

SAE and Me

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Supervised agricultural experiences (SAEs) have long been identified as a critical component of agricultural education (Smith & Rayfield, 2016). According to the National Council for Agricultural Education (2017) an SAE is “a student-led, instructor-supervised, work-based learning experience that results in measurable outcomes within a predefined, agreed upon set of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (AFNR) Technical Standards and Career Ready Practices aligned to your Career Plan of study.” The lack implementation of SAEs has been a problem documented in agricultural education for many years (Dyer & Osborne, 1995; Retallick, 2010; Steele, 1997; Wilson & Moore, 2007). A lack of SAE knowledge by both the teacher and the student, a lack of student motivation to participate in SAEs, and a shortage of teacher time to supervise SAEs have all been cited as possible causes of low SAE participation (Lewis, Rayfield, & Moore, 2012; Osborne, 1988; Steele, 1997; Wilson & Moore, 2007). A wealth of quantitative research has been done in this area over the years to attempt to determine why there is a lack of SAE participation by students however, there has been little to no qualitative research on the subject.

Given the lack of SAE implementation, we examined SAEs through experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory is the combination of work from several researchers. They all generally require the learner to take part in a meaningful experience, reflect on the experience, and apply the knowledge gained to new situations (Dewey, 1938; Kolb; 1984). In order to gain a better understanding for why there continues to be a lack of SAE participation, qualitative research efforts must be made to go beyond what quantitative research has been able to provide (Lewis, Rayfield, & Moore, 2012). Given these recommendations for further research and the utilization of the reflection portion of experiential learning, the researchers probed deeper into the use of SAEs. The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth interview with a person who had an SAE in the past to identify factors that negatively impacted his/her SAE experience.

Methods

A qualitative, case study research approach was used to address the purpose of this study. A case study is an in-depth examination of a particular case, individual, program, project, or work unit and can be limited to one type of situation (Lichtman, 2014). Meta interview techniques were used for data collection in this case study because the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee affects the data (Lichtman, 2014). A semi-structured interview was most appropriate for this topic. For the sake of anonymity, the interviewee will be referred to as Daniel. The interviewee was selected because he had an SAE for the entirety of his secondary agricultural experience. To establish credibility analyst triangulation was employed where multiple analysts were used to interpret the data in an attempt to shed light on multiple interpretations of the data. An external audit was conducted by an expert in SAE research at [University] to establish dependability of the research methods in this study. Multiple researchers were involved in the design and data interpretation of this study to facilitate a reflexive research

design, adding confirmability to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interview was recorded and transcribed directly by the interviewee and analyzed by the researchers of this study.

Findings

Four main themes emerged as we reviewed the transcript from the interview. The first theme identified was a lack of student SAE knowledge. When Daniel was asked what barriers did you have with participation in an SAE in high school he said “For the longest time, I never even knew I had an SAE. I started agriculture classes and being involved with FFA in eighth grade. It wasn’t until I was a junior that I realized I even had one when my teacher said I should fill out a state degree application.” The second theme emerged as a lack of teacher supervision time when Daniel went on to say, “Once my teacher and I had the conversation about what SAEs were, she wanted to come see my operation, but she never did come.”

There was obviously some influence on SAE participation from the teacher, but we really wanted to know what some of the personal barriers were to participation. This led to the question “What were some personal barriers you had for participating in your SAE?” From this the third theme arose as a lack of student resources. Daniel said “Well I also wanted to show cattle, but I was stuck on a fish farm and doing fish stuff because that’s what my parents did. I told them I really wanted to show cattle, but they said we can’t afford to do that, and I needed to stay in school.” Another interesting comment from Daniel was “I really had no motivation to have an SAE. It wasn’t really talked about in ag class and I just happened to have one because I lived on a farm. It certainly wasn’t a requirement for class, but hey, I got my American Farmer degree, so I guess it all worked out!” From this statement the fourth theme emerged; a lack of student motivation.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The case study interview with Daniel gave the researchers a wealth of information, not only on barriers to SAE participation, but on themselves. The SAE for All initiative from the National Council for Agricultural Education (2017) stresses the importance of an individualized SAE project. This can only occur if a good relationship between the agricultural education teacher and the student is established with particular detail given to SAE. The themes of this study support the findings of previous studies in the quantitative realm in the areas of lack of student knowledge, lack of teacher time for supervision, and a lack of student motivation to participate (Lewis, Rayfield, & Moore, 2012; Osborne, 1988; Steele, 1997; Wilson & Moore, 2007). This study gives rich detail as to how these barriers came to be with Daniel.

Several recommendations for practice can be made from the findings of this study. Agricultural education teachers should always teach their students about SAEs in the classroom. If Daniel had known about the different opportunities available to him, he may have had a different outcome with his SAE. Making SAEs a course requirement is essential to gaining student participation. Recommendations for further research included expanding the case study to include several students who had successful SAE experiences and determining what made the experiences positive. Finding teachers who are excelling in SAE supervision and reporting their view point would also be helpful to the profession and agricultural education community.

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