PRACTICING AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' CONCERNS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE PROFESSION

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Changing agricultural education programs to meet the needs of student clientele has been a major focus of the profession in recent years. Program change was a primary emphasis in the report Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education, (1988) where it was noted that "the focus of agricultural education must change" (p. 2). In this report it was advocated that if agricultural education is going to serve all students the mission should be broadened to include agricultural literacy. Further, it was advocated that major changes are needed in programs of agricultural education to accomplish this task.

Prominent changes in agricultural education programs have occurred because of funding initiatives. Still other programmatic changes have occurred because of expressed federal concerns, state mandates, and research findings. Berry and Ginsberg (1990) related that educational policy makers now believe that "lasting improvements in teaching will occur only if educational decision making is decentralized and teachers are empowered to use their best professional judgment" (p. 617-618). However, as noted by Hillison and Burke, (1988), the views of practicing teachers are seldom sought to aid in making major decisions which affect programmatic change. It is recognized by the profession that the teacher is the key to a strong viable program of agricultural education.

Since practicing teachers are major implementers of program change, their concerns should be of high priority in determining direction for agricultural education programs. Lack of such consideration for teachers may be affecting their attitudes toward programs and longevity in the profession. Miller (1978) indicated that low teacher morale may be a contributing factor to high teacher turnover in Virginia. This finding may also be true in other states. As noted by Camp and Echeverria (1989) and Craig (1984) spot shortages of agricultural teachers continue to exist in certain states throughout the country. Miller (1977) concluded that teacher morale may be an important variable contributing to successful teaching. Kittrell (1978) found that the job settings of agricultural teachers were related to teacher morale. While Miller (1977) noted that a majority of Virginia first year teachers did not possess the best working relationship with their principals as they might have.

The experiences of industry may be helpful to education in addressing the professional concerns of teachers. Migler, Wardlow, Simon, and Hutter, (1989) noted that industry spends considerable resources to ascertain the concerns, beliefs, attitudes and needs of customers. Migler et al. (1989) further indicated that business believes the risks are simply too great to assume they know the market needs of customers.

Hence, this study was designed to determine professional concerns of practicing teachers of agriculture, as a program improvement endeavor, and to ascertain their implications for agricultural education in Virginia.

Purposes and Objectives

The major purpose of this study was to determine the concerns of teachers of agriculture in the Commonwealth of Virginia about agricultural education. Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Ascertain the local and state level programmatic concerns of Virginia teachers of agricultural education.
2. Determine teacher concerns relating to rewarding experiences encountered in the teaching career.
3. Determine teacher concerns relating to frustrating experiences encountered in the teaching career.
4. Describe what teachers believe could be done by local school divisions, state supervisory staff members, and by teacher educators to make their teaching experiences more pleasant.

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Procedures

The current mission of Agricultural Education in Virginia (Mission, 1989) states, "By June 30, 1991, document the major job concerns of agriculture teachers and conduct workshops to address them" (p. 19). The researchers determined that the best way to accomplish the above objective was to conduct a mail survey of a representative sample of agricultural education teachers in the state. With a population of 315 teachers, a systematic sample of 105 was randomly selected which permitted an alpha level of .05 (Hinkle, Oliver, & Hinkle, 1985).

An instrument was developed by the researchers to collect needed demographic data and concern statements of subjects in the sample. It was developed with the assistance of peer teacher educators and the 10 members of the Virginia Agricultural Education Teacher Advisory Council. The instrument was field tested with 7 practicing teachers at the state's Eastern Area meeting in the fall of 1989. The instrument was refined at each step in the development process.

On November 6th a packet including a cover letter guaranteeing confidentiality, a copy of the instrument, a stamped return envelope, and an incentive were mailed to the respondents in the sample. Nonrespondents were followed up with two subsequent mailings requesting completion and return of the instrument. The three mailings yielded a return of 76 usable instruments for a response rate of 73%. Telephone interviews were then conducted with five randomly selected nonrespondents which falls in the 10% to 20% range advocated by Miller and Smith (1983). The responses of nonrespondents were tabulated and compared to respondents. Upon data analysis the researchers determined that responses of the nonrespondents fell into the same general categories as the respondents. It was concluded that nonrespondents were not different from mail questionnaire respondents. Thus telephone interview data were tabulated in the study results.

Categories were established for the purpose of coding teacher concerns. The categories were based upon an analysis of the data collected and the common themes that evolved. The same person coded each section of the instrument as a means of enhancing consistency and accuracy. Frequency counts were utilized to give meaning to the data.

Results

In addressing objective one, the first concern statement written by each subject was analyzed. The first level concern written was recorded. The minimum criterion for reporting was that the same concern had to be expressed by at least two different subjects before it was reported. A total of 99 specific concern statements were recorded. Statements were categorized into three hierarchical levels as identified by Fuller (1969); 1 = self (I am concerned about discipline problems), 2 = process (I am concerned about writing lesson plans), and 3 = impact (I am concerned about doing the right thing for students). The 99 statements included were 10 self level, 82 process level, and 7 impact level, see Table 1. Specific local and state concerns of agriculture teachers can be found in Table 2. A total of 55 local concerns and 44 state concerns were identified. Program funding and enrollment were the most frequent local concerns of teachers wile program funding, graduation requirements, and FFA were the most frequent state level concerns.

Table 1
Major Categories of Concerns by State and Local Levels

Category	Local(n)	State(n)
1. Self	8	2
2. Process	46	36
3. Impact	1	6

In determining rewarding experiences encountered by Virginia teachers of agriculture, objective two, 128 concern statements were reported. These concerns were placed into 11 categories as reported in Table 3. Growth and development of students, and leadership and FFA contest achievement were the rewarding experiences most frequently reported by respondents.

Table 2
Number of Specific Concerns for the State and Local Levels

Concerns	Local(n)	State(n)
Funding	12	13
Enrollment	11	2
Students	7	4
Summer Employment	6	1
Administration	4	1
Graduation requirements	0	5
Future of program	3	1
Paperwork	2	3
FFA	0	5
Apathy	2	1
Discipline	2	1
Morality	1	1
Local incompatibility with agricultural education	2	1
Teachers' conference	0	2
State support	0	2
Guidance	2	0
Changing agriculture	1	1
Totals	55	44

Table 3
Rewarding Teaching Experiences Reported by Virginia Teachers of Agricultural Education

Categories	Frequency
Growth and development of students	43
Leadership and FFA contest achievement	35
Students expressing gratitude to the teacher	15
Teaching students/classroom instruction	11
Helping young and adult farmers	7
Interaction with students	6
Teacher development through inservice	4
Developing quality programs of agricultural education	3
Teacher recognition	2
Others	2
Total	128

Objective three sought to determine the most frustrating teaching experiences of Virginia teachers of agriculture. Data analysis revealed that 140 concerns were expressed. The most frequently related concerns are listed in Table 4. lack of student interest/dumping ground, and lack of administrative support/interest were the concerns most often reported by teachers.

In responding to objective four, subjects reported 95 actions which local school divisions could have taken to make their teaching more pleasant. The most frequent responses are noted in Table 5. Analysis revealed that standing behind agriculture teachers and their programs, and improved program administration were the most frequently expressed actions which could be taken by local school divisions to make agriculture teaching more pleasant.

Table 4
Categories of Frustrating Teaching Experiences Reported by Virginia Teachers of Agricultural Education

Experiences	Frequency
Lack of student interest/dumping ground	23
Lack of administrative support/interest	17
Poor discipline/student management	13
Large time demands	10
Lack of instructional equipment/supplies	10
Lack of guidance support	7
Inadequate facilities	6
Excessive paperwork	6
Poor program quality	5
Poor student quality/low academic levels	5
Others	38
Total	140

Table 5
Actions Which Could Have Been Taken by Local School Division to Make Teaching More Pleasant

Category	n
Stand behind agriculture teachers and their programs	16
Improve program administration	14
Regulate teaching load/provide summer employment	11
Provide more program funding	11
Keep better and more open lines of communication	8
Exercise firm student discipline	4
Provide more and better facilities	4
Provide more support for agriculture	4
Encourage higher program standards	4
Do not place undesirable students in program	4
Others	15
Total	38

Respondents related 38 actions which could be taken by state supervisory staff members to make teaching more pleasant. The most frequent responses are summarized in Table 6. The most frequent responses were: provide more support for teachers/programs and encourage local program administrators to be supportive of agricultural programs. Respondents shared many unsolicited positive comments about the good job the state supervisory staff was doing in supporting teachers.

A total of 50 responses were given indicating ways that teachers believed their job could be made easier by teacher educators. Respondents indicated that teacher educators should provide workshops and courses on technical subjects and prepare teachers for all aspects of teacher responsibility. The most frequent responses are shown in Table 7. Many positive comments were related about the excellent assistance currently given to teachers by teacher educators.

Table 6
Actions Which Could Have Been Taken by State Supervisory Staff to Make Teaching More Pleasant

Category	n
Provide more support for teachers/programs	7
Encourage local program administrators to be more supportive of agricultural education programs	4
Strive for less paperwork	4
Provide more professional development activities	3
Enhance FFA activities	3
Lower class size limits	2
Visit more often	2
Enhance funding for agricultural programs	2
Be stronger in recommendations	2
Try to preserve multiple teacher departments	2
Others	7
Total	38

Table 7
Categories of Actions Which Could Have Been Taken by Teacher Educators to Make Teaching More Pleasant

Category	n
Provide workshops and courses on technical subjects	13
Prepare teachers for all aspects of teacher responsibility	8
Provide workshops on teaching techniques	6
Return to high school classroom for return to reality	6
Develop teaching materials	5
Make more contact with teachers	3
Talk to administrators relating what a quality agriculture program is about	3
Develop a better understanding of agriculture teacher's responsibility	1
Others	3
Total	50

Conclusions and Recommendations

At the state and local levels the programmatic concerns of Virginia teachers of agricultural education were process oriented. Action plans at all levels should be developed to help teachers cope with major concerns of program administration, enrollments, funding, and excessive paperwork.

The most intangible rewards for teachers of agriculture came from seeing students develop while in the program and from seeing students succeed at leadership and competition activities provided by the youth organization. Systems should be developed at the state and local levels to recognize agriculture teachers for the achievements of their students.

Frustrating concerns were more dominant among Virginia teachers of agriculture than rewarding experiences. Plans of action should be developed to cope with prominent frustrating concerns, i.e., lack of student interest/dumping ground for problem students and lack of administrative support and interest. Teachers believed that local school divisions can do the most to make their teaching experiences more pleasant. Action plans should be targeted at the local level to try to make

agricultural teaching as pleasant as possible for instructors. State supervisors and teacher educators should be proactive with local school divisions and agricultural education teachers in trying to implement plans of action which make the teaching experience more pleasant for instructors.

Implications

Those who supervise and work with agricultural education teachers, including teacher educators, supervisors, and school administrators, should carefully monitor the concerns expressed by practicing teachers. Concerns can be informally monitored in casual conversation or formally solicited by using a questionnaire. The important points are that teachers have someone to share their concerns with; that those who work with the teachers can stay apprised of such concerns; and when concerns call for action, justified action be taken to preserve teacher morale and a quality teaching-learning environment. In addition to being apprised of teacher concerns, such monitoring can be an important form of feedback to supervisors, teacher educators, and school administrators.

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