

Criteria Public School Administrators Consider When Hiring First-Year Agricultural Education Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe factors that public school administrators consider when hiring agricultural education teachers. Participants in the study were 24 administrators that hired first year agricultural education teachers in the 2002-03 academic year. The collection of data was conducted by phone interviews. The researcher sought 100 % response rate by calling and setting up appointments with the administrators to accompany their tight schedules. Descriptive statistics were used in interpreting the data. Results of Likert-type questions were reported with a mean and standard deviation. Open-ended questions were coded and frequencies were analyzed.

Administrators placed the most emphasis on the knowledge of agriculture as measured by a subject matter competency test. Administrators seek well-rounded agricultural instructors who are confident in all areas of the agricultural education setting. They view student project involvement and the supervision of those projects as the most important. Administrators desire candidates who can manage the classroom and who develop rapport with the community. Administrators seek candidates who can orally present their knowledge of agriculture in an enthusiastic manner. Administrators place most value in cooperating teachers' recommendations. Administrators prefer candidates who are fully certified as compared to alternatively certified.

Introduction

Historically, vocational educational teachers have been hired using criteria much different than that of the common school teachers. Vocational teachers were expected to be expert in two areas: the art of teaching and the trade to be taught (Schaefer, 2001). If only one of these were available, preference was given to employing vocational teachers who were deemed competent in their trade. Prosser believed that if vocational teachers had to meet the same requirements as general education teachers the field would sacrifice technical proficiency. Prosser thought colleges and universities were ill equipped to prepare trade teachers and professional teacher education was impractical for most vocational educators. He asserted that vocational teachers should have practical experiences in their trade before teaching the youth of this nation. Thus, occupational experience replaced higher levels of education and provided vocational education teachers with subject matter expertise (Prosser & Quigley, 1949).

Agriculture and home economics teachers were the exception to this model. Agriculture and home economics teachers usually completed baccalaureate degrees in subject matter colleges and completed general education requirements expected of their colleges. Teacher education coursework was kept to a minimum. Boys were to have lived and worked on a farm and graduate from a secondary vocational agriculture program. Girls likewise were educated to become high school home economics teachers but only if they had successfully completed homemaking projects under the direction of their mother and high school homemaking teacher.

Historically vocational education has insisted on educators with experience in the field, however that is changing. Bruening (2001) found that only 10% of teacher education programs in vocational education require work experience for program entry and only 25% require work experience for program completion. Increasingly, vocational education is placing greater emphasis on a teacher's ability to integrate academic and career education rather than work experience.

Clearly, the education community is unsure of the qualifications necessary to teach in the public schools. In an exploratory study of employment interview practices, Coady (1990) found that little attention has been paid to recruiting teachers in secondary education. He asserted that faculty are central to the academic mission, which means that failure to hire good faculty can harm the school for decades. He believed that the teacher selection process is one of the most important tasks that face educational administrators. In studying the teacher selection process, Boulton (1979) found the selected interviewees for teaching positions were chosen based on cooperating teacher recommendations, college supervisor recommendations and the candidate's subject area concentration.

Mortaloni (1984) studied public school administrators regarding several areas associated with teacher preparation programs and found that factors considered most

important in recruitment of teachers were the letters of reference by the cooperating teacher, college supervisor, and building principal for the candidate's cooperating center, and the candidate's grade in student teaching. Braun (1990) found that teacher candidates were often selected based upon recommendations made by inexperienced and often unskilled interviewers. In some cases, one person hired teachers on the basis of one interview. Whether an interview was meaningful depended on the skill of the interviewer as well as the personality of the teacher candidate. Also, interviewers were often administrators who may not be familiar with classroom realities. This resulted in decisions based upon personal judgment rather than significant objective criteria. Braun noted that, "candidates who are articulate, glib, and confident in dealing with adults may appear more capable than less gregarious candidates who may be more effective teachers in the classroom" (Braun, 1990, p. 46).

Seiferth (1979) studied bias by the interviewer on his or her interviewing decisions. Preferential treatment was given to married candidates; candidate's just beginning their careers, candidate's with co-curricular expertise, and well-groomed, physically attractive candidates. The interviewing process was not standardized, making comparisons among several candidates difficult and more subjective. Seiferth found that the average interview lasted less than one hour with the interviewer talking 80% of the time. Often, the interviews were unstructured, featuring yes or no questions, leading questions, and irrelevant questions (Seiferth, 1979). As one researcher stated, "Often the administrator hires the applicant who seems to reflect his or her own attitudes" (Vornberg & Liles, 1983, p. 10).

According to supply and demand projections, the United States will need to hire 2.2 million educators in the next decade who are not currently teaching in elementary and secondary schools. In addition to the number of teachers needed, concern exists about teacher preparation and the quality of today's teaching force (Feistritzer, 1999). A teacher shortage is a constant concern to school administrators across the country as competition for teachers increases. This current research was undertaken to determine if there is a common set of criteria public school hiring officials utilize in judging applicants for teaching positions. Such information could be valuable as new teachers seek positions in public schools.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe factors that public school administrators consider when hiring first-year agricultural education teachers.

The following objectives were formulated to successfully accomplish the purpose of this study.

1. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's academic achievement.
2. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's agriculture experience.
3. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's teaching practice.
4. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's interview.
5. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's references.
6. Describe the importance administrators placed on candidate's type of certification.

Procedures

The population for the study included the 24 public school administrators who hired a first-year agricultural education teacher for the 2002-2003 academic year in a southern state. The researcher contacted the five regional agricultural education program specialists to identify the school administrator most responsible for hiring agricultural education teachers.

Instrumentation

The development of the instrument began by reviewing literature on criteria considered when hiring vocational teachers (Dunton, 2001, Loehr, 1986). The questionnaire was pilot tested on three public school administrators and reviewed by a panel of experts. The panel of experts was utilized to determine specific wording of the questions, content, and the sequence. The researcher used the telephone interview to increase the study's response rate.

Validity and Reliability

The researcher conducted the data analysis to avoid the threat of scorer variability. The administrators also knew they were being interviewed causing the effect of reactivity (Leedy & Ormord, 2001). Researcher bias was taken into consideration. The researcher was aware of personal bias as a threat to reliability. Meetings were held with the panel of experts. The panel assisted in enhancing content, construct, and face validity of the instrument, as they were knowledgeable about the desired content and target audience. The panel of experts was the researcher's graduate committee members.

Data Collection

The researcher sought 100% response rate by calling and setting up appointments with administrators to accommodate their schedules. The researcher chose the telephone interview for increasing response rate, time efficiency, and feasibility. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) asserted that telephone interviews are less time consuming and less expensive (they involve only the cost of long-distance calls), than other data collection methods. The researcher recorded the data by filling out the questionnaire while asking the administrators questions over the telephone. Each questionnaire was coded by replacing the name of the school with a number and then entered into a computer protected by a password ensuring confidentiality. The data was collected during a two-week period in May, 2003. A scale was developed to interpret findings from the Likert-type scale.

Table 1.
Scale for Categorizing Findings

Score	Level of importance
1.00 – 1.50	Not important
1.51 – 2.50	Not very important
2.51 – 3.50	Somewhat important
3.51 – 4.50	Important
4.51 – 5.00	Very important

Findings

The first objective was to describe the importance administrators place on candidates' achievement. The objective was measured with five items on the questionnaire. Administrators placed the most emphasis (mean=3.96) on the candidate's knowledge of agriculture as measured by an agricultural competency test Subject Area Tests (OSAT). The General Education Test (OGET) was given the lowest rating (mean= 2.92). Table 2 gives the complete findings related to the first objective.

Table 2.
Importance Placed on the Candidate's Standardized Tests Scores and College Grade Point Average by School Administrators (N = 24)

Assessment	M	SD	Level of importance
Knowledge of agriculture (OSAT)	3.96	1.04	Important
Knowledge of teaching (OPTE)	3.58	.88	Important
College grade point average	3.63	.49	Important
Standardized tests in general	3.00	.59	Somewhat Important
Knowledge of general education (OGET)	2.92	.65	Somewhat Important

The second objective of this study was to describe the importance administrators place on a candidate's agriculture experience. The objective was measured by one open-ended question and by five closed-ended questions. The open-ended question asked, "Is there any specific area on which you place more emphasis? Explain." Every administrator responded that they wanted a well-rounded teacher who was competent in all areas in agriculture. One administrator said, "We want a well-rounded teacher who has a general

knowledge about all aspects of agriculture.” Another administrator said, “We look for an agricultural education teacher who has a broad spectrum in agriculture, someone who is well balanced and doesn’t place emphasis on any one thing.” Table 3 gives a summary of responses to the open-ended question.

Table 3.

Open-ended Responses to Specific Areas on which Administrators Placed Emphasis (N = 24)

Specific emphasis	Responses
First response	
Well rounded in agriculture content	24
Secondary response	
Leadership activities	4
Emphasis on classroom teaching	4
Emphasis on FFA activities	2
Emphasis on showing livestock	1
Emphasis on horticulture	1

Administrators placed the most emphasis on student project involvement and supervision of student projects (i.e., SAEs) with a mean of 4.67 giving it a rating of “very important”. Administrators placed the least amount of emphasis on experience in production agriculture with a mean of 3.46 giving it a rating of “somewhat important” when asked, “How important is experience in production agriculture?” Table 4 provides a summary of the directed-questions related to objective 2.

Table 4.

Importance Administrators Placed on Selected Areas in Agricultural Education (N = 24)

Subject	M	SD	Level of importance
Supervision of student projects	4.67	.64	Very Important
FFA activities and programs	4.50	.59	Important
Experience in showing livestock	3.87	.54	Important
Experience in production agriculture	3.46	.59	Somewhat Important

The third objective of this study was to describe the importance administrators place on teaching practice. The objective was measured by seven questions. Administrators rated

classroom management skills as the most important (mean=4.96). Community relations skills, educating diverse students, and working with other faculty was also rated “very important.” Administrators put the least amount of emphasis on integrating other subject areas into the agricultural education curriculum. Findings related to objective 3 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5.

Importance Administrators Placed on General Teaching Practice (N = 24)

Teaching practice	M	SD	Level of importance
<i>Classroom management skills</i>	4.96	.20	Very Important
Community relations skills	4.92	.28	Very Important
Educate diverse students	4.63	.49	Very Important
Work with other faculty	4.58	.50	Very Important
Educate students (special needs)	4.38	.71	Important
Integrate technology	4.25	.74	Important
Integrate other subject areas	4.13	.54	Important

The fourth objective was to describe the importance placed on candidate’s personal interview. The objective was measured by five questions. Administrators placed the most emphasis on oral communication skills (mean=5.00). Administrators placed the least amount of emphasis on the candidate’s marital status (mean=1.25). Findings for objective 4 are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.

Importance of Specific Items Evaluated by Administrators During Interviews (N = 24)

Interview items	M	SD	Level of importance
<i>Oral communication skills</i>	5.00	.00	Very Important
Candidate’s enthusiasm	4.58	.50	Very Important
Personal appearance	4.21	.66	Important
Distance between hometown/job	1.50	.61	Not Important
Marital status	1.25	1.02	Not Important

The fifth objective of the study was to describe the importance administrators placed on recommendations. The objective was measured by administrators rating and then ranking

five possible reference sources. Administrators placed the most emphasis on the cooperating teacher's recommendation (mean=4.54). Administrators rated the candidate's personal references as the least important (mean=3.46). Table 7 displays the findings for objective five.

Table 7.
Administrators' Ratings of Selected References (N = 24)

References	M	SD	Level of importance
Cooperating teacher	4.54	.66	Very Important
State program specialist	4.38	.71	Important
Administrators personal references	4.13	.68	Important
Teacher education faculty	4.08	.58	Important
Candidate supplied references	3.46	.83	Somewhat Important

Administrators were asked to rank the reference: "1" = "most important" . . . "5" = "least important." Administrators ranked the cooperating teacher as number one (mean=1.83). Administrators ranked the references supplied by the candidate fifth (mean=4.29). Table 8 gives administrators' rankings of references.

Table 8.
Summary of References as Ranked by Administrators (N = 24)

References	M	SD
Cooperating teacher	1.83	.82
State program specialist	2.25	1.29
Administrators references	3.29	1.37
Teacher education faculty	3.33	1.09
Candidate supplied references	4.29	1.04

The sixth objective was to describe the importance placed on the candidate's type of certification by the administrators who were interviewed. The objective was measured by two open-ended questions.

When administrators were asked if they would consider hiring an alternatively certified teacher, twenty administrators responded "No." Fifteen of those twenty administrators responded that they wanted teachers who were trained to teach (meaning taking courses in teaching and going through student or practice teaching) and seven said

they would only hire an alternatively certified teacher as a last resort. One administrator said, “No, I want someone with classroom experience, we like teachers who are qualified to teach and who have taken classes in teaching.” Another administrator responded, “No, I want the best candidate for their needs, like someone who went through practice teaching and classes over teaching.” Table nine gives findings for the first open-ended question.

Table 9.

Administrators’ Open-ended Responses When Asked about Hiring an Alternatively Certified (AC) Teacher (N = 24)

Response:	Responses
Yes	4
No	20
*If no, then why?	
Wanted teachers who have been trained to teach	15
Wanted classroom experience	13
Alternatively certified teachers are less qualified	4
Would hire alternatively certified Ag teachers as last resort	7

*Note: The number of responses does not equal 24 (total population) because these are secondary responses after administrators answered no initially.

Conclusions

Conclusions related to objective 1: Importance administrators placed on candidate’s academic achievement.

1. Administrators were most interested in the candidate’s knowledge of agriculture and knowledge of teaching.
2. Administrators’ interest in academic achievement in college was supported by the interest in the candidate’s college grade point average.
3. Administrators viewed standardized tests as somewhat important, however, the researcher notes that several administrators were not aware that subject matter tests existed for agricultural education. The candidate’s general education knowledge was not a significant concern for administrators as long as candidates were adequate in those areas.

Conclusions related to objective 2: Importance administrators placed on candidate's agriculture experience.

1. Administrators sought well-rounded agricultural instructors who were competent in all areas of the agricultural education setting.
2. Administrators viewed involvement with student projects and the supervision of those projects as the most important job-related duty of an agricultural education instructor.
3. Administrators viewed candidate's experience in FFA activities and programs as well as their showing livestock as important criteria to consider when hiring a first-year agricultural education teacher.
4. Production agriculture experience was not viewed as important as other areas but some administrators still considered it.

Conclusions related to objective 3: Importance administrators placed on teaching practice.

1. Administrators wanted candidates who could manage the classroom, and who could develop rapport with members of the community. Educating a diversified student population and the ability to work with other faculty were also considered desirable traits.
2. Administrators viewed educating students with special needs, integrating technology, and integrating other subject areas as important but did not place as much emphasis on those areas as compared to items discussed in bullet number one.

Conclusions related to objective 4: Importance placed on candidate's interview(s).

1. Administrators sought candidates who could orally present their knowledge of agriculture in an enthusiastic manner. Personal appearance was also desirable. This supports the Kelly and Kelly (1982) finding that enthusiasm for teaching was a common quality among outstanding teachers.
2. Distance between hometown and job location was not important in the hiring-decision nor was marital status. This supports Seiferth's (1979) finding that marital status was of no importance in the hiring of teachers.

Conclusions related to objective 5: Importance administrators placed on candidate's references.

1. Administrators valued cooperating teachers' recommendations the most. This supports research by Boulton (1989) and Mortaloni (1984) who found that selected interviewees for teaching positions were chosen based on cooperating teacher recommendations.
2. The state program specialists, administrators, and teacher education faculty references were rated equally.
3. The candidate's personal references were not viewed as credible contacts.

Conclusions related to objective 6: Importance placed on the candidate's type of certification.

1. Administrators preferred first-year agricultural education teachers who were fully certified. They valued pedagogical preparation that gave teachers a foundation to enter classrooms prepared academically and philosophically. Darling-Hammond (1990) supported this conclusion.
2. Administrators preferred not to hire alternatively certified teachers.
3. Administrators believed alternatively certified teachers are less qualified; less experienced, and lacked the pedagogical knowledge to be effective teachers. Hawley (1990) also contended that teachers who have expertise in subject matter, but lack training in pedagogical skills are less effective. Administrators viewed alternatively certified agricultural education teachers as a last resort when considering hiring. If a traditionally certified teacher were not available, then they would seek other options. This finding was to the contrary of Darling-Hammond (2000) who found, "students of teachers who possess full certification with a major in their field of instruction significantly out perform students of teachers who enter the classroom lacking full credentials" (p. 58).

Discussion/Implications

The study sought to better understand the criteria administrators consider when hiring first-year agricultural education instructors. It provided a better description of what administrators value in a prospective agricultural education teacher.

Since publication of the report "Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education" (National Research Council, 1988), a major swing away from teaching about production agriculture in secondary agricultural education has occurred across the nation. For example, universities who prepare agriculture teachers have changed their pre-service programs to meet perceived needs about what competencies entry-year agricultural education teachers should possess; however, it was unknown if school administrators agreed with many of these changes. This study found that administrators were also de-emphasizing a first-year agricultural education teacher's experience in production agriculture.

It is generally accepted that the student teaching experience is one of the most valuable components of a teacher preparation program. Although not knowing if administrators placed student teaching in agricultural education in high regard, this study revealed that administrators did hold high value for that experience. Even in schools systems that hired alternatively certified teachers, the administrators responsible for those hiring decisions admitted that their teacher did not have the classroom experience desired. It was

perceived that having no previous classroom experience made them farther behind their traditionally certified peers, therefore, affecting their students' learning.

Most administrators stressed that alternative certification is not appropriate for first-year agricultural education teachers. While administrators stated these concerns, five of the 24 first-year agricultural education teachers hired for the 2002-2003 academic year were alternatively certified. This information may be valuable for reforming the current requirements concerning alternative certification. Alternative certification has been a hot topic across the United States.

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