

A LOOK AT WORK WITH BEGINNING TEACHERS

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If my readings, research, conversations, travels, and thoughts about my work with beginning teachers has meant anything it is this: We as teacher educators are at great odds in working with prospective teachers of vocational agriculture. I say this fully aware that our program reaches far beyond the depths of that attained by many other teacher education programs with which I am acquainted. The stresses of relating college education to field performance has unfolded at least two major problems.

Teacher Perceptions Needed

First, our graduates leave college with a rather vague idea of what is important in teaching vocational agriculture. Our recent attempts to improve this situation are encouraging. Somehow we must go further to quiet our own beliefs long enough to allow the student the opportunity to describe his own perception of vocational agriculture to himself and to us. Without this understanding, it is doubtful that our efforts will produce the change needed in the teaching profession today.

We need a measure of each student's perception regarding what he feels constitutes an effective program in vocational education, especially in agriculture. We need such information from the day a student enters our curriculum until the day he leaves. Surely this cannot be accomplished daily, but some measure is needed following each education course, especially in and around the time of student teaching. If we do not understand what our students "see" in vocational agriculture by certification time we will have even less opportunity to develop such insights thereafter.

Secondly, we have a problem that causes a reorganization of beginning teachers perceptions very soon after they become "employed" teachers of vocational agriculture. Such a statement is based upon the assumption that the emphasis given certain areas in our training program is perceived by the agricultural education graduates at the moment of employment. I realize the danger of such an assumption in view of our status regarding problem one above. It is our hope that the image the graduate has of teaching vocational agriculture includes the following: teaching young and adult farmers, developing effective teaching materials, engaging in methods of community study as a prerequisite to program planning, improving instructional programs for all groups and developing sound approaches to programs in supervised practice, farm mechanics and Future Farmers of America all within the framework of the newer concepts of vocational education. At best such an expectation can only be classified as a perception of the teacher educator.

Blocks to Teacher Attainment

Visits with teachers in the field indicate that if our students leave college with such an image its influence was short-lived. That such is happening is not the issue; rather the issue is one of determining ways and means of altering this situation. Our ability to meet the challenge hinges largely upon learning the following: 1/ (1) What do our graduates perceive as important in teaching

1/ Based upon a discussion of this topic in Krech, David and Richard S. Crutchfield, Theory and Problems of Social Psychology, New York, McGraw Hill, 1948, pp. 110-146.

vocational agriculture? What are their goals? (2) What blocks the attainment of goals, as seen by beginning teachers?

We know there are many blockages, such as; heavy in-school teaching hours, being the minor in a multiple teacher department, being an equal or a leader in multiple teacher departments, a school philosophy not conducive to education for all ages, inadequate facilities, being everything to everybody, poor farming situations, and so forth. But we do not know which one or what combination of these blocks is resulting in the greatest reorganization of perceptions by a beginning teacher about teaching vocational agriculture. Nor can we relate these blocks to certain teachers and situations as a means of offering meaningful assistance.

Psychology has found that acute frustration can most easily be reduced through cognitive reorganization. Such a reorganization may, and in fact does change one's perception about teaching vocational agriculture. Sociology has revealed similar findings.

If and when cognitive reorganization begins, what series of organizations does the process involve? The relationship of one goal block to another or even to a series of blocks. Which ones are minor or major when found alone? Which are minor or major when in a series of goal blocks? Which blocks were dominant in a particular teacher's perceptual field at the moment change occurred in his concept of vocational agriculture? How guidance, instruction, information and education can arrange and relate new relationships to teachers who are nearing the point of perceptual reorganization out of line with sound educational philosophy?

Developing Meaningful Goals

What perceptual reorganizations may we claim not be a part of tension-reduction but rather associated with other principles of organization? An understanding of this point would acquaint you and me with our effectiveness in the classroom and office. Some of our best-liked methods may have little lasting effect. For example, the processes of retention and forgetting are a matter of concern in understanding this question. In what ways are these processes strengthened or weakened through the use of visuals, committees, term papers, tests, verbal materials, etc? In what ways does our individual or collective efforts affect the factors of (1) leveling: Omitting many details about a program activity. (2) sharpening: Emphasizing certain features while minimizing certain others about a program activity, and (3) assimilation: Relating the detail(s) emphasized to the prevailing conditions at hand?

What is the ease and rate of change in perceptual reorganization of beginning teachers about teaching vocational agriculture? Of course it is our hope that the beginning teacher will eventually reorganize his perceptions as a teacher of vocational agriculture much in keeping with our educational goals. We must, however, remember that these are goals which we have set for the prospective teacher and they represent goals which he must reorganize as a teacher once he begins teaching. With this in mind our goal of providing assistance to beginning teachers must consider ways and means of really helping him reorganize his cognitive structure

into a meaningful role in a local situation. To be in a position to render this service we must know the difference between simple and isolated cognitive structures. Once this information is known we may then seek ways and means of assisting the beginning teacher in his perceptual reorganization process. Research at this moment indicates that "simple and isolated structures can best be amended to reorganization by indirect attack." In addition the latter is more available for new creative recombinations.

The beginning teacher has a long way to go to reach the goals we have established for him. We, also, have a long way to go before we will know our best role in assisting him to attain meaningful concepts and goals in relation to his job as a teacher. There is much that we can learn about each other. As we learn, he too will learn more effective ways of solving the problems of a beginning teacher.