

Why Do Agricultural Education Teachers Continue to Teach? A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Agricultural education, along with many other teaching professions, continues to face a shortage of qualified teachers. The situation is exacerbated by the attrition of teachers from the profession. If the agricultural education profession is going to grow and prosper in the 21st century, it will need an adequate supply of qualified teachers. One way to increase the number of qualified agricultural education teachers is to reduce the number of teachers who leave the profession early through attrition. The purpose of the study was to determine the factors that motivated agricultural education teachers as a beginning teacher and the factors that currently motivate the teachers. Qualitative research techniques were used to analyze the answers to two open-ended questions about beginning and current motivational factors. Twenty motivational factors emerged including educating students, student achievements in FFA, helping students, financial rewards, professional brotherhood, personal goals and satisfaction, job location and security, career choice, enjoyed teaching agricultural education, administrative support, love of agriculture, students, community support, challenges of teaching agricultural education, family, determination, adult program, university support, locked in the professional, and facilities. The three most frequently mentioned motivational factors were “educating students,” “student achievements in the FFA,” and “helping students.”

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Projected shortages of teachers in the United States have received considerable attention from the national media (Henke & Zahn, 2001). Although the widespread predicted shortages of teachers have not materialized (Levine & Christenson, 1998), agricultural education has had problems maintaining an adequate supply of teachers. In 2001, the number of qualified potential agricultural education teachers actually seeking employment as teachers fell far short of the net number of replacements needed (Camp, Broyles, & Skelton, 2002). Although the number of agricultural education teachers has fluctuated over the 37-year life of the study, the shortage of qualified individuals has been an annual phenomenon.

Teacher attrition is the single largest factor determining the demand for additional teachers in all subjects in the United States (Croasmun, Hampton & Herrmann, 1999). In a national study of all K-12 teachers employed in April 1994, approximately 20% were not in the same occupation three years later (Henke & Zahn, 2001). In the 1970s there was a 33% probability that a first-year teacher would leave the profession (Croasmun et al., 1999).

Teacher attrition has been linked to many of the problems faced by teachers. One of the leading reasons for leaving the teaching profession was salaries (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003; Self, 2001; USDE, 1999). Poor administrative support was also mentioned by many teachers leaving the profession (Fox & Certo, 1999; Gersten et al., 1995; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003;

Self, 2001; USDE, 2002). Other problems linked to teacher attrition include: lack of parental support (Fox & Certo, 1999; Self, 2001); lack of involvement in decision making (Fox & Certo, 1999; Gersten et al., 1995; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003); student discipline (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003; Self, 2001); poor student motivation (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003; Self, 2001); large class sizes (Ingersoll, 2001); inadequate time to prepare (Ingersoll, 2001); and lack of community support (Ingersoll, 2001).

While it is important to examine the reasons teachers leave the profession, it is just as important to examine the factors that motivate individuals to continue to teach. Research has shown that teachers obtain satisfaction from their personal achievement (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kim & Loadman, 1994; & McCracken & Etuk, 1985), as well as the achievements of their students (Bruening & Hoover, 1991; Perie & Baker, 1997; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004). Other factors that contribute to the satisfaction of teachers include administrative support (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990), opportunities for advancement (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990), autonomy over their program (Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990), community support (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990), well disciplined students (Perie & Baker, 1997; Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990), enjoy what they do (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 2004; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Perie & Baker, 1997; Watson & Hillison, 1991), facilities available to perform their job (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004; Watson & Hillison, 1991), the opportunity to help students (Kim & Loadman, 1994), professional relationships (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Kim & Loadman, 1994), opportunities for recognition (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990; McCracken & Etuk, 1985), responsibilities of the position (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999), salary (Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Watson & Hillison, 1991), and the working conditions (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990).

If the agricultural education profession is going to grow and prosper in the 21st century, it will need to maintain an adequate supply of qualified teachers. One way to improve the number of qualified agricultural education teachers is to provide conditions that lead to teacher satisfaction.

In order to improve the retention of high school agricultural education teachers, the profession should examine factors that motivate teachers and provide for teacher satisfaction and address these situations through the preservice education and/or teacher in-service programs.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of the study was to examine factors that motivated agricultural education teachers in West Virginia and ultimately lead to job satisfaction. The primary objective was to develop and categorize a list of motivational situations/factors encountered by teachers of agricultural education during their first years in the profession as well as motivational situations/factors they were facing in their current teaching assignment. The following research questions provided direction for the study: 1) what were the motivational situations/factors

encountered by beginning teachers? 2) what were the motivational situations/factors agricultural education teachers currently face? and 3) are there differences in motivational situations/factors encountered by beginning teachers and the motivational situations/factors encountered by experienced teachers?

Methods/Procedures

A qualitative research design was used to determine beginning and current motivational situations/factors encountered by agricultural education teachers in West Virginia. A qualitative research design was selected in order to examine the phenomenon in detail and allow the respondents to describe the situations in their own words (Ary, Jacobs, Razaieh, and Sorensen, 2006). The populations consisted of 95 teachers employed in West Virginia during the 2002-2003 school year. The population frame was established using the state's secondary agriculture teacher directory.

Procedures

After reviewing the available literature, a questionnaire was developed that consisted of two open-ended questions. The first question asked the respondents to list five motivational situations/factors they encountered as a beginning teacher in agricultural education. The second question asked respondents to list five motivational situations/factors they were currently encountering. Teachers who had taught three years or less were instructed to only answer the question dealing with beginning motivational factors.

Although the research design and data analysis were qualitative in nature, Dillman's (2000) tailored design method was used to collect the data. A cover letter requesting assistance in the research study and a copy of the questionnaire were emailed to every teacher in the accessible population. They were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. A second cover letter and copy of the questionnaire were emailed to all teachers who failed to respond to the initial email message. A two-week deadline was given for the completion of the questionnaire. At the end of second deadline, a cover letter and questionnaire were mailed to each of the non-respondents. Fifty-three respondents (56%) returned completed questionnaires.

Data analysis was divided into three stages (Ary et al., 2006). In stage one all identifiers were removed from the questionnaires prior to the data entry process. The data were transcribed verbatim into an Access database by an administrative assistant in the department to assure the data's dependability. The principal investigator, having taught agricultural education for nine years, had first hand knowledge of the problems faced in the state by beginning and veteran teachers. Peer debriefings were conducted at key stages in the data analysis process to assure the procedures were credible. In stage two the responses were reviewed, response categories established, and the responses were placed in the categories. The questionnaire, coding rubric, and final results of the coding were presented to the researcher's peers to establish trustworthiness and credibility of interpretation and to ensure confirmability. Approximately one week following the initial coding of the data, the principal researcher recoded the data (Ary et al., 2006). The results of the initial coding were similar to the results of the second coding, thereby establishing the validity and reliability of the coding process. In stage 3 the data were

summarized and interpreted. Copies of data from each step in the process have been maintained.

Results/Findings

The responses to the open-ended question on motivations encountered as a beginning and current agricultural education teachers were analyzed. As the data were analyzed 20 categories emerged. The categories included educating students, student achievements in FFA, helping students, financial rewards, professional brotherhood, personal goals and satisfaction, job location and security, career choice, enjoyed teaching agricultural education, administrative support, love of agriculture, students, community support, challenges of teaching agricultural education, family, determination, adult program, university support, professional dead end, and facilities. The categories were ranked on the frequency they were mentioned by the respondents. Ten of the most frequently mentioned motivations of beginning teachers and ten of the most frequently mentioned motivations of current teachers will be discussed. Motivations of current teachers, not included in the beginning teachers' ten most frequently mentioned motivation list, will also be discussed.

Motivational Factors for Beginning Teachers

The three most frequently mentioned motivational factors for beginning teachers involved the students and student success. Twenty-three respondents (45.1%) indicated "educating students" provided motivation for their career as a beginning teacher (see Table 1). Twenty-three respondents (45.1%) also indicated "student achievements in the FFA" motivated their beginning teaching career. Nineteen teachers (37.3%) listed "helping students" as a motivational force during their early years in the profession. Examples of factors that motivated teachers to continue in the teaching profession included: "I enjoyed teaching students new ideas and making them think," "To make a difference in the lives of students," "The desire of the students to be involved in new ventures," "being able to make a difference in the lives of young people and seeing their success in agriculture and the FFA," "turning 'marginal' or problematic students around where other programs fail - agriculture & FFA meets the needs of a wide range of students," and "giving students a chance they wouldn't otherwise get."

Agricultural education teachers were also motivated by the financial aspects of the profession. Fourteen respondents (27.5%) indicated the financial rewards motivated them to continue in the profession (see Table 1). Statements included comments about the "salary," "insurance," and "benefits" of teaching. Other comments included "it was my first job with a steady paycheck," "I needed the job," and "I had a family to support."

The professional brotherhood of the agricultural education profession was a motivation for 11 of the respondents (21.6%) (see Table 1). The professional brotherhood included teaching professionals in agricultural education and the teaching profession in general. Examples of the motivational comments included: "I was a part of a professional "brotherhood" of teachers with similar problems, challenges and successes;" "I had some excellent mentors to grow and advance my professionalism;" and "the other staff (educators, service personnel and administrators) were and are great to work with."

Eleven respondents (21.6%) were motivated to continue as an agricultural education teacher by personal goals and personal satisfaction (see Table 1). Respondent comments included “The desire to do the best job possible to allow for students advancement,” “I had fun doing something I like; working with agriculture and young folks,” and “I looked forward to building a quality program.”

Table 1
Beginning and Current Motivations Experienced by Agricultural Education Teachers

	Beginning Motivation			Current Motivation		
	Rank	<i>f</i>	%	Rank	<i>f</i>	%
Educating students	1	23	45.1	2	18	35.3
Student achievements in FFA	1	23	45.1	4	13	25.5
Helping students	3	19	37.3	1	25	49.0
Financial rewards	4	14	27.5	4	13	25.5
Professional brotherhood	5	11	21.6	6	9	17.6
Personal goals and satisfaction	5	11	21.6	11	6	11.8
Job location and security	7	10	19.6	8	8	15.7
Career choice	7	10	19.6	17	3	5.9
Enjoyed teaching agricultural education	9	9	17.6	3	15	29.4
Administrative support	10	8	15.7	10	7	13.7
Love of agriculture	11	7	13.7	11	6	11.8
Student	11	7	13.7	11	6	11.8
Community support	11	7	13.7	14	4	7.8
Challenges of teaching agricultural education	14	5	9.8	8	8	15.7
Family	14	5	9.8	14	4	7.8
Determination	14	5	9.8	20	0	0.0
Adult program	17	4	7.8	19	2	3.9
University support	18	2	3.9	14	4	7.8
Professional dead end	19	0	0.0	6	9	17.6
Facilities	19	0	0.0	17	3	5.9

Ten respondents (15.7%) indicated job location and security and 10 respondents (15.7%) listed career choice as a motivating factor that kept them in the teaching profession (see Table 1). Respondents comments included: "I considered that teaching agriculture was the best use of my talents and interests," "I thought teaching was the 'dream job,'" "lifelong dream - I never thought of anything else to do," and "working with young people - a pure enjoyment."

Nine teachers' (17.6%) comments fell into the enjoyed teaching agricultural education category as a motivating factor that kept them in the teaching profession (see Table 1). Respondent comments included: "I liked what I was doing and the relationships that were developed," "teaching was what I love and enjoy," and "teaching was fun and rewarding."

Although research has documented that administrative support can be a problem for teachers (Fox & Certo, 1999; Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, & Billingsley, 1995; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Self, 2001; Sultana, 2002; Veenman, 1987), administrative support was listed as a motivational factor by eight respondents (15.7%) (see Table 1). Responses included: "knowing other teachers and principals were showing support" provided motivation and "I had a good vocational team with a good full time director."

Motivational Factors for Current Teachers

Eight of the ten most frequently mentioned motivational factors for beginning teachers were also on the list of the ten most frequently mentioned motivational factors for current teachers. The list of motivational factors for current teachers of agricultural education that were a part of the beginning teacher list included: helping students (rank = 1, $n = 25$, 49.0%), educating students (rank = 2, $n = 18$, 35.3%), enjoyed teaching agricultural education (rank = 3, $n = 15$, 29.4%), student achievements in FFA (rank = 4, $n = 13$, 25.5%), financial rewards (rank = 4, $n = 13$, 25.5%), professional brotherhood (rank = 6, $n = 9$, 17.6%), job location and security (rank = 8, $n = 8$, 15.7%), and administrative support (rank = 10, $n = 7$, 13.7%).

Two factors on the beginning teacher motivational list were not in the ten most frequently mentioned factors for current teachers. Current teachers were less likely to list personal goals and satisfaction (rank = 11, $n = 6$, 11.8%) and career choice (rank = 17, $n = 3$, 5.9%) as motivational factors.

Eight current teachers (rank = 8, 15.7%) included the challenges of teaching agricultural education as a motivational factor. Respondents were motivated by: "potential to do great things with students," "desire to make a difference in the world through young people," "keeping up with the world," and "regardless of 'uninterested' students, it is still the best class most of them have all day."

Nine teachers (rank = 6, 17.6%) were motivated to teach agricultural education because they felt they were locked in a professional career. Respondents indicated they were motivated by: "being too close to retirement (to change jobs)," "the amount of time they had invested in profession," "they taught too long and were no longer employable," "no other jobs were available that can pay as much," and "the lack of capital necessary to start their own business."

A number of other motivational factors were mentioned by beginning and/or current teachers. These factors included: love of agriculture, the student, community support, family, determination, adult programs, university support, and facilities available for the program.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

There are a host of factors that motivate agricultural education teachers as beginning professionals and as experienced educators. The factors that motivated teachers in West Virginia were similar to the factors revealed in the review of literature that motivated teachers across the United States. The factors discovered in this research and the review of literature included: student achievements (Bruening & Hoover, 1991; Perie & Baker, 1997; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004), helping and educating students (Kim & Loadman, 1994), financial rewards (Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Watson & Hillison, 1991), professional brotherhood (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Kim & Loadman, 1994), personal goals and satisfaction (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kim & Loadman, 1994; & McCracken & Etuk, 1985), enjoyed teaching agricultural education (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 2004; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kim & Loadman, 1994; Perie & Baker, 1997; Watson & Hillison, 1991), administrative support (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990), challenges of teaching agricultural education (Cano & Miller, 1992a; Cano & Miller, 1992b; Castillo & Cano, 1999), and facilities (Jewell, Beavers, Malpiedi-Kirby, & Flowers, 1990; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004; Watson & Hillison, 1991).

Teachers are motivated to enter, and for the most part, continue in the teaching profession to help students. The three most frequently occurring motivational statements for beginning teachers included educating students ($n = 23, 45.1\%$), student achievements ($n = 23, 45.1\%$), and helping students ($n = 19, 37.3\%$). The three factors were also in the top five motivational factors listed by current teachers.

Teachers were motivated by the professional brotherhood associated with agricultural education. Eleven respondents (21.6%) indicated that professionalism was a motivational factor as a beginning teacher and nine respondents (17.6%) indicated it currently motivated them in their teaching position.

Teachers were often motivated in their early years by personal goals and determination. Eleven respondents (21.6%) indicated that personal goals and satisfaction motivated them as a beginning teacher. Five respondents (9.8%) indicated that determination motivated them as a beginning teacher.

Experienced teachers were more likely to be motivated by the challenges of teaching agricultural education than they were as beginning teachers. Eight respondents (15.7%) indicated the challenges of teaching agricultural education were a current motivation while only five individuals (9.8%) indicated the factor was a motivation as a beginning teacher.

Recommendations

Additional research should be conducted to determine the extent and describe the nature of each of the motivational factors. This could be accomplished by conducting case studies when the subjects could participate in a series of in-depth interviews. In addition school administrators and colleagues of the teacher would be interviewed. This would provide the researcher with detailed information of the factor and how the factor could be enhanced.

The population should be expanded beyond teachers in West Virginia. An organization such as the AAAE North Central Region's 5-Star Consortium could provide a vehicle for regional duplication of the research. This will allow the researcher to determine if similar trends exist in the region.

Information from the qualitative studies should be used to develop a quantitative study on the topic. Information learned during the qualitative phase would be valuable in developing hypotheses and a data collection instrument for an expanded quantitative version of the study (Ary et al., 2006).

Implications

The research in its current stage, as well as the advanced research included in the recommendation section, has wide spread implications for agricultural education teacher preparation programs. The content of teacher education programs, the inservice opportunities provided for current teachers, induction and/or first-year teacher programs, and coordination between state departments of education and teacher preparation programs could, and should, be impacted by the results of this and similar research.

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