Early Field Observations: An in-depth approach of career exploration

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Introduction

"Agricultural teacher education programs should expose students to and make them aware of the vast array of opportunities and responsibilities related to teaching agricultural education" (Baker, Culbertson, Robinson, & Ramsey, 2017, p. 264). Student requirements vary from program to program; however, most agricultural education teacher preparation programs require early field experiences (EFE) for students throughout the program (Retallick & Miller 2007). According to the Oklahoma State University Professional Education Student Handbook, prior to clinical practice, pre-service teachers at Oklahoma State are required to complete 60 hours of diverse field experiences.

Aiken and Day (1999) recommend the need for alternate EFE practices and identify the use of EFEs to prepare teachers, making them beneficial in exposing students to the profession of teaching. Aiken and Day (1999) also suggest early field experiences be monitored for knowledge acquisition, and specific techniques be observed to ensure the pre-service teacher's learning objectives parallel those of the teacher preparation institution. Various forms of EFE are integrated into multiple pre-service agricultural education classes at Oklahoma State University and includes four hours of early field observation (EFO) to be completed in the Foundations and Philosophy of Agricultural Education course.

The Early Field Observation Packet is designed to provide structure and guidance to the observation experience, integrating key topics taught in the class, including the characteristics of effective teachers, learning environments, and interactions with learners. Baker et al., (2017) implemented a photovoice early field observation experience, allowing students to capture what they observed in a single picture and reflect upon the observation later with the help of the instructor. The Early Field Observation Packet implemented in this innovation as a succession to the photovoice experience.

How it works/methodology/program phases/steps

Pre-service teachers in the Foundations and Philosophy of Agricultural Education course were guided through their EFO experience with a five-part observation packet. Students were assigned the Early Field Observation assignment during the 3rd week of the class. Using the scripted worksheets, students were instructed to observe, collect artifacts, and reflect upon key elements in the school-based agricultural education (SBAE) program where they conduct an on-site visit.

Part 1 of the packet required students to observe various learning environments for the SBAE program, including classrooms, the agricultural mechanics laboratory, and other learning laboratories (e.g. greenhouse, school farm, etc.). Students were instructed to focus on the following aspects of the learning environment: Is it clean and orderly? Is it arranged in a way to enhance learning? Is there ample space for the number of students in the class? Is the technology up to date? Is equipment in good working condition? Does the environment appear to be safe to use? Students are also asked to consider what they would do differently if the facility were theirs to manage. Students were also required to include photos of the learning environments.

In Part 2, students observed a teacher and rated the teacher based on the top five traits of effective teachers described by Rosenshine and Furst (1971).

In Part 3, students observed the teacher's classroom management. Students responded to a series of questions based on the teacher's use of classroom management strategies, including setting expectations, behavior management, positive reinforcement and addressing negative

behaviors. Finally, students were asked if they would make changes to the approach of classroom and behavior management they observed.

In Part 4, the pre-service teachers were charged to look at the topic of instructional planning. To guide their observation, they addressed whether the teacher used routines, provided an interest approach, if visual aides were used, and if they were effective. Students also asked to identify if and how learning was assessed.

In Part 5, pre-service teachers observed student engagement. They assessed the level of interest generated and maintained by the teacher throughout the class period and identified approaches and techniques used to increase or decrease student interest. Part 5 also addressed frequency of questions asked during the lesson. Pre-service teachers tallied the number of questions asked and identified students who answered those questions. They also tracked the cognitive level of questions asked using the Bloom's Taxonomy scale.

After the due date, the instructional team for the class evaluated students' packets using a rubric designed for the assignment. Digital copies were kept on file for later use. One of the last lecture sessions for the course was dedicated to discussing the observation experience. Students were able to compare and contrast their observations and reflections to those of their peers.

Results to date/implications

To date, this EFO packet has been used twice in the Foundations class. Review of completed packets indicates this guided approach is serving its purpose. Course instructors concluded students were able to make strong connections between concepts taught in the class with their field observations. Making these connections during the EFO experience strengthens the bridge between concepts and applications, further setting the stage for courses and experiences to follow in their preparation to become school-based agricultural education teachers.

Future plans/advice to others

Future plans are to continue using this tool within the Foundations class and to analyze information contained in the reports. The packets are rich in quantitative and qualitative data that can provide insight to what pre-service students observe, and how they process those observations. Data from the observation forms provide information about SBAE programs and teachers that might help identify sites and mentors for other pre-service teacher experiences.

We advise others to implement a similar model into teacher preparation programs to track and measure EFOs of future agricultural educators. Future research should be conducted investigating the impact of the EFO on the teacher aspirants, considering the facilities observed, the effectiveness of the teacher, and the overall impact on student learning.

Costs/resources needed

There are no costs for the department associated with this project. Packets are distributed digitally via the course website and students submit their work by posting the completed document using the online submission tool. The only additional costs required of students is transportation to the school where they conduct the observation.

References

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