

Cooperating Teachers' Perceptions of Important Elements of the Student Teaching Experience: A Focus Group Approach with Quantitative Follow-up

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It has been argued that the most important component of preservice development for agriculture teachers is the student teaching experience. For example, relationships between cooperating teachers' attitudes toward teaching and those of their student teachers have been identified. Moreover, many believe that an efficacious student teaching center provides "safety" as well as "challenge," and that the quality of supervisory "climate" is critical for success.

To this end, two purposes of this study were to describe selected characteristics of cooperating teachers and their schools, and to identify teachers' perceptions about the important elements of the student teaching experience. Historically, researchers have "quantified" these elements. However, others have posited that to better understand a complex phenomenon such as student teaching, a "soft systems" approach may be more effective. This design could involve the use of focus groups. So, another purpose was to compare teachers' perceptions when determined by focus groups and by a mail questionnaire.

Five focus groups were used to determine teachers' perceptions. The groups included 35 teachers representing 23 schools; each group represented a "core" component (area) of the student teaching experience. Teachers identified 34 elements as being "important." These elements (items) were included in a questionnaire administered during the study's second phase. Items addressed "core" areas of the student teaching experience—classroom and laboratory instruction, supervised agricultural experience programs, student leadership development, school and community relationships, and cooperating teacher-student teacher relationships; included were 11 multiple-choice questions describing selected characteristics of the teachers and centers. Participants rated the elements using a Likert-type rating scale ("5" = "High Importance," ... "1" = "No Importance"). Cronbach's reliability estimates for the core areas ranged from .49 to .86, and .91 for the overall scale. The final rate of return was 89% and 91% for teachers and centers, respectively.

All items were perceived to have either "much" or "high importance" ($M \geq 4.00$); the overall mean was 4.54. Two core areas tied for highest composite mean (4.69)—"Classroom and Laboratory Instruction" and "Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships." The highest rated element was "a well rounded program emphasizing instruction, SAEs, and youth leadership activities" ($M = 5.00$). Four of the five lowest rated elements belonged to the core area "School and Community Relationships."

The focus groups' perceptions were confirmed by the teachers' ratings of importance via a mail questionnaire. This finding supports the assertion that a "soft systems" approach can be an appropriate research procedure when examining a complex phenomenon, and further that it may be beneficial to apply "methodological mixes" to a research design when deemed feasible.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Is there a more important component of the preservice professional development of aspiring agriculture teachers than the student teaching experience? Schumann (1969) argued, “The experiences obtained during student teaching are probably the most crucial activities involved in the development of prospective vocational agriculture teachers” (p. 156). Schumacher and Johnson (1990) stated that “the influence of the cooperating teacher on the preparation of new teachers is profound” (p. 2). Moreover, Norris, Larke, and Briers (1990) asserted, “the student teaching center and the supervising (cooperating) teacher are the most important ingredients in the student teaching experience” (p. 58). Other researchers (Deeds, 1993; Deeds, Arrington, & Flowers, 1988; Garton & Cano, 1994; Martin & Yoder, 1985) have supported this premise.

DeMoulin (Hoyle & Estes, 1993) posited that “Ideally, students should exhibit positive changes in attitude toward teaching and come away from the student-teaching experience with a positive attitude toward their chosen profession” (p. 160). Deeds and Barrick (1986) examined attitudes of preservice teachers toward themselves as future teachers and toward teaching agriculture, following early field-based experiences. They concluded that the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding the quality of program in which their early field-based experience transpired were related to the extent that their attitude was positive. Further, Byler and Byler (1984) analyzed student teacher morale before and after the student teaching experience and concluded, “there was a significant relationship after the student teaching experience between student teachers’ morale and the morale of their cooperating teachers” (p. 27).

Martin and Yoder (1985) conceptualized a successful student teaching experience as one in which a “team approach” (p. 19) defined the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher. This approach envisioned a supervisory “climate” devoted to using a clinical teaching analysis model. These researchers contended that “the success of the supervision and the success of the individual student teacher depends, to a very great extent, upon the general supervisory climate in the department and on the educational leadership abilities of the cooperating teacher” (p. 21). Moreover, Korthagen and Kessels (1999) argued that a cooperating student teacher center “must be able to offer a sound balance between safety and challenge and a balance between the goal of serving the student teachers’ learning and the interests of the school” (p. 14). Further, DeMoulin (Hoyle & Estes, 1993) contended, “The supervisory instructor is present to foster unique teaching concepts and to give support and encouragement to preservice teachers” (p. 160). In support, Garton and Cano (1994) maintained, “Priority should be given to selecting cooperating teachers who model the desired teaching behaviors expected of student teachers” (p. 213). As Martin and Yoder (1985) stated, “Supervision of student teachers represents an important responsibility” (p. 21). It is a responsibility that has and continues to demand a diligent research interest on the part of the profession.

Investigators (Deeds, 1993; Deeds, Arrington, & Flowers, 1988; Larke, Norris, & Briers, 1992) have identified and quantified important dimensions of the student teaching experience through the use of survey research methods (i.e., mail questionnaires). For example, Deeds (1993) collected data from 82 institutions, nationally, that were charged with agricultural teacher education. Further, Larke, Norris, and Briers (1992) conducted a national study that queried three groups—teacher educators, supervising teachers, and student teachers. Consistent with

traditional quantitative research methodology, these studies sought to “generalize” the essential components of a frequently complex phenomenon—the student teaching experience. Yet, is a post-positivistic approach a valid method for describing the important elements of this experience?

Miller (1998) stated that “Our [agricultural and extension education] tradition and our learning related to research methods are couched in the empirical method. However, much of our interest for knowledge production or problem solving lies in practical understanding with our basis in communicative interaction or emancipation” (n. p.#). Moreover, Miller (1998) argued that the very “nature” of social science research, that is, its tendency for being highly contextual and problem-centered, seriously hampers even the most rigorous attempts to generalize the results. As an appropriate alternative, Miller suggested a “soft systems methodology [SSM]” as “a philosophical basis for conducting inquiry,” one that “deals with problem setting, and involves stakeholders in the research process in the local context” (n. p.#). An application of this premise could be a focus group research design. Focus groups, by definition, hinge on the principle of “communicative interaction” and the direct participation of stakeholders (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

A review of literature revealed no research using cooperating (supervising) agriculture teachers as a “focus group” to collect information about their perceptions of important elements of the student teaching experience. However, researchers (Cole & Waters, 1997; Gamon & Chestnut, 1994; Haak & Talbert, 1998) have used focus groups when investigating other questions in agricultural education. Moreover, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) concluded that “among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences are group depth interviews, or focus groups” (p. 9). In support, Popham (1993) stated, “...behavioral scientists have been increasingly drawn to the virtues of *focus group interviews* as a method of securing useful qualitative data” (p. 194). Morgan (1997) defined a focus group “as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 6). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) opined that a “contemporary focus group interview generally involves 8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and assures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest,” and that it “will last from one and a half to two and a half hours” (p. 10).

This form of qualitative research methodology is recognized for its ability to yield “emic” data, that is, “data that arise in a natural or indigenous form” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 13). Focus group participants “respond in their own words, using their own categorizations and perceived associations” (p. 13). For these and other reasons focus groups can be useful research tools for generating hypotheses, for better understanding the participants’ “vocabulary” regarding the question(s) under study, for refining questionnaire terminology and scaling, and for increasing the researcher’s understanding of previously collected quantitative data (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Popham, 1993).

A fundamental characteristic of focus groups is that they create a forum for “group” interaction and collective expression; yet, this is viewed as having both positive and negative consequences. For example, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) stated, “This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not be uncovered in individual interviews” (p. 16). However, “the responses from members of the group are not independent of one another, which restricts the generalizability of results;” and that, “the results obtained in a focus group may be biased by a very dominant or opinionated member” (p. 17).

Popham (1993) echoed these reservations yet maintained “qualitative methods such as focus group interviews will usually yield certain insights and understandings that are simply not obtainable through quantitative methods alone” (p. 204), and that focus groups are a useful source of data that “can be used in concert with quantitatively oriented procedures” (p. 203).

Moreover, Krueger (1994) stated, “Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative procedures, resulting in greater methodological mixes that strengthen the research design” (p. 29). Related to this premise, Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) asserted that the process of “triangulation helps to eliminate biases that might result from relying exclusively on any one data-collection method, source, analyst, or theory” (p. 574). Further, they suggested that it is possible to achieve triangulation by following “the process of using multiple data-collection methods, data sources, analysts, or theories to check the validity of case study findings” (p. 574). To this end, Krueger (1994) asserted, “focus groups can precede quantitative procedures;” and that the “insights [gained] can then be used to develop more efficient follow-up quantitative procedures such as telephone or mail-out surveys” (p. 29). Further, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) maintained, “Focus groups also have a place as a confirmatory method that may be used for testing hypotheses” (p. 15).

Yet, will cooperating teachers’ perceptions of important elements of the student teaching experience be similar (i.e., confirmatory) or different, depending on whether their perceptions are determined by a focus group or alternately by a mail questionnaire?

Purposes and Research Questions

Two purposes of this study were to describe selected characteristics of cooperating teachers and their schools, and to identify what cooperating teachers perceive to be the important elements of the student teaching experience. An additional purpose was to conduct a form of triangulation (Gall et al., 1996) and compare cooperating teachers’ perceptions of important elements of the student teaching experience, when determined by both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Specific research questions guiding this study were: 1) What are selected personal, professional, and school setting characteristics of cooperating teachers? 2) What do cooperating teachers perceive to be important elements of the student teaching experience as determined by focus groups? 3) What do cooperating teachers perceive to be important elements of the student teaching experience as determined by a mail questionnaire? 4) Are cooperating teachers’ perceptions of the important elements of the student teaching experience as identified by focus groups similar to those elements perceived to be important as determined by a mail questionnaire?

Methods and Procedures

This was a descriptive study that used both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (mail questionnaire) research procedures to describe selected characteristics of cooperating teachers and their schools, and to identify cooperating teachers’ perceptions of the important elements of the student teaching experience. The Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University hosted an agriculture cooperating teacher workshop on July 6-7, 1998. A portion of the workshop included a focus group exercise to determine participants’ perceptions of the “important elements” of the student teaching experience. The study’s focus groups were

comprised of the teachers in attendance. The groups' members included teachers (n = 35) and schools (n = 23) that had either served as cooperating student teaching centers during the previous three years or were future placement sites.

Prior to the workshop, the teachers were divided into five different focus groups of seven members each. Members of the same department were assigned to different groups (Popham, 1993). Each of the five focus groups represented a "core" component (area) of the student teaching experience as identified by a review of literature (Claycomb & Petty, 1983; Edwards & Briers, 1998; Garton & Chung, 1995; Larke, Norris, & Briers, 1992; Martin & Yoder, 1985; Miller & Scheid, 1984) and by teacher education faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. The five core areas were: classroom and laboratory instruction, supervised agricultural experience programs (SAEPs), student leadership development (FFA), school and community relationships, and cooperating teacher-student teacher relationships.

Teachers were notified by mail of their group's core area and were asked to devote their "best thinking" to that component of the student teaching experience. During the workshop, approximately one and a half hours was used for the purpose of focus group breakout sessions. The participants were provided flip chart sheets and pens, and were instructed to record the important elements that emerged during the session. During the "group" time, a teacher educator monitored the discussions, served as a "moderator," and provided structure when necessary (Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In turn, each focus group reported the "important elements" of the student teaching experience that they had identified.

The teachers identified 34 elements of the student teaching experience as being "important." These elements (items) were included in a mail questionnaire administered during the second phase of the study (Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Part one of the survey instrument consisted of 11 multiple-choice questions describing selected personal, professional, and school setting characteristics of the cooperating teachers. The second part of the questionnaire was divided into five "core" areas of the student teaching experience and included the 34 "important elements" identified earlier by the cooperating teacher focus groups: classroom and laboratory instruction (5 items), supervised agricultural experience programs (SAEPs) (4 items), student leadership development (FFA) (7 items), school and community relationships (9 items), and cooperating teacher-student teacher relationships (9 items). The survey participants were asked to rate the "level of importance" of the elements using a Likert-type rating scale ("5" = "High Importance," "4" = "Much Importance," "3" = "Some Importance," "2" = "Low Importance," and "1" = "No Importance"). Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability estimates for the five core areas ranged from .49 to .86, with the overall importance scale of 34 items yielding a .91.

Following the workshop, participants were mailed a research packet that included a cover letter explaining the second phase of the study, a survey questionnaire, a pre-coded scan sheet, and a return envelope coded to determine non-respondents. Following a two-week waiting period, non-respondents were contacted and encouraged to return their questionnaires. Teachers who requested another research packet were mailed one. After another two-week waiting period, a third mailing of research packets containing a slightly altered cover letter was mailed to remaining non-respondents. The final rate of return was 89% (31 of 35) for the cooperating teachers representing 91% (21 of 23) of the cooperating student teaching centers. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences v. 7.5. Research questions one and

three were analyzed descriptively with frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Results and Findings

As shown in Table 1, the cooperating teachers who participated in this study were overwhelming male; only two of the 31 respondents were female. Almost half (15) of the teachers held only a Bachelor's degree, while slightly more than half (16) had earned a Master's degree. All of the teachers were members of their state's professional organization, and slightly more than half (16) reported national affiliations. Nineteen of the instructors had 11 or more years of experience as an agriscience teacher, and 22 of the 31 had six or more years of service at their current school. Eighteen of the cooperating teachers had previously supervised four or more student teachers, and one-third had cooperated in the supervision of seven or more preservice teachers (Table 1).

Regarding selected school-setting characteristics, 12 of the 21 centers had a school-schedule with a 6-, 7-, or 8-period day and an 18-week semester, while the remaining centers reported various alternative scheduling patterns. There was a similar dichotomy regarding school size; 12 of the centers reported campus enrollments of 780 or more students and the remainder were smaller. Departmental enrollments were evenly split; that is, half reported student enrollments of 151 or greater while the remainder served fewer pupils. All but three of the 21 centers were multiple teacher departments, with 10 centers having two faculty members.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Cooperating Teachers (N=31)

| <u>Characteristics</u> | <u>Frequency</u> | <u>Percentage</u> |
|--|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 29 | 93.5 |
| Female | 2 | 6.5 |
| Highest Degree | | |
| Bachelor's | 15 | 48.4 |
| Master's | 16 | 51.6 |
| Service as an Agriscience Teacher | | |
| 3 to 5 years | 6 | 19.4 |
| 6 to 10 years | 6 | 19.4 |
| 11 to 20 years | 7 | 22.6 |
| 21 or more years | 12 | 38.7 |
| Number of Schools Taught Agriscience | | |
| 1 | 14 | 45.1 |
| 2 | 11 | 35.5 |
| 3 or more | 6 | 19.3 |
| Service at Current School | | |
| Beginning first year | 1 | 3.2 |
| 1 to 5 years | 8 | 25.8 |
| 6 to 10 years | 5 | 16.1 |
| 11 to 20 years | 10 | 32.3 |
| 21 or more years | 7 | 22.6 |
| Student Teachers Supervised | | |
| None | 4 | 12.9 |
| 1 to 3 | 9 | 29.0 |
| 4 to 6 | 8 | 25.8 |
| 7 or more | 10 | 32.3 |
| Professional Affiliations | | |
| VATAT ^a only | 15 | 48.4 |
| VATAT ^a and NAAE ^b | 11 | 35.4 |
| VATAT ^a , NAAE ^b , ACTE ^c , and others | 5 | 16.2 |

^aVocational Agriculture Teachers' Association of Texas

^bNational Association of Agricultural Educators

^cAssociation for Career and Technical Education

The 34 “important elements” of the student teaching experience that were identified by cooperating teachers focus groups are shown in Table 2. The elements are grouped into five “core” areas and a “composite” mean computed for each area. Two core areas were tied for highest composite mean (4.69); they were “Classroom and Laboratory Instruction” (5 elements)

and “Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships” (9 elements). The core area “Student Leadership Development (FFA)” (7 elements) had the next highest composite mean (4.54). The core areas “Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs” (4 elements) and “School and Community Relationships” (9 elements) had the second lowest and lowest composite means (4.40 and 4.36, respectively).

Cooperating teachers rated elements (items) of the student teaching experience on level of importance (“5” = “High Importance”...“1” = “No Importance”) via a mail questionnaire, all of the 34 items were perceived to have either “much” or “high importance” ($\underline{M} \geq 4.00$) (Table 2). The overall mean was 4.54 or midway between “much” and “high importance.” The highest rated element was “a well rounded program emphasizing instruction, SAEs, and youth leadership activities” ($\underline{M} = 5.00$; $\underline{SD} = .00$). “Daily (systematic) classroom and/or laboratory instruction” was the second highest rated element ($\underline{M} = 4.94$; $\underline{SD} = .25$), while the element “a cooperating teacher who has a positive attitude” was rated third ($\underline{M} = 4.90$; $\underline{SD} = .30$). Four elements, belonging to the core area “Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships,” tied for fourth ($\underline{M} = 4.77$) (Table 2). “Recognized integrity of the cooperating teacher and program” ($\underline{M} = 4.74$; $\underline{SD} = .45$) was rated the eighth most important element, and two elements, “resources available to train a competitive team” ($\underline{M} = 4.71$; $\underline{SD} = .53$) and “a cooperating teacher who communicates clear expectations to the student teacher...” ($\underline{M} = 4.71$; $\underline{SD} = .46$), tied for ninth. The core area “Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships” accounted for five of the ten highest rated elements. Of the remaining elements, 19 had mean importance ratings between 4.25 and 4.70, while five items had mean rating scores approaching “much importance” ($\underline{M} < 4.25$). Four of the five lowest rated elements belonged to the core area “School and Community Relationships.”

Table 2. Cooperating Teachers’ Perceptions of the Important Elements of the Student Teaching Experience (N=31)

| <u>Elements^a</u> | <u>M^b</u> | <u>SD</u> | <u>Ranking</u> |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| <u>Classroom and Laboratory Instruction</u> | | | |
| Daily (systematic) classroom and/or laboratory instruction | 4.94 | .25 | 2 |
| A discipline management plan used in a structured environment | 4.65 | .55 | 12 |
| Current technology used in instruction | 4.32 | .70 | 27 |
| Creative teaching methods as a basis for day-to-day instruction, e.g., use of multimedia | 4.52 | .63 | 18 |
| A well-rounded program emphasizing instruction, SAEs, and youth leadership activities | 5.00 | .00 | 1 |
| | Composite Mean ^c | | 4.69 |
| <u>Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs</u> | | | |
| All students meeting State SAEP requirements, with accuraterecord books | 4.48 | .72 | 20 |
| Diversity within the students’ SAEPs | 4.10 | .79 | 33 |

(table continues)

| Elements^a | M^b | SD | Ranking |
|---|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Project supervision and an explanation of this commitment to the student teacher | 4.61 | .50 | 14 |
| Student participation in advanced awards and degrees on district, area, state and national levels | 4.39 | .62 | 26 |
| Composite Mean ^c | | | 4.40 |
| <u>Student Leadership Development (FFA activities)</u> | | | |
| Strong classroom instruction in leadership development | 4.55 | .57 | 17 |
| These activities as essentials for a balanced program | 4.68 | .48 | 11 |
| A history of successful participation | 4.32 | .70 | 27 |
| Cooperating teachers who are familiar with current rules for participation in events (e.g., CDEs and LDEs) | 4.52 | .57 | 18 |
| Cooperating teachers who delegate the training of at least one team to the student teacher | 4.58 | .56 | 15 |
| Resources available to train a competitive team | 4.71 | .53 | 9 |
| Opportunities for the student teacher to judge or monitor a district or area Leadership Development Event (LDE) | 4.42 | .72 | 23 |
| Composite Mean ^c | | | 4.54 |
| <u>School and Community Relationships</u> | | | |
| Recognized integrity of the cooperating teacher and program | 4.74 | .45 | 8 |
| Dep'tal support organization(s) (e.g., advisory committees, booster clubs, and Alumni) | 4.29 | .69 | 29 |
| A cooperating teacher who supports other school activities (e.g., sports banquets) | 4.10 | .75 | 33 |
| A cooperating teacher who supports activities in the community (e.g., service organizations) | 4.13 | .81 | 32 |
| A spirit of professional cooperation among fellow teachers | 4.58 | .50 | 15 |
| Use of local media | 4.23 | .62 | 30 |
| School administrators who are involved in program activities | 4.42 | .62 | 23 |
| Community service projects | 4.23 | .67 | 30 |
| Availability of facilities (e.g., computer lab, shops, horticultural lab, school farm) | 4.48 | .72 | 20 |
| Composite Mean ^c | | | 4.36 |
| <u>Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships</u> | | | |
| A cooperating teacher who is willing to be a mentor | 4.77 | .43 | 4 |
| A student teacher who is willing to be mentored by the cooperating teacher | 4.77 | .43 | 4 |
| A cooperating teacher who has a positive attitude | 4.90 | .30 | 3 |
| A cooperating teacher who is a "good" role model | 4.77 | .50 | 4 |

(table continues)

| Elements^a | M^b | SD | Ranking | |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|------|
| A cooperating teacher who communicates clear expectations to the student teacher (e.g., role in the classroom and calendar of events) | 4.71 | .46 | 9 | |
| A cooperating teacher who provides frequent evaluations and feedback to the student teacher | 4.65 | .55 | 12 | |
| Discipline policies that are in place and enforced | 4.77 | .43 | 4 | |
| “Reinforcement” techniques in teaching (e.g., pace, reteaching, retesting, and accommodation of various learning styles) | 4.45 | .62 | 22 | |
| Assistance in job placement | 4.42 | .62 | 23 | |
| | Composite Mean ^c | | | 4.69 |
| | Overall Mean | | | 4.54 |

^aImportant elements were determined by focus groups and reflect the groups’ “language.”

^b5 = High Importance...1 = No Importance.

^cComposite mean of elements for that core area.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Based on findings of this study, cooperating teachers used by the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University were predominantly male, members of their state’s professional organization (VATAT), and generally experienced teachers who were likely to have had several years of service at their school. Most of the teachers had previous experience supervising student teachers and were most likely employed in a multiple teacher department staffed by two instructors.

Focus groups perceived that the “traditional” triad associated with secondary-level agricultural education (i.e., classroom/laboratory instruction, the FFA, and SAEs) was an important component of the student teaching experience. This perception was confirmed by teachers’ ratings of importance when queried via a mail questionnaire; “instruction” was the most important of these three areas. However, found to be equally “important” were those elements belonging to the core area “Cooperating Teacher-Student Teacher Relationships” (Table 2). Other researchers (Martin & Yoder, 1985) have made a similar contention. Interestingly, the core area “School and Community Relationships,” although considered “important,” had the lowest composite mean for the five areas. Moreover, investigators (Edwards & Briers, 1998; Garton & Chung, 1995; Mundt & Connors, 1999) have found that early-career agriculture teachers identify a need for inservice education in this area. Does expression of this “need” by beginning teachers arise because of a lower “value” that cooperating teachers may have for this part of the student teaching experience? Perhaps student teachers were not being adequately exposed to “related” learning opportunities; and, then, on becoming a practicing teacher, they realized that they were lacking in these professional competencies. This potential “association” between inservice education needs of novice teachers and perceptions of cooperating teachers about important elements of student teaching warrants further study.

Regarding research methodology, what is implied by the fact that all of the important elements, as determined by focus groups, were rated either “much” or “high” in importance when teachers were surveyed via a mail questionnaire? Did one approach simply “confirm” the findings of the other (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990)? This implies that either data collection method was equally “valid,” at least for the purpose of gathering this type of information from this particular “sample.” Moreover, what if the questionnaire items had been generated by a “non-indigenous” source (e.g., the researchers)? Then, how similar, different, or valid would the questions have been and, ultimately, the study’s findings? Is it conceivable that the similarity of the findings can be attributed to the fact that the questionnaire items were “crafted” by a stakeholder group (i.e., cooperating teachers) that was arguably one of the most qualified sources for this purpose (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Popham, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990)? Accepting this premise, these findings support Krueger’s (1994) assertion that “benefits” can be reaped by properly applying “methodological mixes” to a research design. Further, the findings of this study and their implications appear to support Miller’s (1998) contention. That is, using a “soft systems” methodological approach when attempting to “understand” complex behaviors that are problem-centered and highly contextual (i.e., the student teaching experience) is an appropriate procedure.

Recommendations for practice and future research: 1) Prior to student teaching, preservice teachers should be made aware of the important elements of the student teaching experience identified by cooperating teachers. These elements should be used as a “framework” for examining and anticipating cooperating teachers’ “expectations” for the student teacher and the student teaching experience. Further, these elements can serve as “talking points” (i.e., points of reference) for the student teacher, when defining and “negotiating” duties, roles, and responsibilities with their cooperating teacher at the onset of student teaching. 2) Student teachers should be surveyed using a similar quantitative instrument. If significant areas of “disagreement” arise, these areas could serve as “directed-questions” for student teacher focus groups, and explored as to “why” they are perceived to be less or more important. Concomitantly, cooperating teacher groups should examine “why” teachers perceive these elements to be important. Then, with a “greater” understanding of both groups’ perceptions, teacher educators can design and implement preservice learning activities to address any incongruence that might be a limiting factor preventing development of an effective cooperating teacher-student teacher relationship (Martin & Yoder, 1985). 3) Researchers are encouraged to consider using a focus group approach when deemed an appropriate methodology for their investigation, for example, to collect data, to design and refine instruments, to generate hypotheses, and to confirm earlier findings (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Popham, 1993). 4) Moreover, to further strengthen our collective understanding of the potential “value” and the possible “limitations” of research that involves both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (i.e., “mixed methods”), researchers are urged to conduct investigations that incorporate both approaches (Krueger, 1994), compare their findings, and report their conclusions.

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Cooperating Teachers' Perceptions of Important Elements of the Student Teaching Experience: A Focus Group Approach with Quantitative Follow-up

A Critique

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Edwards and Briers present a study that explores what cooperating teachers believe are important elements in a preservice student teaching experience in agricultural education. As they stated, these important members of the education community have not been involved much in investigations of the student teaching experience, which makes this study timely and appropriate. The Introduction and Theoretical Framework section of the paper flows well and is well written, although I would classify this section as a "Conceptual Framework," and it was not clear to me why the authors devoted a significant amount of space discussing the methodology in this section of the paper. This discussion belongs in the Methods section, which would leave additional room to develop a more in-depth theoretical or conceptual framework focused on the student teaching experience. Dewey's notions of the clinical experience might be important to this discussion.

The methods of the study are clearly outlined and easy to follow. The purpose and research questions were appropriate to the study, but led to an important question. Why use the same participants for both the focus group discussions and the subsequent quantitative survey and what differences did the authors hope to uncover in responses (and how)? While this procedure does not appear to validate any methodological assumptions, I would question its usefulness. The authors should consider distributing the survey instrument to a random sample of Texas secondary agriculture teachers (or others) to assess the importance of the identified elements.

The results of the study are well-written and easy to follow. The tables are also well done, but I would caution the authors against repeating too much information contained in the table in the accompanying text. This space would be better utilized for more in-depth discussion of the broader meanings of the results. My earlier comments regarding the use of focus group participants for the survey are sufficient to address some of the questions posed by the authors in their discussion of the results. The authors have attempted to share a research methodology not typically utilized in agricultural education research. More efforts such as this to broaden our research methods base are definitely needed. This section could have been enhanced with some deeper insights into how the researchers believe using this type of methodology enhanced their results. In addition, the authors related results to the theoretical framework.

Edwards and Briers are to be commended for conducting a good research study and presenting its findings to us in a well-written paper. I enjoyed reading it.