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LANDING THE JOB: A SURVEY OF NEW TEACHERS

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A survey of recent graduates who successfully landed teaching positions was conducted to provide practical information for future teachers and the university personnel and faculty who may assist them with this process. The survey yielded insight as to the format and content of the interview and other factors which school district personnel may examine when making their decisions. The new teachers perceived that individual matters, such as gender or timing, and personality characteristics, such as enthusiasm or honesty, were probable reasons for landing their job as often as were factors relating to their teaching skills and knowledge. Innovative aspects of an interview process, such as portfolio reviews and demonstration teaching, were not widely used. Regular surveys of successful job seekers can track trends and changes in the process of finding that first teaching position.

Background and Rationale

They have invested significant time and financial resources towards their career goal of becoming a teacher. They may have had to repeatedly defended their career choice as friends and relatives question why they selected a relatively low-paying, low status occupation. They also know the job market is crowded in most teaching fields and there will be many candidates for each position. So what can newly certified teachers do to prepare for their first job search? Can they learn anything from their peers who recently succeeded at landing their first teaching position?

The process of hiring new teachers has been studied from a number of different perspectives. From the employer's perspective there is concern over what factors to consider and how to compare candidates. Bredeson (1985) analyzed research about the hiring process and constructed a decision making model. The model illustrates how employers perceive and integrate information from various sources and make hiring decisions. Kopetskie (1983) examined the process from a more practical point of view, proposing the use of a Candidate Comparison Instrument with designated categories such as philosophy of education and extracurricular activities. If the administrator sticks

with this structure, applicants can be more objectively compared.

A key element of the hiring process, the job interview, has also been a topic of inquiry. O'Hair (1989) proposed a model of five factors: demographics, communication, psychological, atmosphere and enthusiasm, which influenced interview outcomes, and suggested means for preparing prospective teachers for interviews. Travers (1989) tells the interviewer that a thorough interview, covering interpersonal skills, instructional effectiveness, fit with the school needs and professional development, can be conducted in less than an hour.

Special issues relating to candidates' success or failure in securing a teaching position have also been studied. An applicant's age, number of letters of reference, and G.P.A. were factors which Young and McMurry (1986) found contributed to employer bias when reviewing fictitious resumes. Perry (1981) lamented that the "best" teachers were not necessarily the ones hired, as employers placed a heavy emphasis on test score data.

Braun and others (1990) found the perceptions of successful teacher applicants and school administrators, regarding aspects of the job seeking process, were quite similar. Both groups viewed the interview as the most impor-

tant element. Written recommendations from those who had observed the candidate's teaching were perceived as the most important part of the credential file and honesty of responses was identified as most important during an interview. They urge further study of the recruitment and selection process.

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the hiring process for new teachers from the perspective of those who recently were successful in securing teaching positions. What takes place during the all important interview? What is the usual time frame for the whole job hunting process? Did knowing someone or other "connections" play a part in the outcome? This view focused on what worked—so that this information might then be useful to prospective job seekers.

Design of Study

To gain more insight into factors related to

successfully finding a first teaching position, a survey questionnaire was sent to 55 recent graduates of a teacher education program for whom information was available that they had, indeed, been hired as a teacher. This information was obtained through the placement office and department faculty. The questionnaire, along with a cover letter and stamped return envelope, was sent at the completion of their first year of teaching. This time lapse allowed the teachers to reflect, perhaps more objectively, on the hiring process.

The four-page questionnaire, which could be completed anonymously, included 15 multiple choice questions about the job seeking process for the position they accepted, as well as information about other interviews or offers. The teachers were also asked whether they were employed by a public or private school, their grade level and subject area. As this

Table 1
Summary of Demographic Information

Category	Number of Responses	% of Sample
Type of School		
Public	15	68.0%
Private	7	32.0%
Grade Level		
Elementary/Pre-K	12	55.0%
Secondary	10	45.0%
Subject Areas for Secondary Level ¹		
Math	4	36.4%
Science	2	18.2%
Foreign Languages	2	18.2%
English	2	18.2%
History	1	9.0%
Teacher Education Program		
Baccalaureate	10	45.5
Post-Baccalaureate Certification	1	4.5%
Master's Degree & Certification	11	50.0%

¹One teacher had two subject areas.

Teacher Education Program has different options, these teachers were asked to identify themselves as baccalaureate degree, post-baccalaureate certification or master's degree with initial teaching certification students. The questionnaire concluded with open-ended questions about why they thought they got the job and advice for others who will follow.

Results and Analysis

Twenty-two of the questionnaires were returned. As many of these forms were completed anonymously, a follow up for those who had not sent them back was not possible. Although the percentage of responses was disappointing, the information gained is interesting. The demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

The teachers were asked to respond to a series of general questions about their interview with the school or district that subsequently hired them. They were asked how they got the interview, when it occurred, how long it lasted, who participated in it, and whether it was an individual or group format. For some questions, multiple responses were possible. Consistent with what many people suspect, the most popular reason for getting an interview was knowing someone in the school or district. Also, predictably, a principal was the most frequent interviewer. Perhaps less predictable were the responses indicating that the hiring process did not take place at the last minute, just before school opened, and that the interview tended to last less than one hour. Summaries of the responses are in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Responses to General Questions About the Interview

Question	Number of Responses	% of Sample
How I got the interview:		
I knew someone	12	35.0%
School requested it	11	32.0%
I asked for it	6	18.0%
Placement Office	5	15.0%
When the interview occurred:		
Before June	10	45.5%
Summer	10	45.5%
After September	2	9.0%
How long interview lasted:		
Less than 1 hour	13	59.0%
More than 1 hour	9	41.0%
Who participated in the interview: (checked as many as applied)		
Principal	18	33.0%
Personnel Director	10	18.5%
Teachers	10	18.5%
Other Applicants	2	4.0%
Others (various other administrators)	14	26.0%
Interview Format: (some teachers experienced both formats)		
One-on-one	18	60.0%
Group	12	40.0%

Table 3
Summary of Interviewer Questions/Topics

Topic	# of Teachers Reporting it Asked	% of Total Topics Reported ¹
Background in general	20	9.4%
Reasons for choosing teaching	20	9.4%
Professional plans and goals	20	9.4%
Student teaching experience	20	9.4%
Teaching style	20	9.4%
Classroom management	19	8.9%
Educational philosophy	15	7.0%
Experience with children	13	6.1%
Past work experience	12	5.6%
Extracurricular activities/interests	12	5.6%
Child/adolescent development	10	4.7%
This school/district	9	4.2%
Subject matter knowledge	9	4.2%
Personal plans/goals	8	3.8%
Other ²	6	2.8%

¹Due to rounding of percentages, total of all responses is 99.9%.

²Discipline, LD interests, Grade levels, "What would you do if ..." questions, Japanese education, New teaching strategies.

The questionnaire also attempted to get an idea of the content of these interviews. The teachers were asked to check topics that the interviewer raised and to also indicate topics or questions *they* initiated during the interview. The topics raised most frequently by the interviewer cluster around two general categories. One category, which could be called "Getting to Know You" includes general background information, reasons for choosing teaching as a career and professional plans and goals. The other category might be labeled "Teaching Issues" and includes the topics of student teaching, teaching style and classroom management. The teachers reported considerably fewer instances of topics/questions they initiated (213 asked of them, 80 asked by them), with their

most frequently asked question being about the job responsibilities, and the next most frequent question being about the timeline for the hiring decision. Summaries of the interviewer and teacher questions are found in Tables 3 and 4.

The new teachers were also asked questions about factors other than the interview which may have played a role in their hiring. These factors are ones which university faculty often discuss with their students, thus this survey information could provide a sort of reality check as to their importance.

Consistent with an elementary/secondary level trend, teacher candidates are often urged or required to prepare a portfolio to bring to their interview. Based on this survey, the trend

Table 4
Summary of Questions Asked by Teacher During Interview

Topic	# of Teachers Reporting it Asked	Percent of Total Questions Asked
Job responsibilities	14	17.5%
Timeline for hiring decision	11	13.75%
The community/school	10	12.5%
Support for new teachers	10	12.5%
Extracurricular activities/interests	10	12.5%
What they are looking for	8	10.00%
Teacher evaluation	7	8.75%
Other ¹	7	8.75%
Salary	3	3.75%

¹parent involvement, administrative roles, philosophy of school system, why I want to teach in this district, support for graduate courses and professional development

is not yet a factor that is important to interviewers. Only one teacher reported being asked about a portfolio. Twelve (of 22 or 54.5%) reported they brought or showed parts of their portfolios.

The idea of a demonstration teaching lesson is also perceived as gaining in importance as part of the hiring decision process. The teacher is asked to prepare a lesson and teach it to a group of students. Sometimes this lesson is videotaped. Of the 22 teachers, only four reported this occurring, and an additional teacher had been observed during student teaching.

Although the interview is generally recognized as the determining factor in the hiring decision, some of these new teachers reported that other pieces of information had been reviewed. Fifteen (of 22 or 68%) believed their recommendations were reviewed, one teacher reported that recommendations were not reviewed and six teachers reported they did not know. Regarding more academic matters, 12 teachers (or 54.5% of the 22) reported their

college transcripts were reviewed, 2 said they were not and 8 did not know. Passing the National Teacher Examination (NTE) is noted on the college transcript and is a requirement for certification. Only five teachers (23% of the 22) reported questions about their specific scores.

Information reported by these successful job seekers about the way the process played out for them is interesting and generally consistent with conventional wisdom. Most were not offered the job on the spot (although 3 were), but had to wait up to a week (11 teachers) or more than a week (8 teachers) to receive the good news. The job market is, indeed, competitive. Nine teachers reported that they believed more than 10 others were being considered for the job they got, one teacher said 5-10, four teachers said 1-5, and four teachers believed they were the only candidate. Four teachers reported they did not know how many other candidates were considered.

The new teachers reported the total number of interviews they had, although this

information can be viewed from different perspectives. In a tight job market it is often difficult to get beyond the application phase and be invited for an interview, so few interviews might be reported. However, in this competitive market a candidate may have to

go through several interviews before succeeding with a job offer. For this group of 22 teachers, 12 (54.5%) reported having 2-4 interviews, and 6 (27%) said they had 5-10. Two teachers reported they had more than ten interviews and, two teachers said they only

Table 5
Summary of Teacher Responses to "Why I got the Job"

Factors Attributed to Getting the Job	Number of Teachers Citing the Factor
Individual/Personal Reasons:	
At the right place at the right time	3
Coaching experience	3
Being a male	2
My child attends this school	2
Life experiences	2
Being a minority	1
I went to school there	1
Had worked with the principal	1
	(Total = 15)
Teaching Skills and Qualifications:	
Strong recommendations	4
Educational background	4
Multiple certifications	2
Most qualified	1
Reputation of university program	1
Current course work in teaching field	1
Teaching ability	1
Subbing experience	1
	(Total = 15)
Personality and Interpersonal Factors:	
Energetic/enthusiastic/interested	4
Honest/sincere	3
Interviewed well	2
Creative	1
Good interpersonal skills	1
Confident	1
	(Total = 12)
Known Quantity Because of Student Teaching	4

interviewed where they got the job. Most of the teachers (12 or 54.5%) reported the job they accepted was their only job offer. Eight teachers (36%) had two job offers, one teacher had three job offers and one teacher reported having more than three job offers.

The open-ended question asking the new teachers why they thought they were selected for the job yielded numerous (a total of 46) responses. Nearly all of these reasons given could, logically, be grouped into three broad categories: (1) Individual and Personal Reasons, (2) Teaching Skills and Qualifications and (3) Personality and Interpersonal Factors. One response (given by four teachers), that they were a known quantity because they had done their student teaching there, seems to fit both the first and second categories. Thus, it is

listed separately. It is perhaps not unexpected, yet interesting to note, that items of fate or chance unrelated to teaching ability (category 1) is viewed as being of equal importance to teaching-related qualifications. Table 5 summarizes the responses.

When asked to give advice to those who will be seeking teaching positions in the future, these teachers had much to say. They made 52 suggestions, the most frequently named focusing on personality factors (be yourself and be confident) and preparedness (be knowledgeable). These suggestions, understandably practical in nature, are summarized in Table 6.

Discussion and Recommendations

Interesting patterns regarding the job hunting experiences of new teachers emerge from

Table 6
Summary of Teacher Advice to Future Job Seekers

Suggestion	Frequency Mentioned
Relax and be yourself	7
Be knowledgeable and prepared	7
Be confident	6
Know something about the school system	4
Network	3
Sell yourself	3
Be patient	3
Apply everywhere	3
Be open to extracurricular responsibilities	2
Be persistent	2
Participate in Career Day on campus	2
Take a portfolio	1
Give a teaching demonstration	1
Be flexible	1
Substitute teach	1
Learn interviewing techniques	1
Excel in student teaching	1
Ask for interview or tour	1
Write thank you notes	1
Pick a district with compatible beliefs	1

this survey data. This information could prove useful to others who will be seeking positions and to teacher education faculty who try to prepare their students for the job market.

Although it can be assumed that all employers are out to find the most competent teachers, factors unrelated, or only marginally related, to a candidate's teaching competence played a significant role in these teachers' job seeking experiences. Who you are, who you know and even quirks of fate appear to be powerful elements in the process. The chance of even getting an interview seemed linked, in a number of cases, to knowing someone in the district or to taking the initiative and asking for an interview. Questions of a personal nature, such as why the candidate had chosen this profession, figured prominently in the actual interview. These teachers attributed their success in landing a job to factors related to their individual situation (i.e., being male or being in the right place at the right time) and to personality factors (i.e., enthusiastic or honest) as much as to indicators of teaching competence (i.e., strong recommendations or educational background).

However, teaching-related factors were still perceived as important to these successful job seekers. Questions about the student teaching experience, teaching style and views about classroom management were part of the interview for nearly all the survey respondents. Most also believed their recommendations had been reviewed by the interviewer. Many of these teachers felt it was important that future job seekers are knowledgeable, implying that personality and luck are not enough!

Based on these teachers' experiences, innovative aspects of the interview process, such as a portfolio review or a teaching demonstration, have not been widely adopted. The interview, itself, seems to carry more weight than recommendations, grades or test scores.

Although the sample size of this survey was relatively small, the data do represent a bal-

anced mix of elementary and secondary teachers and both undergraduate and graduate level teacher certification program completers. Based on these findings the following recommendations emerge:

- 1) The data from this survey should be shared with future teachers. Information and advice from peers, who have recently been where they now plan to go, is probably far more compelling and credible than similar statements from placement office personnel or university faculty.
- 2) If personal contacts and luck are factors which can influence hiring decisions, it makes sense to try to maximize these possibilities. Networking to expand contacts, using any personal connections, and highlighting desirable personal talents or traits on a resume or during an interview should be presented as valid and important parts of a job search.
- 3) It is important for future job seekers to work on both the "how" and "what" of the interview process. Interviewing techniques and the ability to express articulate answers to education-related questions can both be developed through practice. Mock interviews, either through the placement office or by area educators, can be a valuable learning experience.
- 4) A survey of successful job seekers should be repeated periodically. This process would help track changes or trends in interviewing practices. Also, if such a study is conducted regularly, graduates of a teacher education program would anticipate being part of it and the survey return rate might improve.

Landing a job as a teacher is not easy. Information that can help job seekers be better prepared and that can also help placement office personnel and teacher education faculty to better serve them is one way to try to make it, perhaps, just a little bit easier.

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