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Chapter

E-Learning Acceptance: Online Teaching Degree Earners and What Principals Think

Christopher Applegate

Abstract

Online education continues to increase in popularity and one degree currently offered is a bachelor degree of education. Once students graduate, they will begin to seek employment. Those seeking positions in K-12 education settings do not know if they have the same opportunity to get hired as someone from a traditional degree program. Previous researchers on this topic have failed to address the issue of an online degree earner getting hired. Based on the growth of online education, it was necessary to find out if K-12 principals' perceptions of online education programs may prevent graduates of online teacher programs from successful employment. The purpose of the qualitative critical case study was to explore how K-12 principals' perceptions directly related to the hiring of licensed graduates with bachelor degrees from online teaching programs. The results identified numerous factors related to principals making hiring decisions of teacher candidates, however, where or how they complete their degrees is not one of them. The study became more pertinent with the arrival of Covid 19 in the United States and school districts moving to an online learning environment.

Keywords: online degrees, perceptions, licensed, qualitative, higher education

1. Introduction

Online learning continues to grow in popularity, no more evidence is needed than the recent explosion of online learning in schools around the United States throughout the Covid 19 pandemic. Those that previously may have scoffed at the online learning environment are now trying to learn more about this process to find out how effective online learning can be for the future. School districts like the one in Collier County, Florida have even gone so far as to develop an E-Collier Academy where students can now elect to attend school virtually. While this seems like the direction education is headed, what was the perception of online learning prior to Covid? Was there evidence that it was acceptable in higher education prior to the Covid shutdowns?

Online education continues to increase in popularity and one degree currently offered is a bachelor degree of education. Once graduates complete their online degree in education, they will begin to seek employment. Those seeking positions in K-12 education settings did not know if they would have the same opportunity to get hired as someone from a traditional degree program. Many of the studies

concerning online degrees have focused on the programs and the evidence shows leaders have negative perceptions of online programs. Previous researchers on this topic have failed to address the issue of an online degree earner getting hired. Based on the growth of online education, it was necessary to find out if K-12 principals' perceptions of online education programs may prevent graduates of online teacher programs from successful employment. The purpose of this qualitative critical case study was to explore how K-12 principals' perceptions directly related to the hiring of licensed graduates with bachelor degrees from online teaching programs. Current principals in Pittsylvania County Virginia were contacted to participate in phone or email interviews using predetermined questions. Principals' answers were reviewed, analyzed and the data were categorized, patterns were identified and conclusions reported in order to establish their perceptions of teaching candidates with a degree from an online teacher preparation program. The results identified numerous factors related to principals making hiring decisions of teacher candidates, however, where or how they complete their degrees is not one of them.

Institutions of higher education offer online courses embedded within some programs and some offer complete online degrees [1–4]. Student enrollment in online courses increased by half a million students from 2002 to 2008 [5]. Currently there are over 7 million students taking at least one course online through their university studies [1, 2, 6]. Research has revealed that K-12 principals believe online programs teach the proper theories associated with being a classroom teacher but lack the preparations in classroom management, diversity, special needs, and social aspects of teaching [7–10]. These principals believe it is possible to learn the information associated with being a teacher but that online programs lack the social aspects needed for someone to be a properly prepared teacher [7, 8, 11].

The research available focuses on K-12 principals' perceptions of online teacher preparation programs and less on if these graduates can get hired after completing their degrees [7–9, 12, 13]. Online teaching programs offer participants flexibility while they obtain their degree [14]. Students can continue to work a fulltime job and take courses at home, when time allows, instead of being confined to a specific course schedule [10, 14]. Online coursework and degrees offer students flexibility with taking their classes and planning their schedule, however, K-12 principals believe there should be a balance between online and traditional face to face courses; and that field experiences are vital to teacher training [7–10, 15]. The research available is limited since researchers have examined how principals perceive online teacher preparation programs. An online bachelor's degree in teacher education offers students the opportunity to obtain their degree through online courses [10]. Past researchers found that these online degrees may not be as positively viewed as a traditional degree, by K-12 principals who make hiring decisions [7, 8, 11–13, 16]. There is evidence of research reporting K-12 principals strongly favor brick and mortar institutions as opposed to online institutions [12]; due to the perception of a lack of time working with an experienced teacher learning skills first-hand [14, 15]. K-12 principals may not be aware online programs do offer practicum experiences as well [14, 15]. This has led K-12 principals to perceive online programs as not offering the necessary experiences to produce graduates prepared to teach in a classroom environment [7–9, 11, 17, 18]. Even with the increase in graduates from online programs, the number being hired is not increasing [1, 16, 18, 19].

Previous research did not address a principal's perceptions of a graduate from an online program who is applying for a teaching position, which is why it was necessary to conduct a study to determine if online programs were worth the time and money students invest, in the hopes of getting hired after they have completed their degrees. The amount of published research is limited concerning K-12 principals'

perceptions of hiring licensed online graduates even though online course and degree programs continue to increase in popularity and enrollment [1].

The purpose of this qualitative critical case study was to explore how K-12 principals' perceptions directly relate to them hiring licensed graduates with bachelor degrees from online teaching programs. According to Huss [12], this type of study allowed the researcher to conduct interviews which are semi-structured, talking directly with those involved in hiring prospective teacher candidates, both online and brick and mortar trained. By using a qualitative critical case study there was an opportunity to develop an understanding or inform based on comparing similar situations to the case being studied [20]. The study was conducted through personal interviews by phone or email of principals who hire candidates who have graduated from both online and brick and mortar institutions. Principals were asked to complete a pre-screening form to make sure that all who are interviewed have had experience hiring both types of candidates.

Research shows how many administrators who have been questioned in the past do not feel online programs carry any credibility and they do not feel these programs adequately prepare potential teacher candidates to be classroom teachers [7]. There is a concern online education lacks the personal contact and time spent through the social aspects to be a successful teacher [8]. There is also the concern how certain skills and information cannot be gained through an online environment [21]. Administrators lack confidence in online teacher preparations and their lack of confidence extends into their hiring decisions and when confronted with two candidates who have similar backgrounds and training, those surveyed will hire the traditional brick and mortar candidate one hundred percent of the time [11]. However, there was some indication a portion of administrators would take into consideration the institution the candidate received their online degree and it could have either a negative or positive influence depending on where the degree was completed [13]. Principals could begin to trust online trained teacher candidates once they have the opportunity to experience online trained teachers on their staff. This brings up the chicken or the egg analogy though, if hiring online trained teachers will prove they are just as capable as their traditionally trained counterparts, principals are going to have to take a chance in order to find out if these teaching candidates are capable of working as a classroom teacher. Overall, research has shown the attitude of administrators to be very negative when presented with candidates whose credentials were obtained through an online program [12]. Online courses are not perceived as an acceptable method to properly prepare a teacher to teach in a classroom [7–9, 13]. There is a social aspect to teaching which administrators perceive is missing when a course or degree is completed online [9, 22]. Information available reports how students who participate in online courses actually engage socially more than if they in a traditional classroom setting. In fact, teacher to student communication is enhanced in the online setting because students are required to make discussion posts, have more time to consider their response, and should contact their professor through email to discuss any questions [23]. Students in a traditional based program learn from watching and following the lead of the teachers they work with, which allows them to get a hands-on understanding of what their potential future career entails [8, 9, 17]. Field experiences allows the student the chance to gain those skills necessary to be a good classroom teacher. Field experiences are critical for students to have the opportunity to observe, reflect, and practice numerous aspects of their future career prior to stepping into the role as the main classroom teacher [24]. Administrators do not feel comfortable with the idea of hiring someone who had completed their degree online [11]. Administrators seemed to have confidence in a candidate's ability to learn the proper theories and principles related to teaching [7–9]. Although, research does not address why administrators have confidence

in these particular areas but so vehemently are against teaching candidates with a degree from an online degree program. There are overall beliefs candidates who have been trained through an online program would not be sufficient teacher candidates, and given the choice between two candidates, one of which has completed their degree online and the other through traditional means, almost one hundred percent of the time, they will choose the traditional candidates [7–9, 11, 25]. There is this belief system, but then again there are programs such as the one in California which follows the same rigorous accreditation process when compared to brick and mortar schools follow and whose students must pass the same certification test at the end of the course [14]. Principals do not have confidence in online learning as an effective method of properly preparing teachers to work in a classroom [22]. The research gathered also shows a lack of acceptability of online credentials for principals as well [22]. Even when other factors are considered such as a principal's experience with online earning and their age, there does not seem to be a deviation from an overall negative perception of online learning as being an acceptable method of preparing educators for the career they seek. The results continue to be the same; principals do not feel comfortable with the training received through online program to feel comfortable offering an online graduate a position over a student who received their degree through a traditional brick and mortar institution [7–9, 13, 26]. Principals are uncertain with the preparation received by candidates who have completed their coursework through an online environment and feel the online work may not be as difficult, which again continues the belief concerning online education and how students could be taking online coursework in an attempt to avoid the rigor of brick and mortar courses [8, 9, 13, 22].

2. Study of principals' perceptions

The study was conducted in the spring of 2017 and asked principals what their perceptions were in regards to hiring a teaching candidate who has completed a bachelor degree from an online teacher preparation program compared to hiring a teaching candidate from a traditional campus based teaching program? This study was done as a case study by doing an interview of K-12 principals to gain an understanding by using in depth questions to gain detailed information from the participants. This study focused on interview questions and participants' responses to gain insight into the perceptions principals have concerning potentially hiring online degree earners. By using open ended questions, the researcher gained in-depth information concerning the participant's perceptions, opinions, and feelings as they relate to hiring teachers who have obtained their teaching degrees through an online program. It was conducted by contacting principals in a county in Virginia through email and setting up times to conduct interviews with each one or giving them the option of responding by email. The participants were also given a scenario similar to [26], who had given permission to use the questions in this study. Adams and Defleur [22] presented three different scenarios concerning interviewing teaching candidates with a traditional, partial online, or online degree and which they would choose to offer a position to and why. This portion gave participants three candidates to choose from for an upcoming open teaching position. The only difference between the three candidates was the level of online studies they have completed to obtain their degree. The participants were asked to explain which candidate they would choose and why.

The results showed that principals interviewed have an overall positive perception of teacher candidates who have completed their degrees through a web-based teacher preparation program. The information presented details how principals pay

little attention to where a teaching candidate completed their degree but instead focus their attention on the experiences the candidate has completed in addition to their degree plan which may have prepared them to teach in a classroom. This could happen through student teaching, practicum, and internships. The study was conducted in a public-school county in Virginia and out of 20 principals who were asked to participate in the interview process, eight offered their responses to the questions; three high school, one middle school and four elementary school. Only principals who participate in the hiring process were invited to participate in the interview process. Principals did not indicate a desire for one specific method of obtaining a degree but were more concerned with a candidate's hands-on experiences as well as recommendations from those familiar with the candidate's abilities in the classroom. While there were, numerous factors associated with hiring a teaching candidate, principals made it very clear that where or how a degree was obtained was not a factor. Principals put a different emphasis on multiple items when making a hiring decision but how a degree is obtained is not one of them.

What are principal's perceptions of hiring a teaching candidate who has completed a bachelor degree from an online teacher preparation program compared to hiring a teaching candidate from a traditional campus based teaching program? Participants were asked a series of 16 questions with no follow up questions asked in an effort to maintain uniformity throughout the process. When appropriate, the participants' responses were analyzed and determined to be positive perceptions, negative perceptions, or neither positive nor negative perceptions. Participants were asked how they would respond to an interviewee who completed a web-based online teacher preparation program to attain his/her certification and the overall perception was a positive one. One reoccurring theme concerning this question and others was how much additional experience the candidate had in addition to their degree. Seven of the eight participants indicated they would have a positive perception of a candidate who had completed a web-based online teacher preparation program to attain a teaching certificate. The one person did not have a positive or negative perception but instead indicated a desire to know more about the program the candidate completed and the program's requirements. All respondents indicated a desire to know how much experience a candidate had in a real classroom environment. Principal D stated "I interview people, not degrees."

When participants were then asked to address any advantages, or disadvantages they could perceive for this candidate, again the overall response was positive. Participants did not perceive candidates as having any specific advantages or disadvantages related to their completing an online teacher preparation program. However, another reoccurring theme was the lack of personal interaction unless the candidate's program required a student teaching or internship assignment. Six of eight participants indicated have their own positive experiences as they related to online courses. The other two did not have any experience with online courses. Those who had indicated having positive experiences as they related to online learning, had utilized online coursework either for re-certification or to work on their own graduate degree aspirations. Principals noted the flexibility of completing their work online and perceived this type of learning as effective. One complaint by two principals was the lack of hands on learning which they perceive as valuable in the learning process.

Principals were asked to describe their own personal opinions of web-based teacher preparation programs and six out of eight principals indicated a positive perception of online teacher education/preparation; as long as they are obtaining the necessary degree/certification. One principal did not feel comfortable enough with online teacher education programs to provide an answer and another indicated the belief that a classroom environment is just going to be better for preparing a

future teacher candidate. It is worth noting that this principal had recently hired a teacher candidate who completed their degree online. This principal did not feel comfortable addressing the question concerning the use of online teacher preparation programs but still felt confident enough to hire a teaching candidate who had completed their degree through an online program.

Principals' perceptions of an online teacher program preparing a teaching candidate for classroom management, their methodology/pedagogy of teaching, and how to handle special needs students or diversity were neither positive nor negative. Principals had confidence that the information could be taught and learned but an overwhelming theme related to these questions was the need for students to participate in a classroom as a student teacher or through an internship. Experience was mentioned numerous times by all those who participated in this questionnaire. Principal E stated, "theory can be taught in the online classes and the actual field experience would be used to fine-tune in the field through the internship."

All of the principals who participated in this study indicated at least minimal knowledge of the use of online teacher education with their knowledge increasing for those who have used online education as source for their own continuing educational experiences. Principals were presented with a scenario where a teaching candidate, had completed wholly or almost wholly a degree via the internet and were asked to describe their level of concern. Principals indicated their level of concern would be minimal to none. Two had concerns related to if the candidate had completed any student teaching or practicum experiences. They also wanted to know more information about the candidate than just the fact that they had completed an online degree program. Principal F stated; "my only concern would be that the candidate could show actual field experience that would demonstrate their overall understanding and application of what they had learned in their coursework". Principal C added "I have personally seen the level of persistence it takes because one of my teacher aides was going to school online to get her teaching degree and is now working on a Master's degree."

Principals indicated that their organization does not place an emphasis on the reputation of a specific college or university. Principals elaborated on their response and the desire to find someone who would fit in their school setting regardless of how they obtained their degree. Principals are aware of a school in the local area who produces teaching candidates but they all stated that where someone graduates is not a factor in deciding to offer them a position teaching in their school. Principals perceive how the degree is earned as being irrelevant. To continue a common theme throughout their responses, there was a continued focus on the candidate themselves and the personal experiences or internships which allow them to put what they have learned to action. Principal D reiterated an earlier statement, "I am interviewing the person, not the degree."

When asked further if principals perceive online candidates the same as students from traditional programs they responded with a positive perception of students from online programs and perceive them as being like candidates with a traditional degree. The subject of experience in the classroom and student teaching assignments was brought up again, with five of the eight respondents who felt they had the necessary experience to address this question mentioning it being essential for the candidate to have had a field experience. The other three respondents did not feel they had the experience necessary to respond to this question. The overall perception is that online degrees are equal to traditional degrees. Although, two respondents did say they would want to know more about the program the candidate completed. Principal C said, "I believe traditional

should be better, but I need teachers with degrees and I am not concerned with where they obtained them from." All but one respondent had at least some experience with online coursework, even if it was a training course required by the county for which they worked. Three participants had worked or were working on their own post graduate online degree. Regardless of their personal experiences, principals have a positive perception of teaching candidates regardless of their past experiences with online learning. Principals are more concerned with the experience gained through the program completed and with issues such as the interview, references, and additional details gained rather than how the degree was obtained.

Finally, principals were given the option of telling how they would decide who to hire between three candidates. One attended a traditional brick and mortar college or university, one completed part of their degree traditionally and another part online, and the third completed a web based program online. All three interviewed well and their transcripts are almost identical. Participants responded unanimously to this particular question and stated that how a candidate completed their degree would not impact the final decision concerning hiring a candidate. There were numerous statements made:

- Principal A "When we hire a candidate, we always interview as a committee and we ask tough questions and it is a tough process but one thing I have never heard a committee member discuss is where a candidate received a degree from."

- Principal B "I would need to find something that set them apart from one another but how they obtained their degree would not be something I would think of using."

- Principal C "I would review experience, resume, etc. to determine the best fit for the position without regard for which learning experience they had participated in."

- Principal D "It would depend on factors other than what is listed above."

- Principal E "My choice would be how I feel about a candidate after the interview. A teacher needs the degree but also needs the personality for the position."

- Principal F "I am inclined to hire the candidate that has a glowing recommendation from a teacher that they worked under during their practicum and that has good references from co-workers and other teachers and/or administrators."

- Principal G "The individual who has the best recommendations, most well-rounded experiences and most productive, positive student teaching placement. Success in a student-teaching placement indicates that a candidate works well with students and colleagues."

- Principal H "I will hire the candidate whom I feel connects best with people and has a stronger content area knowledge base. I will also look to see who best fits into the existing culture and climate of the school. How they earned their degree will be irrelevant to me."

3. Evaluation of findings

Based on the information presented from the principals' responses to the 16 questions asked, there are numerous factors which can impact how they perceive a teaching candidate but the one factor which does not impact their decision for hiring a candidate is how they obtained their degree. These findings are in stark contrast to Faulk [7–9] and Huss [11, 12], who reported the negative perceptions principals had concerning web-based teacher education programs. Principals expressed confidence in web-based programs providing the training necessary in order to understand the proper theories, principles, and knowledge necessary to be a competent classroom teacher. This was similar to the positive perceptions principals have expressed in past studies [7–9]; however, the principals were also very clear on the need for actual experience in the classroom getting an opportunity to put into practice the information they had learned in through the online environment. This was consistent with past studies which addressed the continual need for hands-on time in the classroom getting experience actively teaching a group of students [7–9, 11, 12, 26]. There is a concern expressed by principals that without the personal experience in the classroom, teaching candidates could miss out on some of the skills and information an internship or student teaching assignment afford. This aligns with the study conducted by Grossman and Johnson [21], who also reported the need for those being trained to be a teacher to get an opportunity to gain personal experience and learn in an actual classroom environment. Principals made it very clear that having a degree from a web-based program would not impact a candidate and that when given the option between three candidates whom are all similar other than the method they chose to obtain their degree; the method of degree completion would not be a defining factor. This is a contradiction to Huss [11], who reported than when given the choice between two candidates, one who completed an online degree and the other traditional, principals would hire the traditional candidate every time.

It was also evident that even principals who had limited experience with online programs still had confidence these programs could prepare a teaching candidate appropriately. There are other factors that go into a principal deciding who they should hire, but as the principals have stated, how the degree was obtained or where it was obtained does not get evaluated. Thornton [15], instead they discussed the reasons they believe there is no difference between web-based and traditional teacher preparation programs if they require similar experiences outside of the learning environment. Even though past researchers have shown that principals are concerned with where a degree was completed or the reputation of the school offering the degree [9, 13]. The principals interviewed were not concerned about where the degree was completed but instead need teachers who have completed a degree program and are certified as teachers. They are looking for the person who has a degree and is the most qualified to do the job. This aligns with Bourke & Brown [27], which addressed the main point when it comes to looking to hire a teaching candidate is finding the best person for the job. This was not the anticipated outcome of this study since almost all the previous research in relation to online degrees or online teaching degree programs reported that principals had a negative perception of these teacher preparation programs [7–9, 12, 16]. There is also evidence that principals place an emphasis on the amount of time spent in a classroom through practicums, internships, or student teaching which was consistent with past research [14, 15, 26]. The number one word used by principals throughout their responses was experience.

4. Summary

Eight out of 20 principals in a school district in Virginia agreed to complete the interview and their statements concerning web-based teacher preparation programs identified numerous factors related to a teaching candidate getting hired, but having a degree through an online program was not a factor. Principals made it clear they pay attention to experience, interviews, as well as recommendations from others but that they are more concerned with the candidate having a degree and certification necessary as well as making sure they are a proper fit within their organization. This contrasts with previous studies which focused on web-based preparation programs and principals' negative perceptions of these types of programs [7–9, 12]. Principals may or may not have experience with online courses themselves but regardless their concerns about web-based teaching degrees centers around if the programs have the same requirements as traditional programs and making sure the candidate has had an opportunity to show what they have learned through the program by doing a practicum or student teaching experience. Candidates who have had that opportunity can also help themselves in the interview process by providing letters of recommendation from those who have seen the candidate performing the would-be job. It is then up to the candidate to sell themselves to the principal or committee who is interviewing perspective employment candidates. This is consistent with other studies which focused on what principals look for when searching for teaching candidates to fill open positions [14, 27–29].

5. Conclusion

Online education has become an integral part of the educational process and the popularity of this kind of education has continued to grow which is evident since 9 million students took online courses in 2020 (Education [30]). With this rapid growth in online coursework and programs, it seemed appropriate to determine how online degree programs could impact students completing their teaching degree with this method. In this study, the researcher sought to determine what principal's perceptions of hiring a teaching candidate who has completed a bachelor degree from an online teacher preparation program compared to hiring a teaching candidate from a traditional campus. The responses were concise that the amount of time a teacher candidate has had in the classroom is more of a factor than the method used to obtain the degree. Principals made it very clear that when it comes to determining who to hire for a teaching position, there are issues like how the person interviews, references, as well as evidence which shows they can apply the book work they have learned in an actual classroom. The principals were concerned about the social aspect of teaching and how that would be addressed through an online program but that is contradictory to Hendricks [13], which reported that students who complete a web-based degree engage more socially than those completing a degree traditionally. The principals' responses centered more on the social interaction of working in a classroom instead of the social connection of a taking a course. The biggest limitation to this study was the size of the county and the number of principals available to be interviewed. There were only twenty principals and while eight responded, providing a good response for this county, a larger county may have provided more responses.

Online education continues to grow and for this author, the rigor and requirements of online learning is equal to traditional brick and mortar schools and this

opinion stems from his time teaching online programs and supervising student teachers who are finishing their online programs and working toward certification. All of this culminates with a licensure and the prospective teacher being offered a job where they are completing their student teaching assignments. There has yet to be a principal who has expressed concern over the fact that they student teacher completed their degree through an online program.

This form of education took on a whole new meaning in the spring of 2020 when Covid-19 shut down schools and left districts with only one option for educating our youth. Since that time, online education for K-12 has exploded on the scene and the methods used continue to evolve. It would only make sense that if schools are taking advantage of the online environment for educating students that they would reach out or be interested in teachers who, themselves had worked through and completed an online program. The power of understanding the circumstance of taking a course online is far more powerful than trying to gain an understanding through reading and feedback from students. This author was an online student and now teaches online students for the university. Knowing how it feels to wait for a grade, a return email, or feedback pushes him to complete all of those tasks in a timely manner so they student can continue to work toward their goal of finishing their degree. Covid-19 has caused schools to accept online learning, even if they do not care for it and the results should show that students are still learning and teachers are still being successful delivering their lessons.

Author details

Christopher Applegate[1,2*]

1 Liberty University, Lynchburg, USA

2 Collier County Schools, Naples, USA

*Address all correspondence to: applecounselor@comcast.net

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