wider range of different backgrounds and experience.

Conclusion

The study confirms that four criteria were used to assess applicants for the position of principal of a secondary school by Hong Kong school supervisors. These were, in order of importance, *Generic Managerial Skills*, *Communication and Presentation Skills*, *Experience and Credence*, and *Religious Affiliation and External Connection*. Of these four criteria, only *Experience and Credence* is directly related to teaching and learning and it is also the only criterion that can be more objectively assessed. The results reflect the proliferation of the roles of principals, from that of educational leaders to administrative managers. This, in turn, leads hiring bodies to consider the applicants' managerial skills in addition to their curricular-related experience. Vice-principals, who are traditionally trained in their own area of academic expertise and were preoccupied with student related activities in their earlier careers, may lack the motivation or confidence to take on the additional responsibilities. The result is that they may hesitate to apply for the position of principal.

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