

What Should be Done with “Fit” in Principal Selection?

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Abstract: Although the school principal’s role has been growing in importance, the methods used to select principals have changed little since the 1950s. Moreover, researchers have seldom scrutinized principal selection methods; yet, significant procedural issues exist. The concept of *fit* has been used within principal selection for decades, but researchers appear to disagree on whether *fit* is an effective criterion and whether its use may foster discrimination. This primarily qualitative study explored the perceptions and practices of top-level district administrators regarding the use of *fit* within principal selection processes through a conceptual framework of *cloning cultures* which raise significant equity issues for non-Caucasian selection participants. Results of this study indicate participants define *fit* both similarly and differently, they believe *fit* is an important attribute sought in selection, using *fit* within selection has both advantages and disadvantages, and selecting principals based on *fit* does not guarantee that a principal will *fit* the school and district community. Therefore, the concept of *fit* should be clearly defined and operationalized. In addition, objective assessment criteria should be developed if *fit* is to be used within principal selection processes to promote equality within selection practices.

Key words: principal selection, equity, *fit*, person-job *fit*, person-organization *fit*, cloning cultures, equity

Introduction

Principal selection has not notably changed in many decades (McIntyre, 1974; Palmer, 2014; Wendel & Breed, 1988). As the role of the principal has markedly increased in scope and responsibility, the methods school districts continue to use are often more limited than those in practice during the 1950s (Palmer, 2014). Principal selection came under the microscope over three decades ago when Baltzell and Dentler (1983) conducted what they hailed as “the first national effort” to determine how principals are actually selected (p. 1). Baltzell and Dentler’s (1983) research uncovered the use of *fit* as an attribute used by districts to select school principals. While many questionable and exemplary principal selection practices emerged in Baltzell and Dentler’s (1983) research, *fit* has endured as an issue in later principal selection literature (e.g., Baron, 1990; Blackmore, Thomson, & Barty, 2006; Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009;

Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Kwan & Walker, 2009; Palmer, 2014; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Watkins, 1991).

The purpose of this primarily qualitative study was to ascertain the perceptions and practices of top-level school district administrators regarding their use of *fit* within principal selection. This research sought to answer the question, How is *fit* defined and used by top-level district administrators to select principals? The research question was developed based on a review of over three decades of principal selection literature that used *fit* or related terms having the same connotation.

Principal selection has not been substantially interrogated by researchers (Blackmore et al., 2006) and has been further described by Hooker (2000) as “anecdotal, unpublished, and atheoretical” (p. 183). Likewise, the use of *fit* within principal selection also has not been substantially scrutinized by researchers and requires further study. Results of this study showed that although the concept of *fit* differed among top-level school administrators, they described the importance of *fit* with near unanimity, despite disadvantages of its use. Also, the predictability of using *fit* to determine whether or not a principal candidate actually is congruent within their respective school/district community remains questionable.

Review of *Fit*

The Birth of *Fit*

The use of *fit* within principal selection appears to have been born from a lack of criterial specificity (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). When questioning top-level district administrators regarding the operationalization of *educational leadership*, Baltzell and Dentler (1983) were provided with what they referred to as a “circular definition cycle” which relied primarily on notions of *fit* (p. 6). In principal selection literature, which is limited, the questions of what *fit* is and whether it should be used in hiring remain unresolved. *Fit* is seen as both a practical necessity within principal selection (Baron, 1990, Kahl, 1980) and a furtive practice in opposition to equity, merit (Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006) and innovation (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). According to Walker and Kwan (2012) *fit* maintains the status quo within school districts.

Definitions of *Fit*

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) described *fit* as “interpersonal perceptions of a candidate’s physical presence, projection of a certain self-confidence and assertiveness, and embodiment of community values and methods of operation” (p. 7). Although the term *fit* within principal selection appears to have originated from Baltzell and Dentler’s (1983) national study, the essence of *fit* was mentioned in earlier work. Kahl (1980) described “local tailoring” as a congruence of educational philosophy, combined with local values and goals between an individual and the school-community. Baron (1990) later described *fit* as compatible goals, values, and philosophy between candidates and organizations. *Fit* was referred to in more recent work by several researchers with a negative connotation. Gronn and Lacey (2006) introduced the term *cloning* as a selection reproduction strategy and explained *fit* as an aspect of cloning. While *fit* was undefined by Gronn and Lacey (2006), they explained how candidates that *fit* a preferred mould... may have already been socialized in preferred ways” (pp. 102-103). They also described selection as “a match or mismatch . . . between candidate presentations and selectors’ prototypes” (p. 109), both of which allude to the idea of *fit*. Similarly, Blackmore et

al. (2006) explained the concept of *fit* as “particular local and systemic dispositions and images” (p. 312). *Fit* also has differing connotations within the literature. Kwan and Walker’s (2009) research found candidates’ view of *fit* was their reputation, which was seen as more important than even interviewing. Finally, Walker and Kwan (2012) described *fit* as a match between the values of the school-organization and the candidate. While there is no unifying definition of *fit* in the literature, the term most often refers to congruence between real or perceived candidate attributes and aspects of the organization.

The use of *fit* appears to be an unresolved issue within principal selection. Kahl (1980) believed “local tailoring,” *fit*’s predecessor, should be used to select school principals. Baron (1990) held conflicting views. He suggested *fit* to be an important aspect of principal selection as the principal must be “knowledgeable of and accepted by the constituents of local systems to function effectively” (Baron, 1990, p. 10). Conversely, Baron (1990) also suggested a political aspect regarding the use of *fit* (i.e., “who you know vs. what you know”) which may be used to override merit. In a recent study on equity of principal selection and district hiring cultures by Palmer (2014), participants identified *fit* within both merit-based and non-merit based principal selection experiences as well as non-merit based hiring cultures. Other researchers have questioned the use of *fit* in relation to ensuring equity (e.g., Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006) and merit (e.g., Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006).

Implications of *Fit*

According to Baltzell and Dentler (1983), the use of *fit* as a selection criteria works heavily against several types of candidates, particularly women, minorities, and out-of-district candidates. While the concern for out-of-district candidates might be minimal, certainly a practice that discriminates against women and minorities should be of major concern to top-level school district administrators because of legal ramifications. Baltzell and Dentler (1983) asserted women and minorities are seen as different by definition and do not *fit*. Furthermore, a principal position is often seen as a man’s job (Blackmore et al., 2006; Watkins, 1991). Unfortunately, discrimination that may occur through the use of *fit* is not overt or even readily identifiable because *fit* may be what Dressel, Hartfield, and Gooley (1994) referred to as an *advanced discrimination*.

Advanced discrimination is defined as “the utilization of seemingly neutral rules and criteria that nevertheless have a different impact on distinct groups of people, with benefit to the accruing dominant group” (Dressel et al., 1994, p. 42). Discrimination against certain groups within organizations is emblematic of social cloning based on fancied attributes of sameness (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). In research examining ascriptive features and organizational power, Elliott and Smith (2004) investigated several hypotheses concerning race and gender that revealed a “pattern of increasing inequality, relative to white men,” especially for black women when controlling for other factors (e.g., human capital and employment context) (p. 376). However, these patterns of inequality also work against black men, white women, Latinos, and Latinas in indirect ways and by different modes (Elliott & Smith, 2004). This inequality may be the result of selection systems that are designed for reproduction where those who “do not fit . . . are excluded” (Blackmore et al, 2006). Dressel et al. (1994) contended, advanced discrimination is challenging to overcome because it manifests itself under selection and recruitment processes that typically seem to operate based on merit. Reproduction or preference for sameness dehumanizes and rejects all others who are perceived as different (Essed & Goldberg, 2002), thus selection systems are the vexed reproduction technologies described by Blackmore et al.

(2006). These “vexed” selection processes become axiomatic as they are established by the dominant group and typically go unacknowledged; the nature of the processes remain unquestioned (Dressel et al., 1994). Unfortunately, the recourse available to candidates may be limited. Dressel et al. (1994) contend the discrimination may lack discernable intent and legal remedies may be fruitless.

Fit also works heavily against merit within principal selection. Although education systems assert the use of merit as primal, candidates believe *fit* is at the forefront of selectors’ minds (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). One participant in a recent study by Palmer (2014, p.98) noted, There appears to be a tendency to hire like-minded individuals that agree with the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. Whether the argument is authentic or inauthentic, it doesn’t seem to matter. So, people are carefully presenting themselves in a way to acquire this anointment.

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) affirmed the notion that *fit* tends to override more concrete factors in selection. Blackmore et al., (2006) also described how education systems where the use of merit was previously in place had given way to the use of *fit* with “particular local and systemic dispositions and images” emerging as dominant (p. 312). If merit has given way to *fit* within some educational locales, the implications may be significant.

Aside from inequity concerns of *fit*, as used within principal selection, *fit* also has other implications that may negatively affect whole educational systems. Gronn and Lacey (2006) suggested organizations put a higher premium on loyalty than expertise, despite contrary claims. Furthermore, Gronn and Lacey (2006) raise the *Orwellian* spectre of *groupthink* which “puts a premium on concurrence seeking at all costs in decision-making” (p. 119). Blackmore et al, (2006) raise a similar concern for conformist ideals in selection due to a reliance on notions such as *fit*. The use of *fit* and its counterparts also affirm the status quo which is favored over (Kwan & Walker, 2009) and at odds with innovation (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). Relying on *fit* in lieu of merit may have a detrimental effect on student achievement, as the role of principal has been found to have an effect on student achievement by numerous researchers over several decades (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Gullatt & Lofton, 1996; Hallinger & Heck 1998; Heck, 1992; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used as an analytical lens for this study was *cloning cultures* posited by Essed and Goldberg (2002). The dimensions within cloning cultures presented by Essed and Goldberg (2002) are explained through concepts of *kinhood*, *productivism*, *consumerism*, and *aestheticism* “which can be revealed as contributing to the reproduction of systems of social distinction and privilege” (p. 1071). The concept of *kinhood* served as the primary lens for examining the use of *fit* in this study. *Kinhood* refers to “any form of (imagined) connectedness on the basis of sameness – from kinship, usually reserved for family, clans, and tribes, to ‘own kind,’ often the basis of shared community, nation, race, and gender” (Essed & Goldberg, 2002, p. 1073). Cloning cultures permeate many organizational structures, including the field of education, by the proliferation of generalized norms of merit and ability (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). This propagation occurs as individuals display certain archetypal behaviors in order to gain acceptance into particular groups (e.g., race, cultures, communities); this process is a mechanism of cloning cultures (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). Cloning was specifically mentioned in conjunction with *fit* within principal selection by Gronn and Lacey

(2006) when describing the use of *fit* in lieu of merit in educational systems; they explain *fit* as being “conducive to cloning” (p. 111). Cloning may be indicative of larger systemic issues as Essed and Goldberg (2002) suggested cloning cultures present “systemic and complex problems” which may be the result of hegemonic consensus (p. 1080).

Cloning cultures create complex problems because they propagate social injustices within organizations that are often concealed (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination based on most ascriptive characteristics, the equity impact within organizations has been limited. Organizations have routine structures and dynamics which contravene legislation explicitly designed to prevent such occurrences (Dressel, et al., 1994). The discrimination that may occur within organizations is no longer overt. Dressel et al. (1994) referred to these mechanisms as *micropolitics*, which “occur behind closed doors under a veil of confidentiality, defined as personnel matters” (p. 44). The “systematic and cumulative processes of advanced discrimination produce homosocial reproduction,” one of the mechanisms by which cloning cultures are sustained (Dressel et al., 1994, p. 60).

Generalized norms are the systemic mechanisms by which homosocial reproduction occurs, as those in power tend to select personnel they oversee based on ascriptive characteristics (Elliott & Smith, 2004) or “imagined perfections of the same type and profile” (Essed & Goldberg, 2002, p. 1069). Kanter (1977), in her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, conceptualized homosocial reproduction in her description of bureaucracies as being gendered. Kanter (1977) suggested organizational structures create a phenomena in which replication of management occurs based on social similarity, especially male social similarity, to cope with the uncertainty of managerial work. While Kanter (1977) dubiously referred to this phenomenon as both homosexual and homosocial reproduction, principal selection researchers have smartly settled on homosocial reproduction to describe the social pattern of replication within organizations.

Homosocial reproduction can be defined as “the reproduction of the systems of preference for sameness shaped by real or imagined kinhood . . . producing *more of the same at the same time* as well as *more of the same across time*” (Essed & Goldberg, 2002, pp. 1076-1077). Elliott and Smith (2004) similarly explained homosocial reproductions as a tendency to replicate the particularities of organizational power through succession propagation (Elliott & Smith, 2004). This occurs within school systems as senior district administrators select lower school site administrators to succeed them. Blackmore et al. (2006) described how succession propagation occurs within principal selection,

Conservative panels have elected conservative principals; people ‘at the top’ have selected and inducted those who conform to their idea of leadership to take over; and schools themselves have encouraged this form of homosocial reproduction by repeatedly selecting incumbents regardless of alternatives (p. 312).

Gronn and Lacey (2006) similarly described the same phenomena of propagation within education selection systems:

This tendency is a way of seeking to guarantee that new appointees fit a preferred mould, or are deemed able to be moulded, the assumption being that such moulding is more likely to occur if appointees come from within the school where they may have already been socialized in preferred ways in prior lead-up roles consistent with the overall leadership culture of a school. (p. 102)

These types of homosocial reproduction, which tend to result from cloning cultures are consequent of masculine hegemony (Essed & Goldberg, 2002).

Blackmore et al. (2006) and Grummell, Devine, and Lynch (2009) problematized homosocial reproduction as a result of masculine hegemony. Blackmore et al. (2006) found what they referred to as a ‘closed circuit’ of masculine leadership reproduction in one geographic region. However, such pronounced leadership reproduction may be more subtle. Elliott and Smith (2004) explained that employers may let minority race and gendered persons into low-level positions of authority but are reluctant to allow them to occupy higher-level positions which allow greater control, such as mid-level positions which represent the first level of legitimate authority within organizations. The principalship represents legitimate mid-level authority described by Elliott and Smith (2004) as principals typically have significant decision-making authority and autonomy at their respective schools.

Furthermore, higher-level managers seek to maintain homogeneity by filling positions under them to maximize desired salient traits within organizations. White men have historically controlled organizations within the U.S. and ostensibly allowed other white men to move-up the organizational hierarchies; consequently, exacerbating equity concerns for minorities (Elliott & Smith, 2004). Even though Black men and women, Latinos and Latinas, and white women also practice homosocial reproduction at even higher rates than those of white males, white males have greater opportunity to engage in homosocial reproduction as they have three times the opportunity of white women and over eight times the opportunity of other minority groups (Elliott & Smith, 2004).

The degree to which masculine hegemony either explains *a priori* segregation or a “real time” preference for upper-level management to select similar others has not been empirically determined (Elliott and Smith, 2004). However, in cases of overt masculine hegemony, mechanisms may have long been in place which can concentrate the pool of applicants to real or imagined sameness rendering choice irrelevant. Consequently, when diverse opportunities arise among candidates, preference for similar others becomes salient (Elliott & Smith, 2004).

The use of *fit* is described by numerous researchers within principal selection in similar terms and at times in conjunction with homosocial reproduction and cloning cultures and may be the result of masculine hegemony within educational organizations. Cloning cultures therefore, serves as an adequate conceptual framework to investigate the use of *fit* within principal selection.

Method

A primarily qualitative design was used to explore the perceptions and practice of top-level school district administrators regarding the use of *fit*. An electronic questionnaire with open-ended questions and one Likert-scale question was used to answer the research question, how is *fit* defined and used by top-level district administrators to select principals? Participants were asked questions such as “How do you define *fit* as an attribute to select school principals.”

Instrument

Principal selection research lacks a validated instrument (Kwan & Walker, 2009) for a study of this nature. An instrument was developed by the researcher and reviewed by an expert panel consisting of five top-level district administrators with doctorate degrees and two university professors of education who were familiar with principal selection and school district

human resource practices to establish face and content validity. The instrument was revised upon review by incorporating the expert panel’s feedback.

Participants

Purposive random sampling was used to identify superintendents and school district human resource managers to participate in the study. Purposive sampling can increase the credibility of a study and is “believed to be sufficient to provide maximum insight and understanding” (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorenson, 2010, p. 428). Individual State Departments of Education School Directories and county and school district websites were used to obtain 12,626 top-level district administrator (e.g., superintendents) email addresses from all 50 states within the United States. School district email listings for each state were incorporated into Microsoft Excel, and assigned a unique numerical value and then chosen for this study using a random number generator. Email addresses for each chosen school district top-level administrator were then put into an Excel database to generate an email list. The survey was sent to 4,299 participants with 85 surveys being returned for a 2.0 % response rate (85 of 4,299). Participant demographics are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Participant Demographics by Percentage of the Sample (n=85)

Variables	Percentages	Variables	Percentages
Position		Age range	
Superintendent	84.7	56 years and older	35.3
H.R. Asst. Supt.	11.8	46-55 years	50.6
Other	3.5	36-45 years	12.9
Gender		< 35 years	1.2
Male	74.1	Years as top-level administrator	
Female	25.9	1-5	32.9
Race-ethnicity		6-10	23.5
Caucasian	97.6	11-15	23.5
African-American	0.0	16-20	6.0
Hispanic	1.2	21 or more	14.1
Asian	1.2		
Highest degree			
Doctorate	34.1		
Master’s	65.9		

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using coding methods associated with Glaser’s (1965) constant comparative method. Two coders analyzed the data, and inter-coder reliability of at least .80 was established by comparing results at several intervals during data analysis process. The use of multiple coders allows reliability of the data to be tested (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Also the use of multiple coders is an essential component of establishing validity (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

Results

Participant responses were organized by survey item and the major themes and sub-categories that emerged during data analysis within each survey item. In several cases participant responses exceeded the number of participants due to multiple categories and sub-categories often noted within a single participant response.

Fit as Defined by Top-Level School District Administrators

Participants primarily defined *fit* as either a congruence of some aspect(s) between the principal candidate and the school/district community, desired character traits, and/or an understanding of some component of the school/district community. Several participants defined *fit* as having previous success or as meeting the requirements for the principalship (e.g., credential, degree, etc.). A number of participants (11) either did not answer the question or provided a response that did not address the purpose of the survey item (e.g. non-sequiturs).

Fit as Congruence

A match between some aspect of the principal candidate and the school/district community was noted in 46 participant responses. Within these responses, participants used terms such as meets, mesh, align, same, similar, and match to describe a congruence between a principal candidate and the school/district community. Participants described this congruence among both multiple and single factors. The factors of congruence most commonly reported by participants were values (22 responses), traits (15 responses), position (9 responses), and culture (7 responses). A demographic congruence was noted within two participant responses.

A match of values, traits, position, and culture were the most common recorded responses within the descriptions of *fit*, and denoted similar characteristics between a principal candidate and the school/district community. Participants at times described multiple points of match (i.e., values and traits or traits and culture). Regarding a match of values, Participant 37 explained, “Through the interview I must get a sense that the candidate shares the same values that our organization models. We can teach technical skills, I do not believe we can shape someone’s personal values.” Traits were also noted by a number of participants as a point of match as Participant 47 described, “We want to know if the candidate’s personality traits will be an advantage or disadvantage to them in the position . . . For example, some buildings might accept someone who has a robust sense of humor, other buildings may not.” Also, some participants described *fit* as a non-specific congruence between the principal candidate and the principalship. Participant 4 stated, “After we interview the candidate, we determine which of the candidates *fit* the position that we currently have available.” Matching the culture of the school/district community was noted by some participants. Participant 43 described *fit* as “commonality with the culture and ‘personality’ of the school and community.” The participants’ differing definitions of *fit* adds complexity to the use of *fit* within principal selection.

Fit as Character Traits

Fit was defined by participants as character traits within 34 responses. Character trait responses within this section differ from the previous section where a congruence of traits between the principal candidate and the school/district community were reported because participants did not describe any type of match between the desired traits and the school/district community. Participants described specific traits as well as generally referring to traits within their definition of *fit*. Participant 56 defined *fit* as a list of traits: “pedagogical content

knowledge, excellent manager, assessment literate, superior interpersonal skills.” Likewise, participant 64 described *fit* as “the qualities we desire in a principal.”

Fit as Understanding

Fit was described as the principal candidate having an understanding of some aspect(s) of the school/district community within 23 participant responses. Participants described the understanding mostly in terms of the school/community (10 responses), culture (7 responses), or student population (6 responses) of a particular school/district. Some participant responses also included multiple types of understanding (e.g., the school and student population). Participant 22 defined *fit* as a principal candidate who “understands and appreciates the culture of the school and community.” Similarly, participant 81 stated *fit* means an understanding of the employees, students and community as a whole.” Participants’ description of *fit* as an understanding may be unique to this study as principal selection researchers have relied on a definition of *fit* as congruence between aspects of the principal candidate and the school/district community.

Fit’s Importance

Participants were asked which characteristics from a list of common attributes sought in principal candidates were more important than the attribute of *fit*. Participants listed ability to build relationships (49 responses), communication ability (36 responses), educational leadership ability (35 responses), and ability to work collaboratively (27 responses) as desired attributes more important than *fit*. Success in raising student achievement was only noted within 18 participant responses. A number of participants did not list any of the attributes as more important than *fit* for several reasons: (a) 1 participant stated the sum of the listed attributes were equal with *fit*, (b) 10 participants stated the list of attributes were part of what defines the term *fit*, and (c) 9 participants did not answer the question. Participants were also asked how important *fit* is as a candidate attribute within a Likert-scale question. Over 90% of participants (79 of 85) identified *fit* as an important candidate attribute. Results for *fit*’s importance are displayed below in Figure 1.

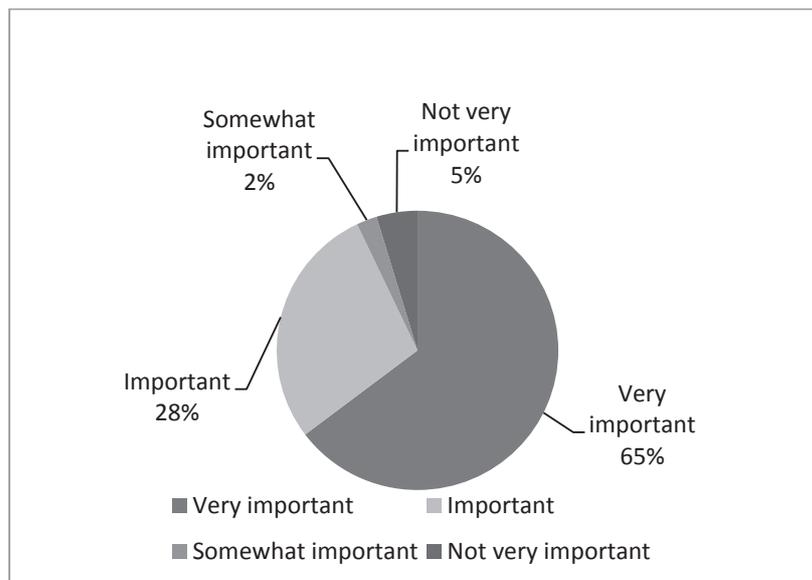


Figure 1. Depicts participants’ beliefs of how important the attribute *fit* is in principal selection.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using *Fit*

Participants described both advantages and disadvantages of using *fit* as a desired candidate attribute when selecting principals. The major advantages participants noted for using *fit* were as follows: principals that *fit* are more successful (8 responses), acceptance of the principal by staff (7 responses), getting the principal with the desired attributes (5 responses), and the ability of the principal to transition more quickly (4 responses). Regarding success, participant 57 stated “The advantage is if you get it right the candidate will be more successful.” Using *fit* also helps the incoming principal gain acceptance as participant 12 stated, “*Fit* could also identify one who will be ‘received’ better by stakeholders.”

The major disadvantages of using *fit* as a selection criteria were that *fit* was subjective (29 responses) and that other highly qualified candidates may be overlooked (10 responses) in lieu of *fit*. Three responses indicated that using *fit* promoted bias. Participant 71 described *fit*'s subjective nature and stated, “there could be varying definitions and understandings of *fit* by members of the selection committee” Regarding hiring for *fit* over qualifications, participant 37 stated, “It may be difficult to justify the selection of an individual whose vitae might not align with the job description as well as another candidate.”

Effectiveness of Hiring Using *Fit*

Participants were asked to describe if *fit* had been used to select a candidate only to find out later the candidate was not actually a good *fit*. More than half of the study participants (46 responses) reported they had not encountered this situation. However, within 26 responses, participants recalled hiring a candidate based on *fit* and later found the selection was not a good *fit*. Major reasons identified for this occurrence were a lack of other important attributes (6 responses), misjudging the candidate (6 responses), and candidate misrepresentation. Participant 62 described an incident where the candidate lacked other important attributes: “Our district selected a candidate based upon the person’s desire to move in and be a member of the school community (a good fit) but whose leadership, curriculum, and instruction knowledge, and management skills were weak.” Regarding misjudging a candidate, Participant 42 stated, “I violated my hiring process by pushing through a candidate I thought was excellent. She was just the opposite! I have not violated that process in the years since.” Participant 5 described their experience with candidate misrepresentation:

I also have had the experience of people being good at misrepresenting their skills and abilities and later seeing and working with the real person... They were a great salesperson in the interview and much less impressive with the actual work.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study may stem from the low participant response rate (2%, 85 of 4,299). However, since the study is primarily qualitative, the low participant response rate may not be so critical as to terminally limit the results of this study. Additionally, the findings are also limited to the interpretation of participant responses by the researchers during data analysis. Although inter-coder reliability was established during data analysis, other researchers may have interpreted the results of this study in a different manner. While the findings of this study may not be generalizable, the survey results from 85 top-level school district administrators from a national sample demonstrate the complexity and irregularity of the use of *fit* within principal selection and provide direction for future research.

Conclusions

This study has provided insight into several aspects of *fit* from the perspective of top-level school district administrators. How *fit* is defined, its importance within principal selection, advantages and disadvantages, and the reliability of using *fit* as a selection criteria were illuminated. The research question how is *fit* defined and used by top-level district administrators to select principals is discussed within this section.

Fit Does Not Always Mean Congruence

The use of *fit* as a selection criterion by top-level school district administrators appears to have several different connotations. Within principal selection literature *fit* appears to have a near universal definition of an alignment between real or imagined characteristics between a principal candidate and the school/district organization. This definition was affirmed by a slim majority of responses within this study but *fit* was also noted by many participants to connote certain specific attributes the principal candidate possesses irrespective of the school/district community or as having an understanding of some aspect(s) of the school/district community. How *fit* is defined by top-level school administrators adds another layer of complexity to an already thorny issue regarding the use of *fit*. Based upon results of this study, *fit* may be redefined as the specific attributes possessed by a candidate, or a congruence or understanding of certain real or imagined features between the candidate and the school/district community. While this definition differs from what may be considered typical definitions of person-job or person-organization *fit* within other literature, the use of *fit* within school districts might have different implications than in business organizations because of the differing goals (e.g., student achievement versus profit motive). How *fit* is defined by top-level school administrators is important to understanding other aspects of *fit* within principal selection such as how important *fit* is as an attribute and how *fit* is regarded and used within principal selection.

Identifying a Candidate’s *Fit*

The identification of a candidate’s *fit* during principal selection is a significant issue within principal selection research. While some participants of this study believed they could identify *fit* in much the same way that late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart could identify obscene material by invoking, “*I know it when I see it,*” many participants noted the subjective nature of identifying *fit* as a disadvantage of its use within principal selection. For example, Participant 77 described his ability to identify *fit* within selection and stated, “It [*fit*] is a feel, I get an overall essence of a person.” Conversely, Participant 62 noted “It is hard to ascertain *fit* in the interview and selection process.” Superintendents’ propensity to rely on intuition has been frequently noted within principal selection literature (Gronn & Lacey 2006; Morgan, Hall, & McKay, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Rammer, 2007; Wendell & Breed, 1988) and should be limited in favor of more objective methods.

How Important is *Fit*?

The importance of using *fit* as a candidate attribute was noted by most of the participants of this study (93%, 79 of 85). Although many participants identified several characteristics as more important than *fit* (e.g., ability to build relationships, communication ability, and educational leadership ability), surprisingly *success raising student achievement* was not considered to be more important than *fit* by more participants of this study (only 18 out of 85), as student achievement has been a focus of the U.S. education system for decades. Participants also

did not specifically indicate success in raising student achievement as an advantage of using *fit*; however, they did indicate overall candidate success as an advantage (8 responses) and other advantages of using *fit*. The importance of *fit* as a desired attribute of principal candidates compared to other attributes, especially success in raising student achievement, warrants further study.

Fit as a Cloning Mechanism

The use of *fit* as a means of cloning was difficult to ascertain by examining participant responses within this study. Essed and Goldberg (2002) described cloning as *kinhood* which refers to “any form of (imagined) connectedness on the basis of sameness – from kinship, usually reserved for family, clans, and tribes, to ‘own kind’, often the basis of shared community, nation, race, and gender” (p. 1073). Top-level school district administrators primarily described *fit* as congruence between some aspect(s) of a candidate and the school/district community, which may be akin to cloning cultures as defined by Essed and Goldberg (2002). Some principal selection researchers have suggested the use of *fit* may have tendencies to produce homogeneity (e.g., Baltzell and Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn and Lacey, 2006), while others have described advanced discrimination within organizations (e.g., Dressel et al., 1994). Dressel et al. (1994) further described advanced discrimination as difficult to overcome within organizations because the discrimination appears as merit-based processes within selection.

Results of this study may offer a “smoking gun” of cloning cultures within school districts due to the large number of participants who described *fit* as congruence between principal candidates and school districts. However, without knowing the demographic data of individual school systems administration within this study, suggesting that cloning cultures exist would be purely speculative. Updated studies similar to Research and Development Corporation’s (RAND) (2004) three state study, where the gender gap and selection of minority principals were analyzed may provide additional data to examine whether or not *fit* is producing clones based on ascriptive features. Further study of *fit* focusing on gender and/or racial selection outcomes within specific locales through a case study method might provide a suitable answer to the question of whether or not cloning cultures, as described by Essed and Goldberg (2002), exist within school systems.

What Should be Done With *Fit*?

The use of *fit* as a selection attribute is criticized by some principal selection researchers as a veiled practice to either promote sameness among leadership or limit the access of women and minorities to the principalship. Few principal selection researchers have supported the use of *fit* as a necessity for a new principal to gain acceptance of stakeholders. While participants of this study described *fit* as a search for sameness and subjectivity as a disadvantage, they still believed in its importance as a selection attribute. Whether *fit* is defined as specific traits sought or congruence or an understanding of some aspect(s) of the school district community, how *fitness* is assessed within principal selection should be of concern for top-level school district administrators. The subjective nature of principal selection is a near constant through decades of principal selection literature and the use of *fit* may represent the highest level of subjectivity within the principal selection process.

If *fit* is to be used within principal selection, it should not supersede other attributes that can be more objectively determined, especially a principal candidate’s ability to raise student achievement within schools. *Fit* should also be defined and operationalized into the specific

attributes which encompass it. Selection personnel should develop objective selection protocols to determine principal candidates’ *fit* through rigorous selection processes. Development of objective measures for *fit* may also reduce some disadvantages of its use within selection, primarily its subjectivity and predictability of a candidate’s success. Aptitude and personality tests having psychometric rigor may assist selection personnel in determining the specific attributes that may define *fit* in lieu of using intuition. The use of *fit* within the private sector is well known and a number of organizations within the private sector use tests that have psychometric rigor to aid in the selection process. School districts would be wise to follow suit. Performance tasks with rigorous scoring procedures such as one developed by Wildy, Pepper, and Guanzhong, (2011) could also be used to assist top-level school district administrators to identify components of *fit* in the selection of school principals. School districts should refrain from intuition based selection in favor of more objective methods, especially for positions critical to raising or sustaining student achievement such as the principal.

The use of *fit* and how it is assessed within principal selection should be further studied to provide school district selection personnel with the most objective means to assess a principal candidate’s *fit*. Selecting school principals primarily by their *fit* may undermine equity in selection and could have legal consequences if school districts maintain homogeneity through its use. School districts may also differentially affect student achievement if the selected principal lacks other important attributes such as the ability to raise or sustain student achievement. *Fit* as a selection attribute should be used with caution until sufficient objective measures are developed by school districts. School district personnel should focus selection of school principals initially around a principal who can close the achievement gap by raising or sustaining student achievement within their schools, before other attributes are considered, especially attributes such as *fit*.

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