

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Agricultural Educator Perceptions of Job Attributes

Brooke Howell, University of Idaho
Anna Pratt, University of Idaho
Bishal Thapa, University of Idaho
Kasee L. Smith, University of Idaho

875 Perimeter Drive, MS 2040
Moscow, ID 83844
(208-885-6358)
klsmith@uidaho.edu

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Agricultural Educator Perceptions of Job Attributes**Introduction/Need for Research**

The number of open agricultural educator positions in the United States has exceeded the number of agricultural education graduates since 1980 (Blackburn, Bunch, & Haynes, 2017). The shortage has stemmed from a large number of retirements, but also from agricultural teachers leaving the profession before retirement age (Blackburn, et. al, 2017). Some of the noted reasons for leaving the profession include low self-efficacy, work-life balance, and burn out (Blackburn, et. al, 2017; De Lay & Washburn, 2013; Lemons, Brashears, Burris, Meyers, & Price, 2015). Positive work environments and professional relationships are factors that help teachers stay in their career for long term (Blackburn, et. al, 2017). Motivation to begin a teaching career can be linked to a passion for a subject, teaching seen as a socially important profession, and a desire to work with children (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014). Understanding why agriculture teachers choose to teach and why they choose to leave the profession can help agricultural education professionals in recruitment and retention efforts. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of current agricultural education teachers surrounding the positive and negative aspects of their careers.

Theoretical Foundation

Social cognitive theory was used as the theoretical foundation for this study. Bandura (2011) stated that human actions are based on the dynamic interaction between personal, environmental, and behavioral factors. Through this study, we examined the interaction between the personal and environmental factors related to being an agricultural educator, and the behavioral factor of resilience in the profession.

Methods

This qualitative case study employed the use of a focus group. Focus groups can help researchers conduct a discussion of more depth as participants build on topics initiated through other participants (Burgess-Allen & Owen-Smith, 2009; Morgan, 1996). Our study was reviewed and deemed exempt through the [University] IRB panel prior to recruiting participants. The population of this study were the agricultural education teachers in [State]. The focus group activity was held at the [State] professional agricultural educator organization summer in-service meeting. Participants included 91.8% of all [State] agricultural educators.

Participants were assigned to groups in order to diversify experience level, program size, and regions in the state within each group. Groups were asked to consider their answers to the following questions: what is the best part of being an agriculture teacher, and what is the worst part of being an agriculture teacher? Focused time was allotted for group discussion and groups summarized their conversations on large papers at the center of the table. Group responses along with researcher notes were collected, photographed, and transcribed into a digital format. Lofland and Lofland (1995) state that self-gathering, photography, and field notes are all methods of data collection with a focus group. A panel of three researchers individually completed open coding of responses. The research team then used axial coding procedures to group responses into central themes. Data were organized using Microsoft Excel.

Trustworthiness was established by maintaining field journals, recording onsite interactions, triangulating, and maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results/Findings

The question “what is the best part of teaching agriculture?” yielded 20 codes in the open coding process. The question “what is the worst thing about being an agriculture teacher” yielded 27 codes. Axial coding yielded three themes for the best part of teaching and five themes for the worst part of teaching.

What is the best part of teaching agriculture?

The first research question resulted in three emergent themes; being an educator, program characteristics, and working with students. Participants stated that having curriculum diversity along with SAE engagement and FFA experiences all made their job enjoyable, it was apparent that most groups considered the holistic. Being an educator was the second most popular theme. One participant stated that the most positive part of their job was “the firm belief in the value of what we do.” The professional relationships and networking were also noted as positive attributes. One participant group stated that a positive associated with their job was “the opportunity to network with other ag teachers around the state.” Teachers also noted the joys of working with students, specifically noting the opportunity to interact with students and a positive classroom environment as some of the best parts of their career.

What is the worst part of teaching agriculture?

There were five themes which emerged related to the negative aspects of being an agricultural educator. Negative administrative relations was the most prominent of these themes. Also noted were uncooperative and unmotivated students, a lack of time for family life, meeting community expectations, and workload. Respondents noted that all of the negatives were related to being unable to meet expectations at home and at work, or misalignment in the expectations of administrators and stakeholders. Specifically mentioned by all groups was the negative impact of paperwork on workload.

Conclusion, Implication, Recommendations

Lemons, et. al (2015) found that a major reason for attrition of secondary agricultural teachers are long hours, low budgets, and amount of work. This aligns with the findings of this study. Groups specifically noted “complexity of paperwork” and “time away from home” as some of the negative aspects of the profession. Professional teaching organizations and teacher educators can use this information in preparing new teachers and conducting continue education to help with the balance of workload.

State leaders can also use the information in this study to help recruit new teachers into the agriculture education profession. Highlighting the themes of positive publicity and salary and compensation, along with student success can help to encourage future agricultural educators. Using the information from this study to help early career educators can help to decrease the rate of attrition and help with the overall teacher shortage.

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