

Advocating for Agricultural Education: The Lived Experiences of Secondary Teachers

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Introduction

Advocacy has been defined as the ability to work with a range of individuals to bring awareness to complex problems (Berke et al., 2010). As such, the underlying principle of advocacy is a desire to make a difference by improving the behaviors, policies, and practices that exist in society (Ezell, 2001). In agricultural education, advocacy efforts have become more critical in recent years because less than 2% of the U.S. population is now directly involved in agriculture (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2018). As a result, U.S. citizens are now less likely to support programs and policies that affect agricultural education (Kovar & Ball, 2013). Through advocacy, agricultural educators can seek to change attitudes, behaviors, the political process, and power imbalances in a variety of contexts (National Association of Agricultural Education [NAAE], 2020). To achieve this, however, requires that educators embrace advocacy as a professional responsibility and become *leaders* for their profession (LeJeune & Roberts, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Bond's (2011) theory of teacher leadership served as the theoretical framework used to guide this investigation. Through this lens, teachers seek to be proactive at the local, state, and national levels to drive positive educational change. In particular, teacher leaders use various approaches of advocacy to demonstrate support for a cause or policy. As a result, teacher leaders can influence change regarding: (a) institutional policy and practice, (b) public attitudes and behaviors, (c) the political process, and (d) power imbalances for marginalized groups (Bond, 2016). Because the issues and problems that affect agricultural education are ever-evolving, teacher leaders must be prepared to adapt and respond to various forces that could negatively impact the profession.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand secondary agricultural education teachers' lived experiences in regard to advocating for agricultural education. This investigation was based on the premise that if decision-makers do not see value in the discipline, they would be unlikely to support agricultural education in the future. As such, this investigation supported the American Association for Agricultural Education's National Research Priority 7: *Addressing Complex Problems* (Andenero et al., 2016). One research question guided the study: *What were the lived experiences of secondary agricultural education teachers in [State].*

Methodology

An interpretive qualitative approach was used to conduct this investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We also built Tracy's (2010) standards for qualitative quality into the design of this study to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. To collect data, we gathered written narrative responses from 113 participants, including 61 females and 52 males. Data were also triangulated using: (a) demographic questionnaires, (b) quantitative instruments using a Likert-type scale, and (c) other supporting documents.

In our analysis of the data, we employed Saldaña's (2016) analytic strategies by which we coded our data through two distinct phases of analysis. In our first cycle of coding, we used the

following coding approaches: (1) in vivo, (2) descriptive, and (3) values. Thereafter, we utilized axial coding to distill categories from our initial analysis and interpret our findings using Bond's (2011) theory of teacher leadership. As a result of our analysis of the data, four themes emerged.

Findings

From an analysis of the data, four themes emerged that represent secondary agricultural education teachers' lived experiences in regard to advocating for agricultural education: (1) agricultural education-based events, (2) involvement in political meetings and conversations, (3) advocating to and through students, and (4) community-based events.

In the first theme, participants reported specific events connected to agricultural student organizations, such as the FFA. These events included FFA Day at Capitol and The National FFA Convention. In particular, Participant #69 explained he brought his students to the state capitol and "to see them experience the legislative process in real life was rewarding for me." In the second theme, participants explained that their advocacy experiences were often as a result of participating in political meetings and conversations with elected officials. For instance, multiple participants mentioned they had previously met with the governor, local decision-makers, city council members, and other elected officials. At these events, they were able to talk "with legislators about program funding for agricultural education" (Participant #82) and "show...the importance of the FFA and how it produces well-rounded students" (Participant #12).

In addition to advocating to political officials, in the third theme, many secondary agricultural education teachers asserted that their most memorable experiences advocating involved interactions with their students. Participant #108 explained she "promote[d] ag daily in my classes to help students realize the importance of agriculture in our daily lives." In the final theme, participants mentioned that community awareness events were some of the most memorable experiences regarding the phenomenon of interest. Some of these experiences included "writing to newspapers" (Participant #80) about agricultural literacy as well as being able to advocate to "local industries, farmers, and business owners" (Participant #56).

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on the Profession

When analyzing this investigation's findings through Bond's (2011) theory of teacher leadership, four themes emerged. The themes provided a unique insight into the lived experiences of secondary agricultural education teachers in regard to advocating for agricultural education in [State]. Therefore, we conclude that participants' experiences could be explained through four primary sources: (1) agricultural education-based events, (2) involvement in political meetings and conversations, (3) advocating to and through students, and (4) community-based events. Going forward, we recommend that state agricultural education leaders and teacher educators create professional development opportunities focused on improving agricultural education teachers' ability to advocate for their profession. We also recommend that future research examine the various approaches that teachers use to effectively champion various issues and causes that may affect their local programs. Finally, we call for greater emphasis to be placed on helping teachers learn how to tell agricultural education's story in ways that motivate decision-makers to become allies for the profession.

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