FIELD PROBLEMS OF WISCONSIN RURAL TEACHERS

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

The collection and compilation of the teacher problems of this report was undertaken for the purpose of providing a partial content for teacher training curricula and as an agency in the supervision of teachers in service.

There are many avenues of approach to a curriculum for teacher-training institutions, such as an analysis of past and present school-room practices, a survey of past and present professional literature, a study of the history of teacher-training, a study of the philosophy and objectives of education, studies in the psychology of learning, the analysis of teacher activities, and analysis of the actual problems met by teachers in service. The results of all of these and other possible studies are needed to guide curriculum makers in organizing the courses of study for various types of teacher-training institutions. No one type of study will furnish reliable data for formulation of a teacher-training curriculum. Each source should contribute the most significant data and finally the material from all studies should be unified for the general program of studies in teacher-training institutions.

It seems to be a valid assumption that the function of a teacher-training institution is to prepare teachers to meet adequately and intelligently the problems and situations of actual teaching experience. If this assumption is valid, we may go forward hoping that the field problems here presented will suggest types of professional activities which student teachers should perform during the period of training.

Plan of Investigation

In the beginning of this study the rural school teachers of Wisconsin were invited to cooperate by listing outstanding problems which they encountered in their actual teaching activities. They were asked to do this during a period of three weeks early in the fall, three weeks near the middle of the year, and for three weeks near the close of school in the spring. By this time distribution, a preponderance of problems peculiar to a given season was avoided and those typical of a full year of teaching experience were secured. Teachers were instructed to list the two or three problems each week which had caused them the most thought and upon which they would have liked to have secured supervisory assistance.
The tabulation of the material was made possible by the painstaking work of W. F. Price, now Principal of the County Rural Normal School at Richland Center, Margaret Robinson, Elementary Supervisor, Janesville, and Mable Jorstad, Instructor in Rural Education, Wisconsin State Teachers College, River Falls. The problems were studied and classified by them according to standards set up at the beginning of the study. The three studies are at this time thrown into one group. The organization used in the earlier compilations has been maintained with only minor changes.

Classification of Problems

It may be noted that the problems are classified according to the general underlying principles involved rather than according to their special application to a teaching situation. For instance, problems of motivation of specific subjects are classified under motivation in general rather than under the teaching of phonics, geography, or arithmetic. Problems arising from individual differences in ability or experience within the class group are listed as individual differences among pupils rather than as problems of a specified subject. The principles of motivation in history cannot be widely different from the principles of motivation in science. The recognition of and provision for individual differences in geography do not present problems distinct from those in arithmetic. The problems encountered in selecting, adapting, and organizing materials in one subject become clear to a teacher who has solved the question of selecting, adapting, and organizing materials in another subject. For these reasons, such situations were classified as problems of general rather than specific technique.

The wording of the question as furnished by the teacher has been retained as closely as possible. This has required a large number of groups which many investigators would have united. This may have been desirable but there is significance to the teacher's statement of her problems which would be lost if fewer groupings were made. Further, certain types of study are made possible through this organization. Some may wish to study the list for the purpose of organizing material for a course in general technique; others to find the duplication of problems in various courses in a training institution; and still others to find all the types of problems which pertain to the teaching of a particular subject. Many other lines of analysis are possible and anticipated.

Interrelation of Problems

It is obvious that these problems are interrelated in a seemingly inextricable array. Problems arising from a lack of books and materials are closely connected with those of planning the best use of available materials, with those of selection and organization of subject matter, and with problems of class management and discipline. The classification of such questions becomes largely a matter of judgment. The wording of the problem has in the main determined its classification, but a few changes were made as further study revealed the implication of the teacher's statement.
Reading and Study Problems

Many of the questions relating to the development of good study habits have been classified with those dealing with the development of various reading habits and skills. These are the fundamental study habits which may be applied to the study of any subject. Since the reading skill must be developed before it may be applied to the study of other subjects the problems were assigned to reading rather than to the special subject. However, teachers should be prepared to develop ability to apply these fundamental skills to various types of materials and purposes. It is not sufficient to equip prospective teachers with modern plans and the latest techniques of teaching reading. They need the knowledge and insight necessary to transfer these skills to the reading or study of historical, scientific, or other materials.

Equipment Problems

A large number of the problems arise from meager school equipment. Can we calmly face that situation and say that the school board and community must assume the responsibility for this difficulty? Should we expect lay people to know the needs of the school and to supply these needs without suggestions from the teachers of the school? This can hardly be expected. Should training institutions surround student teachers with ideal school equipment hoping that the students will feel the lack of such equipment if placed in schools inadequately supplied, and will then put forth an effort to secure the desired materials? Should the training school provide less material and devote more effort to training students to adapt, as well as possible, their teaching procedures to such equipment as is available? It would seem best to familiarize students with good equipment and to lead them to recognize its place in the educative program. Students should become acquainted with the best ways of educating school boards and communities to the value of first-class equipment. They should know tactful methods of asking for supplies. They should know relative values of various types of teaching aids and first requests should be for materials which will contribute toward large values.

Implications for Teacher-Training

While many of the problems listed may seem trivial and unimportant yet they are, apparently, real problems to the young and inexperienced teacher and for that reason should receive attention from the institutions training young people for positions in which they may be confronted with just such difficult situations. Some of the questions are too general, vague, and indefinite to be effective guides in supplying supervisory help. These disclose the lack of a keenly thoughtful attitude on the part of the teacher. Such questions as, "How to maintain order" or, "How to teach reading" are indications of the habits of thinking acquired by these teachers. Is this type of thinking the goal of our educational program?

This great number and extensive variety of problems present more or less significant implications for teacher-training. The majority of
the questions call for immediate concrete help. Many possible fail-
ures may be converted to future successes if such concrete help
is provided. However, training institutions and supervisors should,
by no means, restrict their efforts to guidance on this level. Young
teachers need to have wider interests, broader vision, and deeper in-
sight into the large general aims, purposes and outcomes of education.

What implications have such questions for teacher-training? First,
it appears that many of the student activities have been concerned
with device level tricks. There is evidence that these young people
have acquired the habit of asking for the concrete device which
may be used in a particular situation. The underlying principle in-
volved in the case at hand is not the avenue along which the teacher
searches for a solution. Second, teachers have not acquired the habit
of analyzing the problem-situation into its elements. The question,
“How shall I teach reading” discloses the fact that the teacher does
not think in terms of the specific habits, skills, and abilities involved
in the reading process. Nor is a diagnostic attitude apparent. The
question is not Why is this child failing? Is failure due to one or
more of very specific conditions? Surely effort should be made to
sensitize teachers to the significance of the problems which they face.
How much of the short training period may deal with underlying
principles of education and what time should be devoted to concrete
devices and procedures are other questions to be answered through
further study.

The question of the best procedure for training prospective teach-
ers to meet actual teaching situations in the future is a crucial one.
Should general principles and procedures be stressed in a course in
general technique or should the principles of motivation, selection and
organization of materials, establishing right habits of work and con-
duct be made a part of special methods courses? Is there unnee-
sary duplication in the latter plan? Is the transfer from a general
to a particular situation beyond the ability of young students? The
answers to such questions should be valuable guides in the reorganiza-
tion of teacher-training activities.

Implications for Supervision

The problems herein listed are equally useful to the supervisors
of teachers in service. Too frequently supervisors are known to offer
the teacher the help she thinks the teacher needs. Too infrequently
are teachers given an opportunity to ask for the help they most
desire. If written records are kept of supervisory suggestions it
would be interesting to check over and classify the suggestions of-
fered. A comparison might then be made to determine how frequently
the supervisor had helped in solving the problem which the teacher
recognized as a major difficulty. If teachers were encouraged to note
their questions in anticipation of a conference with the supervisor,
the conference might be more direct, definite, and specifically helpful.
Too, if supervisors would carry these problems back to the individual
training institution in which the teacher has been trained, further im-
provement of teacher-training could be effected.