

MENTORING FIRST YEAR AGRICULTURAL EDUCATORS: EXAMINING A STATE-MANDATED INDUCTION PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study determined perceptions of mentoring within a state-mandated first year teaching program of agriculture teachers and their assigned resident committee members. The objectives were: 1) Describe the personal characteristics of first year teachers and committee members, 2) Describe the mentor relationships that exist, 3) Compare perceptions of mentoring among committee members, and 4) Determine if participants approve its continuance. Results indicated that residency committee members believed they did provide mentoring to the first year teachers in agriculture. First year agriculture teachers perceived the mentor teacher to be the committee member who provided the most assistance during their first year of teaching. To the contrary, mentor teachers believed they did not assist with agricultural education issues or technical agriculture areas. Mentor teachers, administrators, higher education representatives, and first year agriculture teachers favored the continuance of this program; however, improvements could be made to strengthen the mentoring component. Recommendations included involving teacher educators as higher education representatives more and expand the residency committee to include an agriculture teacher as the mentor teacher. Special efforts to develop rapport beyond mandatory meetings and scheduled observations should be made. In addition, informal mentoring must continue to meet the first year agriculture teachers' needs.

Introduction

It is predicted that over two million new teachers will be employed in America's schools during this decade, due to increased student enrollments and to replace a large cohort of retiring teachers. (Gerald & Hussar, 1998). Attracting and retaining the next generation of teachers is a monumental task which is encountered by the current educational community. Not only will these teachers be challenged to educate diverse learners in an increasingly complex society, they will need to be the best-prepared teachers our nation has ever known (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

While many universities, states, and school districts have recently intensified

teacher recruitment efforts, anecdotal evidence suggests that the retention of teachers is a long-term strategy for alleviating the teacher shortage. Retaining first year teachers has profound implications for student achievement and the possibility of sustained educational reform. Research over the last decade has led to an understanding that quality teaching is critical to student success and "what teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p.iv). The Commission's 1996 Report called for a number of strategies for supporting beginning teachers, including effective induction through teacher mentoring.

Induction is the broad process by which beginning teachers are socialized into the profession. Camp and Heath (1988) identified the induction process as a transitional period when beginning teachers move from the role of students to experienced teachers. It is during this time through assistance, beginning teachers develop competence in knowledge, skills, and values. This assistance ranges from informal friendships to very formal and structured programs. Yee (1990) found teachers with positive early first year experiences, reasonable assignments in terms of course loads and subjects, and adequate feedback and personal support from colleagues and supervisors are more likely to become competent and skillful teachers who remain in the profession.

First year agricultural education teachers especially need a positive induction process as these teachers have additional responsibilities. Agricultural education teachers are not only responsible for the activities of a normal subject teacher, but also they are responsible for an entire agricultural education program. Debertin and Priebe (1984) and Grady (1985) found experienced agriculture teachers have higher levels of morale or job satisfaction when compared with beginning agricultural education teachers. Specifically, when compared to national morale norms for junior and senior high faculties, beginning agricultural education teachers rank consistently below the 50th percentile (Flowers & Pepple, 1988).

In the early 1980s, programs were developed to serve as a vehicle for connecting theory and practice for beginning teachers. Since inception, resident teacher programs have created "new ways for colleges and school systems to work together around instructional reform, creating greater common ground, and leveraging improvements in both settings" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 80). One aspect of the induction process is the development of formal or informal mentoring relationships. In fact, one of the recommendations in *What matters most: Teaching for America's future* (1996) was to

"create and fund mentoring programs for beginning teachers" (p. vii).

In 1980, a state-mandated induction program was implemented for all first year teachers in Oklahoma. The intent of the legislation that created the program was "to establish qualifications of teachers in the common schools of this state through licensing and certification requirements" (HB 1706, Section 4). In this state-mandated residency program, a committee composed of an administrator, mentor teacher, and teacher educator is assigned. The role of this committee is to assist this new professional throughout the first year of teaching. Three classroom observations and formal and informal discussions take place during the school year. A stipend is paid to the mentor teacher as compensation for their efforts. Few changes have occurred with this induction program during its history.

The theoretical model for this study is based on Kram's mentor role theory (1985). She concluded that mentoring is a type of developmental relationship in which mentors provided career and psychosocial functions. Career functions operate primarily at the organizational level to assist in the advancement of the junior colleague, while psychosocial functions affect each individual at the interpersonal level, both inside and outside the organization. Career functions "are those aspects of a relationships that enhance learning the ropes and preparing for advancement in an organization" (p. 22). These functions increased the likelihood of the protégé becoming successful, and included sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions enhanced an individual's "sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a professional role" (p. 23). These included acceptance, counseling, friendship, and role modeling. Social, a fifth psychosocial function was later incorporated into the theory. Kram suggested the greater the number of functions provided by the mentor, the more beneficial the relationship will be to the protégé.

Numerous research studies have examined the induction process; however few have focused on the role of mentoring

through a formal induction program. Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study was if this state-mandated resident teacher program provides effective mentoring for agriculture teachers.

Purpose and Objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to determine perceptions of mentoring within a state mandated first year teaching induction program of first year agricultural education teachers and their assigned resident committee members. The following objectives were formulated to accomplish this purpose:

1. Describe the personal characteristics of first year agricultural education teachers and their committee members assigned to the residency committee.
2. Describe the mentor relationships that exist between the first year teacher and his/her committee members.
3. Compare perceptions of mentoring among residency program committee members.
4. Determine if the participants in the residency program approve its continuance.

Procedures

The study used a descriptive design. The population for this state-wide study consisted of residency committees for first year agricultural education teachers in Oklahoma during the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 academic school years (N=37 committees, N=148 committee members). This state-mandated program for first year agricultural education teachers, enforced by the Oklahoma department of education, was used as the population frame. Data were collected from a census of the population.

A telephone questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The instrument was modified from studies by Barbee (1985) and Barrera (1991) and contained two parts. Part I was designed to gather selected demographic data of first

year agricultural education teachers and their committee members. Part II was designed to gather respondents' perceptions of mentoring between the first year teacher and the committee members. Items used throughout the instrument were close-ended questions, with participants ranking those items from greatest to least. One open-ended question was in place to gather respondent's description of mentoring within the residency committee and current program.

Validity and reliability was established by a panel of experts (Tuckman, 1978). The selection of the panel of experts was based on knowledge of agriculture, agricultural education, and research methods. The instrument was pilot tested with agricultural education teachers who went through the induction year program during the 1998-1999 academic year along with the persons who served on their residency committees. Members of the pilot group completed the telephone questionnaire, answered questions related to the clarity of the instrument, and made other suggestions. No major changes were made to the instrument as a result of this process.

The researcher administered the instruments to all participants. First year teachers and committee members were contacted by telephone to explain the purpose of the study and describe the process of completing the instrument in addition to scheduling an interview appointment. This preliminary call allowed participants time to gather their thoughts regarding their mentoring experience in the resident teacher program and to ensure a more accurate response. A total of 97.3% ($n=144$) of the population completed the questionnaire. All responses were usable for data analysis. Data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were used for all variables. Chi-square was also computed for comparative data. No analysis for non-respondents could be made as four administrators could not be located.

Findings

Objective 1: Personal Characteristics of Respondents

Nearly 90% of the first year agricultural education teachers, administrators, and higher education representatives were male. As shown in Table 1, most committee members serving as mentors had more than 15 years of experience in education. Few administrators and mentor teachers had an

agricultural education background; however, 37.8% of the mentor teachers possessed a vocational certification. Most administrators serving on the residency committees were high school principals (84.8%) and almost 88% held certification in an academic subject.

Table 1
Participant Profile of the Residency Program

	Resident Teacher (n=37)	Mentor Teacher (n=33)	Administrator (n=37)	Higher Education Representative (n=37)
Gender	Male (89.2%)	Male (70.3%)	Male (89.2%)	Male (89.2%)
Educational Level	Bachelors (97.3%)	Bachelors (67.6%)	Masters + 15 (54.5%)	Doctorate (89.2%)
Certification Area	Agricultural Education (100.0%)	Secondary Vocational (37.8%)	Secondary Academic (87.9%)	Agricultural Education (94.6%)
Total Years in Education	0-5 (100.0%)	Over 15 (73.0%)	Over 15 (87.9%)	Over 15 (87.9%)
Total Years Teaching	0-5 (100.0%)	Over 15 (73.0%)	Over 15 (42.4%)	0-5 (87.9%)
Years in Higher Education	--	--	--	11-15 (43.2%)
Years in Administration	--	--	6-10 (33.3%)	--
Type of Administrative Experience	--	--	High School Principal (84.8%)	--

*Objective 2: Mentor Relationships
Described*

Information was solicited about the relationship of committee members to the first year agricultural education teachers through open-ended questions. As displayed in Figure 1, both positive and negative themes were identified. In many instances the higher education representative and the mentor teacher were identified as having provided great assistance and mentoring, especially when the higher education representative was an active part of the pre-service teacher education program. In this instance, the teacher educator serving as a higher education representative had a feel for the program's mission, goals and community needs. However, each group also identified areas where the mentoring offered through the higher education representative committee member could have been improved.

Mentor teachers identified that the success of mentoring within each committee was dependent on the committee members.

The administrators added that the personality of the first year agricultural education teacher was also important for effective mentoring to occur. For example, the first year teachers' ability to listen to feedback and take constructive criticism and adopt and implement changes in their teaching style and program is vital. If a first year teacher's personality is one that he or she will not listen to the mentor assigned, the program will not be effective.

*Objective 3: Committee Members'
Perceptions of Mentoring*

Committee members and first year agricultural education teachers perceived mentoring did occur through the state mandated residency program. As illustrated in Figure 2, first year agricultural education teachers perceived the greatest assistance came from their mentor teacher (49.0%). However, mentor teachers perceived they did not provide technical or agricultural education assistance to the first year teacher.

First Year Agricultural Education Teacher Comments	
<p><u>Positive Comments</u> Mentor teacher provided assistance Higher Ed Rep was of assistance Administrator provided assistance</p>	<p><u>Areas for Improvement</u> Mentor teacher – no assistance No understanding of ag education program Program is Evaluation instead of Mentoring Just a process to go through-no meaning</p>
Mentor Teacher Comments	
<p><u>Positive Comments</u> Success depends on people in committee Program is needed for new teachers Teaching areas are similar - “vocational”</p>	<p><u>Areas for Improvement</u> Higher Ed Rep – no tie to community No technical ag or ag education assistance Time to provide assistance was difficult</p>
Administrator Comments	
<p><u>Positive Comments</u> Program effectiveness relies on personality Other committee members did a good job</p>	<p><u>Areas for Improvement</u> Mentor teacher is not aware of technical ag More involvement with Mentor Teachers</p>
Higher Education Representative Comments	
<p><u>Positive Comments</u> Higher Education Rep. provides support</p>	<p><u>Areas for Improvement</u> Often a rush to get process finished Uneven assistance given - Higher Ed Rep. Improvements need to be made in system</p>

Figure 1. Themes from Open-ended Questions Describing the Relationships Formed Through Residency Committee.

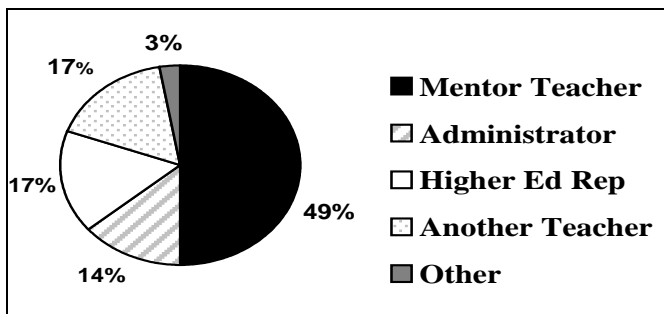


Figure 2. Comparison of Individuals Providing Mentoring as Perceived by First Year Agricultural Education Teachers.

Both first year agricultural teachers and the committee members perceived the first year teacher asked for assistance 1-5 times throughout the academic school year.

Figure 3 shows that first year teachers (78.4%) believed the mentor teachers spent the required amount of time serving as their mentors.

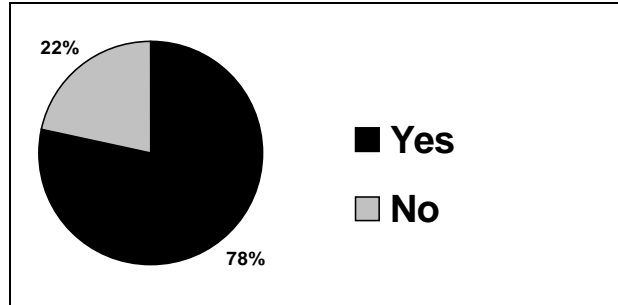


Figure 3. An Analysis of Required Time Spent by the Mentor Teacher as Perceived by First Year Agricultural education Teachers.

Objective 4: Respondents' View of Continuing the Residency Program

Fifty-eight percent of the respondents stated they would strongly favor the continuance of the residency program. In fact, the most frequent response for each type of committee member was "strongly favor." However, 20 (13.8%) of the respondents were either uncertain or opposed to continuing the program. First year agricultural education teachers were unsure of the effectiveness of the mentoring component within the program, as eight (21.6%) were either uncertain or opposed to its continuance. Twenty (50%) of the committee members having a negative view were higher education representatives, with 8.1% of the higher education representatives strongly opposed to the continuance of the program.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Objective 1: Personal Characteristics of Respondents

Committee members in the residency program typically have 15 or more years of experience in the educational system. Committee members often draw on their previous teaching experience to provide advice, support and solutions to problems first year teachers face. This experience is

important and it is recommended that experience continue to be a factor for committee member assignments.

Few administrators and mentor teachers assigned to a residency committee have a technical agriculture or agricultural education background. The background of these committee members may hinder the effectiveness of the program specifically for agricultural educators. Many problems first year teachers of agriculture encounter are specific to their content area. These administrators and mentor teachers without technical agriculture or an agriculture background believe they are not of assistance in these areas. It is recommended that a program specialist be added to the committee in order to meet the need of the technical agriculture content. This program specialist can answer those questions specific to agricultural education, thus making the committee well-rounded.

Objective 2: Mentor Relationships Described

First year agricultural education teachers perceive they receive mentoring from their residency committee. Most higher education representatives are familiar with the first year teacher, agricultural education, and the agricultural education programs in this state; however within some committees this did not occur.

The mentor teacher provides the greatest assistance to the first year agricultural education teacher, however mentor teachers believe they do not assist first year agricultural education teachers in technical or agricultural education areas. Because few members of residency committees have experience in technical agriculture, committees for first year agricultural education teachers should be expanded to include a mentor agricultural education teacher and an agricultural education program specialist from the state department of career and technical education.

However, first year teachers in agriculture rarely ask their committee members for assistance in their first year of teaching. Therefore committee members should make a special effort to develop a rapport with these first year teachers beyond the mandatory meetings and scheduled observations. Likewise, the first year teachers must ask their committee members for assistance when needed, beyond the scheduled committee meetings. Further research needs to be conducted to learn why first year agricultural education teachers do not seek mentoring assistance from their assigned mentors. In addition, further investigation should be placed on experienced agricultural education teachers regarding their views of serving as mentors for beginning agricultural education teachers.

Objective 3: Committee Members' Perceptions of Mentoring

First year agricultural education teachers and their mentors appointed through this induction program believe the function of the residency program is related more to evaluation than mentoring. Residency program committee members stated this mentoring program helps to create a feeling of security for the first year agricultural education teacher. One of the main functions the higher education representative brings to this residency committee is their familiarity to the resident teacher. Familiarity with the teacher preparation program in which the teacher recently graduated is also an important aspect. Most higher education

representatives are familiar with the first year teacher, agricultural education, and the agricultural education programs in Oklahoma; however within some committees this did not occur. Thus, higher education representatives appointed should be only those teacher educators who play an active role in the pre-service program.

Objective 4: Respondents' View of Continuing the Residency Program

The residency program in this state should continue because some mentoring of the first year teacher does occur by his/her committee members. However, some issues must be addressed. Many participants believe the function of this induction program is more evaluative rather than mentoring. Educators must focus on the mentoring aspect specific to this induction program and provide assistance, rather than serving as an evaluator to the first year teacher. Therefore, a recommendation for state leaders is to eliminate the evaluation process and link for certification to the induction process. As a result of this recommendation, first year teachers will seek more assistance from those committee members and more quality mentoring will result.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research must be conducted on mentoring, especially in the area of assistance to first year teachers of agriculture. Gaining a further understanding of the mentoring needs for beginning agriculture teachers is critical. Studies with qualitative methods should be conducted to focus on the first year teacher experience, especially related to mentoring. Longitudinal studies should also be conducted to measure these participants' perceptions of the residency program throughout their career. If mentoring will be truly effective, all participants -- first year teachers, experienced teachers, administrators, university teacher educators, and program specialists -- must be willing and able to meet the many expectations.

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