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## Why Principals Hire Recent Graduates from a Teacher Preparation Program

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# WHY PRINCIPALS HIRE RECENT GRADUATES FROM A TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

Article by Laurie James, Joy Mahiko, and Jonathan Schwartz

## Abstract

Principals want to hire the most qualified teacher when positions are open at their schools. Oftentimes a preservice teacher, who recently earned their teaching certificate is their first choice. The purpose of this research was to look at the satisfaction level of elementary, middle-level, and high school principals who hired graduates from a local teacher preparation program at a nationally accredited 4-year baccalaureate-granting university in Leeward O'ahu. The methodology utilized in the study includes four individual face-to-face interviews. Questions were asked to determine 1) desired qualities principals look for when hiring a new teacher and 2) what a local teacher preparation program does well to prepare future teachers to have a positive impact on student learning. The findings suggest that principals were highly satisfied with local graduates because they demonstrate life-long learning, leadership skills, technology skills, connect with diverse student populations, and are part of the community. In this study, the local teacher preparation program is meeting the expectations of principals. Nevertheless, further investigations into this research are important to understand more about the rationale principals use to hire new teachers.

**Keywords:** Preparation program, leadership, soft skills, positive impact, alumni teachers, teacher candidates

## Introduction

Attracting and retaining local teachers is an ongoing problem as the State of Hawai'i faces roadblocks in recruiting enough teachers each year. The Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) recognizes that a critical challenge is the severe shortage of qualified teachers. In recent years, researchers and journalists have cited various indicators as critical signs of the shortage, including hard-to-fill subject areas, personal testimonies from district administrators, and declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). The Learning Policy Institute's seminal 2016 report noted that many school districts had serious difficulty finding

qualified teachers for their positions (Sutcher et al., 2016). Current data and projections reveal teacher shortages across many states could worsen if trends continue (Sutcher et al., 2019) and will have serious consequences.

Schools that have the fewest resources tend to have the least qualified teachers hired because of problems arising from a nationwide shortage of teachers (Carothers et al., 2019). Filling vacancies by hiring the least qualified teachers threatens students' opportunity to access equal and high-quality education and impacts their ability to progress in the general education curriculum. In 2019, the State of Hawai'i had a severe teacher shortage. On January 7, 2020, out of a total of 13,463 teaching positions, 1,074 positions statewide were not filled by highly-qualified teachers. Of those positions, 352 were in special education. Additionally, the HIDOE reported that State Approved Teacher Education Programs (SATEP) produced only 387 new teachers, while out-of-state SATEPs generated 572 and 294 did not have a SATEP degree. Of the new hires, 64.5% had no previous teaching experience and the largest numbers of hires were directed to teach on the Leeward Coast of O'ahu with the highest concentration of Native Hawaiian, homeless, and underprivileged students at 29.3%. Overall, it is estimated that every year more than 60,000 students in Hawai'i public schools are not being taught by a qualified teacher.

Teacher turnover is currently at its highest rate since 2001 and was recently ranked No.1 in the nation. In Hawai'i, only 50% of teachers hired five years ago are still in the classroom. These statistics mirror those across the nation (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Considerable resources are spent recruiting teachers from mainland states. For example, the HIDOE participated in out-of-state recruitment fairs in Champaign and Norman Illinois, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia Pennsylvania, Spokane Washington, and Portland Oregon. Should these efforts succeed, history suggests that new hires may not stay in their positions. Nevertheless, to strengthen capacity and address the teacher shortage, the HIDOE continues to aggressively recruit the best candidates as the state is aimed at growing a pipeline of quality teachers (Covell, 2018).

## Literature Review

The teacher shortage must be addressed to ensure that the students of Hawai'i receive the highest quality education possible to support their academic and personal growth. Teacher staffing problems are driven by numerous factors, including not only the production of new teachers in various fields, but also teacher turnover, changes in educational programs and student-teacher ratios, and the attractiveness of teaching in specific locations (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Nearly every state is reporting teacher shortages with more than 40 states having shortages in several subject areas, such as mathematics, science, and special education (Sutcher et al., 2019). Consequently, school districts across the United States face multiple challenges to recruit and retain teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

One component of successful recruitment and retention of qualified teachers is to determine what qualities principals look for in new hires. Some research suggests that

principals consider professional skills and personal characteristics when making decisions about hiring new teachers (Harris et al., 2010). Yet, much remains to be understood about this process as a shortage of qualified teachers threaten students' ability to learn (Garcia & Weiss, 2019) and there seems to not be agreement on what characteristics define a good teacher.

Teacher characteristics play a central role in predicting teacher effectiveness over the first three to five years in the classroom (Harris & Rutledge, 2010). Professional teaching skills and personal characteristics are two essential factors principals take into consideration when hiring preservice teachers. Principals preferred teachers who possess professional teaching abilities that are consistent with working effectively in a group, demonstrating confidence in the classroom, and motivating reluctant students. Desired personal characteristics would include self-confidence, enthusiasm, having patience, and being a lifelong learner (Alashwal, 2019). When hiring new teachers, principals search for qualities such as strong communication with others, relating well with their students, and understanding different perspectives (Harris et al., 2010). Current trends focus on teacher impact on student learning (Opper, 2019), the consistent finding in research that good teaching is the most powerful influencer on student learning and development (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2003; Marzano, 2003, 2007), a closer examination at what principals look for in hiring new teachers is critical.

Hiring effective teachers can be a challenging task when a principal decides about the qualities of those they will hire (Kimbrel, 2019). A principal may need to hire more teachers as school enrollment increases, teachers leave, the curriculum expands, and teachers are needed in new fields (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). However, school principals are best situated to identify the characteristics of good teachers and teaching at their school. Principals believe teachers need to have soft skills that complement the hard skills that are the technical necessities of quality teaching. Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance a teacher's interactions, personality traits, social gracefulness, personal habits, and friendliness (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

As former classroom teachers, most principals have extensive teaching experience in school settings. As administrators, principals must remain current on teaching and learning research and practices as they evaluate and advise teachers regularly through classroom observations and conferences. The principals know the effective teachers who develop relationships at their school. They understand teachers and their needs (Wong, 2004). Principals are responsible for developing culture at their school based on knowledge of their local community.

Recruiting quality teachers represents a continuous challenge for school districts. The principals are not able to offer incentives or hiring bonuses for new teachers as the pay scale is predetermined. This is a big disadvantage because low teacher pay is reducing the attractiveness of choosing education as a lifelong career. Teachers have long been underpaid compared with similarly educated workers in other professions. Unfortunately, in high-poverty schools, teachers face a double disadvantage, as they

are further underpaid relative to their peers in low-poverty schools. This leads to higher turnover rates with 50% of teachers in the United States leaving the teaching profession within their first five years.

The local teacher preparation program at a nationally accredited 4-year baccalaureate-granting university on O'ahu was initiated in 2006 in response to the high rate of turnover and need for teachers. The University of Hawai'i System, therefore, promoted a traditional teacher preparation program where students who had grown up in Leeward or Central O'ahu would be educated and return to teach in their local communities. This follows the "Grow Your Own" model (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), which capitalizes on the fact that teachers are more likely to stay and continue teaching in their communities. The Grow Your Own program is now receiving recognition as a method of addressing the racial and ethnic gaps between teachers and students (Gist, 2019). To Grow Your Own pathway in Hawai'i, potential teachers who are born and/or raised in the islands understand and can navigate the multitude of ethnicities, cultures, and languages found in the young students they will be teaching (Kahumoku & Kekahio, 2010).

This traditional teacher preparation program has a clear path for undergraduate teacher candidates to build their content knowledge and develop specialized content for elementary, middle-level, and secondary grades. Course delivery occurs both on-campus and online, with flexible scheduling that recognizes candidates' busy family, work, and academic responsibilities. Teacher candidates complete a minimum of 40 hours of Service Learning and are required to take two prescribed courses on inclusive schooling and teaching students with exceptionalities. Additionally, field placements occur in partnership with the Hawai'i Department of Education schools island-wide and especially in areas identified as "hard to staff", including Central and Leeward O'ahu.

Leeward O'ahu is comprised of communities along the southwest shores of O'ahu that includes Nanakuli, Waianae, and Makaha. These areas are mostly rural along the coast and lined with beach parks. The population is predominantly Hawaiian. On June 25, 2020, the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism released the 2019 Hawai'i Census report identifying the average price of a home is just under \$400,000, the lowest on O'ahu (Census, 2020). Fewer than 100,000 people living in Leeward O'ahu. The median household income is the lowest on the island.

Central O'ahu is a more urban area and extends from the Ko'olau Mountain Range on the east side of the island and the Waianae Mountains on the west side. Communities in Central O'ahu include Kapolei, Moanalua, Pearl City, Mililani, and Wahiawa. Central O'ahu is an urban area comprised of clusters of small cities and neighborhoods. The population is a diverse mix of people, including those who are Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, White, and mixed ethnicities. According to the 2019 Hawai'i Census, the median price of homes in Central O'ahu is around \$570,000 (Census, 2020). Almost 150,000 people are living in Central O'ahu. The median household income is \$89,000. The economy employs 75,000 people. The largest industries are restaurants and food services, construction, and elementary and secondary schools (Census, 2020).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to determine the satisfaction of elementary, middle-level, and high school principals who hired alumni from a local teacher preparation program at a nationally accredited 4-year baccalaureate-granting university on O'ahu. There is a need to conduct this study to gain information to identify desired traits that principals look for in a new teacher. A partnership was created between the university's teacher preparation programs and the Hawai'i Department of Education. Common goals were established and fully aligned with the standards of the teaching profession, as required by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). This study takes a close look at the K-12 teacher preparation programs to discover what principals believe is done well to ensure highly-qualified teachers enter the field of teaching.

## Research Questions

Two research questions were developed to guide data collection: (1) What are the desired qualities principals look for when hiring a new teacher? (2) What does a local teacher preparation program do well to prepare future teachers to have a positive impact on student learning? During in-person interviews, elementary, middle-level, and high school principals answered the following open-ended questions.

1. Why do you choose to hire teacher education alumni from a 4-year baccalaureate-granting university located on Leeward O'ahu?
2. How effective do you believe preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers can differentiate instruction for diverse learners, take on leadership roles, and teach accurate content?
3. How would you describe the alumni teachers' ability to impact student learning?
4. What recommendations do you have for the teacher preparation program regarding methods of improvement for teacher candidates to have a positive impact on student learning?

## Methodology

To address the need to hire highly-qualified teachers, it is important to uncover the desired qualities principals look for in a new teacher and what a teacher preparation program does well to prepare future teachers to have a positive impact on student learning. The researchers sought to understand why elementary, middle-level, and high school principals Leeward and Central O'ahu hired graduates from a nationally accredited teacher preparation program. Researchers used a qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) for this study.

To determine what key characteristics principals look for in a highly-qualified teacher, four interview questions were selected to identify specific qualities of the alumni teachers from a local teacher preparation program. Within a 2-week period, interviews were conducted in each principal's office. Through these interviews, the four principals who had hired the most alumni teachers over nine years shared their level of satisfaction about the local teacher preparation program and provided reasons for hiring new teachers. Interviewees came from a convenience sample of four principals: 2 elementary schools (n=29 alumni), 1 middle-level school (n=7 alumni), and 1 high school (n=2 alumni). These alumni teachers represent 17% of elementary and 50% of middle-level/secondary graduates who are at this time employed in Hawai'i schools. Currently, 79% (N=190/240) of all alumni from the local university are teaching full-time in a public, charter, and private schools in the State of Hawai'i.

A Grounded Theory approach was used as part of this research to generate a theory that would explain why principals made decisions to hire graduates from the teacher preparation program. The constant comparative methodology for analyzing data developed by Glaser and Strauss (1999) helped to develop a grounded theory. The constant comparative methodology used coding procedures intended to generate a theory. After each interview was conducted, both researchers coded data. Data were then placed in categories based on themes found in existing research on the topic and then combined to simplify reporting. Two main categories were identified: teaching skills and personal characteristics. Though additional categories were identified in the literature and noted, such as content knowledge, these categories were later dropped when not supported by findings.

## Results

In this study, data collection consisted of 45-minute face-to-face interviews, recording responses, transcribing statements, and identifying themes to responses from the following interview questions.

*Question 1: Why do principals choose to hire teacher education alumni from a 4-year baccalaureate-granting university located on Leeward O'ahu?*

As part of the teacher preparation program required field experiences, teacher candidates spent considerable time at the schools where they were hired. This allows principals to get to know the candidates better and helps candidates effectively use their understanding of the community as part of their teaching. A principal noted, "Candidates being at my school for three months, for their student teaching or practicum placements, made it like a three-month interview."

During the interviews, all principals referred to the importance of the potential teachers' understanding of how learning takes place through individualizing and differentiating instruction. Knowing learning theory allows teachers to make informed instructional decisions about the learning environment, student readiness to learn, and learner development. These theories impact decisions on matching methods of teaching the

specific subject matter. The principals are looking for quality teachers who want to learn and are driven to better themselves.

Principals suggested that teacher candidates possess the “soft skills”. These soft skills are termed dispositions in the teacher preparation program and are an integral part of the program. Dispositions that principals note as important include hardworking, responsive to feedback, life-long learners, collaborative, caring, genuinely interested in the community, good listeners, thoughtful, kid-oriented, and proficient in the use of technology.

Three out of four principals discussed how teacher candidates need a strong understanding of the local community so there is less of a learning curve when they come to teach at the school. Principals looked for teachers who were willing to assume leadership roles and willing to develop relationships. They looked for teachers who enjoyed collaborating and collaborated well with peers. Two principals also noted that the elementary teacher candidates were proficient with implementing technology into their lessons and willing to model techniques at staff meetings.

*Question 2:* How effective do you believe preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers can differentiate instruction for diverse learners, take on leadership roles, and teach accurate content?

### ***Differentiate Instruction for Diverse Learners***

During the interviews, two principals mentioned that they want teachers to believe all students can learn, know how learning takes place, and understand the needs of the community. All principals interviewed believe preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers need to improve their ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. The principals feel that novice teachers need more experience and should seek out additional resources that foster their development in working with diverse groups.

Overall, the principals believed that experiences in special education settings force teachers to manage and address the needs of struggling students. As one principal noted, “Special education is a foundation for teaching. It would be good if all teachers had the knowledge and/or experience in special education. This allows them to focus on skills as part of their teaching. If you can teach the most struggling learner, everything else is easy.”

### ***Leadership Roles and Empowering Students***

Principals at all four schools reported that the preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers were willing to take on leadership roles. One principal stated, “I am always looking for teachers who can be leaders down the road. This might be their first step to be a future administrator.” Another principal said, “I notice how often the elementary alumni teachers assist their peers with new technologies and take an active role in their grade level data teams.”



All four principals look for qualities in new teachers who believe all students can learn. As one principal noted, "Quite often our students make mistakes, both in and out of school. These students require teachers who are caring and non-judgmental." Therefore, principals noted that schools need teachers who know the student populations with whom they are working with and can give all students a clean slate every day. The teachers need to empower students to set goals and believe in themselves. As one principal described, "Teachers can't have an attitude and belief that students just can't do something."

### ***Teach Accurate Content***

Principals did not feel content knowledge was as important as knowledge of the Common Core Standards. As one principal said, "Content knowledge is an ongoing thing that my teachers learn while they are here at our school. I need them to be able to use the standards to drive the content." Another principal stated, "When interviewing, I am not looking for candidates to have mastered content knowledge. Other traits are more important." One principal commented, "New teachers will learn as part of working with mentors and in-service training." Another principal said, "If alumni teachers are open and willing to learn, they could absorb content over time while being immersed in the school culture."

Preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers are reflective and inquiry-driven to create a safe, inclusive, and dynamic learning environment. They critique their teaching, frequently seeking resources to improve their content and pedagogical knowledge. Principals felt that preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers need to make choices about instructional practices and assessment strategies based on an understanding of the community as well as knowledge about the students in their classroom.

Principals were impressed with the way elementary preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers go above and beyond what is expected. One principal said, "Even during their student teaching semester, elementary teacher candidates were coming to all staff meetings and involved in school activities. They seemed to feel it was important to understand what was going on in the school. They want to work and are willing to work."

*Question 3:* How would you describe the alumni teachers' ability to impact student learning?

Alumni teachers have positively impacted the school culture. As one principal noted, "They bring a new mindset, a new attitude. They bring a sense of hope and believe that all students can learn." Another principal said, "Your teacher preparation program prepares teacher candidates in multiple areas, which has a positive effect on student learning." The alumni teachers demonstrate an enthusiasm for teaching and a commitment to the profession. They recognize the importance of incorporating

emerging technologies whenever possible to diversify instruction and promote student learning.

Principals repeatedly said that teachers should welcome students who give the persistent effort that leads to improvement. One principal stated, “New teachers who have a growth mindset will model to their students how to be a successful learner.” Preservice teacher candidates and alumni teachers should thrive on challenges and see failure as a springboard for growth believing that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work that creates a love of learning through teachable moments. As another principal noted about a newly hired elementary alumni teacher, “She brings positivity, which may also be naivety. But the first-year teacher believes that all students can learn. This is a different attitude but still a growth mindset.”

New teachers reflect on student learning by effectively using formative and summative assessments to inform high-quality lesson planning. They attend professional development sessions to enhance their teaching and impact student learning. Two principals commented that the elementary alumni teachers appear to enjoy teaching and interacting with students creating an inclusive classroom environment.

As a way of embracing the challenge of continuous improvement, alumni teachers are self-disciplined and understand their role in influencing student growth. They share new content and pedagogical information with peers. Furthermore, one principal said, “I want to cultivate new teachers. I want a learner – someone who will get better. I want those who are driven to get better.”

*Question 4: What recommendations do you have for the teacher preparation program regarding methods of improvement for teacher candidates to have a positive impact on student learning?*

All principals agreed that the hardest thing for all teachers to master is the ability to differentiate when they are teaching. One principal thought that it is most critical that teachers know how students learn to generate positive changes. According to a principal, “If teachers know students can learn, then they will be able to differentiate. Differentiating is key in the classroom.”

Principals felt that all teachers should have a deep understanding of how to teach students with special needs. Teaching strategies used in a special education setting can be used as a foundation for teaching. It would be beneficial if all teachers had the knowledge and/or experience in special education to strengthen their teaching.

The principals interviewed were very pleased to work with the Division of Education faculty from the Leeward O’ahu teacher preparation program because they felt the university can best serve the needs of future teachers. They commented that the teacher candidates benefited from repeated opportunities to engage in teaching in the classroom, gained experiences in the field, and being active in the community. These aspects of the teacher preparation program impacted student learning outcomes.

Preparation programs must have robust early field experiences and student teaching components that allow teacher candidates to develop and improve their teaching skills. When mentored by faculty within a teacher preparation program, the field experiences allow teacher candidates to apply what they have learned and developed effective pedagogy skills most likely to impact student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

## Discussion

The principals stated how important it is for all teachers to be professional, display integrity, and use good judgment when interacting with others. The findings of this research suggest that principals are highly satisfied with graduates from the local teacher preparation program because they demonstrated soft skills, have a positive impact on school culture, are respectful, and take on leadership roles. Moreover, principals identified that new teachers should possess these qualities to ensure a good fit for their respective schools.

Principals want teacher candidates who can connect with students and work as a team (Bigham et al., 2014) while being committed to the community in which they work. When hiring a new teacher, the principals are looking for someone willing to stay by committing to the profession. They want a “kid-magnet” who has an intangible spark that a student can connect with emotionally. This would be an enthusiastic individual who shows compassion, has interpersonal skills, is a life-long learner, and has a growth mindset.

A growth mindset is a framework for looking at how someone learns. It is a belief that mistakes can be embraced and lead to better performance. Another way to frame a growth mindset is to look at the “productive failures” where each mistake is viewed as a learning opportunity. Thus, it becomes the teacher’s job to identify and employ teaching practices that meet the needs and learning styles of their students. When someone develops a growth mindset they work and learn more effectively by forming new connections in their brain while challenging themselves in the face of failure (Anderson et al., 2018).

An examination of the disaggregated data revealed four themes that serve as recommendations for practice: 1) enhancing teachers’ soft skills, 2) fostering community involvement, 3) teacher preparation program strengths, and 4) building relationships.

### ***Enhancing Soft Skills***

Findings suggest that the teacher candidates who demonstrate soft skill characteristics are preferred hires by principals. This may be because soft skills are a way to enhance social interactions (Tang, 2018). Soft skills are a combination of people skills that enable a person to fit in at a place of work. Teachers with a vast array of soft skills prove to be more effective in the classroom because they are better able to work with individual students and colleagues. Prospective teachers need to understand a wide array of things about soft skills and teaching to be able to enact these understandings in

classrooms serving increasingly diverse students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Principals want teachers with soft skills and are willing to work with candidates who demonstrate these skills.

Field experience settings should provide students with practical opportunities to utilize positive dispositions for learning and other ways of knowing (Sheffield et al., 2020). It is recommended that soft skill characteristics be a part of professional dispositions which, in turn, were designed around the values needed for candidates to be a highly-qualified teacher based on the priorities of the faculty. This occurs through explicit teaching about soft skills, extensive discussions with stakeholders, and utilizing assignments that incorporate soft skills.

The soft skills that principals valued included having a strong work ethic, being a team player, and responsive to feedback, contributing to life-long learning, exhibiting genuine care and empathy, and the ability to communicate and problem-solve effectively. Principals were very observant and noted how teacher candidates and alumni enjoyed collaborating with peers, attended staff meetings, and were willing to share technical skills with other staff. They voiced how teacher candidates and alumni exhibited a positive mindset and attitude when interacting with students.

Soft skills should reflect the professional dispositions that are a major tenet of the teacher preparation program. Developed in the first three years of the Leeward O'ahu teacher preparation program, the professional dispositions were designed to reflect the values needed for candidates to be a highly-qualified teacher. The program was formalized and dispositions were incorporated into a field placement handbook. The five main dispositions include (1) enthusiasm for teaching; (2) an understanding of social justice as it relates to teaching; (3) an ability to be reflective, use inquiry and create a safe, inclusive and dynamic learning environment; (4) the need to strive toward pedagogical and content expertise; and (5) demonstrating a commitment to the profession.

Research as part of this study found the university faculty teach developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogy that focuses on dispositions. One way this is done is by highlighting and refining these skills as part of the professional series of coursework. Dispositions were integrated throughout a teacher education program and discussed regularly in the teacher candidates. Assignments and field experiences were designed to capture and promote the dispositions. For example, each semester, special attention was given to issues related to home, school, and community relations.

As part of their course of study, teacher candidates complete assignments where they were required to collect information on the home life of students, the school, and their community. They integrated this information into lesson plans and taught the lessons in their field placement classroom. They learned how to gather information about the community and used that information in their teaching. Each teacher candidate was then evaluated by their mentor teacher and university supervisor using dispositions rubrics that were aligned with the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support

Consortium (InTASC) Standards. These standards outlined the common principles and foundations of teaching practices that cut across all subject areas and grade levels necessary to improve student achievement (CCSSO, 2011).

### ***Community Involvement***

Teachers must connect with the community in which the school is located to build and foster trust with students, parents, peers, and other local stakeholders. They need to have knowledge about the community, participate and contribute to the community, and be visible in the community. Teacher education programs must teach candidates how to get involved with the community in which they teach.

Extracurricular activities play an important role in helping to engage students. A teacher who attends extracurricular events builds relationships and connects with students by promoting a sense of belonging while taking a sincere interest in the lives of their students. Students feel a great sense of pride when their teacher attends their special event like a sporting event, science fair, or a music concert. Promoting compassion and building meaningful relationships with students through community activities develops teacher-student bonds.

Principals want teachers who understand the values and culture of the community in which the school resides. When the teachers are from the community, they know the families. This makes a difference in the teacher's ability to succeed. Though indeed, teachers from outside the community or service area of the school can be successful, principals agree that those who are from the community, or who live in the community, have less of a learning curve when it comes to teaching the students. These teachers' understandings are more precise and grounded in deep experiences from growing up in the area and taking part in activities. They are better enculturated into the local community.

Discussions with teacher candidates and alumni teachers as part of this research showed that they preferred to teach in their local community. They felt they were more familiar with the population and events. This made them feel more comfortable and perceived knowledgeable.

Principals agree that teachers who are directly involved in the community use their understanding to connect classroom learning activities to what students know and value. They make learning experiences more meaningful to students. According to principals, teachers are often seen at local hula events, paddling at nearby beaches, surfing, and attending community celebrations and meetings. They take an understanding of these experiences into the classroom and connect background knowledge in ways that are relevant and meaningful to learners.

Principals further suggested that when teachers become involved in their students' activities outside the school setting, their actions further the sense of commitment to the community. The concept of community should be integrated into a teacher education

program. For example, special attention can be given to issues related to home, school, and community relations. Teachers who immerse themselves in the community in which they teach gather knowledge about the families and use these understandings in the classroom as part of their teaching.

Developing a deeper understanding of the community and families can shape the attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy of teachers to educate students with diverse and individual learning needs. It is very common for beginning general education teachers to have a low sense of self-efficacy to teach children with diverse learning needs. In the Hawai'i public schools, forty percent of students receiving special education services spend at least eighty percent of their day in the general education classroom, which is moderately below the national average of 50%. The inclusion rate will only continue to rise signifying. For that reason, it is critical to equip teacher candidates with the skills and capacity to serve students with diverse learning needs in their general education classrooms.

One of the most important factors affecting the achievement efforts of inclusion is the attitude of the teachers (Shields et al., 2020; Yuknis, 2015). Alumni teachers were commended by principals for their growth mindset and enthusiasm for teaching. Although principals recommend that teachers need to improve their ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners, it shows that the teacher candidates possess the prerequisite traits to develop the essential skills for differentiated instruction.

Research suggests that inclusion teachers at all levels face challenges in differentiating instruction for all students. Differentiated instruction is an effective approach that all teachers can use to ensure equity in student achievement and meet the individual learning needs of students. Despite the teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and having a growth mindset of their students' ability to learn, research shows that many teachers struggle to implement differentiated instruction due to their understanding of differentiated instruction, insufficient time for planning, and lack of training and resources (Deason et al, 2014). It is worthwhile to take a closer look at the preservice learning opportunities in teacher preparation programs that relate specifically to learning how to educate students with special needs and actually teaching students with special needs.

### ***Teacher Preparation Program Strengths***

A teacher preparation program should be systematic in teaching content and pedagogy while providing preservice teachers the tools they need to both be successful and want to stay in the field (Cheek et al., 2019). The Division of Education faculty collects information each semester on the teacher candidates' performances both on campus and in the field. This is done by administering assignments, observing lessons, and evaluating dispositions. All items are evaluated using rubrics and provide information on candidates' ability to meet measurable standards.

The Division of Education faculty reviews and discusses data during the biannual assessment meetings. During these meetings, both program-level and course-level changes are discussed to improve the teacher candidates' experiences. Examples of changes include procedures to implement support and interventions for candidates who do not exhibit expected levels of professionalism, the addition of courses to improve content knowledge, and the development of a program to support mentor teachers to evaluate teacher candidates. Faculty continuously review assessment tools to align with the InTASC Standards and Progressions. In this way, the teacher candidates' ability to meet the standards can be seen at multiple data points in such a way that is clear and not ambiguous.

A key component supports field-based coursework of over 630 hours that includes early field experiences, service-learning, practicums, and student teaching. Each course as part of the professional series of courses is directly linked to a field experience where candidates are in elementary, middle-level, or secondary classrooms for a minimum of 45 hours each semester. Coursework throughout the program supports a deep understanding of standards through presentations, case studies, research projects, and peer evaluations. The field experiences provide candidates with extensive hands-on experiences including teaching lessons, managing students, understanding diverse students, and implementing educational technology.

Part of this research revealed that graduates from the Leeward O'ahu teacher preparation program are competent, caring, collaborative, and receptive to new ideas. They are life-long learners who exhibit leadership skills, especially with technology, and bring into the school energy and innovations. Their professionalism is excellent and they communicate well with parents in part because they are also members of the community. As community members, they understand diversity and therefore work well with diverse student populations. Evidently, there is value in recruiting and training teachers to return to teach in their local communities.

Another strength of the teacher preparation program is the faculty. The Division of Education faculty differentiates instruction, implements content standards, and model lessons for all subjects in the core courses. The university faculty has an average of 11 years of teaching experience in the public-school setting, are content experts in their field of study, and stay current with the requirements from the Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board.

Through discussion with approximately 10% of the teacher candidates and alumni teachers, additional information was collected on their field experiences. Their comments revealed that overall their professors helped to set the groundwork for teaching all students. When taking classes and teaching in their field placement, teacher candidates felt that they had the support of their instructors. They were able to "try new things like different teaching methods with their students" because they felt they "had support from all of the professors." The teacher candidates reflected on their field placements and the amount of time it took to look at data, create hands-on activities, and implement the state standards. As one candidate said, "I am glad the

university made us do more fieldwork than other programs because all schools were doing different things and the experiences I have gained from different placements made me a more well-rounded teacher.” An alumni teacher stated, “my principal has commented on how I am always extra prepared for my lessons. I believe it was because of the thorough lesson plans I had to write during my field experience placements.” Another alumni teacher commented that “We definitely learned a lot of different strategies at the university that helped to teach fun, engaging lessons in every content area. I always used different teaching styles to engage my students.” Overall, the teacher candidates and the alumni teachers thought there were well-prepared to teach in the classroom.

### ***Building Relationships***

Over the past 10 years, the faculty has developed partnerships with elementary, middle-level, and high school principals. This research documented a Field Experience Coordinator and the principals working together to determine the best field-based placements for teacher candidates emphasizing the connection between theory and practice. Ensuring that teacher candidates have high-quality student teaching experiences in actual classrooms is critical (Jackson & Remer, 2014). In doing so, candidates were placed in ideal settings to ensure success and gradually assume more independent responsibilities for teaching. Principals expect that teacher candidates will spend enough time getting practical experiences and professional development at their schools before exiting the teacher preparation program and earning their teaching license by the Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board. This research showed how this was favorable when new teachers were hired.

## **Implications**

This study provided some insight into the satisfaction level of elementary, middle-level, and high school principals who hired alumni from a local nationally accredited teacher preparation program. Principals ranked soft skills, building relationships with students, and getting involved in the community as the top qualities they look for interviewing potential candidates. These findings are important to know because effective teachers must be committed to students, their learning, and teaching as a career.

Soft skills were perceived as very important for preservice and in-service teachers. They are the skills that teachers need to succeed as an educator. Teachers who exhibit soft skills will have a much easier time fitting in with other staff at their school and therefore may influence their longevity and willingness to remain in teaching. Besides, a teacher with soft skills is an indication of their capacity to grow thereby making them a long-term asset to principals rather than having to expend resources to find another replacement. Identifying whether a teacher candidate possesses soft skills may be difficult until they are observed and evaluated in their ability to work with a team. The teacher candidate program may consider embedding opportunities to measure the soft skills of teacher candidates in the coursework and field experiences. Doing so may help teacher preparation programs identify quality teachers with the potential to succeed and be a



long-term asset to principals. Furthermore, this could provide principals with valuable information for consideration during the process of hiring quality teachers.

With the school principals constantly searching for ways to attract and retain quality teachers, it is crucial to streamline the efforts to find and keep teachers through the hiring process. Knowing the top qualities that principals look for in new teachers will be helpful for the Division of Education faculty's efforts to attract and recruit future teachers. To identify future teachers in Hawai'i, the local teacher preparation program must focus on recruiting from within the local communities to address the teacher shortage in science, math, special education, and Hawaiian Language Immersion. Attracting and recruiting future teachers who live in the community are more likely to have an invested interest in serving children and families who reside in their community. They will already be familiar with the individual characteristics of the community, its culture, and its neighborhoods. This can lead to improved teacher retention especially in schools that have difficulty hiring quality and qualified teachers. The classroom teacher is the single most important factor that impacts student learning. Recommendations for further research to extend the principal interviews to all the complex areas on O'ahu and explore how the teacher shortage may be impacted by low teacher wages.

## Conclusion

The teacher preparation program connects pedagogical field-based coursework to experiences, so candidates gain a better understanding of teaching concepts. The principals preferred having teacher candidates conduct their field experiences at their schools to allow for more time to get to know and evaluate their teaching potential as if it were a continuous interview process. Principals noted that those who had rich teaching experiences possess a deeper understanding of the demands of the profession.

Each principal interview provided an understanding of areas the Division of Education faculty did successfully to ensure teacher candidates had a positive impact on student learning. The Division of Education faculty formed relationships with the teacher candidates as well as taught developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogy that prepared future teachers to understand the values and culture of the community.

The four principal interviews may have influenced the interpretations of this research. For future research to continue and develop this study more in-depth, interviewing additional principals who hired alumni at their schools would provide more details on the preferred qualities and characteristics principals seek. Further investigation needs to be conducted to explore and understand more about the principal's rationale when hiring resource teachers, special education teachers, and other specialists.

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