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# Rice, Rice, Rice in the Bin

## Addressing Culturally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Classrooms

**C**hloe, Ben, Kim, and José are playing at the sensory table. Their teacher has filled half of the bin with rice. She adds food coloring to the rice to make it appealing so that the children can observe, interact, and play with the rice. As the children play, they talk with one another:

Chloe (scooping the rice and pretending to measure it in a cup): "I want to cook some rice for dinner."

Ben (showing a plate to Chloe): "Can I have some rice?"

Kim (standing by the bin and watching Chloe, Ben, and Jose play with rice): "I don't like rice; it's gross!"

José (pretending to eat the rice): "My mom cooks rice. I like rice."

Mei (approaching the group and looking curious): "What are you making? Why are you playing with rice? It is not to play with! My mom cooks rice for meals."

The above scenario could play out in early childhood classrooms across the United States. Children readily explore and play with food items, such as rice, at the sensory table. They investigate the texture of the rice and weigh it as they begin to assimilate and construct basic math and science concepts. Opportunities for learning academic concepts are limitless. The book *Everybody Cooks Rice* (Dooley, 1991) is a story about how different families in the United States cook and eat rice in various ways; Carrie and Anthony's family from Italy, Mr. and Mrs. D from Barbados, Dong Tran from Vietnam, the Huas from China, and the Bleus from Haiti all eat rice prepared in different ways. Rice has been documented as an interesting play material and also a means to teach children about diversity (Derman-Sparks, 1989; York, 1991).

Using food as a play material has been a long-standing practice in early childhood classrooms in the United States (Dahl, 1998; Edwards, 2000; Fuhr & Barclay, 1998; McMullen et al., 2007). Teachers use dried beans, pasta, and rice for sensory experiences, to make art projects, and to introduce early math concepts through cooking activities. However, when using food as a play material, teachers may need to exercise sensitivity about the cultural appropriateness of using certain food items. To be culturally sensitive is to be aware of the ways in which cultures differ and the effects of these differences on the quality of learning for young children. Teachers also

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need to be extremely careful not to make any assumptions about cultural practices, as some have their own culturally based beliefs about how and why they use food in activities in their centers (Freeman, 2004; Hsieh, 2004).

Equally important, teachers should be aware of their own perspectives and values about how their cultural practices influence their teaching practices and beliefs, while being conscious of the beliefs and values of others. This consciousness is very important to avoid conflicts in expectations between teachers and parents. Zan (2005) indicates that conflicts between parents and teachers due to differences in cultural values create stress among children. The role of early childhood educators is critical in developing children's education experiences and addressing best practices in early childhood education (Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Zan, 2005).

This article is a reflection on my professional experiences in early childhood education and how they illustrate the controversial issues and challenges involved in being culturally sensitive and using developmentally appropriate cultural practices in early childhood classrooms. Specifically, I highlight the issue of cultural conflicts and expectations between teachers and parents regarding the use of food as play items. I first discuss the different cultural attributes of rice and the impact of using rice in sensory tables. I describe the unintended consequences of using the rice as an example to highlight the inappropriate practice of using food as play items. I also suggest four approaches for how to deal with the practice of using food items in early childhood classrooms.

### Why Rice?

Rice can hold different cultural meanings. In many Asian cultures, playing with rice would be considered not only inappropriate but also insulting (Liu, 1991, 1999; Olmsted & Montie, 2001). In the opening vignette, Mei sees children playing with rice and is confused about why they are playing with something that she eats. Why, then, do teachers use rice as a play item? Are no other play materials available that can provide learning and sensory-oriented skills? Although rice is fairly inexpensive compared to the other play materials, is the United States so rich that it can waste food?

During my supervision of preservice and student teachers in preschool settings, I observed that almost all the classrooms used rice at the sensory table. I noticed that the rice sometimes scattered on the floor while the children were playing with it. The teacher would sweep it up and put it in the trash can. I thought, "What a wasteful practice! They throw away food while millions around the world starve." This led me to think about another common occurrence in preschool

classrooms: children playing with food that they do not like to eat during snack or lunch time. I would watch children smash their bananas or throw peas on the floor. It made me wonder if they are receiving the message that food is an appropriate play material or that it is okay to waste food or step on food if they do not like to eat it. I wondered if the practice of using food as a play material ran counter to the philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice, as championed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Zan, 2005).

The next question concerns what skills or concepts young children are learning through this play. Obviously, using dry rice at the sensory table targets sensory motor skills, but these same skills can be developed by using other, non-food materials. Instead of using real food, teachers may use recycled food and materials from the environment, such as watermelon rind for art projects; inedible tree nuts (such as buckeyes, beech-nuts, and sweet chestnuts) for early math activities; and seeds from alder cones, birch cones, or pinecones for the sensory activities. These nuts and seeds not only provide good learning experiences about science, but are also appropriate ways to enhance students' awareness about the environment.

Teachers need to appreciate the values and traditions of all cultures in order to create a healthy environment and teach children to appreciate other cultures. Avoiding the use of food as play materials not only shows that teachers respect what other people value, it also teaches children to do so. If the teacher allows the children to play with rice at school, it may send a message that it is okay to waste or be disrespectful of food items. Even parents who would not be offended by using food as a play material ultimately may consider it inappropriate, as they may be concerned about their children transferring that play to their food at mealtimes.

### Addressing Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 33% of the total 2006 U.S. population belonged to a minority group; 45% of children of minorities were under the age of 5. With the increasing number of families from minority groups in U.S. schools, culture collisions and tensions between teachers and families are possible. Therefore, implementing culturally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms is critical.

Many teachers seem to know about culturally appropriate practice, but they need help to implement it. According to Hyson (1991), practices in early childhood education are a reflection of teacher beliefs, parental expectations, administrative pressure, and broad societal imperatives. Teachers have difficulty designing

practices that meet the expectations of these influences while also addressing cultural factors. Hyson further explains that some teachers act in more culturally appropriate ways in guiding and nurturing children than in providing activities and materials for learning. This is due to a lack of training about or experience with developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (Hsieh, 2004; Hyson, 1991; Hyun, 1998).

Hyun (1998) states that teachers should teach and learn in environments that require in-depth reflection on their own lives and values. She argues that having a personal understanding of one's own biases is an important step toward truly legitimizing developmentally and culturally appropriate practice in the education of young children. Teachers need to foster their ability to have a multi-ethnic perspective. The challenge is to get beyond asking what is right and wrong and instead being able to see another person's point of view and communicate openly, always keeping in mind the common goal of supporting the child.

Teachers may consider four approaches when considering the use of food items in the early childhood classroom. The first approach is observational, while the second relies on autobiographical information. The third approach is phenomenological, and the last is an integrated approach.

*Observational Approach.* Teachers need to observe children's interactions in different situations and listen to their conversations to have a better understanding of their behaviors and interests. Children from different cultures and family backgrounds behave differently when they are alone, in small-group play, or sitting with the rest of the class during circle time (Lee, Md-Yunus, Son, & Meadows, 2008). Children may become confused when they see practices at school that are different from what they are used to seeing at home. For example, children may be dismayed or over-excited when teachers use pudding to sharpen their sensory motor skills or use marshmallows in art projects.

Early childhood teachers act not only as facilitators but also as observers to children's interactions in class. The children's comments and behaviors can guide teachers in their teaching and planning activities. A teacher may gain a complete picture of the child's interests and behaviors by observing these differences.

Information gathered through observations can be used to create strategies that lead to better relationships with children of different cultures and their families. Invite minority parents to speak to the class, or organize a potluck to share a variety of dishes. Teachers and children might observe that some of the foods that the minority parents bring are actually something that they play with at school. This activity could remind the teacher and children from mainstream cultures that some of the materials they have been playing

with in the classroom are actually other people's food. Understanding culture and cultural differences is not easy, even with the best of intentions, but it is essential for teachers and families to ensure that children's well-being and learning become the primary focus.

*Autobiographical Approach.* Hyun (1998) suggests taking an autobiographical approach toward developing the ability to understand multiple perspectives. Autobiography, when integrated into field-based teacher preparation courses, is a way for teachers to articulate their multi-ethnic perspective-taking. This approach creates room for teachers to experience and develop multiple perspectives in relation to their growing sense of critical pedagogy (Hyun, 1998). In the process of reflecting on and writing about their experiences, early childhood teachers can explore how they develop an understanding of diverse cultures and how this understanding relates to their teaching. This step can aid them in identifying their cultural lens and seeing how their own cultures will affect their beliefs and practices. For some teachers, this is an eye-opening experience, bringing them to discovery "about the self and who they are" (Hyun, 1998, p. 36).

To apply this approach, and using the example at the beginning of the article, the teacher would recognize that rice is a staple food for many people around the world. Therefore, teachers must understand that cultural beliefs and practices dictate that this type of food is not meant for playing. If teachers understand that this practice is inappropriate and offends other people, then they may stop using food as play materials in the classroom. Respecting children by incorporating their ideas, their voices, and their cultures into their learning is the first step in recognizing diversity in young children.

*Phenomenological Approach.* The phenomenological approach "examines life experiences through knowledge and understanding" (Byrne, 2001, p. 67). Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world, that truth and understanding of life can emerge from life experiences, and that meanings are co-developed through the experience of being human, our collective life experiences, our backgrounds, and the world in which we live. Early childhood teachers' understanding of using food as play items emerges from professional training and teaching experiences, which may not have been sensitive to the fact that using food as play items demonstrates insensitivity toward cultural differences.

Teachers need to be extremely careful to avoid making any assumptions about cultural characteristics. For example, teachers can enhance their understanding of cultural diversity by interacting with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Using the phenomeno-

logical approach, teachers can explore, construct, and reconstruct their understandings of the world. Most early childhood classrooms create events and functions for parents to get involved with their children's education. For example, open houses, parents nights, and parent-teacher meetings can help teachers to gather information and learn about children's families and home backgrounds through interaction, conversations, or even simple observations. Teachers also can do simple research about the families of children in their classes.

*Integrated Approach.* An integrated approach is necessary to incorporate a multicultural curriculum in the classroom and celebrate cultural diversity. Teachers need to integrate multicultural aspects across subject areas and teach them throughout the school year. This approach focuses on the basic information of children's daily experiences and incorporates learning opportunities to explore the differences and similarities.

When integrating daily experiences into children's learning, teachers need to present the information in terms that are concrete, accurate, and meaningful to children and do not present stereotyped imagery. For example, to raise awareness of some Asian cultures, some teachers use the theme of "Chinese New Year" and have kindergarten children make art projects with Chinese fans or do the lion dance, have Chinese parents come to class and write Chinese characters for children's names, and so on. However, such events only occur during the week of the Chinese New Year; during the rest of the year, Chinese cultures are never mentioned. This is called the "tourist approach" or the "contributions approach" (Banks & Banks, 2003), and is "characterized by the insertion of ethnic heroes and discrete cultural artifacts into the curriculum, selected using criteria similar to those used to select mainstream heroes and cultural artifacts" (p. 198). Discrete cultural elements are studied, such as the foods, dances, and music of ethnic groups, but little attention is given to their meanings and importance within ethnic communities (Banks & Banks, 2003). Teachers need to integrate multicultural activities in daily curriculum activities, so that children can relate them to their own daily life experiences. Teachers need to avoid studying just one important perspective within ethnic communities. Rather, they need to expand children's learning and understanding through all subject areas and teaching materials, such as using textbooks and activities that incorporate all aspects of learning from different cultures (Yelland, 2000).

Early childhood practitioners also must reflect critically on the context of play from divergent perspectives, especially when selecting appropriate play materials. Some cultures perceive play materials as something that children use for pleasure; others will see them

as a tool to acquire knowledge and learning. In this context, early childhood educators need to rethink the appropriateness of using food as play items.

The following preliminary thoughts might help broaden teachers' perspectives on diversity, remove the barriers of cultural differences, and build trusting relationships with families from different cultures:

- Be aware of how your culture, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations shape you as a person and a teacher; this will give you some insight into the deep influence that culture has on others, including the children and families with whom you work.
- Observe to discover similarities as well as differences between your culture and those of the children you teach and their families. Like most of us, you may find similarities easier to deal with than differences. But remember, differences do exist and recognizing them is necessary before we can bridge them. Be open and try to accept and acknowledge both.
- Seek more information to understand what culture means to each family and the ways in which it is reflected in children's behavior. Continue to observe and listen; as trust grows, share some of your questions and your own experiences and beliefs.

As teachers and practitioners in the early childhood field, we should be more sensitive when we are around young children. We need to model ethical behaviors and make a significant contribution in meeting the challenges presented by diverse family cultures and practices. Teachers need to use knowledge of social and cultural contexts to inform their practice in the classroom.

Decisions about our practice are based on knowledge that is always changing. Teachers need to communicate clearly their position on the significant role of cultural context. By sending messages to children that it is okay to play with rice or other food, teachers are emphasizing the differences between children's cultural backgrounds. Playing with food valued by a culture is not showing respect for that culture. Understanding Asian culture is not only knowing not to use rice as a play material, but also respecting the traditions and values associated with rice.

Teachers sometimes find themselves in situations in which a family's perspectives differ from their own on how to support a child's learning. The challenge is to get beyond asking what is right and wrong and being able to see another person's point of view and communicate openly, always keeping in mind the goal of supporting the child. If the rules at home and at school are conflicting, children can be confused or feel forced to choose one culture over the other (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple, 2003; Copple & Bredekamp,

2009). A child who chooses to identify with his or her family may refuse to play at the sensory table, leading to the worst error that teachers can make—treating cultural differences in children as deficits (Bredenkamp & Copple). Such situations hurt children whose abilities within their own cultural context are not recognized because they do not match the school's cultural expectations (Elkind, 2005; Gonzalez-Mena, 2002).

The biases and negative stereotypes about various aspects of human diversity prevalent in society undercut all children's healthy development and ill-equip them to interact effectively with people from different cultures (McCartney, 2006; Sheets, 2005). Children are not born to be racist. They are born to learn and accept what their environment has to offer. Modeling respect for children's own food as well as for the beliefs of others about food is one way for teachers to ensure that their classroom environment and teaching practices address culturally appropriate practice.

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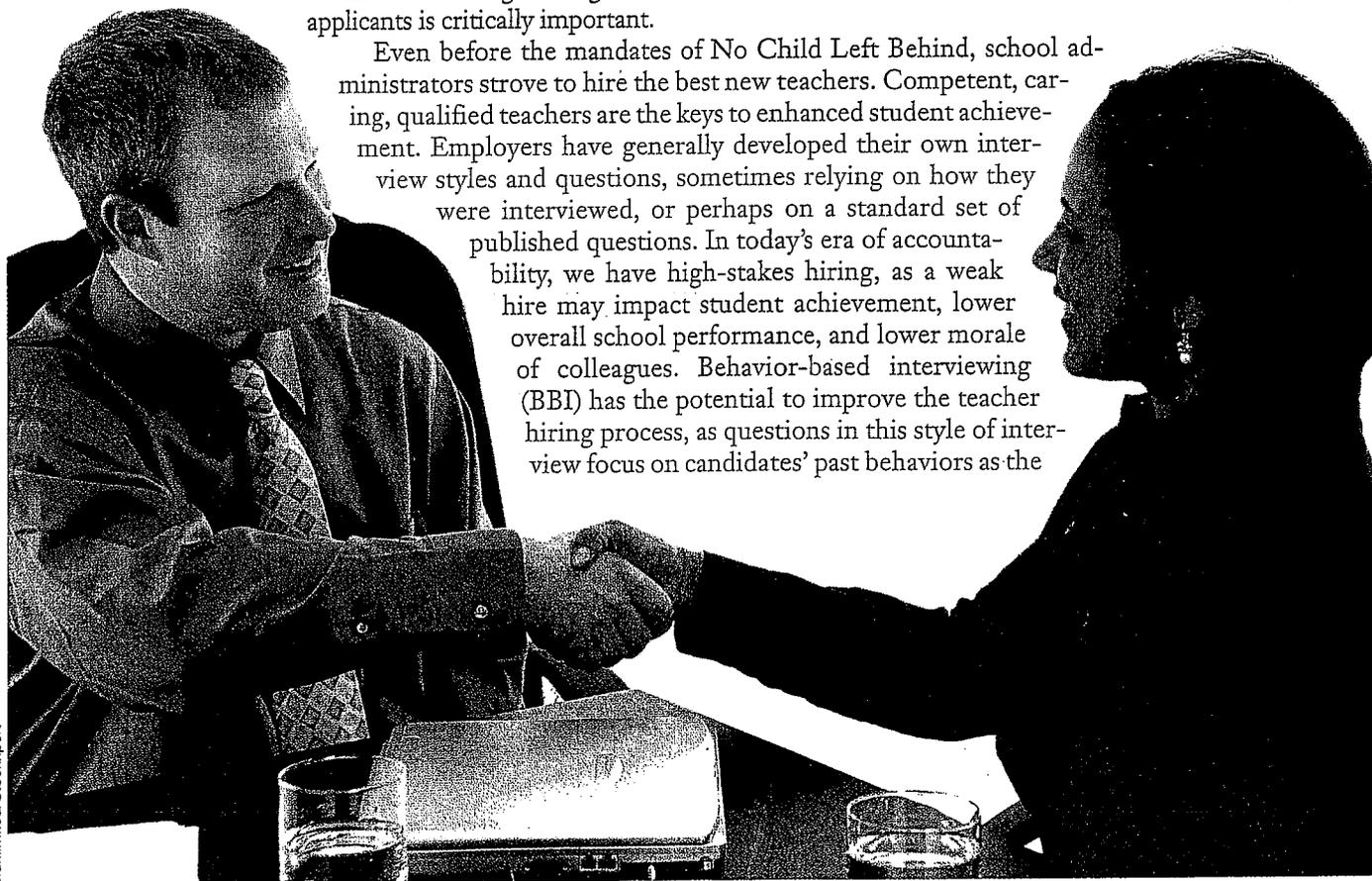
# Hiring **Highly Qualified Teachers** Begins with **Quality Interviews**

Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, so educators would be wise to craft interview questions that explore past experiences, skills, and behaviors of job candidates.

**By Mary C. Clement**

The personnel director of a large Midwestern city school district recently remarked that, in today's economic climate, he was receiving 1,800 applicants for about every 10 teacher jobs available. Yet, in a Sunbelt state, hundreds of new hires are made annually from a pool of provisionally certified teachers who qualify to teach after passing a subject-matter test and then committing to take teacher education courses at night and in the summers until they're fully certified. In either scenario, school administrators have some tough hiring decisions to make, and an interview to select the most highly qualified applicants is critically important.

Even before the mandates of No Child Left Behind, school administrators strove to hire the best new teachers. Competent, caring, qualified teachers are the keys to enhanced student achievement. Employers have generally developed their own interview styles and questions, sometimes relying on how they were interviewed, or perhaps on a standard set of published questions. In today's era of accountability, we have high-stakes hiring, as a weak hire may impact student achievement, lower overall school performance, and lower morale of colleagues. Behavior-based interviewing (BBI) has the potential to improve the teacher hiring process, as questions in this style of interview focus on candidates' past behaviors as the



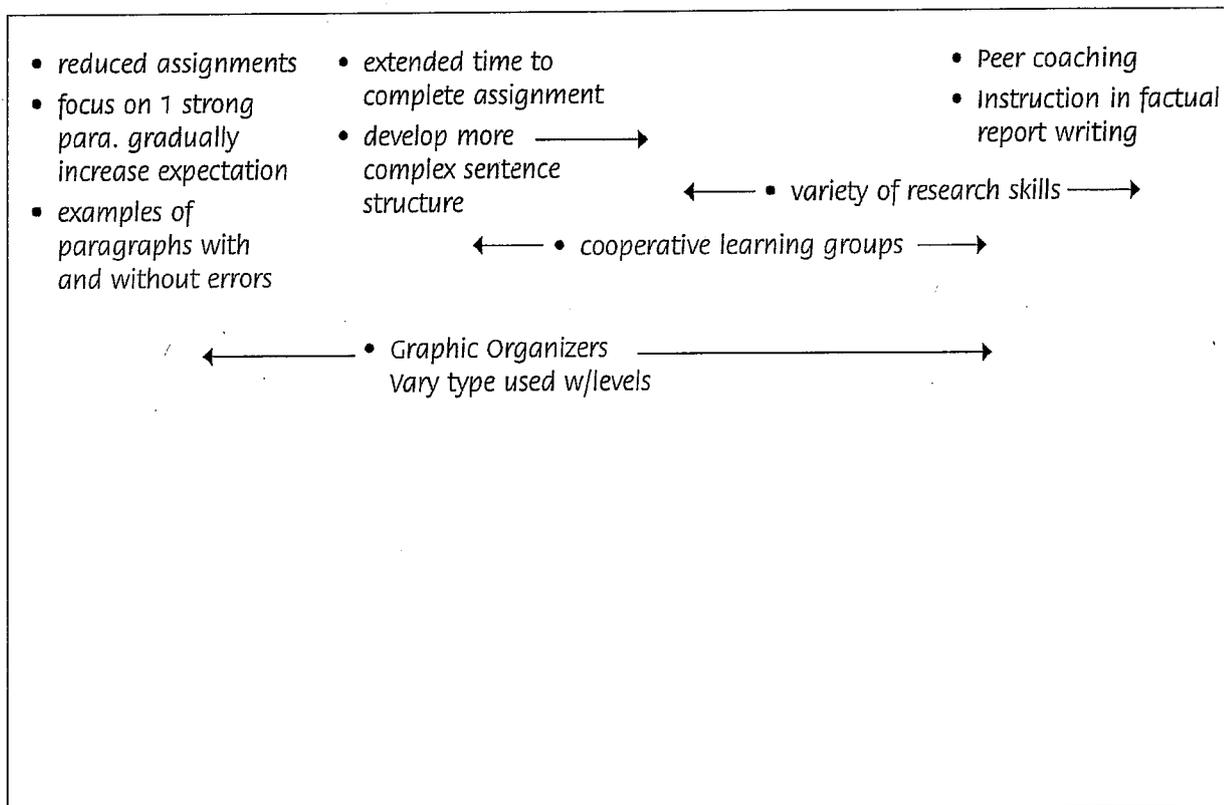
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4. Describe the learning needs of the identified students.

objective not met	objective partially met	objective met	exceeding objective
<p>Sam:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• examples (visual) that match criteria</li> <li>• 1:1 or peer tutor—paragraphs, review basic structure + how to gather factual info</li> </ul>	<p>Carl:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• review conclusion + indentation</li> <li>• fact gathering tools</li> </ul>	<p>Ebony:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop more complex sent. structure</li> <li>• expand composition →</li> </ul>	<p>Frankie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use variety or research tools</li> <li>• develop factual reports</li> </ul>

5. Identify differentiated strategies/instruction to move students forward. Note any patterns and trends. Consider resources and/or personnel to support you.



predictor of their future performance.

Used for decades in the business world, behavior-based interviewing depends on creating specific questions to ascertain the past experiences, skills, and behaviors of the candidate. When BBI-style questions are answered, the interviewer has a clearer sense of the candidate's suitability for the position, based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. BBI questions begin with the phrases "tell me about a time when," "how have you," or "describe your experience with." Of course, the questions asked directly relate to the pertinent skills of teaching.

### CREATING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Long before the interview begins, the individuals responsible for hiring need to determine the skills for the specific teaching position. While debate continues about the traits of effective teachers, questions about content knowledge, lesson planning, methods of teaching, classroom management, student diversity, motivation, assessment, communication, and professionalism are musts in any interview.

Your questions should be open-ended ones that require candidates to describe their past experiences, while demonstrating they know what to do when hired. For example, ask, "Describe the grading policy you have used for language arts." If a candidate can describe a total point system that's easy to administer and easy for students to understand, this is presumably the same policy that they'll implement on the first day of school — and that they will explain to parents at the first open house. A candidate who cannot explain a policy to you in the interview won't know how to establish one during the first grading period and will need training in this area. A candidate with a grading policy so complex that the listener needs a Ph.D in statistics to understand it won't be clear when talking to students or parents, either.

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Describe two important curricular topics that you have taught in this grade/subject area. (curriculum/content knowledge)
2. How have the state standards for this subject guided your teaching? (curriculum/content knowledge)
3. Tell me about a lesson you taught and why it went well. (lesson planning)

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4. Name a specific method or strategy you have used to teach in the past and why it is one you will continue to use. (teaching methods)
5. Describe a classroom management plan that you have used and why it worked. (classroom management)
6. What have you done to start and end a class successfully? (management/planning)
7. Describe an approach you have used to differentiate instruction for students. (diversity/motivation)
8. While a lesson is ongoing, how can you tell if students are "getting" the material? (assessment)
9. Describe positive communications with students' families that you have used in the past. (communication)
10. How have you evaluated your own teaching to improve? (professionalism)

**Those who can't explain basic answers to the interviewer, or who have had no previous experience with the topics, won't be successful with the necessary demands of teaching.**

### MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

While all teachers must possess the general skills of teaching, when a specific position opens, interview questions must be tailored to the position in order to find the most highly qualified applicant. Examples follow:

1. Elementary: What approaches to teaching reading have you used?
2. Elementary: How have you used manipulatives in teaching math?
3. Middle school: How have you worked with a teaching team?
4. Middle school: Tell about integrating the teaching of reading into subjects at the middle-school level.
5. High school: How have you interested your students in the subject and motivated them to learn it?
6. Science: How have you used labs in the classes you have taught?
7. Foreign language: What percentage of a typical lesson do you teach in the target language?

8. Art: What routines for safety and cleanup have you implemented?
9. Music: Describe a successful performance or concert that went well and why it succeeded.
10. Health/physical education: How have you built weight-consciousness topics into your courses?
11. Special education: Describe your experiences working with students in a \_\_\_\_\_ setting. (mainstreamed, full inclusion, pull-out, etc.)
12. Special education: Tell us about working with other teachers to help a student in a collaborative consultation.

**Behavior-based interviewing depends on creating specific questions to ascertain the past experiences, skills, and behaviors of the candidate.**

#### **GUIDES TO HELP YOU EVALUATE ANSWERS**

The acronyms, PAR and STAR, serve as guides to help you evaluate candidate answers. PAR stands for *problem, action, and result*. If you ask a candidate how they have provided remediation for an under-achieving student, their answer should tell you about a time when they encountered the problem, took action, and what result occurred. Since no candidate can experience every issue in teaching, new teachers will rely on their student teaching experience and may describe what they saw their cooperating teacher do in the situation. This is still good, as they have learned from observing best practice.

STAR stands for *situation, task, action, and result* and is another way to listen to answers systematically. If you ask, "Describe a classroom management plan that you have used and why it worked," a strong student answer might follow the STAR pattern. "In my student teaching placement in a 5th grade (situation), my teacher used a plan with three to five rules that were observable, enforceable, and in effect at all times. She taught me that having the rules with consequences and positives wouldn't help at all if we didn't teach the rules like part of the curriculum (task). So, every morning the first few weeks of school, we actually taught the plan and the rules (action). The rest of student teaching went well because students knew the rules and the class procedures (result)."

#### **AN EVALUATION INSTRUMENT OR RUBRIC**

A cardinal rule of the behavior-based interview is to have a complete list of questions written ahead of time and then to use the same questions with each candidate. Don't ask questions that can't be evaluated. Develop an instrument or rubric for evaluation

before the interviews. The instrument does not have to be elaborate. An effective one lists the question, then has three categories — unacceptable, acceptable, target. A candidate receives an unacceptable evaluation if they say, "I don't know," have no answer, or relate an answer that is not "best practice" in teaching. (Example, when asked about management, a candidate said, "I plan to harshly humiliate the first couple who get out of line, and that should take care of it.") Acceptable answers show experience and knowledge about the question. Target answers wow the interviewer. A target answer may include a visual, as the candidate shows a management plan from a portfolio when asked the management questions. An evaluation instrument adds objectivity to the hiring process, as the candidate with the most target answers should get the job offer.

#### **THE POTENTIAL OF BBI**

With high-stakes hiring, interviewers no longer have the luxury of asking candidates to "tell about themselves" or to ask random hypothetical questions. Employers need to determine the skills for the teaching position, write the questions, have an evaluation system, and then ask questions that determine if the candidate has the experience, knowledge, and skills to do the job. Candidates who can explain grading scales, management plans, and effective teaching methods are the ones who can explain things well to their students.

A good interview allows the candidate to teach the interviewer the things they will be teaching students and parents. Those who can't explain basic answers to the interviewer, or who have had no previous experience with the topics, won't be successful with the necessary demands of teaching. Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, and a behavior-based interview will aid administrators in hiring the best, most highly qualified teachers. **◀**

#### **For more information about behavior-based interviewing for teachers, see:**

Clement, Mary C. "Retention Begins with Hiring: Behavior-Based Interviewing." *EDGE* 2, no. 5 (May/June 2007): 1-20. Access through the Phi Delta Kappa publication archives, [www.pdkintl.org/kappan/find.htm](http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/find.htm)

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