

A Year in the Lives of Three Beginning Agriculture Teachers

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The process of becoming socialized into teaching is one of the most difficult stages in the professional development of teachers and agriculture teachers are certainly no exception. Indeed, the nature of the experiences during the first year or more are often pivotal in the eventual success or failure of the beginning teacher. Beginning teachers are usually expected to assume all of the responsibilities of teaching as if they were veteran teachers (Wildman & Niles, 1987). Some beginning teachers experience personal changes, such as moving to a new community and starting a new lifestyle (Levy, 1987).

The broad process by which beginning teachers are socialized into the profession is called induction (Waters, 1985). The induction process is a transitional period during which beginning teachers move from being students or workers to become experienced teachers (Camp & Heath, 1988). The induction process can be difficult and lengthy. It has been long recognized that beginning teachers need support to help them through the first year (Wildman & Niles, 1987).

Research reported by Buehler (1933) and cited in Osipow (1973), proposed a general theory of human development. According to the Buehler Model, individuals pass through four basic developmental stages: growth, exploratory, maintenance, and decline. Looking at only one aspect of human development, Ginzberg, Ginzberg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951) proposed a general theory of occupational choice based on developmental stages in which individuals pass through a series of stages they labeled fantasy, tentative, and realistic.

Super, Crites, Hummel, Moser, Overstreet, and Warnath (1957) proposed a more comprehensive stage theory of vocational development which posited a life-stage model with approximate age-spans corresponding to each

stage. The Super, et. al. (1957) theory provides a direct basis for the examination of the induction process and suggests a number of differences that could be expected to arise among the teachers we examined for this study. That theory includes an exploration-trial stage (approximate age 22-24) which usually involves a first permanent job. That stage is followed by an establishment-trial stage (approximate age 25-30) which involves adjustment problems that eventually lead to a stabilization stage (approximate age 31-44) or a continuing pattern of job changes throughout one's working life. It is at the exploration-trial or the establishment-trial life stage that we find most beginning agriculture teachers, and in particular all three of the teachers in this study.

"The transition from student to first-year teacher is traumatic for many and has been labeled 'reality shock in the educational literature' (Marso & Pigge, 1987, p. 53). New teachers are often placed in classrooms with little preparation and no specific support structure. It is no wonder then that "beginning teachers frequently report stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy" (Joyce & Clift, 1984, p. 6). Fifteen percent of all new teachers never recover from this initial experience and leave the profession after the first year (Huling-Austin, 1986). Over 50 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years (Olson & Rodman, 1988).

Research on the professional development of beginning teachers has appeared periodically over many years. Conant (1963) examined the education of teachers for America's schools. Although his primary concern was the preparation of teachers, he also addressed the professional development of teachers once they entered the classroom. Fuller (1969) worked with preservice and beginning teachers in Texas. She found the beginners exhibit specific behaviors in a recognizable order during the induction period.

Ryan (1986) expanded on Fuller's work to describe four stages in a teacher's career: fantasy, survival, mastery, and impact.

Research on beginning teachers frequently focuses on the problems they experience. Veenman (1984) conducted an extensive literature review to compile a list of perceived problems of beginning teachers. Camp and Heath (1989) reported on the problems identified by beginning vocational teachers who were certified through both traditional teacher education programs and through alternative approaches such as technical degrees and occupational experience. They found that an important proportion of the induction experience for vocational teachers involved vocational-education specific experiences, both positive and negative. Mundt (1991) provided a naturalistic examination of the induction process for eight beginning agriculture teachers in Idaho during the 1987-88 school year. He found that dominant characteristics of the beginning agriculture teachers were confusion and insecurity.

Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of this study was to develop descriptive accounts of the first year of three beginning agriculture teachers. The basic questions asked by this research were:

What events occur in the daily lives of beginning agriculture teachers?

What effect do they have on the teachers?

Procedures

A case study approach, as described by Yin (1989) was used in this research. Yin stated that the case study approach is appropriate for exploratory studies. He defined exploratory research as studies which develop propositions for further study. One purpose of qualitative research, such as this study, is to generate propositions rather than to prove hypotheses.

Selection of Participants

The three agriculture teachers for this study were selected to represent both traditional teacher education and alternative teacher certification. Of the three agriculture teachers who participated, two (Tom and Susan--psuedonyms) were traditionally

certified and one (Mary--psuedonym) was certified as a result of vocational experience and had no teacher education prior to entering the classroom. They lived and taught in three different south-eastern states.

Both Susan and Mary were older than Tom. Both women were in the age range 25-29 at the start of the study with Tom being in the 20-24 age range. According to the Super, et. al. (1957) model, we would expect more instability and insecurities from Tom, although the differences in age were not extreme. We should expect more occupational maturity from both Susan and Mary because both of them had previous full-time work experience in agriculture and because they were older than Tom.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected throughout the 1988-89 school year using questionnaires, in-depth interviews, participant observations, as described by Spradley (1980), and daily taped-recorded logs. The use of multiple sources of data produces what is referred to as "Triangulation," and is a powerful component in establishing external validity and generalizability of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1990).

Questionnaires were used to obtain general demographic information on the teachers, as well as work and classroom information. In-depth interviews were conducted at the beginning and again at the end of the teachers' first school year as well as during each of field visits described in the next paragraph.

Three field visits were made to each teacher. During the field visit, project researchers obtained information through classroom observations; interviews with administrators, mentors or buddy teachers, vocational directors, and students; and school and community observations.

Throughout their first year, the teachers recorded a daily log using a tape recorder and a set of researcher-supplied questions. The teachers mailed the recorded tapes back to the researchers for transcribing. In addition, all of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

According to Ball (1984), the analysis of case study data involves the logical depiction of the subject of the study. There are several stages of interpretation that must occur before the final production of a case study account. Ball stated that throughout these stages validation and revision must occur. In addition to the triangulation effect mentioned earlier, the content of each case study was validated by having the participants read the first drafts of the parts referring to them.

Results

There are many factors which influenced how the teachers experienced their first year. Not all were influenced by the same factors. Even though each teaching setting was different, there were common themes in the teachers' experiences.

Student Discipline

All three teachers experienced problems with student discipline. The most common complaint was with students talking in class or with general misbehavior. Mary received a less than satisfactory rating in her annual evaluation on the management of student behavior because of these and similar problems. Her assigned mentor commented in December, *"I think her biggest problem was with the students--the discipline."*

Susan, on the other hand, experienced more severe discipline problems with students stealing tools and houseplants from the laboratory. She complained in late September, *"They weren't paying attention in class. They kept talking . . . They argue with me. They get real smart."* Her principal reported, *"She's intelligent, bright, capable . . . she lacks classroom management."*

As early as the end of September of his first year, Tom had learned, *"If you cannot maintain the classroom discipline or manage the class (then) nothing can be accomplished and it can drag you down and there's just no way that you can teach what you want to."*

At the end of the year, Mary reflected, *"It didn't turn out the way I thought it would for the entire year and that was due to my inconsistency at the beginning of the year in giving punishment, okay. I got myself into trouble real quick there*

because I was not consistent and so I have had to pay for that all year."

Unique Requirements

All three of these teachers had job requirements that were unique to agriculture or vocational teachers. Advising the FFA is one example of a unique job requirement. Tom, Susan, and Mary spent many hours outside of class time coaching, transporting, and otherwise working with students. This included time spent on weekends and time away from home at contests and other events.

Other requirements that were unique to these teachers included preparing for several different classes, purchasing laboratory supplies, managing the laboratory, completing state-required reports, and designing the curriculum without the benefit of a textbook. Tom commented that he had more class preparations than other first-year teachers in chemistry. Each of these teachers, especially Tom because of his agricultural mechanics duties, had to learn the procedures for ordering laboratory supplies. At one point Tom reported, *"I've been trying to get some stuff ordered (supplies for the agricultural mechanics laboratory) but it seems like I can never-find the time to get it done."*

Each of the teachers was responsible for managing a laboratory. Susan had problems with storing lumber, Mary with managing a land laboratory, and Tom with the agricultural mechanics laboratory. Finally, these three agriculture teachers had to use many different sources to develop curriculum since there was not an agriculture textbook.

Unique Pitfalls

The daily lives of these three teachers were complicated by activities that teachers from other subject-matter areas may not experience. Two of Tom's students injured themselves in the agriculture laboratory. The responsibility for students' safety is a concern that academic teachers probably do not face to this degree. At one point, Mary said, *"You do have to worry about safety and that is a big concern for all vocational teachers. If you have a student chop off (his) finger while your back is turned, I mean nobody else is responsible, it's you."* These teachers also had liability

concerns when they transported students to various activities. Once, Susan had to use her personal automobile to transport her FFA poultry judging team to an off-campus activity.

These three new teachers also rediscovered the well-known reliance of the community on the “shop” facilities at the school. One day, a student’s parents brought a little lumber that the department head had promised to “plane down.” Tom laughed as he recounted, *“It was a couple thousand board feet -- it was more than we expected.”* He and the other teacher spent an entire class period, along with the students working on the wood, *“They stood in line with the board and held it while I joined the edges on it and Mr. Jones was planing.”*

Teacher Isolation

These three agriculture teachers were physically isolated from their co-workers and the rest of the school. Tom’s laboratory was in a separate building, Mary’s classroom was in a separate pod, and Susan’s laboratory was at one end of the building. Each teacher had minimal contact with other teachers and, except for Tom, had minimal contact with other agriculture teachers. Mary even had a mentor, but rarely spoke of any contact with her.

Students

As a group, students received the most comments from the teachers for both negative and positive events. In addition, all three teachers made references to gauging the success of a class period on whether certain students were present or absent. One day, Tom commented, *“Sixth period, most of my trouble students weren’t in there today and that period went really (well). We got a lot done in there today.”* Many times the teachers made comments such as, *“The students were well-behaved. It was a good class.”*

Students are the main group that beginning agriculture teachers come in contact with on a day-to-day basis. The teachers tended to gauge their worth as teachers based on the results of these contacts. When asked for the most important thing that had happened to her during her first year, Mary said, *“The most important overall, I guess, has been the fact. . . that the majority of the 200 ag students at school have accepted me.”*

FFA Activities

FFA activities were many times the bright spots in otherwise disastrous weeks for these teachers. The teachers also commented that the FFA and the students made them feel proud to be advisors. The teachers made numerous comments about enjoying the out-of-class interaction with the students through FFA activities. Susan’s comment, after one FFA judging team practice session, was, *“I just remember thinking, wow, this is what it’s supposed to be like. This is what teaching vo ag is all about.”*

Time Management

First-year teachers spend an enormous amount of time grading papers, planning for instruction, and completing other paperwork. All three teachers in this study commented about spending late nights and weekends preparing for classes. These three teachers devoted many hours to coaching judging teams, taking students to conferences, and preparing for other FFA activities.

In particular, Tom had problems with time management. He had an especially difficult time grading students’ assignments and completing report cards at the end of a grading period. At one point, Tom indicated that he had learned, *“Don’t put off everything until the last day of the six weeks. That’s definitely what I learned and I will not do it again.”* The lesson apparently never produced significant a change in Tom’s time management skills. At the end of the first year, his principal observed, *“My overall concern with him . . . has less to do with instruction than it does for . . . being dependable, prompt--coming to meetings, being on time, getting to work on time, this kind of thing.”*

Lesson Planning

Neither teacher-education teacher, Susan nor Tom, expressed much concern with lesson planning, however, the alternative certification teacher, Mary, was extremely concerned with lesson plans. This concern continued throughout the school year, even though Mary was enrolled in several education courses. Her comment in late October was, *“It’s been hard sometimes to be well prepared with lesson plans . . . and so I’d come into class the next day and come up short, you*

know--run out of something to say with 15 minutes left of the class period."

Classroom/Laboratory Management

Susan had problems with classroom and laboratory management throughout the year. During the first month of school she commented, *"It's very difficult to watch twenty students . . . hammer, nails, and saw and drill and everything else. It's too much for a beginning teacher to handle. I reached such a point of frustration . . . it was all I could do to stay in there. . . I've just been given a little bit more than I can handle."*

Along with her problem in lesson planning, Mary also experienced concern with the difficulties in class management that result from inadequate planning. Asked what advice she would give to other beginning teachers, Mary responded, *"I would tell them that they need to have an activity planned for every minute of the 55 minutes they have those students."*

Discussion

Just as the Super, et. al. (1957) model predicted, and as the research literature on induction indicated, the three beginning teachers experienced a multitude of insecurities and problems. From the perspective of teacher education, it was a bit disappointing that the most severe discipline problems and most dramatic adjustment problems of the three teachers were experienced by one of the two teacher education graduates, Susan.

The predominant impression given by the educational literature regarding the lives and experiences of beginning teachers is one of overwhelming problems and frustrations. What we found was that not all first-year experiences are bad. Beginning teachers receive positive feedback from students and others, and this encourages them to keep on trying. Agriculture teachers also may receive recognition because of student organization and professional activities. Finally, the mere realization of actually being a teacher is exciting for some beginners.

The teacher induction literature makes broad generalizations about the problems and needs of beginning teachers. Yet, little research has been reported regarding the unique problems and needs

of beginning teachers of agriculture. As induction assistance programs are planned for beginning agriculture teachers, some consideration for those unique needs should be taken into account. Difficulties arising from laboratory management, considerations of the safety of students while using potentially dangerous machinery, requirements for FFA events, transportation of students to off-campus activities, and problems arising from teacher isolation are just a few of the potential areas warranting special attention that were documented by this study.

This research, as well as the educational literature, shows clearly that a system of induction assistance is needed. The existing state-supported mentoring system provided to one of our teachers (Mary) proved to be of little value. On the other hand, the teacher with the most difficult year (Susan) had no support system at all. The teacher (Tom) whose department head worked very closely with him had the smoothest induction experience of the three. It must be concluded that in spite of well-meaning efforts by educational leaders over the past decade and sometimes large investments, current efforts did not meet the induction needs of the three beginning agriculture teachers in this study.

Teacher educators, local educational leaders state department of education leaders, and leaders of the professional organizations must all accept some responsibility for guiding and nurturing novices. With the emerging shortage of agriculture teachers reported by Camp and Oliver (1990), the profession cannot afford to lose promising teachers because of traumatic experiences that could have been corrected during the first year.

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