

Middle School Agricultural Education Programs: Source of Growth or Area of Improvement

*John Rayfield
Barry Croom
North Carolina State University*

Introduction

According to the 10x15 Long-Range Goal for Agricultural Education, there will be 10,000 quality agricultural education that serve students through classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experience, and FFA programs by the year 2015. One avenue of potential growth is to create more middle school agricultural education programs. There are approximately 2000 middle school agriculture teachers in the United States. Of these, approximately 600 teach exclusively in middle schools (Camp, Broyles, and Skelton, 2002). The expansion of middle school agricultural education is a noble idea, but how do current middle school agricultural education teachers feel about the local, state, and national status of their programs? This study was conducted to get middle school agricultural education teacher's perspectives on potential areas of improvement at all program levels in regard to classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experience, and FFA activities.

Theoretical Framework

Erickson's Social-Emotional Development Theory is the basis for understanding adolescents in middle school. Erickson proposed that socialization is an eight-stage process with each stage arriving as the result of an internal need that must be met. Middle graders fall into Erickson's model at the fourth stage where they begin to master peer relations, cognitive skills in reading and math, and the complex rules associated with formal play and organized recreation. Erickson's fifth stage is just beginning as the child departs from middle school. It is characterized by a need to develop a unique identity (Croom, 2005). This theory helps clarify many of the programmatic concerns addressed by the teachers in this study.

Methodology

The researchers used the Delphi method to solicit responses from a panel of experts. According to Linstone and Turnoff (1975) "the Delphi technique may be characterized as a method for structuring a group so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals as a whole, to deal with complex problems" (p. 13). The population for this study was middle school agricultural education teachers from a state within the southern region of AAAE. Seventeen individuals replied to the initial survey. Dalkey (1969) stated that when the group size for a Delphi study is larger than 13, the reliability is greater than .80.

The participants were asked two open-ended questions: 1) What can be done on the local, state, and national levels to improve middle school agricultural education programs?
2) When looking at the 3 circle model for agricultural education, what improvements can be made for middle school agricultural education related to FFA, SAE, and classroom instruction? Responses were compiled and collapsed into similar categories.

Results

In addressing question one, the findings of this research show that middle school teachers believe much work can be done in the area of curriculum design and development. Some suggestions were development of curriculum for urban students, develop an introductory course for 6th graders, and make the curriculum more exploratory in nature. On a professional level, teachers thought it was important to educate school administrators on the importance of middle school programs. Concerns linked to the local system were increased class time, holding students accountable for their performance in middle school agriculture classes, lower class size, and students who are forced to take the class and have no interest in agriculture. Finally, these middle school teachers expressed their concern of facility issues related to their programs. These included designing classrooms for agricultural education, not for a science laboratory and many stated there was a need for better materials and equipment for their students to use.

When asked about improvements to middle school agricultural education as it relates to FFA, SAE, and classroom instruction, teachers had the following recommendations: create FFA events for urban middle school students, develop an on-line graduate course for middle school agricultural education teachers, make SAE and CDEs more middle school friendly, offer middle school proficiency awards, recognize 6th graders as National FFA members, financial support for FFA membership in low income areas, club time for FFA during school hours, develop an SAE shadow experience, create true middle school CDEs not watered down senior events, and provide more recognition at the regional at state level for middle school FFA participants.

Conclusions

Based on the finding of this study, the researchers have concluded that there are many issues facing middle school agricultural education teachers that warrant future study. Before the agricultural education profession proposes a growth plan that advocates the creation of many new middle school agricultural education programs, we should listen to the concerns of our existing middle school educators and work to fill in the gaps that are currently not being filled at the local, state, and national level related to FFA, SAE, and classroom instruction.

Implications/Recommendations

The implications for this study are huge in respect to meeting the long range goals of our profession. In order to achieve the goal of 10,000 programs, many school administrators will have to make decisions regarding the addition of agricultural education to their menu of career and technical education courses. With much of the proposed growth coming from middle school programs, how can we promote tremendous growth when there is much work to be done to the framework of middle school agricultural education? Future research is recommended to investigate methods of improving the middle school agricultural education curriculum and attempt to standardize a national curriculum. Further research is needed to explore new and innovative ways to improve SAE and FFA activities for our middle school audience.

References

- Camp, W.G., Broyles, T., & Skelton, N.S. (2002). *A national study of the supply and demand for teachers in agricultural education in 1999-2001*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Career and Technical Education.
- Croom, D.B. (2005). *The ideal middle school agricultural education program*. Alexandria, VA: A white paper for the National Council for Agricultural Education.