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Public School Principals' Perceptions Concerning the Hiring of Social Studies Teachers

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A school principal's job is one full of multiple responsibilities. Without question, the most important responsibility is to hire competent and highly qualified teachers for his or her school (Mason & Schroeder, 2010). The purpose of this study was to determine the current hiring practices of public school principals as they relate to certified social studies applicants. Additionally we sought to examine desired applicant's characteristics both before and during the face to face interview.

Background

The need for experienced teachers, as defined by years of teaching, is an area of interest for various researchers. Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt and Wyckoff (2011) reviewed the applications for request for transfer (the union's documentation of hiring) from New York public school teachers during the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years. They found that "schools are significantly more likely to hire teachers with more experience" (p. 104). They further concluded that "the effect of one year of experience increased the likelihood of being hired by ten percent" (p. 103). In another study, Smith (1992), examined the hiring of teachers with no experience in their respected area of certification. He surveyed 248 school principals in Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Illinois and concluded that personal traits were ranked most important followed by professional traits, academic preparation, professionally related experience and work experience. In Smith's study, principals stated when hiring first year teachers they look for outgoing, enthusiastic, confident, and caring teachers who know their subject matter.

In order to assist with securing a job, some applicants submit portfolios in an attempt to impress school principals. The importance of a portfolio (whether electronic or traditional notebook) has been evaluated recently. Reilly (2003) surveyed students who graduated from his institution's teacher credentialing program with electronic portfolios, and found they reported local school district interviewers were not prepared to view electronic portfolios and had little interest in them. Theel and Tallerico (2004) concluded many hiring officials expressed skepticism regarding the candidate's ability to actually teach and what was presented in the portfolio. Temple, Allan and Temple (2003) found principals reported opposition altogether with regard to portfolios. Strawhecker, Messersmith and Balcom (2007) surveyed 37 principals concerning their



use of portfolios in the hiring process. They concluded resumes, references and letters of recommendations were the most important elements of the portfolios. Additionally, through the use of key word analysis, they concluded that the word “organization” (p. 67), was the most important quality principals associated with impressive portfolios. Organization was defined as the ability to provide materials (resume, portfolios, etc.) in a neat and error free manner.

The responsibility of making a decision to determine which candidate to hire generally falls in the hands of the school principal. Kersten (2008) used a mixed methods design and surveyed 142 Illinois principals in order to determine the hiring procedures associated with teachers. Kersten concluded 57% of principals stated they were the ultimate decision maker in who would be hired. Donaldson (2011) interviewed 30 principals in public and charter schools and concluded public school principals were primarily the final decision maker when it came to hiring but many felt constrained when it came to deciding the teacher they would hire. On the opposite end, Liu and Johnson (2006) surveyed 486 first and second year teachers in California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan in order to review the process in which they were hired. The authors concluded the majority of new teachers were hired through a decentralized, school based process which resulted in very limited experiences outside of the principal’s office. The results concluded the hiring was more efficient when the process was decentralized and thus up to the individual school district to decide. Even though it is more efficient, Liu and Johnson did not examine teacher quality of the new hires.

Once a candidate is invited by the principal for a school visit, the interview becomes the most critical instrument for gaining employment. Mason and Schroeder (2010) interviewed 60 principals and concluded principals considered the face to face interview the most important aspect of the hiring process. Furthermore, during the interview “the principal highly weights personal attributes, such as appearance, ability to communicate, enthusiasm, and confidence” (p. 191). Hindman and Stronge (2009) surveyed 300 principals concerning their interviewing process. Principals reported they often use techniques (e.g., structured interviews, note taking, anchored rubrics, and experience-based questions) that enhance the validity and reliability of the interview. Nichols (2004) surveyed 83 rural school superintendents in the Mississippi River Delta to determine their hiring practices. Nichols concluded “Critical issues such as student achievement and qualifications of teachers were not addressed during the recruiting or interviewing phases of the employment. Interviewers focused most of their discussions on student behavior, parental support, administrative support and facilities.” (p. 45). Nichols further stresses these interviewing techniques could have a negative effect on a school’s achievement.

Ingle, Rutledge, and Bishop (2011) interviewed twenty one Florida principals to determine characteristics they desired to witness during a successful interview. Principals in their study stated characteristics such as caring, subject matter knowledge, strong teaching skills and job fit were the most important. However, the authors concluded the manner in which the principals viewed teacher quality was difficult to examine. Harris et. al (2010), interviewed school districts in a small Florida school district in order to analyze the desired characteristics of potential teachers. Principals preferred an individual mix of personal and professional qualities. The principals also attempted to hire teachers who differed from those already employed in the school in terms of race, gender, experience. The Florida principals, citing tenure policies, desired to hire new, less



experienced teachers because if they were not effective their termination would be easier. Kersten (2008) concluded principals wanted teachers who knew the latest research, trends and best practices in the field (22.3%) and on the opposite 16% identified poor personal appearance as a major factor in “hindering their selection (as employees)” (p. 365).

Gross, DeArmond and Goldhaber (2010) examined a single urban school district which was in the process of eliminating hiring solely based on seniority and moving towards an interview based system (one they classified as mutual consent). After conducting an interrupted time-series analysis of data from 1998-2005, the researchers concluded a shift from a seniority-based hiring system to an interview based system led to an initial increase in both the rate of teacher turnover and the number of inexperienced teachers, especially in the district's most disadvantaged schools. For the most part, however, these initial increases were corrected within four years of the transition and thus left little change in the distribution of inexperienced teachers or levels of turnover across the school district. The authors concluded, “The results suggest that although it might be necessary for school districts to lift hiring constraints to improve school staffing, lifting seniority-based constraints alone is unlikely to be sufficient” (p. 2).

While previous researchers have focused on the hiring practices of administrators as it related to teachers in general, research on the perspectives of principals as it relates to a specific area of concentration (i.e. social studies) has not been examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to determine the quality of social studies applicants as perceived by school administrators, as well as the interviewing processes used in the selection of new social studies teachers.

Method

Research Design

We employed a qualitative research methodology based on structured and unstructured interview questions to gain insight into the perspectives of school administrators as it relates to teaching applicants in the field of social studies.

Participants

This study was approved by Mississippi State University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (Study #12-0550). Using a random sampling strategy (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2009) phone interviews were conducted with 42 school principals randomly selected from the 188 Mississippi school districts. A list of all public high schools was generated and random interviews were conducted via the telephone. At the conclusion of the 42nd interview it was determined a case of data saturation had occurred and therefore conclusions could be made (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006).



Interviews

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which Fontana and Frey (2000) state are “one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). The interview questions were an adaptation of Mason and Schroeder’s (2010) “survey of principals” (p. 193). The adaptations allowed for a focus interview concerning social studies hiring. For each qualitative question, the participants were given a structured prompt and replies were recorded. All principals were confidentially surveyed by telephone and the phone conversations were recorded in accordance with state law (Miss. Code Ann. §§ 41-29-501 to 537). The interviews ranged from 6 to 22 minutes. Each interview was conducted by one of the three authors. As principals were interviewed, the interviewer probed for further information, elaboration, or clarification of responses as deemed appropriate. Semi structured interviews permitted us to address the issue of trust while maintaining a feeling of openness (Kvale, 1996).

Data Analysis

We used cross-case analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to study each principal (i.e., case) as a whole entity, using line by line coding of each principal’s interview response, followed by a comparative analysis of all 42 cases. Each school principal was given a structured prompt, and “replies were recorded, grouped into categories, and according to frequency, used to develop a broader picture of multiple dimensions of the hiring process” (Mason and Schroeder, p. 189). All interviews were audio recorded and analyzed to identify common themes and experiences and to bring forth the professional and personal characteristics principals desired in social studies teaching candidates. The coding of the data was conducted during and immediately following the interviews with the audio recordings be reviewed if necessary.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

The research used followed accepted qualitative research methods however; we recognize that the validity of the findings may be affected by certain limitations. The primary limitation is we did not establish an extended relationship with the participants. Each principal was interviewed once. Multiple interviews would have assisted in building a stronger narrative, however, we feel time restraints on school administrators limited us to multiple phone calls while they were working.

Results

Was there a shortage of qualified social studies candidates?

Forty (95.2%) of the principals stated they had an abundance of applicants for the social studies position. One stated the social studies position had an average amount of demand. Only one principal indicated it was very difficult to find a certified social studies teacher. The principal stated he had trouble hiring in all positions because the school was in a geographical area which unfortunately did not allow him to get quality applicants. One principal added “Social Studies



teachers are too easy to find.” Another principal reinforced this sentiment by saying “They are a dime a dozen in Mississippi.”

What professional qualifications do school administrators look for in social studies applicants?

Desired attributes can be viewed as those individual characteristics that participants identified as visible on the application (resume) and thus led to the granting of a face to face interview. Sixty percent stated prior teaching experience was the most desired characteristic. Teaching experience was defined as prior full time teaching experience and not student teaching or internships. One principal summed up the desire for experience by stating “You can’t beat experience.” Twenty one percent placed a strong emphasis on academic achievement in subject matter as verified through an examination of an applicant’s college transcript. Only one principal stated newly certified teachers were a desire. This principal was also the one who earlier stated he had trouble finding certified teachers. Two principals stated they interviewed every candidate that applied. Other selected comments are as follows:

Principal 09: “I like to look where the potential teacher student taught. This allows me to see if they have experience with diverse populations.”

Principal 26: “Experience is the key but I like to look at college GPA.”

Principal 34: “Experience is the number one hiring characteristic, however, if the person is straight out of college, I will look at their GPA.”

Principal 40: “Not only do I look at experience but I look to see if the person has a love for history.”

What first impressions do administrators seek in social studies candidates once brought into the interview?

Sixty two percent of interviews are conducted solely by the principal. Administrators appreciated candidates who interviewed well. Applicants who presented themselves in a confident manner were attractive candidates. The most important characteristic desired as a first impression was confidence of one self during the interview (54%). Thirty one percent stated appearance was a major first impression. Various comments concerning first impressions included:

Principal 18: “If a person cannot look me in the eye, I just can’t hire them.”

Principal 16: “Dress is very important. I once had a person come in wearing a suit with the tags still on. I hired this person, because I realized that person desired a job so badly that he went out of his way and bought a suit.”

Principal 41: “I love it when a potential teacher actually comes to the interview prepared and on time.”

During the interview, the principals discussed traits they wished to see appear in the candidate. Principals desired candidates who had knowledge of subject matter which many defined as a strong background in a state tested subject (e.g., U.S. History). The key attribute



desired in the interview was a *passion* or *enthusiasm* for teaching (64%). As the interview progressed, principals tried to learn about individual goals, ability to create lesson plans, ability to work as a team and classroom management. Applicants who were organized and possessed skills that complement those of the other teachers employed at the school district were regarded as strong candidates. When asked to expand on organization one principal stated “I like to see a prospective employee enter and appear to be organized, which includes any document such as a resume or portfolio that I might ask for.”

In regard to negatives which could appear during the interview and thus hurt the candidate’s chances of obtaining employment, the response centered around the ability to handle oneself during the interview. Forty three percent cited poor communication skills (poor speech, lack of eye contact, failure to answer questions directly) as a negative characteristic. Twelve percent stated they had failed to hire a candidate due to poor appearance during an interview (un-tucked shirt, blue jeans, etc.) In a growing area of research, four principals stated they googled and/or facebook searched their interviewees to determine their maturity level when it came to social networking. A principal expanded on this by stating “We are very concerned with the social networking of our employees.” Various comments concerning negatives included:

Principal 01: “I do not like it when a person doesn’t know or can identify their own weaknesses.”

Principal 10: “When a person sitting in the interview just won’t answer my questions.”

Principal 27: “I will not ever hire a male social studies teacher who comes into the interview with a ponytail.”

Principal 33: “If I see someone who has multiple jobs over a short period of times, this really concerns me.”

Principal 43: “Do not ever talk negative about your former employer.”

Principals were asked if there was any question or topic the candidate could ask which would impress upon the administrator a desire for the job. Forty eight percent wanted the candidate to ask a question specifically focused on the school. For example, “What can I do to help your school if hired, and what is the goal of your school?” Principals also desired teachers who asked questions about volunteering for clubs or extracurricular activities (10%). One principal explained “The discussion of sponsoring a club demonstrates to me the candidate’s desires to be a larger part of our community.”

When asked the importance of portfolios during the interview process the responses were mixed. Thirty nine percent stated portfolios were very important and helped with a better understanding of the candidate. Twenty four percent were indifferent to portfolios. Thirty seven percent did not view portfolios as important and stated they did not review them after the candidate left the interview. In regard to references, 52% felt references were very important while 23% put no weight into references. Twenty six percent admitted they do not call any references of a candidate, while 52% stated they called every reference. In another trend, 19% stated they discarded the references provided by the applicant and chose instead to contact an outside reference.



If you hired a social studies teacher with very limited teaching experience, is there a grade level you would not feel comfortable assigning them to teach?

Principals were very candid when it came to grade level placement. Eighty three percent stated they would not allow a new teacher to teach 11th grade U.S. History (Subject Area Tested Grade). When asked why this was, all of the principals stated, there was too much riding on their school's accreditation to allow for a new teacher to teach that subject. One explained, "I cannot risk my school's accreditation by placing a new teacher in U.S. History." When asked what message this sent to new teachers one principal stated, "I just can't risk hurting the test scores." Only three (7%) stated they would put a new social studies teacher in any grade. When inquired what subject they would put a new teacher in, 19% stated ninth grade history. The remaining replies varied and stated it depended on the interview and what grade they felt was a good fit. Various comments concerning grade placement included:

Principal 20: "I would not want to put a young teacher in a senior level class. The students are too close in age with the teacher."

Principal 38: "A new teacher will never teach U.S. History their first year."

Principal 02: "I like to get to know the teacher and try to find a subject that is a good fit. But, they can't teach a state tested subject their first year."

Principal 39: "Too much is riding on the state test. I can't risk putting a new teacher in U.S. History."

Discussion

The first result of this study that stood out is the perceived abundance of social studies certified applicants. Historically, Mississippi has struggled with a teacher shortage (Ratliff, 2008). The findings reveal there does not appear to be a shortage of certified applicants in social studies, and in fact the pool is perceived to be saturated. This leads to a larger question, why are there more people choosing to become social studies teachers? One principal surveyed stated "It seems everyone wants to be a history teacher." Perhaps future research could examine why this trend is taking place?

With the large number of social studies applicants available the principals have a choice of the candidates they wish to interview. To assist in this selection process, administrators in Mississippi are primarily concentrating on years of prior teaching experience. The desire to hire teachers with more experience aligns with Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt and Wyckoff (2011) who examined teachers in all subjects. However, a question which might be asked in future research would be "Is there a desired number of years of experience?" After all, Mississippi teachers are paid based on a scale in which the more years they teach, allows for more pay. Therefore, does the desire for experienced teachers decline as the years of experience increases and thus require the school district to pay more money? Harris et. al (2010) did discover desire for teaching experience was erased because of a state's strong tenure policies and thus the difficulty to terminate veteran teachers, but they did not examine the effect of veteran teachers on a school's



budget. Even though administrators in this study clearly state they desire more experienced teachers would their budgets allow for teachers which will require higher salaries?

If an applicant is chosen for a face to face interview it appears the school principal places a large amount of weight on superficial characteristics. During the face to face interview, considered by Mason and Schroeder (2011) to be the most important aspect of the hiring process, the principal highly weights confidence as the quality they desire the most in the interview. When pressed upon how they measured confidence, the answers varied and appeared to revolve around a perceived opinion held by the administrator. While teacher preparatory colleges encourage the creation of units and portfolios, the principals interviewed varied on the importance of such documents. When examining the perceptions held by the administrators concerning these devices the responses were mixed. This finding was consistent with previous research (Temple, Allan & Temple 2003; Theel & Tallerico 2004). An emergent area of concern was the idea some administrators conducted social media searches of their applicants. Future research may wish to expand on this concept of the hiring process.

The importance of state testing in accordance with No Child Left Behind is clearly present in the findings. Not only do principals desire experienced teachers, but they are drawing a line and refusing to allow new teachers to teach state subject grades. The effect this is having on teacher moral is beyond this study. However, Mississippi is losing 50 percent of all new teachers within the first five years of initial employment (Ratliff, 2008). Future research could examine the morale of new teachers as it relates to choice of grade level.

In summary, administrators in Mississippi have an abundance of applicants for social studies teaching positions. In order to attempt to hire the best candidate, they are relying on years of experience and confidence within the interview to make their own hires. What effect these hiring practices are having on the morale of the social studies teachers as well as the academic achievement of the students is yet to be seen.

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Appendix A
(Email Communication Granting Permission)

Lindon,

You can certainly use our principal interview questions. I would be very interested in seeing your findings.

Dr. Richard W. Mason

Educational Leadership Coordinator

Curriculum and Instruction Dept.

Winther Hall, Room 4051

800 West Main St.

Whitewater, WI 53190

From: Lindon J. Ratliff [mailto:LRatliff@meridian.msstate.edu]

Sent: Monday, March 05, 2012 11:51 AM

To: Mason, Richard W

Subject: From Lindon Ratliff

Dr. Mason,

I have read your 2010 article "Principal Hiring Practices: Toward a Reduction of Uncertainty" and I have found it very important.

I am conducting a study of hiring perceptions of Mississippi principals as it relates to social studies teachers.

I would like to replicate your study and therefore use your survey questions. May I have permission to use your survey?

Sincerely,

Lindon Ratliff, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction

Mississippi State University - Meridian Campus

Division of Education



Appendix B

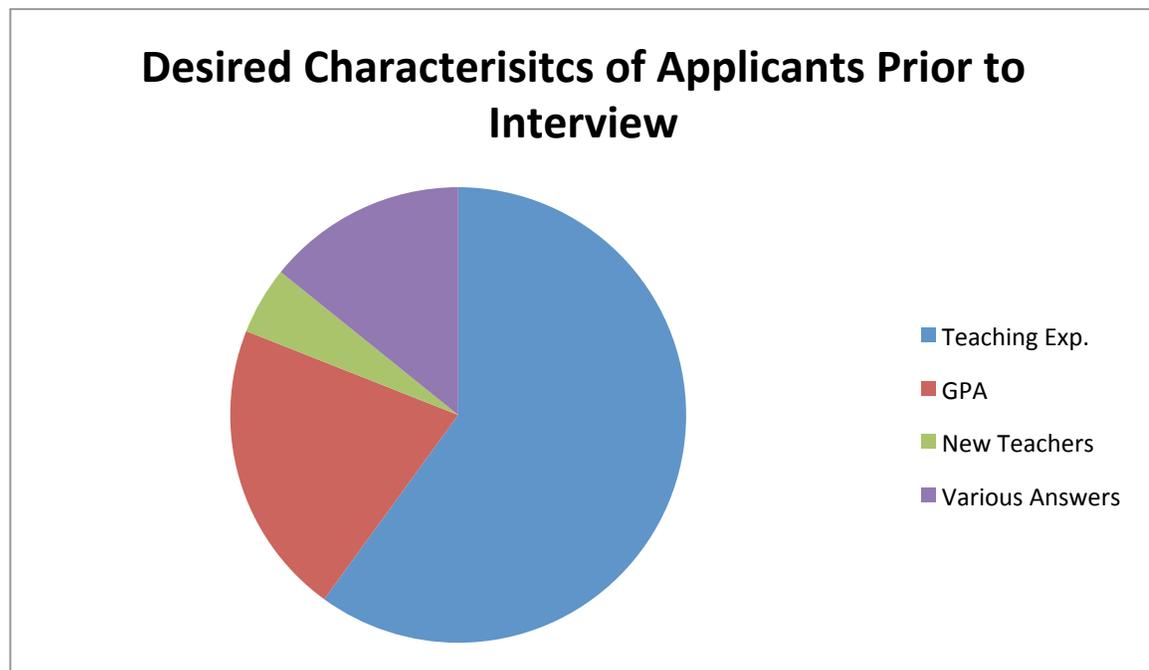
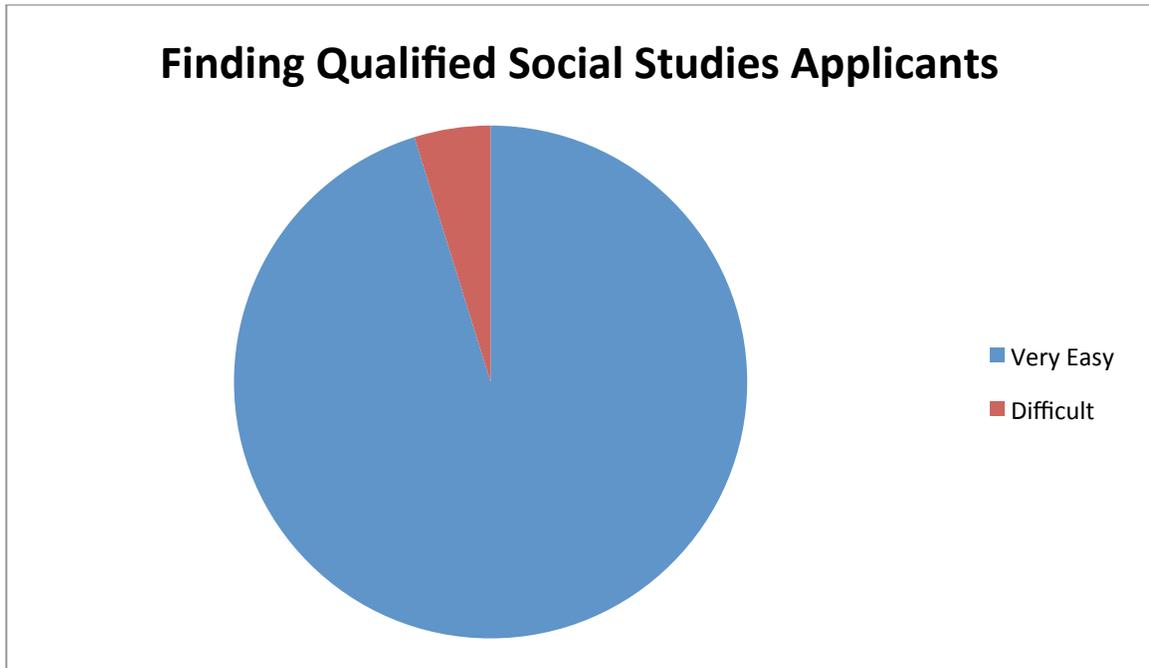
Semi-structured survey administered

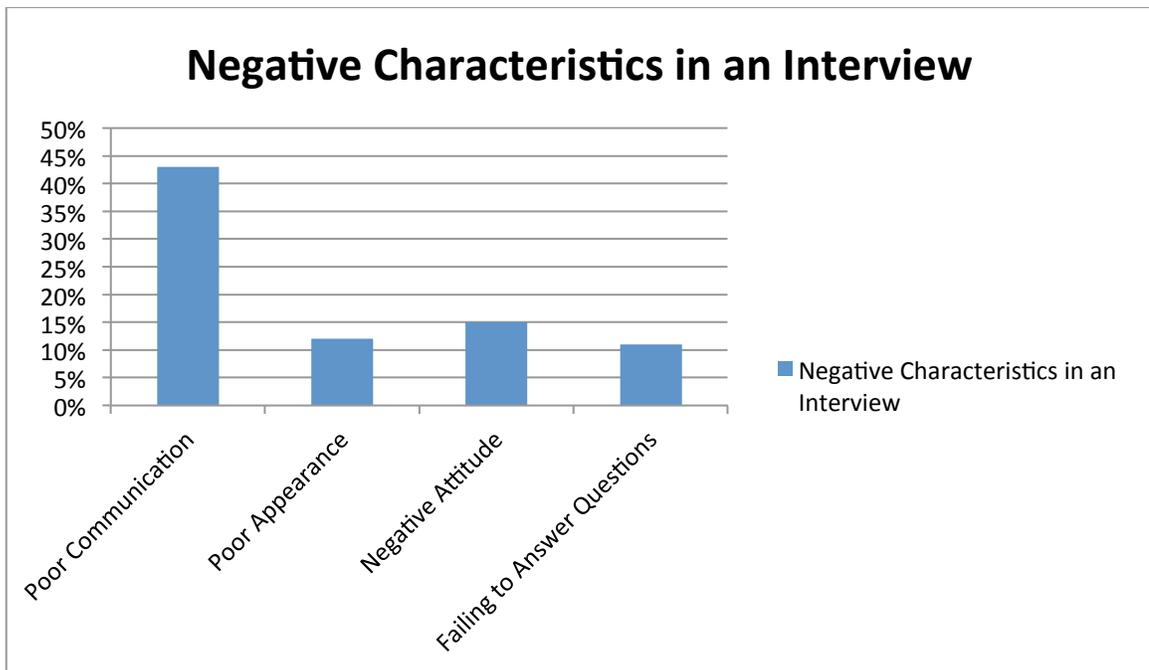
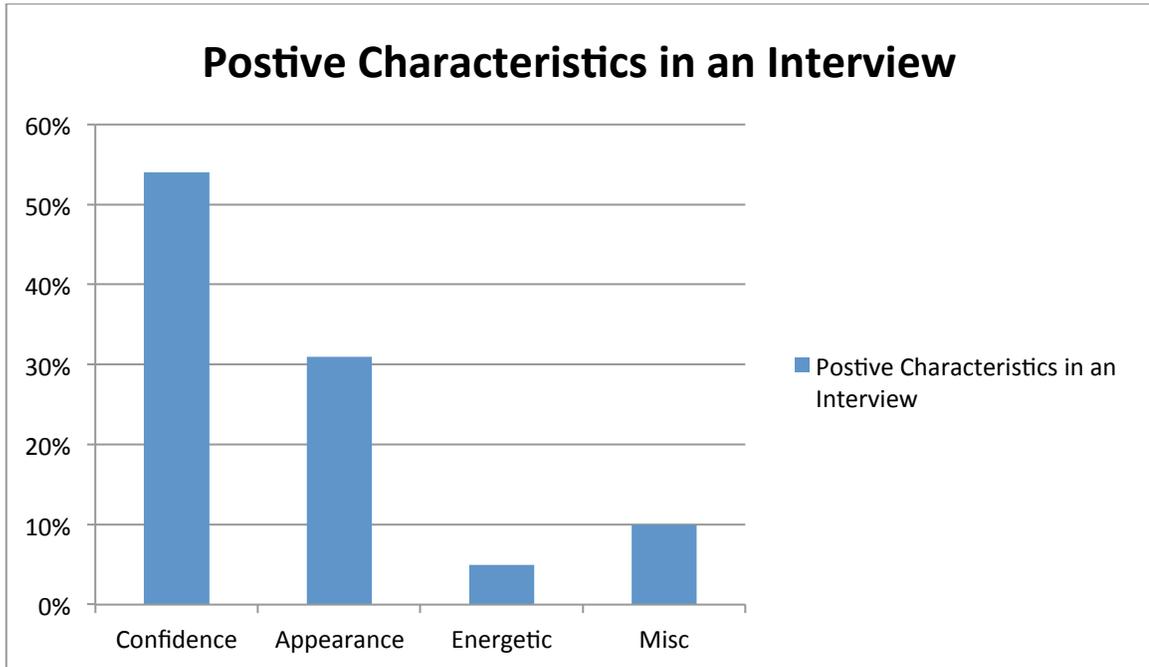
Secondary School Administrators' Perceptions of Potential Social Studies Teachers

1. When a vacancy occurs, how difficult is it to find a certified social studies teacher?
2. How do you separate out candidates before you call them for an interview?
3. Does anyone influence your decision to hire a candidate?
4. What are some positive characteristics you like to see during the interview?
5. Are there any negative characteristics that could emerge during the interview which would hurt their chances of getting the job?
6. What first impression do you like to see in a potential social studies teacher?
7. What questions asked at the end of the interview impress you?
8. How many references do you call?
9. How important are references?
10. How important is a candidate's portfolio?
11. If you hired a social studies teacher with very limited teaching experience, is there a grade level you would not feel comfortable assigning them to teach?
12. How many years were you a teacher?
13. How many years have you been an administrator?



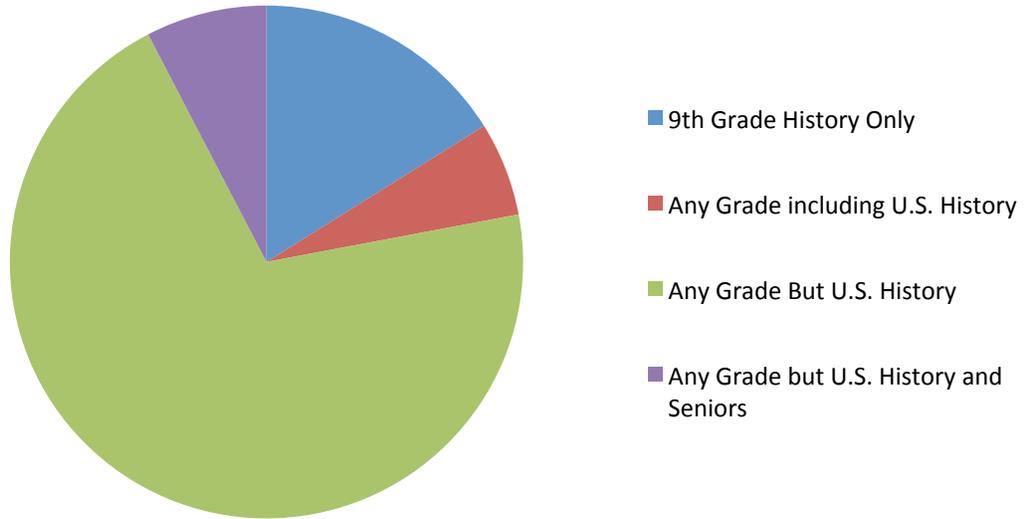
Appendix C
Graphs Depicting Various Findings







Grade Placement of a New Teacher



Principals' Demographics n=42

