

Identification of Mentors for First Year Agricultural Education Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify mentors of agricultural education teachers during their first year of teaching. Specifically, this study sought to describe the personal characteristics of first year agricultural education teachers, identify mentors used by first year agricultural education teachers, and determine areas where mentors are most needed and valued.

The data collection instrument was a researcher-designed electronic survey. It had two parts with questions to gain demographic information, identify mentors of first year agricultural teachers, and determine areas where mentors were needed and valued. The population consisted of twenty-one first year agricultural education teachers in Oklahoma during the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 academic years.

Nineteen respondents (90.5%) were male. All respondents had a bachelor's degree, were certified to teach agricultural education, and had taught agricultural education for two or three years.

Results indicated that fellow agricultural education teachers provided mentorship to new agriculture teachers. Teacher educators and program specialists also played a vital role in the mentoring and professional development of beginning teachers. However, first year agricultural education teachers experienced many of the problems during their first year without assistance from a mentor.

It was recommended that experienced agricultural education teachers continue providing informal mentorship experiences with first year teachers. The relationship between the new teacher and his/her teacher educator and program specialist is important to the professional development of new teachers. This mentorship must continue if the profession is to maintain and increase the number of quality teachers. Additionally, first year teachers must be more proactive in asking for assistance when needed.

Introduction

“Given comparisons to fields such as medicine and law, which recognize the needs of new professionals more fully, some observers have dubbed education the profession that eats its young” (Halford, 1998). The process of becoming socialized into teaching is one of the most difficult stages in the professional development of teachers. Indeed, experiences during the first year are often pivotal in the eventual success or failure of the beginning teacher. Beginning teachers are usually expected to assume all responsibilities of teaching as if they were veteran teachers (Wildman, Magliaro, Niles & Niles, 1992). Additionally, unlike most other professions, where the job becomes more challenging over time, in teaching the most challenging situations are given to the new teacher (Glickman, 1990). It is no wonder “beginning teachers frequently report stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy” (Joyce & Clift, 1984, p. 6).

Aspy (1969) found survival was more important than competence for the beginning teacher. Ryan (1974) discovered a “curve of disenchantment” that followed the change from first year teachers’ initial warm and positive attitudes toward their students to a sharp decline after two months of classroom experience, followed by a slow and gradual rise in positive attitudes again. Rogers described this change process as “culture shock,” and identified stages a person encounters through the process. The stages include elation, anxiety, rejection, regression, reentry, acceptance, and affection. Varah, Thune, and Parker (1986) referred to teacher survival as “sink or swim.” Recently, others reinforced this concept of survival for new teachers and offered assistance in this area (DePaul, 2000; Nichols & Mudnt, 1996; Stedman & Stroot, 1998).

It is not enough to simply look at the immediate school environment to predict if a teacher will remain in the profession. According to Chapman (1984), the strongest predictors of the retention of the new teacher were the teacher’s initial commitment to the teaching profession and early work experiences in the profession. 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.

Several factors contribute to a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy, enhanced motivation, and commitment. Some include a supportive school climate, the presence of collegial values, shared decision-making, and a school culture that provides a sense of purpose, and a shared vision (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Schools must become learning communities for teachers to feel safe and to experiment with various strategies and talk about teaching and learning.

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. First year agricultural education teachers especially need a positive induction process as these teachers have additional responsibilities such as preparing for numerous classes, supervising students’ Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) programs, and advising the FFA. They also are expected to know how to complete state reports, proficiency award and degree applications, and grant proposals for external funding. 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).

Researchers have identified areas of responsibility and needs of first year agricultural education teachers. Hillison (1977) noted these responsibilities include: completing state department reports, planning lessons, and ordering materials. Birkenholz and Harbstreit (1987) identified additional needs such as developing skills in specialty courses, training agriculture/FFA contest teams, and assisting students with SAE records. Most recently, Washburn, King, Garton, and Harbstreit (2001) reported areas of professional development needed by beginning teachers of agriculture in Kansas. Areas included writing grant proposals for external funding, preparing award and degree applications, recruiting and retaining quality students, designing and modifying curriculum and course offerings, meeting changes in technology, developing SAE opportunities for students, building the image of agriculture programs, developing computer applications, and constructing agricultural mechanics projects.

The first three to five years of teaching are a period of transition from novice to established experienced teachers. Referred to as an induction period, it is a broad process of socializing beginning teachers 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. Through assistance, beginning teachers develop competence in knowledge, skills, and values. This assistance ranges from informal friendships to very formal and structured programs.

Various forms of induction programs exist in education today. Many states have formalized induction programs for the development of beginning teachers. One aspect of the induction process is the development of formal or informal mentoring relationships. Kram (1985) stated when a relationship provides both career and psychosocial functions “it best approximates the prototype of a mentor relationship” (p. 42).

Mentoring programs can be organized in three distinct ways: (1) formal, organization chooses mentor; (2) formal, mentee chooses mentor; or (3) informal. The first option involves the organization implementing a mentorship program and pairing mentors with mentees. The organization sponsors a mentorship program in the second approach, while allowing the mentee to choose a mentor to work with. Finally, the informal mentorship program involves the mentee choosing to work with a mentor without any input from the organization.

Purpose and Objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to identify mentors of first year agricultural education teachers. The specific objectives were:

1. Describe the personal characteristics of first year agricultural education teachers.
2. Identify mentors used by first year agricultural education teachers.

3. Determine areas where mentors are most needed or valued.

Procedures

The population (N=37) for this study consisted of first year agricultural education teachers in Oklahoma during the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 academic school years. A state-mandated program for first year agricultural education teachers, which is enforced by the Oklahoma state department of education, was used as the population frame. Data were collected from a census of the population.

An instrument was developed by the researchers to address the stated research objectives. A review of the literature was done to obtain information regarding problems all teachers have during their first year of teaching. When examining problems specific to agricultural education teachers, areas and topics were identified for inclusion in the instrument. The instrument consisted of five areas: classroom instruction, program management, Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE), and FFA advisement. Within each area, problems identified through the literature were presented and the agricultural education teacher was asked to provide the name and position of a mentor who provided assistance for specific problems they experienced during their first year of teaching agriculture.

Part I of the instrument was comprised of open-ended questions seeking demographic information. Part II of the instrument focused on the five areas of agricultural education. Respondents were asked to write the name and position title of each mentor next to the problem identified for each area.

As suggested by Tuckman (1978), a panel of experts reviewed the instrument for content and face validity. The selection of the panel of experts was based on their knowledge of agriculture, agricultural education, and research methods. A pilot test was conducted to establish reliability. The instrument was pilot tested by surveying agricultural education teachers who began their teaching career during the 1998-1999 academic school year. Members of the pilot group completed the 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.

Data were collected for this study using an electronic method as outlined by the Dillman Tailored Design Method (2000). Initially, all agricultural education teachers in the population were contacted by telephone. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and described the process of completing the instrument. The participants were given an option of completing an e-mail or FAX version of the instrument. Precautions were taken to ensure that each first year agricultural education teacher completed the instrument only once.

After the initial contact was made, the researcher either sent a FAX or e-mailed the instrument to the participant. Three rounds of follow-ups were conducted for those subjects who had not responded. Those who had not replied were sent a second e-mail or FAX message. A

second phone call was placed to remind non-respondents to complete the questionnaire. A final follow-up phone call was placed to non-respondents four weeks after the initial phone call.

A total of 51.6% (n=21) of the population completed the questionnaire. All responses were usable for data analysis. FAX and e-mail responses were compared to control for error in data collection between the two instrument formats. No differences were found between the responses comparing the two data collection formats. Non-respondents were contacted a final time. Non-response error was examined by comparing selected items between respondents and non-respondents. No differences were detected.

For data analysis and interpretation purposes, results generated for mentors of first year agricultural education teachers were identified and totaled. This descriptive analysis used frequencies and percentages to identify mentors for each problem area developed through the literature.

Findings

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 21 first year agricultural education teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 19 (90.5%) were male. All respondents (100%) had an educational level of a bachelor's degree and no respondents had advanced degrees. All 21 (100%) teachers were certified to teach agricultural education and had taught agricultural education in public schools for two or three years.

Mentors Identified, Needed and Valued

Four sections of responsibility for agricultural education teachers were studied. These sections were: classroom instruction, Supervised Agricultural Experience, program management, and FFA advisement. Specific problem areas or challenges within each section were listed. Respondents were asked to identify mentors they sought assistance from for each problem area/challenge related to each section of the agricultural education program.

Classroom Instruction.

Specific problems addressed for classroom instruction were: using classroom discipline, creating student motivation, dealing with students' individual differences, assessing students' work, interacting with parents, organizing work, obtaining instructional materials, preparing for classes and activities, dealing with course loads, and getting along with colleagues.

Table 1 displays the data associated with first year agricultural education teachers who identified their mentors in the area of classroom instruction. Other agricultural education teachers were identified most often in the areas of parental interaction, student assessment, and preparation time. The high school principal also mentored first year agricultural education teachers in areas of enforcing classroom discipline, working with colleagues, and student

assessment. However, agricultural education teachers indicated no one provided mentorship in the areas of student motivation, student differences, obtaining instructional materials, dealing with a heavy course load, and organizing work. In these areas the respondents said they learned it on their own.

Table 1
Mentors of First Year Agricultural Education Teachers in the Area of Classroom Instruction

AREAS	N	%	AREAS	n	%
Classroom			Obtaining		
Discipline			Materials		
1. HS Principal	6	28.6	1. No one	6	28.6
2. No one	4	19.1	2. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3
3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3	3. Ag Ed Teachers	3	14.3
Student Motivation			Students' Problems		
1. No one	5	23.8	1. HS Counselor	5	23.8
2. Ag Ed Teachers	4	19.1	2. No one	5	23.8
3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3	3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	2	9.5
Student Differences			Preparation Time		
1. No one	5	23.8	1. Ag Ed Teachers	5	23.8
2. Special Ed Teacher	4	19.1	2. No one	5	23.8
3. Teachers in District	3	14.3	3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3
Student Assessment			Heavy Course Load		
1. Ag Ed Teachers	6	28.6	1. No one	7	33.3
2. Principal	4	19.1	2. Ag Ed Teachers	4	19.1
3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3	3. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3
Parental Interaction			Colleagues		
1. Ag Ed Teachers	6	28.6	1. HS Principal	5	23.8
2. Mentor Teacher-Ag	4	19.1	2. No one	3	14.3
3. Cooperating Teacher	2	9.5	3. Teachers in District	3	14.3
Organization of work					
1. No one	7	33.3			
2. Mentor Teacher-Ag	3	14.3			
3. Ag Ed Teachers	3	14.3			

Supervised Experience Program.

Specific problem areas/challenges addressed in the SAE section were: selecting projects, developing SAE opportunities for students, supervising projects, and completing livestock show procedures. As can be seen in Table 2, those persons who mentored first year agricultural

education teachers in the area of SAE's were other agricultural education teachers in the profession. Overwhelmingly, teachers identified other agricultural education teachers in each area. However, the second most frequent response in all categories was that no one assisted the first year teacher with problems they encountered within the SAE component.

Table 2

Mentors of First Year Agricultural Education Teachers in the Area of Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs

AREAS	N	%
Developing SAE Opportunities for Students		
1. <i>Ag Education Teachers</i>	8	38.1
2. <i>No one</i>	6	28.6
3. <i>Teacher Educators</i>	2	9.5
Selection of Projects		
1. <i>Ag Education Teachers</i>	6	28.6
2. <i>No one</i>	5	23.8
3. <i>Parents of students</i>	4	19.1
Supervision of Projects		
1. <i>Ag Education Teachers</i>	9	42.87
2. <i>No one</i>	5	23.8
3. <i>Mentor Teacher-Ag Education</i>	2	9.5
Livestock Show Procedures		
1. <i>Ag Education Teachers</i>	10	47.6
2. <i>No one</i>	4	19.1
3. <i>Mentor Teacher-Ag Education</i>	2	9.5

FFA.

Specific problems/challenges related to responsibilities associated with the FFA organization were examined. Areas studied included: preparing proficiency awards and degree applications, planning activities of the local chapter, officer elections, fundraising issues, and planning trips and conferences.

Table 3 displays data related to mentorship of first year teachers in the area of leadership and the responsibilities with advisement of the FFA. More than one-third of the teachers identified a neighboring agricultural education teacher as a mentor in regard to completing state degrees and applications (43%), planning chapter program of activities (38%), developing fundraisers (38%), and planning trips and conferences (38%). The second most frequent response given by first year agricultural education teachers was that no one provided mentorship for that area. Program Specialists from the agricultural division of the state department were mentors for new teachers in their preparation of awards and degrees (23.8%) and planning trips and conferences (10%). Those agricultural education teachers who also were teaching partners

in the same program were helpful in mentoring first year agricultural education teachers with planning chapter activities (10%) and fundraisers (10%).

Table 3

Mentors of First Year Agricultural Education Teachers in the Area of FFA

AREAS	N	%
Preparing Proficiency Awards and Degree Applications		
<i>1. Ag Education Teachers</i>	9	42.8
<i>2. No one</i>	5	23.8
<i>2. Program Specialists</i>	5	23.8
Planning Chapter Activities		
<i>1. Ag Education Teachers</i>	8	38.1
<i>2. No one</i>	5	23.8
<i>3. Mentor Teacher-Ag Education</i>	2	9.5
Fundraisers		
<i>1. Ag Education Teachers</i>	8	38.1
<i>2. No one</i>	5	23.8
<i>3. Mentor Teacher-Ag Education</i>	2	9.5
Trips and Conferences		
<i>1. Ag Education Teachers</i>	10	38.1
<i>2. No one</i>	4	23.8
<i>3. Program Specialist</i>	2	9.5

Program Management.

Areas investigated relating to program management included: recruiting and retaining quality students, offering a variety of courses to attract students, modifying curriculum to meet changes in technology, building the image of an agriculture program and courses, using computer applications in agriculture, and constructing agricultural mechanics projects.

First year agricultural education teachers stated that no one provided assistance in more than half of the areas related to program management as shown in Table 4. Problems included recruiting and retaining quality students (38%), offering a variety of courses (33%), building the image of agriculture programs and courses (19%), and modifying the curriculum to meet the changes in technology (29%).

In the other two areas, no mentor was identified as the second most frequent response. Other agricultural education teachers in the profession were identified as the greatest mentor in the areas of building the image of agriculture programs and courses (19%) and constructing agricultural mechanics project (53%). Program specialists were identified as the mentor providing assistance in the area of computer applications (29%). First year agricultural education teachers also identified program specialists as a mentor in the areas of recruiting and retaining quality students, building the program, and modifying curriculum.

Table 4
Mentors of First Year Agricultural Education Teachers in the Area of Program Management

AREAS	N	%
Recruiting and Retaining Quality Students		
1. <i>No one</i>	8	38.1
2. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	4	19.1
3. <i>Program Specialists</i>	3	14.3
Offering a Variety of Courses to Attract Students		
1. <i>No one</i>	7	33.3
2. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	5	23.8
3. <i>High School Principal</i>	3	14.3
Modifying the Curriculum to Meet Changes in Technology		
1. <i>No one</i>	7	33.3
2. <i>Program Specialists</i>	5	23.8
3. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	3	14.3
Building the Image of Agriculture Programs and Courses		
1. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	4	19.1
2. <i>No one</i>	4	19.1
3. <i>Program Specialists</i>	3	14.3
Computer Applications		
1. <i>Program Specialists</i>	6	28.6
2. <i>No one</i>	5	23.8
3. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	3	14.3
Agricultural Mechanics Project Construction		
1. <i>Agricultural Education Teachers</i>	11	53.4
2. <i>No one</i>	6	28.6
3. <i>Mentor Teacher-Agricultural Education</i>	2	9.5

Conclusions

The following conclusions were formulated based on the results of this study.

1. First year agricultural education teachers in Oklahoma are male, hold a bachelor's degree, and possess certification in agricultural education.
2. Fellow agricultural education teachers provide the most frequent mentorship to new teachers in agriculture.
3. First year agricultural education teachers experience many problems their first year and receive no assistance from a mentor.
4. Teacher educators and program specialists play a vital role in the mentoring and professional development of beginning teachers.

5. Other school personnel such as the high school principal, guidance counselor, and the special education teacher provide mentorship to the first year agricultural education teacher in specialty areas such as dealing with classroom discipline, student's personal problems, and student's differences.
6. Mentor teachers in multiple agricultural education departments provide mentorship to the first year agricultural education teacher.

Recommendations

Collaboration between the State Department of Education and university teacher education programs should be encouraged to develop a more comprehensive mentoring program specific to beginning agricultural education teachers. These programs should focus on issues related to agricultural education and foster the development of mentor/protégé relationships with experienced agricultural education teachers. Specific issues of this program could include building an agricultural education program, recruiting and retaining members, developing award applications, and maybe the most important aspect ... surviving the first year as an agricultural education teacher.

Experienced agricultural education teachers should be alerted to the hiring of inexperienced teachers in their area and should be prepared to provide informal mentorship for those new teachers. In addition, they should be encouraged to visit and/or call new agricultural education teachers, introduce them at events, and welcome new agricultural educators to the profession.

Teachers who were employed in a school district with multiple agricultural education teachers identified their teaching partners as providing mentorship with the many problems they encountered. Therefore, experienced agricultural education teachers should be paired with first year teachers in agricultural education to formalize the mentorship experience. Factors such as the location of the school district, age, gender, and interests of the agricultural education teachers should be taken into account when assigning a mentor with a beginning teacher.

Many first year agricultural education teachers experience problems their first year and receive no assistance from a mentor. Therefore, first year teachers must be more proactive in asking for assistance when needed. These teachers should seek experienced agricultural education teachers and develop a relationship with them.

Future research should be conducted to further assess the mentorship experiences of first year agricultural education teachers. Those teachers who attained certification through alternative processes should be examined and compared to the mentoring experiences of traditionally certified teachers. Also, reasons why first year agricultural teachers do not ask for assistance or do not have specific mentors should be examined in more depth. Experienced agricultural education teachers who were identified as mentors could provide valuable information regarding the mentoring of first year teachers in agricultural education.

Discussion/Implications

The shortage of teachers is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it is prevalent within numerous states across the nation. The agricultural education profession is no exception. Quality teachers are needed to replace the large turnover caused by retirements and agricultural education teachers leaving the profession early in their career. Indeed, the first three to five years of teaching are crucial in the development of competent and dedicated teachers. Many new teachers never recover from the initial experience of teaching agriculture, consequently they leave the profession.

Many states provide an induction program for new teachers. Is this program meeting the critical needs of first year agricultural education teachers? Should more be done to assist those new teachers, particularly those in agricultural education? What is the cause for first year agricultural education teachers not to seek additional help or mentorship? Providing valuable mentorship experiences to the beginning agricultural education teacher fosters learning through others and thus creates professional development opportunities on an individual basis and within the profession as a whole.

As classroom teachers become more accountable for student learning, teacher educators, program specialists in state departments of education, administrators, and other teachers within the agricultural education profession and each school district must become more accountable. Through mentorship, new agricultural education teachers will become more prepared to meet the challenges in the classroom and the demand for accountability with student learning.

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There is merit for the profession to know which individuals provide for the support and assistance needs of beginning teachers as they struggle to successfully transition into the profession. The authors are applauded for their efforts to determine who is providing mentoring (support and assistance) to beginning teachers in Oklahoma.

In addition to the comments provided for the other paper, I have additional thoughts, questions, and comments about this paper that I hope can lead to many useful outcomes. First, be sure you are using findings of contemporary studies to create your conceptual framework. There have been a large number of published articles about the needs of beginning teachers in recent years. Secondly, is your study based upon the fact that beginning teachers need support and assistance with every topic presented to them on your questionnaire? Did you allow for them to clearly state they did not need mentoring for some topics? Third, provide greater preciseness to the statements in your findings. For example in the first section, were your respondents still first year teachers when they completed the questionnaire, or had they completed two to three years of teaching? With regard to the information presented in Table 1, explain why a maximum of only 14 respondents ever responded to any one category. Fourth, use your conclusions to inform the research conducted to date. It is important to show how your research supports, refutes, and/or extends the literature already reported about your topic. And finally, carefully use the objectives of your study to confine your recommendations and discussions. Refrain from making statements that are beyond the findings of your study.

Reflect upon a couple of the following questions related to mentors and mentoring.

Should all experienced teachers be mentors of beginning teachers?

What dictates if mentoring has been conducted in an effective manner?

Given what you have learned from this study, propose a corresponding recommendation for principals that serve as mentors of beginning agricultural education teachers.

I encourage to continue your interest and research activity in this topic!