

## **EXPLORING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' HIRING DECISIONS: FITTING IN AND GETTING HIRED**

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Hiring preferences can often determine the amount and kind of consideration shown to candidates for teaching positions, and therefore can have a profound impact on school culture, but have been largely unexplored. This paper describes how one group of principals in Manitoba approach hiring decisions when assessing prospective teachers for “fit” both for the profession and for their schools. Based on a conceptual framework that examined the criteria used in hiring decisions along four sub-categories of person-environment (P-E) fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), the findings illustrate the critical role that principals can play in assessing applicants along various dimensions of fit even though they may have little formal preparation that would increase the reliability of such assessments. Additionally, these highly interpretive assessments constitute a significant part in decisions of who to hire, even though little is known about the relationship between assessments of fit and teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Finally, suggestions are offered that might improve the likelihood that those responsible for hiring teachers are aware of some of the biases that influence various decision-making phases of the hiring process.

### **Introduction**

For decades, educational researchers have confirmed what many parents know: children’s academic progress depends heavily on the talent and skills of the teacher leading their classroom (OECD, 2004, 2005; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Although parents may fret over their choice of school, research suggests that who specifically teaches their child in that school matters a lot more (Dinham, Ingvarson, & Kleinhenz, 2008). Good teachers have a profound effect on

student success. With policy makers, trustees and educational leaders focused on improving student outcomes, many have rightly concluded that the single-most crucial strategy is in preparing, recruiting, hiring, and retaining the most effective teachers (Walsh & Tracy, 2004). Policies focused on getting the best teachers into classrooms have become central to debates on how to leverage student success (OECD, 2004; 2005). While responses to the question of how to improve the teacher workforce vary across the country, those concerned with educational policy face a stark reality: teacher quality matters, and it matters a lot.

Of all of the factors that school divisions and policy-makers control, there is nothing more impacting than the policies that determine who is hired, how that teacher is inducted into the profession and supported, and whether the teacher gets dismissed or is awarded a continuous contract (Darling-Hammond, 2001; 2003; Harris, 2004). Though policies and practices that get the best teachers into the classroom would seem to be a high priority for all stakeholders in schools, there have been challenges to any methods proposed that would purportedly insure that all classrooms are staffed by an effective teacher. In part this is due to the numerous and oftentimes competing conceptions of teacher effectiveness (Little, Goe, & Bell, 2009).

It is beyond the scope of this article to either critique or advocate for any specific definition of teacher effectiveness. It has been suggested, at least as far back as 70 years ago by Rabinowitz and Travers (1953), but also more recently by Cochran-Smith and Power (2010), that defining an effective teacher is a subjective and interpretive act. However, while there may be little consensus on the usefulness of a narrow definition of teacher effectiveness (Campbell, Kyriakides, & Robinson, 2003), it seems reasonable to assume that those responsible for hiring teachers seek to place the most effective teachers they can hire in classrooms and that they use some criteria to make these determinations.

For Canadian public schools, the policies enacted by provincial governments and local school districts decide who will enter and be retained in the teaching profession (OECD, 2004; Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007). These policies have a tremendous impact on the quality of the teaching workforce and yet these policies may be problematic. In Canada, kindergarten to grade 12 schooling is almost exclusively a provincial and territorial function, and each province or territory sets the certification criteria for teachers (Young et al., 2007). Ultimately, however, provincial and territorial legislatures delegate authority regarding the hiring of teachers to local school boards who have been given latitude to choose whoever they believe fits best into their local context, so long as the policies and practices do not violate human rights and employment legislation.

For example, in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan teacher hiring decisions are legislated as primarily within the responsibilities of publicly funded school boards, school authorities, and private schools (Government of Saskatchewan, 1995; Province of Alberta, 2011; Province of Manitoba, 2012; Province of Ontario, 2011). Beyond these broad legislative frameworks, provincial policies do not delineate which candidates deserve employment and which do not. Even though research (Walsh & Tracy, 2004) suggests that hiring policies have a tremendous impact on the quality of a province's teaching force, without province-wide policies to use as guides in hiring teachers, personal perceptions, idiosyncratic assessments, and value judgments inevitably come into play. And, to be fair, it goes without saying that any policy, insofar as it is to be province-wide, should be well supported by research evidence (Walsh & Tracy, 2004).

It is worthwhile to note that, no matter how good any policy is, hiring authorities will likely never be able to render fully informed judgements about prospective teachers (Walsh &

Tracy, 2004). In part, this is due to the fact that, at present, there is no single test, academic transcript, or interview that is known to consistently predict the future effectiveness of teachers (Cashin, 1994). Ultimately, many agree (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010; Gladwell, 2008; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Jacob & Lefgren, 2006) that the actual performance of teachers in classrooms is the best predictor of their future success.

As such, the first step in improving teacher quality is to draw more talented individuals into teacher education programs who can somehow demonstrate their talents for teaching early. The second step is to insure these programs are excellent. The third step is to improve the teacher screening and selection practices used in hiring teachers (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; OECD, 2004; 2005; Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 1987).

By hiring only the most promising prospective teachers and simultaneously encouraging the least promising to help society in some way other than teaching, it seems logical to conclude that students and schools would be well served. Therefore, since those responsible for hiring enact the third step it is worthwhile to examine how some of the current teacher-hiring practices insure that an effective teacher teaches each child.

### **A Critical Focus on Hiring**

Staffing, which is concerned with the recruitment, selection, placement, evaluation, and promotion of individuals, lies at the heart of how schools secure human resources (Peters, Greer, & Youngblood, 2000). As DeStefano (2002) pointed out, because education is inherently a labour-intensive endeavour, a district's human resources practices have a tremendous influence over the school's ability to succeed. In this regard, a critical focus of human resource management in education systems involves matching the capabilities and inclinations of

prospective teachers with the demands inherent in teaching (Herriot, 1989; Montgomery, 1996; Plumbly, 1985; Zhu & Dowling, 2002). Consequently, understanding the dynamics of personnel selection is crucial if schools are to make good on a commitment to school improvement.

In many countries around the world there is an unprecedented emphasis on teacher quality because “teacher quality is assumed to be an essential ingredient in students’ achievement and other school outcomes” (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010, p. 7). Yet, perhaps surprisingly to some, many school districts and schools lack a research-based approach for identifying and selecting new teachers (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007; Walsh & Tracy, 2004). While research abounds on hiring practices for business and human resource professionals (see: Athey & Hautaluoma, 1994; Gibbs & Riggs, 1994; Goza & Lau, 1992; Schmitt & Robertson, 1990; Stone, 1994; Treece, 1989; Tschirgi, 1973; Weslowski & Field, 1987), there is little evidence that the personnel selection decisions made in education actually deliver the desired results (Boyd et al., 2007). Indeed, drawing from research in the U.S., Boyd et al. (2007) concluded that there is little evidence available on whether school systems make good selections among teacher applicants.

The same may be true in Canada. A report by the Ontario College of Teachers (2011) concluded that many recent teacher education graduates believed that the lack of transparency in the hiring process, specifically related to the criteria used to differentiate among candidates who were firstly offered interviews and then subsequently offered jobs, left them unaware of how to improve their chances of landing teaching jobs. Documentation pointing to how current hiring practices in education insure or even guarantee to a high degree that schools are staffed with effective teachers is scarce.

Traditional views on formal organizations (see Bidwell, 1965) and human capital theories (see Schultz, 1961) have proposed that individuals are selected for jobs based on objective measures of qualifications. However, contemporary understandings of human resource approaches used by educational administrators reveal that judgements of a host of subjective criteria, such as assessments of employment interviews and comments from confidential references, often play a significant role in the hiring process, with less weight afforded to what might be considered more objective criteria; for example, a candidate's grade point average (Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, & Thompson, 2007). Trust in the efficacy in current teacher hiring approaches appear to hinge on what Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson (2005) have proposed is an over-estimation by those responsible for teacher hiring that they are capable of assessing a candidate's fit to their school's culture even though defining the culture of school is not only difficult but may also be "ephemeral" (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 28). Therefore, it seems important to both the prospective employee and employer to know what the effect of people's perceptions of fit has on the outcomes of hiring processes.

Some have suggested that hiring decisions ought to be left to principals and committees of teachers because, it is argued, school-based hiring better insures that students have good teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997; DeArmond, Gross, & Goldhaber, 2010). Principals, it has been suggested, have an important and multi-faceted role in shaping a school's culture and a crucial area available to them that shapes the organizational culture is through their staffing decisions (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Firestone & Louis, 1999). Yet, little is known about how hiring committees, and specifically principals, assess applicants against their conceptions of fit even though these personnel decisions not only affect school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Firestone & Louis, 1999) but are also, arguably, among the most important decisions that can

influence a school's effectiveness (Loeb, Béteille, & Kalogrides, Forthcoming; Pappano, 2011).

### **Hiring for Fit**

When hiring to fill a teaching position, it is a common practice to define the responsibilities associated with the position and then create a list of requirements for the job (Rebore, 2007). Employers then use a screening process to eliminate candidates who do not fit the minimum requirements. The initial screening seeks to identify candidates who meet the technical requirements of the job, which means applicants are assessed against a list of preferred qualifications and attributes. Pappano (2011) suggested that those who lead schools are slowly coming to the “aha” conclusion that hiring smarter involves a critical focus on hiring for fit. According to Fullan (2011), one of the ways that the best performing school systems in the world make major, coordinated efforts to improve the quality of the teaching workforce is through systemic and consistent approaches to teacher hiring. Additionally, Fullan (2008) argued this does not simply mean finding candidates that match job profiles, but the best systems found prospective employees that also fit the organizational culture (Schein, 2004). For the purposes of this analysis, the following broad conceptualization of organizational culture has been adopted:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 2004, p.17)

While certainly not the only definition of organizational culture that might be applied to schools (for other examples, see: Deal & Peterson, 1999; Morgan, 2006; Stoll, 2000; among others), Schein's (2004) description addressed a key area of consideration in this study, namely that

school culture both exerts an influence on and is also influenced by the recruitment and socialization of new hires (Firestone & Louis, 1999).

The notion that employers seek to hire applicants based on their "fit" to job and organizational cultures (Schein, 2004) has been long recognized in the human resources management literature. Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart (1992) contend that a wide range of experts have concluded that hiring authorities should pay particular attention to how their selection procedures take into account notions of organizational culture in hiring decisions. In explaining how fit is actually used in the hiring process, Rynes and Gerhart (1990) noted that while the term fit is an elusive construct it is most commonly assessed via the employment interview and that interviewer assessments of fit typically extend considerably beyond technical job requirements. It would appear that education is no different as Pappano (2011) and The New Teacher Project (2012) both recommended that those responsible for hiring teachers pay particular attention to choose candidates who are good fits to their schools.

Based on an extensive review of the literature, Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) proposed that the concept of *person-environment* (P-E) *fit* has been described as being so pervasive in the personnel management literature that it is considered one of the dominant conceptual forces in the field. Moreover, Kristof-Brown et al. (p. 283) stated: "Based in the tradition of interactional psychology, the notion of people being differentially compatible with jobs, groups, organizations, and vocations is almost axiomatic."

In this study, person-environment fit was framed as the general understanding that in ideal situations there is a compatibility between an individual and work environment where the two are well matched (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). According to Kristof-Brown et al., person-environment fit can be defined in four sub-categories: (a) *person-vocation* (P-V) *fit*; (b) *person-*



*job (P-J) fit; (c) person-organization (P-O) fit; and (d) person-group (P-G) fit.* These four categories were used as a conceptual framework to gain an understanding of how one group of principals assessed various dimensions of applicants' fit to their schools.

The broadest of these sub-categories is the concept of vocational fit, and much of the research on person-vocation fit includes theories of vocational choice and vocational interests (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Ehrhart and Makransky (2007, p. 208) stated: "Theory and research on vocational interests support the idea that people search for, choose, and flourish in work environments in which there is good fit between their own characteristics and the characteristics of their occupation."

The concept of person-job fit is the traditional foundation for employee selection (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In fact, Sekiguchi (2004) wrote: "The primary concern in employee selection has been with finding those applicants who have the skills and abilities necessary to do the job" (p. 183). Accordingly, person-job fit has been defined (Sekiguchi, 2004) as the match between an applicant and the requirements of a specific job, or in an educational context a match between a teacher's knowledge, skills, and abilities and the demands of teaching. It has been suggested by Sekiguchi (2004) that there is substantial evidence that a high level of person-job fit has a number of positive outcomes, which include the following: (a) decreased job stress; (b) increased job satisfaction; and (c) stronger motivation, performance, attendance, and retention. Kristof-Brown (2000) proposed that person-organization fit is typically viewed as the match between an applicant and the organizational attributes frequently studied as individual-organizational value congruence.

Person-organization fit has been broadly defined as "the compatibility between people and organizations" (Sekiguchi, 2004, p. 182). Similar to the positive outcomes associated with

high levels of person-job fit, Sekiguchi (2004) concluded that: “Empirical evidence has shown that a high level of P-O fit is related to a number of positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and pro-social behaviours” (p. 183). There is research evidence that suggests that assessments of person-organization fit are typically done during the employment interview (Karren & Graves, 1994). According to Karren and Graves, personnel recruiters often report that their decisions about who to hire are based, more than anything, on their perceptions of the fit between the interviewee and the organization.

Finally, while person-group fit is sometimes regarded as a sub-unit of the broader construct of person-organization fit (Sekiguchi, 2004), Kristof-Brown et al., (2005) identify person-group fit as more closely viewed a match between an individual’s values and the values held by the group that the individual will work with on a regular basis. Person-group fit has been described as the perceived congruence between a newcomer and the members of her/his immediate work group (Antonioni & Park, 2001).

While assessments of prospective teachers along these sub-categories are not mutually exclusive in practice, it is clear that selection has become more complex because of the need to address all of these categories and not just person-job. Hiring now encompasses not only finding people who seem to be suitable for the profession and competent for the job but who also satisfy that elusive sense of “fit” for the organization. Increasingly, there is a need to find employees who fit the climate and culture of the organization and staff (Anderson, Lievens, van Dam, & Ryan, 2004).

Thus, this study examined eight principals’ perceptions of the importance of “fit” between prospective teachers and the understandings that these principals had of their own school culture (Schein, 2004). The study sought to illustrate what principals believed prospective

teachers are supposed to fit into and how they assessed candidates for fit.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative, naturalistic inquiry approach was used to examine principals' perceptions of teacher hiring and teacher candidate 'fit' with school culture (McMillan, 2012). The methodological approach was designed to produce data that could undergo a form of thematic analysis examining the participants' responses on important aspects of hiring. Over a period of eight months, 16 semi-structured interviews (two interviews for each of the eight participants) were held, each one lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The general research question was: What criteria do principals use and what weightings do they assign to those criteria in their hiring decisions as they assess whether an applicant is suitable for employment in their schools? The study was approved by the appropriate institutional ethics research board.

The first semi-structured interview focused on how the participants conceived of their schools' culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999). For example, one question asked the participants to choose three or four words that they felt described their school. As a follow-up probe, the participants were asked to elaborate on what those words meant to them. The second interview centred on questions about the criteria and weighting the participants took into consideration when hiring new teachers for their schools. For example, a question asked: How do you assess an interviewee's suitability to work as a teacher in this school? A follow-up probe to this question asked: What are you looking for or listening to hear from an interviewee that illustrates that she or he will fit into this school's culture?

The sixteen interviews were transcribed (resulting in 176 doubled-spaced, pages of data) and returned to the specific participant for member checking, so that the transcripts would reflect

a greater level of accuracy and credibility (McMillan, 2012). By employing a constant-comparative coding approach (McMillan, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), 61 text segments were chosen from the transcripts as being significant to the general research question and these were analysed based on their congruence to the sub-categories of person-environment fit proposed by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005).

The analysis used “a priori” codes (McMillan, 2012) derived from a general typology developed from Kristof-Brown et al.’s (2005) four sub-categories of person-environment fit, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Sub-categories of Person-Environment fit*

Person-Vocation fit	Person-Group fit
Person-Organization fit	Person-Job fit

The transcripts were carefully read and re-read to surface statements that matched the sub-categories of person-environment fit (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Careful attention was paid to insure, as best as possible, that the data segments fit the appropriate categories and were not forced to fit (McMillan, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

*Participants Involved in the Study*

Participation in the study was limited to eight principals from Catholic schools in Manitoba because it has been suggested that Catholic schools are relatively small, functional communities that are structured (Putnam, 2000), at least in theory, to provide for an on-going encounter with a communal cultural inheritance (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education,

1977). In addition, principals from Manitoba's Catholic schools were selected because while their schools are legislated as "Private Schools" (Province of Manitoba, 2012) the ability to declare themselves as "Catholic schools" is governed by the Canon Laws of the Catholic Church. As such, these schools are only permitted to operate as a Catholic school with the approval of the local Bishop (Canon Law Society of America, 2003). Finally, the participants were chosen because it is common practice in Manitoba's private schools for the principal to be involved in teacher hiring decisions.

As a result, an assumption in the study's design was a belief that there might be some similarities in how principals of Catholic schools in one province assessed the dimensions of person-environment fit as they applied to the hiring of teachers who were suited for work in a Catholic school (Grace, 2002). It goes without question that the validity of this assumption is tenuous as it has been suggested that no two schools and no two schools' cultures are the same (Peterson & Deal, 1998). With this limitation noted, it is important to note that neither the Catholicity of the school nor its Catholic culture were the emphasis of the study.

Table 2, "Participants," provides a summary of some of the demographic information about the participants, their schools, and staffs.

**Table 2**  
*Participants*

Identifier	Teaching experience in a Catholic school (years)	Principal experience in a Catholic school (years)	Highest level of educational attainment	Advanced study or professional development in human resources	Student enrolment	Teachers on staff	Teachers hired in previous three years
P-1	9	1	B.Ed. <sup>a</sup>	1 university course	89	7	3
P-2	11	4	P.B.D.E. <sup>b</sup>	None	593	45	11
P-3	3	3	B.Ed.	None	221	11	4
P-4	9	2	M.Ed. <sup>c</sup>	None	237	13	5
P-5	8	8	P.B.D.E.	1 university course	598	37	9
P-6	18	12	B.Ed.	A few workshops	210	14	4
P-7	5	1	B.Ed.	1 university course	212	16	5
P-8	29	6	M.Ed.	1 University course & a few workshops	587	40	9

<sup>a</sup> B.Ed. denotes the completion of a Bachelor of Education Degree.

<sup>b</sup> P.B.D.E. denotes the completion of a Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Education that is typically completed after a B.Ed.

<sup>c</sup> M.Ed. denotes the completion of a Master of Education Degree.

The eight principals had worked in Catholic schools from as few as three years to as many as twenty-nine years. Additionally, the principals had administrative experience that ranged between one and twelve years. The sizes of the schools these principals administered ranged from a small school of 89 students and 7 teachers to a relatively large one of 593 students and 39 teachers. Their academic backgrounds varied from the completion of a Bachelor’s degree to the completion of a Master’s degree. The amount of formal training, in the form of university courses and/or professional development in human resource management, ranged from no formal preparation to one participant who had completed one university course in personnel management and had attended a few workshops. Nevertheless, these eight principals hired a significant number of teachers, 46 to be precise, over a three-year period between 2006–2007 and 2008–2009.

## **Findings**

This study confirmed that these principals, as positional leaders, played a critical role in assessing prospective teachers' suitability to teach. Moreover, the findings highlighted that, in some cases, participants acted as gatekeepers to both the profession and their schools, assuming responsibility for judging whether or not applicants demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that match their beliefs of what it means to be a teacher in general, and specifically to be hired as a teacher for their schools. This section presents the findings in four sub-sections to parallel the four categories of person-environment fit that guided the data analysis (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

### *Person-Vocation Fit*

The findings of the study suggested that the participants believed it was their responsibility to assess applicants' fit to the profession of teaching, in general. One participant best illustrated this by stating:

[During the interview] I'm listening to hear that they understand that teachers' jobs do not end when the school bell rings. We're always working at getting a little better as teachers. We owe that to our students and this profession. That is part of the vocation. (P-4)

In addition, the findings demonstrated that the participants assessed person-vocation fit through their perceptions of individuals' personalities and matched these against their own beliefs of the vocational requirements needed to be a teacher. This is best illustrated by the comments made by two participants. One said: "To be a teacher can be all consuming. I need to know you see it as more than a job. It's not just a job. It's a calling" (P-2). While another noted: "They have to be able to demonstrate they have the kind of work ethic required from teachers before I can be convinced they are going to be good at it [teaching]" (P-1).

It also appeared that the participants believed they could assess an applicant's fit to their conceptions of teaching as vocation. Two powerful examples of how applicants were assessed for vocational fit are provided below. As one participant commented: "You can certainly get a sense during the interview if a person is a teacher at heart and that her or his passion is to teach. It burns so strongly you can sense it" (P-8). While another said:

I look to see a willingness to continue to improve. I need to know from their cover letter that they are committed to lifelong learning to improve as a teacher. During the interview, I'm looking for something that lets me know they are making a commitment to be a teacher as a way of being. (P-3)

Whereas a person's ostensible reasons for entering teaching and remaining there may differ from the subjective criteria being used in evaluations of vocational fit, the findings demonstrated that these principals believed they had the ability to measure an individual against their perceptions of teaching as a vocation.

### *Person-Job Fit*

The findings suggested that assessments of an applicant's cover letter and/or résumé was relied on to make the initial determinations of person-job fit. This is well illustrated by the comments of two participants. One noted: "When I screen a résumé, I go through and look at what they have done in terms of work history and what their educational background is that fits the details of the job posting" (P-3). Similarly, another stated: "If I can't see it in there [the application package], then I just assume they don't match the job posting. If it's not right there, I don't have time to try and look for it" (P-7).

Additionally, the participants believed that they could further assess person-job fit by matching what they perceived to be the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions to perform



the job against information they had gleaned from candidates' résumés, interviews, and reference checks. Three examples are provided to illustrate the approaches used by the participants to evaluate person-job fit. One participant stated: "I look at cover letters and résumés to see if applicants have the basic qualifications for the job, like the appropriate education and experience, and then I follow that up with reference calls to find more about them" (P-6). Another said: "I want teachers who are warm and nurturing, like parents are. The person I hire has to be open, compassionate, and caring. Those things are hard to determine from paper, but they come out quite naturally in the interview" (P-5). A third remarked: "Sometimes the intangibles outweigh my analysis of any objective criteria. I want to know that someone is a community builder. I want to know that the person values community" (P-8).

The findings demonstrated that the participants felt confident in their abilities to assess candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions against their beliefs of what teaching entails. Furthermore, the findings reinforced that there was a belief that "good" teachers, even prospective ones, can demonstrate these character attributes in their cover letter and résumé.

### *Person-Organization Fit*

The findings of this study indicated that in school-based hiring decisions the individuals involved in judging candidates, from the start of the interview, begin to consider whether or not they believed there was a values match between the applicants and organization. In other words, they considered whether an applicant fits not only the requirements of a particular position but also the specific needs and culture of a school. As one participant stated: "Right from the start, you can pick up a little about their values, what they value. I like to start with the cover letter,

and then as soon as they begin to speak about what matters to them in teaching it becomes obvious” (P-2). Or as another noted:

In the interview, I’m looking for those intangibles that can’t be assessed on a rubric from their cover letters and curriculum vitae. I want to know if they can fit into our school culture and climate, and make a positive contribution to it. (P-8)

The findings also suggested that these principals used themselves as an example of a standard to judge the level of person-organization fit of prospective teachers.

This is poignantly illustrated in the following comments made by two participants. One noted that: “Sometimes the hiring decision boils down to a feeling of whether or not the person’s values fit into what I value and my vision of what the school is about” (P-5). While another stated:

Probably the best way I can describe it is that I’m looking for someone who is in touch with his or her humanity and the humanity of other people. It’s something important to me and I greatly value it in other people. I look for that in an applicant. (P-6)

The participants also identified that they tried to select prospective teachers who could affect positive changes yet operate within the existing organizational culture and structure of the school. This is illustrated best by the comments of one participant, who noted:

I try to get a sense of their ability to be flexible within our system. Rigidity does not work well in this school. We’ve had some people [work] here that were fairly rigid, and they really struggled. I guess I want them to be able to work within the existing [school] culture but also push their colleagues to improve. (P-7)

The findings demonstrated that prospective teachers are simultaneously being assessed for their ability to act as levers for school improvement efforts and their capacity to teach within perceptions of the existing culture of a school.

### *Person-Group Fit*

One participant offered a powerful example that illustrated the importance that can be placed on assessments of person-group fit in hiring decisions:

I want to know if the person is communal. I need to know that the person wants to understand others and work with others. I need to know they can let their egos fall by the side. For me, fit is based on things like the gender balance and ages of my current staff. (P-4)

While it might be difficult to formulate the precise composition of staff required to ensure success for all students in any school, the participants seemed to believe that teachers working in groups was a promising approach that could leverage school-wide improvement.

The following comment by one of the participants illustrated the high regard that the participants had for candidates who they believed could collaborate in teams:

As I listen, I wonder how easy the person will be to work with in a team setting like we have here. I'm thinking, "Is this person an excellent team player?" I want to know if the person focuses on him or herself rather than what is best for the whole group on staff. (P-7)

Evidently, the participants regarded teamwork and a collaborative attitude as universally desired characteristics.

In addition, the findings suggested that the participants had a high regard for applicants who they believed could fit into a school's existing teaching teams and groups. A comment that illustrated how the participants focused on assessments of individuals' person-group fit can be found in the words of one participant, who stated:

I'm always asking myself, "Is this a good fit for the team? Will this person fit in with the other characters on the grade-level or subject-area team?" They have to be able to get along with their colleagues. I'm always thinking about fit. (P-4)

Furthermore, as another participant stated, finding a candidate who fits into the existing staff and can function as part of it was a paramount consideration in decisions of who to hire: "The person

just has to fit into the team here at the school in order to be successful. I don't waste anybody's time if I don't think they will fit" (P-2).

It is important to note that one participant acknowledged that there are also difficulties that are faced when trying to hire someone who could both fit into the existing staff dynamics and, at the same time, affect a positive change in staff culture. This participant stated:

I'm looking for formability. We have some teachers who have been here 15 or 20 years, and they are stuck in a rut and they don't know it. I'm looking for someone who can fit into the group. But, I also need people who are willing to take some risks and push the group. It's a careful balancing act. (P-1)

However, the findings did not demonstrate that any of the other participants sensed that there was a tension in trying to hire based on their assessments of person-group fit, or how those assessments of person-group fit match with an entrenched faculty culture.

## **Discussion**

While the primary purpose of the analysis was to gain some understanding of how principals' conceive of applicants' fit to the profession and their schools, it was not the intent that these findings be generalized to all schools or across all contexts. Geertz (1975) offered the following notable caution:

Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the 'Continent of Meaning' devoid of real grounding and context in habituated example....and mapping out its bodiless landscape. (p. 2)

Thus, while the sample size of the study was small these provisional and preliminary findings provide a degree of naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1997 as cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2012) that are worthy of serious consideration by those concerned with better understanding how principals approach teacher hiring decisions.

Organizations that are “loosely coupled systems” (Weick, 1976), such as schools, ones that allow for a range of employee responses to work requirements, and where there is less control over individuals and the affects of personal variables are greater, need to pay particular attention to insure the “right” people get hired (Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991). Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that these eight principals regarded that their key responsibility in the selection process was choosing individuals who appeared to fit the vocation, job, organization, culture, and existing staff of their schools (Karren & Graves, 1994). Perceptions of fit mattered to these principals, and these views influenced how they assessed applicants and also affected their decisions of who to hire (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

The findings illustrate that assessments of vocational fit are important in teacher hiring decisions. According to Ehrhart and Makransky (2007), the research on vocational interests supports the premise that people search for and do well in work environments in which there is a good fit between their personal characteristics and the requirements of an occupation. However, given the various theoretical conceptions of vocation (see Cuban, 2001; Hansen, 1994; Palmer, 2000) and how those conceptions might be used in hiring decisions, it is quite likely that personal biases dominate assessments of applicants' fit not only to specific schools, but also to the profession. The kinds of vocational assessments illustrated in this study prevail even though education researchers (see, Erickson, Hyndman, & Wirtz, 2005; Ginsberg & Whaley, 2003; Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000) agree that while dispositions are an important qualification for educators, they are very difficult to assess.

Person-job fit is often regarded as an assessment of a candidate's technical knowledge and skills that are considered to be required for successful performance of the job (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This dimension of fit is concerned with finding a match between the

knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to perform the relatively static technical aspects of a job and individuals who have these abilities (Werbel & Johnson, 2001). Consistent with the conclusions of Hines (2010), the findings of this study suggest that these principals, as key people in their schools, believed that certain teacher attitudes or dispositions are critically important in those who will be effective as teachers.

Assessments of person-job fit are largely based on the assumption that there is a body of essential knowledge that is required before an individual “can manage effectively the complexities of teaching” (Parkay, Stanford, Vaillancourt, & Stephens, 2009, p. 38). However, it is important to note that others, such as Kaplan and Owings (2002) countered that there is no evidence that suggests that, by itself, possessing any specific knowledge is enough to allow for someone to be an effective teacher. Regardless of the inherent tensions of trying to identify a knowledge base of teaching (Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001), the findings suggest that those with responsibility for teacher hiring believe that they can differentiate among applicants to determine which ones possess the formal and practical forms of professional knowledge that they believe prospective teachers ought to have as they enter the profession.

Given the short time afforded to employment interviews and the limited information used in the hiring process (Liu & Johnson, 2006), it is highly possible that principals' perceptions are more likely to reflect a “similar-to-me” bias rather than an assessment of an applicant's true fit to school culture (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). While perhaps surprising, these kinds of self-referent standards may not necessarily be harmful to the organization. As Van Vianen (2000) suggested, value similarity between newcomers and principals may have a stronger positive impact on organizational commitment than the broader match between the newcomers' and the organization's values.

The findings also suggest that these principals largely made assessments of person-organization and person-group fit during interviews; moreover, these findings are consistent with those of Karren and Graves (1994), Sekiguchi (2004), and Liu and Johnson (2006). In short, the findings suggest that assessments of person-organization and person-group fit played significant roles in the later stages of the selection process when decisions about who to hire are being made. This appeared to be the case even though little is known about the accuracy of these assessments of fit in terms of predicting employee performance (Karren & Graves, 1994) or whether or not perceived fit is related to actual levels of fit (Kristof-Brown, 1996).

Evidently, the participants believed that person-organization fit is desirable in teacher hiring decisions. This finding is consistent to those of Sekiguchi (2004) who suggested there is empirical evidence demonstrates that person-organization fit is related to a number of positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviours, and self-reported work performance.

With respect to the prevalence of assessments of person-organization fit, it is worth noting the caution offered by Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009) who noted that strong organizational cultures could allow individuals to either embrace or resist change. Therefore, selection approaches focused on matching prospective employees to the existing organizational culture may strengthen organization control through the reproduction of an existing organizational culture (Brannan & Hawkins, 2007), and, in fact, stifle changes aimed at school wide improvement.

Furthermore, Kristof-Brown (1996) offered a sobering point by suggesting that if an organization does not have a culture that is agreed upon, then it does not make sense to assess an individual's fit with that culture. This seems to be a particularly important caution given that

Harris et al., (2007) concluded that many principals could not clearly distinguish what makes their school community different from others.

Based on the findings, it seems possible that under the guise of assessing for person-organization fit the participants are, in fact, assessing candidates along dimensions that more closely resemble those of person-supervisor fit (Kristof-Brown et al, 2005). More specifically, it is possible that they are judging applicants for a dyadic fit between supervisor and subordinate, a form of leader-follower value congruence (Kristof-Brown et al.).

In addition, the manner in which hiring authorities judge applicants fit to their conceptions of the existing school culture might prove to be problematic in an additional way, for it has been suggested that major school improvements require substantive systemic change (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). If an emphasis on conformity is present in a school's hiring for person-organization fit to create an ideal sharing of moral purpose, then when change is needed, the staff that is there to do it may lack those critical and creative skills. There is an obvious tension then between school improvement, which is based on people's individual and collective flexibility, and hiring personnel who fit what is essentially, yesterday's paradigm. Fullan (1993, p. 13) proposed that teachers who are new to the profession must be prepared to combine the mantle of moral purpose with the skills of "change agency" if they are to have any chance of making teaching a noble and effective profession. But it is highly possible that those very teachers that Fullan describes will not be hired due to inconsistent practices in decisions around "fit."

However, the research on the optimal degree of staff homogeneity or heterogeneity to support organizational improvement efforts is ambiguous at best (Prat, 2000). Elfenbein and O'Reilly (2007) suggested that research findings seem to demonstrate that increased



demographic heterogeneity among staff in attributes such as length of tenure, gender, and ethnic origin may have negative effects on work attitudes and performance. However, other researchers studying diversity in the workplace have consistently found that organizations that emphasize collectivism in the work environment see more benefits from workplace diversity than organizations that emphasize individualism (see Chatman & Spataro, 2005; Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003).

Werbel and Gilliland (1999) defined person-group fit as the match between the new hire and the immediate workgroup. Person-group fit is based on the idea that many employment positions require interpersonal interactions with group members. The findings about the importance that the participants placed on choosing teachers who could work as part of school-based groups appears consistent with the recommendations of DuFour (2004) who proposed that powerful professional learning is embedded in the routine practices of the school when teachers are organized into teams, provided time to meet during the school day, and given specific guidelines for engaging in activities that focus on student achievement.

Two significant cautions, particularly relevant to schools, are worth noting regarding the usefulness of relying on person-group fit assessments as employment selection tools. Firstly, some (see Fullan, 2001) suggest that both teachers and their work environment are in a state of continual change. Employees mature, and their abilities and interests are likely to modify as they mature. Trying to select a new teacher based on an assessment of person-group fit to a current staff becomes very difficult to determine as the values and the abilities of the group change with the characteristics of changing group members. This notion reflects a caution offered by Werbel and Johnson (2001) who stated, "It is important to point out that groups have their dysfunctional elements. As they become more homogeneous, productivity may increase, but so may a tendency

towards groupthink” (p. 238). Specifically focusing on the challenges of school improvement efforts, Hargreaves (1991) cautioned that relatively homogeneous subcultures of teachers can lead to a balkanization of staff groups in schools; furthermore, these groups tend to resist changes in traditions or efforts to make changes even if those changes might lead to improved student outcomes.

Taken together the findings of this study suggest that those responsible for teacher hiring may make extensive personality inferences during the hiring process. And, this is done even though there is little existing empirical research that supports the accuracy or usefulness of such assessments (Hines, 2010; Kristof-Brown, 2000). While individuals judge fit differently, the findings of this study make explicit that assessments of fit are considered to be extremely important in teacher hiring decisions.

### **Conclusion**

When selecting teachers hiring authorities necessarily consider a wide range of applicant characteristics that extend beyond narrow assessments of the kind of knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for teaching. However, without further research it is impossible to know if they rely on anything more systematic than idiosyncratic preferences when judging an applicant's fit and whether, or not, these assessments help predict the effectiveness of teachers.

There is much more to be done to better understand the role of fit in teacher hiring decisions, and whether considerations of fit lead to more positive results in selecting effective teachers. Hiring decisions directly impact student achievement and school success. Given the high-stakes nature of their hiring responsibilities, it seems prudent to offer that those charged with the responsibility of staffing classrooms with effective teachers need to be cognizant of the

way they use their perceptions of fit to determine the suitability of candidates to teach. Rather than considering global assessments of fit, they should thoughtfully consider the dimensions of that fit that are being assessed during the various phases of the hiring process and decide which matter most to insure students have access to the best teachers possible (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

At present, hiring authorities could be overlooking candidates who have the capacity to be great teachers, if hired, but who never get the chance to teach because they have been deemed a poor fit to the job, vocation, school, or staff. Such a possibility can have lasting effects on a student because of all of the variables that are potentially open to policy influence by ministries of education and/or school boards, factors to do with teachers and teaching, specifically who gets to teach, are the ones with the greatest influence on student learning.

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