

THE INDUCTION YEAR -- A NATURALISTIC STUDY OF BEGINNING SECONDARY TEACHERS OF AGRICULTURE IN IDAHO

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Education in America is in a state of change at all levels. Beginning with the report A Nation at Risk, a myriad of national and state task forces and special committees have followed with their findings. The Carnegie and Holmes reports have significant implications for teacher education and preparation. Little has been done nor has there been any real focus on beginning teacher induction until recently. Yet, educational leaders at most levels confirm that the beginning year of teaching is critical to future success as a professional educator.

Theoretical/Literature Base

The ideal teacher is one who has or is working diligently toward a firm grasp of basic pedagogical skills (Griffin, 1984). Basic pedagogical skills include classroom organization, management and discipline; allowing for individual differences in learners; utilizing and selecting appropriate resources; and understanding and responding to curriculum requirements that are in place in the system, the school and the classroom.

The expectation of the beginning teacher from the educational community is the ideal teacher. No other profession puts its' beginners into a position where they are expected to immediately perform like veterans. As Johnston and Ryan (1983) point out:

Suddenly, over the short space of a summer or less, beginning teachers' lives are changed dramatically. They are no longer students. Now they are teachers. No longer can they rely on their knowledge, understanding and experience of the students' role. They are now thrust into the role of teachers, a role they have observed countless times but only briefly tried out. (p. 138).

Authors often refer to the transition as "reality shock." Strictly speaking, "reality shock" is a somewhat inappropriately used term as Veenman (1989) states:

Because it suggests that it is only a very short shock which one has to pass, like a swimmer who must acclimatize to cold water. In fact, the reality shock deals with the assimilation of a complex reality which forces itself incessantly upon the beginning teacher, day in and day out. This reality must be mastered continually, especially in the first period of actual teaching. (p. 144).

Fuller and Brown (1975) suggest three stages in the development of teachers:

1. Survival stage--These are concerns about one's adequacy and survival as a teacher, about class control, about being liked by pupils, about supervisors' opinions, about being observed, evaluated, praised and failed. These are concerns about feelings, and seem to be evoked by one's status as a student. Preservice teachers have more concerns of this type than inservice teachers.
2. Teacher situation concerns--These are concerns about having to work with too many students or having too many non-instructional duties, about time pressures, about inflexible situations, about lack of instructional materials and so on. These frustrations seem to be evoked by teaching situations. Inservice teachers have more concerns of this type than preservice teachers.
3. Pupil concerns--These are concerns about recognizing social and emotional needs of pupils, about the inappropriateness of some curriculum material for certain students, about being fair to pupils, about tailoring content to individual students and so on. (p. 37-38).

Although the specific objectives of a beginning teacher program vary, the underlying purpose is to assist the beginning teacher in moving quickly through the first two stages into the third.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to identify patterns of behavior exhibited by beginning secondary teachers of agriculture in Idaho during the induction period, which is defined by this study as the first year of teaching.

The objectives or subproblems were:

1. Describe the characteristic behavior patterns of beginning teachers and their subjective experiences in relation to problems and issues.
2. Describe the typical approaches beginning teachers use in addressing problems and issues.
3. Describe the subjective reports of beginning teachers' feelings as they address problems and issues.
4. Describe the perceptions of principals relating to approaches, behavior patterns and feelings of beginning teachers as they address problems and issues.

Methods/Procedures

The study was descriptive and qualitative in nature. Ethnographic research techniques were used for this field based naturalistic study. Ethnography is a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures. Projecting this definition of ethnography into educational research, Wiersma (1986) described ethnographic research as follows: "The process of providing scientific descriptions of educational systems, processes and phenomena within their specific contexts." (p. 233). Wilson, (1977) further clarifies by stating, "The social scientist cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the subjects interpret their thoughts, feelings and actions." (p. 249).

The researcher utilized the role of participant observer to learn from the subjects in the culture being studied. Participant observation may be defined as a general approach to research that requires genuine social interaction on the scene with the subjects themselves as a part of the data-gathering process (McCall and Simmons, 1969).

The researcher addressed internal validity by meeting the three requirements suggested by Tikunoff and Ward (1980): 1) Observing the behavior as it occurred naturally; 2) Observing what occurred in a natural setting; and, 3) Making efforts to assure that what occurred would have occurred with or without the presence of the researcher.

External validity is described as meaning that people in similar situations and similar settings can verify the findings as being true for themselves. The most common approach to establishing generalizability is utilizing the statistical approach. A method used when dealing with qualitative research data is the logical-situational approach. Logical-situational generalizability means that contextual data must be expanded to include information from multiple sources. When the data sources are expanded and of sufficient quantity and quality, then one can logically generalize to other similar contextual settings. Tikunoff and Ward (1980) further describe logical-situational generalizability and the requirement that limited context data must be considerably expanded:

More information is necessary - about specific classrooms, schools and communities in which research is conducted; about the teachers and students involved and research subjects; about the ecology of the instructional setting and how the social systems in operation within that setting behave naturally. These expanded data, then, may be used to identify "contexts" that are similar to those in which the research was conducted. New knowledge in this instance can be generalized to other situations on the basis of specific similarities and differences rather than on the premise that all types of situations were represented in the research effort. Context thus serves as the vehicle for external validity. (p. 282)

Triangulation was the method by which the researcher validated what was observed utilizing multiple data sources. Wiersma (1986) describes triangulation as a qualitative cross validation process. Triangulation assesses the sufficiency of the data according to the convergence of multiple data sources or multiple data collection procedures.

Data Collection: The population included the eight beginning secondary teachers of agriculture in Idaho during the 1987-88 academic year. The data gathering and observation occurred during January through May of 1988. A trust relationship between the subjects and researcher was important to the study. Prior to the on-site data gathering phase of the study, the researcher established a personal relationship with the subjects.

The data were collected on site by the researcher. Sources of data collected included: 1) observation field notes; 2) information from the open-ended, structured interviews with subjects; 3) information from the open-ended, structured interviews with principals; 4) information from informal discussions with faculty, students and others who could provide relevant data; and 5) artifacts such as lesson plans, teaching ideas, student tests and other documents pertinent to the study.

Each subject was visited three times beginning in January and concluding in May of 1988. The length of each on-site visit was approximately ten hours. Prior to the start of school the researcher established an understanding of the format for the day with each subject. The researcher observed at least one classroom and one mechanics laboratory instructional setting during each on-site visit. Comprehensive notes of teacher and student interactions were recorded during the instructional settings. Field notes described the facility, the setting, the classroom resources and the tools and equipment available for instruction. Structured interviews were conducted on the first and the third visit with each subject and each subject's principal. Each interview lasted at least one hour. Informal discussions with students, faculty and others who could provide relevant data were conducted as appropriate. A two to three hour discussion and summative interaction occurred at the conclusion of the school day and clarification of observations were recorded.

Instrumentation: Structured in-person interviews with both the subjects and the subjects' principal were used to collect a part of the data. Structured interviews were conducted during the first and last on-site visit. The instrument was designed in an open-ended format. Both subjects and principals were interviewed. The instrument utilized for the final on-site visit was developed during the evolving process of the data collection phase of the study. This allowed for a focus on emerging questions as a result of the first two on-site visits.

The first interview focused on subjects' behaviors, feelings and approaches to problems and issues that occurred from the first day of school to the date of the first interview. The second interview focused on subjects' behaviors, feelings and approaches from the date of the first on-site visit to the date of the final on-site visit.

Data Analysis: Data analysis was a concurrent activity which was conducted as data were collected throughout the study. A primary consideration in the analysis of the data was the use of triangulation. The multiple data sources and multiple data collection procedures utilized in this study allowed for the triangulation process. The data were reported as eight individual ethnographies.

Findings

The subjects in the study ranged in age from 22 to 36. All were completing the first year of teaching. Three of the participants had made career changes and began their teaching careers at ages 27, 34 and 36. Six of the subjects were graduates of the University of Idaho. Two received degrees from out-of-state institutions. The schools in which the subjects taught ranged from small, rural and isolated schools with a student population of approximately 100, grades 9 to 12; to large schools with populations of over 700, grades 10 to 12. All were single teacher programs. One of the subjects was not rehired for the ensuing year; a decision made by the local school administration. The other seven have continued at the same school for their second year of teaching. Five of the subjects were quite familiar with the communities in which they acquired their initial positions. One had student taught in the community, another had lived in the community for several years and his spouse was a teacher in the school, another grew up in a neighboring community and was familiar with the community and the other two subjects were natives of their respective communities having attended the public school where they now were teachers.

The problems and issues were many and varied but typical for first-year teachers. The most notable problems were: conditions of the physical facilities; classroom management and discipline problems; global organizational issues; managing the FFA component; a need for more supervision and help from the principal; curriculum scope, sequence and pace; and problems dealing with pedagogy. Initial behavior exhibited was generally that of being quiet and reserved - often afraid to ask for help, hesitant to act and low self-esteem. During the first semester the subjects reported a lack of

confidence and exhibited behavior characteristic of the beginning teacher survival stage. As the year progressed, subjects expressed more confidence because of the experience of the first semester. A subject reported:

At first I was scared to death and didn't know what I was doing or how to do it either. Second semester I was not scared to stand up in front of the class and teach like I was first semester. Experience proved to be a good teacher.

Initial feelings expressed by the subjects included: frustration, isolation, being afraid, disgust, anger and confusion. These emotions resulted from experience in dealing with the myriad of problems, which the participants incurred.

Personality was a big factor in how the teachers dealt with problems and issues. Approaches exhibited were very different probably due to the personalities involved. One subject reported:

I am a little shy and apprehensive about asking for help and trying things. It is a part of my personality.

Some hit the problems head-on and in a methodical fashion:

I try to hit the problems head-on. I try to take care of things quickly and not let things hang on. I don't beat around the bush.

Others ignored the problems hoping that they would go away:

I avoided problems while trying to figure out my approach and often I would wait too long which sometimes made more of a problem.

Some focused most of their energy on one problem and let other things go:

I was angry as I dealt with the facility. There was trash all over the place. During the summer I worked on it until I was sick of it. It took too much of my time. I should have spread out the use of my time.

Generally, the approaches to problems during the second semester were more positive as a result of the first semester experiences. Organizational problems were one of the biggest problems faced by the subjects. The organizational and time management-problems included everything from the organization of the facility, the curriculum and the lesson planning to dealing with classroom management and discipline problems. Additionally, planning for the various FFA events took time and organization. All subjects reported problems with organization and time management. Subjects reported the following comments:

My first semester experience can be described as unorganized and one day late.

There really wasn't any organization here. The facility was a junky mess and deciding where to start with the clean-up of the facility, reorganization of the facility and the total program was a real problem.

Time management was one area which gave me the most trouble first semester.

Subjects' teaching methods were limited and focused primarily on lecture. Subjects utilized classroom questioning, but the focus was convergent questioning and prompting and cueing students for a better or more correct answer was not evident. Clarity of lesson purpose and teaching to an objective were problems for the subjects.

Subjects appeared to be unsure as to what was expected from students in terms of behavior. Classroom control and management was often a problem. In one class, students were continually reminded to stop talking. In another subject's classroom on two occasions, there were several minutes at the end of the class period where students were essentially allowed to do what they wanted. They were encouraged to review their notes or prepare for their next class; but these periods at the end of class turned into noisy unproductive wasted time. Concerning the issue of discipline, six of the eight subjects indicated that they would have been much more strict from the start of school:

Discipline is still a problem I need help with. I need to know what to do in different situations. If I had it to do over, I would have been much more hard-nosed from the start.

All subjects reported that little or no additional help from the principal or school district was provided during the beginning year of teaching. All the subjects' principals reported that they tried to provide closer supervision during the beginning year. Six of the eight subjects would have preferred more supervision from their principal. A subject reported:

As much as I hate to say it, I would have liked to have had more in-class observation by the principal. I wanted to know how I stood.

A principal reported:

I think he would have liked more supervision-but he will grow out of it.

Conclusions

As a result of inexperience in dealing with problems and issues, the behavior exhibited by beginning agriculture teachers appeared to be a lack of self-confidence.

Approaches utilized by beginning agriculture teachers appeared to be varied due to individual personality traits. Beginning teachers generally used limited variety in classroom teaching techniques. Clearly defining daily teaching objectives and classroom expectations in terms of student classroom behavior appeared to be problems.

Feelings of beginning agriculture teachers often focused on confusion, frustration and isolation. Little additional help or supervisory assistance is provided by principals. Beginning teachers would have preferred more in-classroom supervision from their principal. Perceptions of principals relating to approaches, behaviors and feelings of beginning teachers were essentially dismissed as being typical for first-year teachers.

Organizational and management issues appeared to be monumental for beginning agriculture teachers. Physical facilities and the management of those facilities also appeared to be problems.

Recommendations

Teacher education in agriculture should identify personality traits during training and determine how to equip prospective teachers to more effectively cope with feelings and approaches in dealing with the common problems and issues they will face.

Programs should refocus and reaffirm the commitment to the teaching of organization and management skills, to having teachers clearly define daily teaching objectives, and expected student classroom behavior.

Teacher educators should continue to provide induction assistance to first and second-year beginning teachers.

As a result of this study, both subjects and principals indicated that they appreciated the time that was taken in reflective introspection during the interview phase of the study. Several of the principals believed that if they would take time to work individually with all of their staff in a divergent questioning, reflective and introspective manner that overall they would have a staff which would communicate better, a staff which was more aware of themselves – their strengths and weaknesses and principals who were more cognizant of individual staff needs. Additionally, it appeared that introspective reflection on the principals' part helped to define and clarify their own role in relation to the needs of beginning teachers. Questions emerged from this study which could lead to further research:

1. Would a staff development plan which utilized divergent questioning, and reflection introspection have a significant impact on: a) beginning teacher induction; b) the role clarification of the principal in relation to the needs of beginning teachers; and/or c) the role clarification of the principal in relation to the needs of the total teaching staff?

Little additional help is provided to beginning teachers of agriculture. The number of problems a beginning teacher has to face and the pressure to immediately perform like a veteran make it imperative that the teacher possess management and organizational skills. This problem is further exacerbated by the additional components in an agriculture program including: delivery of a diverse curriculum, several individual preparations, management of facilities, the FFA and community based advisory committees. One final question emerges as a result of the study:

2. What can be reasonably expected from a beginning secondary teacher of agriculture?

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