

## PROBLEMS FACED BY HIGH SCHOOL AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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### Abstract

*If the agricultural education profession is going to grow and prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will need an adequate supply of qualified teachers. In 2001, however, the number of qualified potential agricultural education teachers actually seeking employment as teachers fell far short of the net number of replacements needed. Two contributing factors include qualified potential teachers fail to accept employment in the profession and many beginning teachers fail to remain in the teaching profession. One way to improve the number of qualified agricultural education teachers is to reduce the number of teachers who leave the profession early through attrition. The purpose of this study was to identify problems faced by beginning and current teachers of agricultural education. The research revealed 20 problem areas experienced by beginning and current teachers. The categories included administrative support, discipline, class preparations, time management, paperwork, facilities/equipment, community support, self-confidence, developing a course of instruction, budgets/funding, the reputation of the previous teacher, faculty relationships, undergraduate preparation, student motivation, guidance counselors, enrollment numbers, balancing school and home, university relations, special needs students, multi-teacher issues, image of agricultural education, financial rewards, and changes in FFA and agriculture.*

### Introduction

The projected shortage of elementary and secondary teachers in the United States has received considerable attention from the national media (Henke & Zahn, 2001). In spite of an increasing demand for and a decreasing supply of teachers, widespread predicted shortages have not materialized (Levine & Christenson, 1998). Teacher shortage problems, however, have been sporadic (Broughman & Rollefson, 2000; Croasmun, Hampton, & Herrmann, 1999). In 1993-94 virtually all of the teaching positions approved by public school districts were filled with suitable candidates (Henke, Choy, Chen, Geis, & Alt, 1997). While the overall supply of teachers in 1993-94 was adequate, shortages in specific locales and/or teaching fields resulted in districts offering cash bonuses to attract teachers (Henke et al., 1997). Even though the overall projected shortage of teachers has not occurred, many teachers are assigned to

teach classes for which they lack certification (Levine & Christenson). As a result of this practice, a shortage of certified teachers still exists.

Agricultural education has not been exempt from the teacher shortage. 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 et al., 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.).

Once teachers enter the workforce, they face a host of potential problems. The ability to deal with these problem situations often dictates the teacher's success or failure in their given profession. Considerable research has been devoted to the problem situations faced by classroom teachers. The list of problems faced by teachers include; salaries (Croasmun et al., 1999; Fox & Certo, 1999; Self, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), marital status (Croasmun et al.), low ability students (Farrington, 1980), student motivation (Farrington; Heath-Camp, Camp, Adams-Casmus, Talbert, & Barber, 1992; Self; Veenman, 1987), demands of young and adult farmer programs (Farrington; Miller & Scheid, 1984), balancing school and personal lives (Godley, Klug, & Wilson, 1985; Mundt & Connors, 1999), community support (Heath-Camp et al.; Mundt & Connors), management and organizational skills (Godley et al., 1985; Miller & Scheid; Mundt & Connors; Talbert, Camp, & Heath-Camp, 1994), student discipline (Godley et al.; Heath-Camp et al.; Karge, 1993; Self; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Talbert et al.; Veenman, 1987), administration support (Fox & Certo; Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, & Billingsley, 1995; Mundt & Connors; Self; Sultana, 2002; Veenman), facilities and equipment (Farrington; Heath-Camp et al.; Veenman), time management (Heath-Camp et al.; Mundt & Connors; Talbert et al.; Veenman), lesson planning (Heath-Camp et al.; Talbert et al.), recruiting students (Mundt & Connors), paperwork (Karge; Mundt & Connors; Veenman), parental relationships (Fox & Certo; Heath-Camp et al.; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Veenman), stress (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), and preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

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; 2003; Self, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Poor administrative support was also mentioned by many teachers leaving the profession (Fox &

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

If the agricultural education profession is going to grow and prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 decrease the number of teachers who leave the profession through attrition. Many teachers leave the profession because of problems they face in their teaching assignment (Fox & Certo, 1999; Gersten et al., 1995; Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004; Self, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999, 2002). In order to improve the retention of high school agricultural education teachers, the profession must continue to examine the problems faced by new and veteran teachers alike and address these problems through the preservice education program and/or teacher in-service. The purpose of this study was to identify the problems faced by beginning and current teachers of agricultural education in West Virginia.

### Review of Literature

The review of literature examined a number of areas including job satisfaction and problems to determine the body of knowledge associated with problems of agricultural education teachers. The components of job satisfaction, although indirectly, address problems of beginning and current teachers. For example, workplace condition factors/problems, such as administrative support, parental involvement, and teacher control over classroom were significant contributors to teacher satisfaction (Perie & Baker, 1997).

### *Job Satisfaction*

Agricultural teachers who are satisfied with their positions perceive themselves as effective classroom teachers (Bruening & Hoover, 1991). A number of studies have been completed on job satisfaction of agricultural education teachers. In a study of burnout among agricultural education teachers in Ohio, about 24% of the teachers strongly agreed and 68% agreed with statements indicating that they were satisfied with their jobs (Newcomb, Betts, & Cano, 1987). In a study of 76 beginning teachers in Illinois, Flowers and Pepple (1988) found agricultural education teachers to be moderately satisfied with their jobs.

Cano and Miller (1992) studied the job satisfaction of all secondary agricultural education teachers in Ohio. They found agricultural education teachers slightly to somewhat satisfied with each of five job satisfier factors. When all facets of the job were considered, the teachers were undecided about their job satisfaction. Seven years later Castillo, Conklin, and Cano (1999) found similar results with agricultural education teachers in Ohio.

### *Problems of Agricultural Education Teachers*

Farrington (1980) found that beginning teachers had moderate problems with the high number of students with low academic ability, adapting instruction for students with low academic ability, motivating students and keeping them interested, and coordinating the activities of an active young farmer organization. Participants in Farrington's research also rated planning and implementing programs for adults, making the focus of the agriculture program career preparation, and obtaining proper facilities and equipment as being close to a moderate problem. In a study of four-year agricultural education programs in Iowa, Miller and Scheid (1984) identified adult programs, occupational experience programs, program administration, and advising the FFA as areas of difficulties faced by agricultural education teachers. In a case study of three beginning teachers, Talbert et al., (1994) found a number of common themes in the teachers' experiences including student discipline, preparing for

several different classes, managing a laboratory, teacher isolation, student acceptance, time management, and lesson planning. Mundt and Connors (1999) studied state National Vocational Agricultural Teachers' Association Outstanding Young Member Award winners for 1995 and 1996. Participants rated managing the overall activities of the local FFA chapter; balancing professional and personal responsibilities and maintaining personal motivation and a positive outlook; building the support of faculty, counselors and administrators within the school system; recruiting and motivating students in agricultural education; using proper classroom management strategies and dealing with student discipline problems; building support from parents, organizations and adult groups within the community; and properly managing your time, completing paper work and meeting required deadlines as very important.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of the study was to examine the problems faced by agricultural education teachers in West Virginia. The primary objective was to develop and categorize a list of problems encountered by teachers of agricultural education during their first years in the profession as well as problems they are facing in their current teaching assignment. The following research questions provided direction for the study: 1) what were the problems faced by beginning teachers? 2) what were the problems agricultural education teachers currently face? and 3) are there differences in problems faced by beginning teachers and the problems faced by experienced teachers?

### **Methods/Procedures**

A qualitative research design was used to determine beginning and current problems 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,

Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). The population 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*

A questionnaire was developed that consisted of two open-ended questions. The first question asked the respondents to list five problems they encountered as a beginning teacher in agricultural education. The second question asked respondents to list five problems they were currently facing. Teachers who had taught three years or less were instructed to only answer the question dealing with beginning problems.

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 to establish the validity and reliability of the process. In stage three the data were summarized and interpreted. Copies of data from each step in the process have been maintained.

### **Results/Findings**

#### *Problems Experienced by Agricultural Education Teachers*

The responses to the open-ended questions on problems encountered as a beginning and current agricultural education teachers were analyzed. As the data were analyzed 24 categories emerged. The categories included administrative support, discipline, class preparations, time management, paperwork, facilities and equipment, community support, self-confidence, developing a course of instruction, budgets/funding, the reputation of the previous teacher, faculty relationships, undergraduate preparation, student motivation, guidance counselor issues, enrollment numbers, balancing school and home, university relations, special needs students, multi-teacher issues, mentorship, image of agricultural education, financial rewards, and changes in FFA and agriculture. Ten of the most frequently mentioned problems of beginning teachers and ten of the most frequently mentioned problems of current teachers were discussed. Problems of current teachers, not included in the beginning problem list, were discussed.

The number one problem for beginning teachers, as well as the number one problem teachers currently faced, was administrative support (Table 1). Twenty-four respondents (47.1%) indicated that administrative support was a problem as a beginning teacher. Twenty-three respondents (45.1%) indicated administrative support was currently a problem. Examples of the responses included "my administration was not interested in my program," "I did not receive support from my administration,"

“my administration did not understand my program,” “school policies made hands-on learning more difficult,” and “I experience a lack of communication with my administrators.”

Classroom discipline was the second most frequently mentioned problem (33.3%) for beginning teachers (Table 1). Discipline problems declined in importance for current teachers. Seven respondents (13.7%)

indicated discipline was one of the top five problems they currently face. Responses in this category included: “overall lack of discipline in their school,” “difficulty finding effective ways to handle discipline problems,” “flagrant actions by students were a problem,” “I was not prepared to handle major discipline problems,” and “senior students become lazy.”

Table 1  
*Beginning and Current Problems Experienced by Agricultural Education Teachers*

	Beginning Problem			Current Problem		
	Rank	<i>f</i>	%	Rank	<i>f</i>	%
Administrative support	1	24	47.1	1	23	45.1
Discipline	2	17	33.3	10	7	13.7
Class preparations	3	13	25.5	15	2	3.9
Time Management	4	12	23.5	3	18	35.3
Paperwork	4	12	23.5	4	16	31.4
Facilities and equipment	4	12	23.5	10	7	13.7
Community support	7	9	17.6	6	11	21.6
Budgets-funding	8	8	15.7	5	14	27.5
Developing a course of instruction	8	8	15.7		0	0.0
Self confidence	8	8	15.7		0	0.0
Faculty relationships	11	7	13.7	13	6	11.8
Reputation of the previous teacher	11	7	13.7	17	1	2.0
Student motivation	13	6	11.8	2	21	41.2
Enrollment numbers	13	6	11.8	9	8	15.7
Balancing school and home	13	6	11.8	10	7	13.7
Guidance counselor issues	13	6	11.8	13	6	11.8
Undergraduate preparation	13	6	11.8		0	0.0
Special needs students	18	3	5.9	7	9	17.6
Multi-teacher issues	18	3	5.9	17	1	2.0
University relations	18	3	5.9	17	1	2.0
Mentorship	18	3	5.9		0	0.0
Financial rewards	22	2	3.9	15	2	3.9
Image of agricultural education	22	2	3.9	17	1	2.0
Changes in FFA and agriculture	24	1	2.0	7	9	17.6

Thirteen respondents (25.5%) indicated that class preparations were a problem as a beginning teacher (Table 1). Only two respondents (3.9%) indicated that class preparations were a current problem. Problem statements included "I had too many class preparations per day," "I had too many laboratories to manage," "administration constantly changed the style of lesson plans required," "it was difficult to include hands-on activities in my lessons," and "it was difficult to prepare effective lessons."

Twelve respondents (23.5%) indicated that time management was a problem for them as a beginning teacher (Table 1). The time management problem increased in frequency as a current problem. Eighteen respondents (35.3%) indicated time management was a current problem. Respondent statements included: "I had difficulty finding the time to get everything done," "I was involved in too many FFA activities," "there was not enough time to teach all of the CSOs (Content Standards and Objectives)," "too often I failed to set priorities for tasks associated with my program," "I never have enough time to do everything I want," and "I had trouble knowing when to go home."

Twelve respondents (23.5%) indicated problems with paperwork as a beginning teacher (Table 1). The percentage of respondents who indicated paperwork was a current problem increased to 31.4%. The problems included; "the increased level of paperwork was a problem," "the level of paperwork was overwhelming," "I spent too much time doing paperwork," and "extended employment justification required too much paperwork."

Twelve respondents indicated that facilities and equipment (23.5%) were a problem as a beginning teacher (Table 1). The percentage of teachers who indicated facilities and equipment were a current problem declined to 13.7%. Problem statements included: "I did not have adequate teaching supplies," "inadequate facilities were a problem in my program," "I did not have the quality equipment needed for the program," "I did not have resources

needed to expand my program," "my facilities needed major improvements," and "I did not have access to adequate curriculum materials."

Community support was a problem for 17.6% of the respondents during their years as a beginning teacher (Table 1). The number of teachers (21.6%) indicating community support was a current problem increased slightly. Problem statements included: "anti-vocational sentiments reduced community support for my program," "cultural changes resulted in reduced support by parents," "I was not respected by local community leaders," and "the community did not support my program."

Budgets/program financing was a problem for 15.7% of the respondents during the beginning stages of their professional career (Table 1). The percentage of respondents that indicated budgets/program financing was a current problem increased to 27.5%. Respondents indicated the following problems: "there was inequity in the way funds were distributed in my school district," "budget cuts were a problem for my program," "the administration did not provide adequate financial support for my program," "there was little funding for equipment replacement," "financing FFA activities was a problem," and "fundraising for the FFA chapter was a problem."

Eight respondents (15.7%) indicated problems developing a course of instruction as a beginning teacher (Table 1). None of the respondents indicated the development of a course of instructions was a current problem. Beginning problems included: "I did not know what to teach," "I was not aware of the school area needs," "I experienced difficulty identifying units of instruction," and "my program was poorly conceived."

Eight respondents (15.7%) indicated self-confidence problems as a beginning teacher (Table 1). None of the respondents indicated self-confidence was a current problem. The problems included: "I felt inadequate in my knowledge of some aspects of agriculture," "I experienced problems 'establishing' myself as the new

teacher,” “I was concerned that my students knew more than I did in certain areas,” and “my lack of experience caused me to doubt my abilities as a teacher.”

The most frequently occurring problems for current agricultural educators in West Virginia included five problems that were not in the most frequently occurring problems of beginning teachers. The five problem categories not in the beginning problem list included “student motivation,” “enrollment numbers,” “balancing school and home,” “special needs students,” and “changes in FFA and agriculture.”

Twenty-one respondents (41.2%) indicated that student motivation was a current problem (Table 1). This was an increase from 11.8% of the respondents who indicated student motivation was a beginning teacher problem. Respondents indicated: “it was difficult to motivate students,” “students were apathetic about my program,” “students had a poor attitude toward learning,” “students had a poor attitude about the educational system,” and “students were reluctant to make FFA the number one priority.”

Eight respondents (15.7%) indicated that enrollment numbers was a current problem (Table 1). Six respondents (11.8%) felt that enrollment numbers was a problem as a beginning teacher. Problem statements included: “enrollment numbers were more important than student quality,” “state course requirements required me to ‘fight’ to maintain satisfactory enrollment in my program,” “I experienced overloaded classes because students were ‘dumped’ in my program,” “I experienced problems recruiting students into my program,” “too many students enrolled in classes were not interested in the program,” and “small enrollments forced me to combine two classes during the same class period.”

The number of respondents were about equal who felt balancing school and home was a beginning and current problem of agricultural education teachers (Table 1). Seven respondents (13.7%) felt that balancing school and home was a current problem while six respondents (11.8%) indicated it was a problem as a beginning teacher. The problems included: “creating a balance between my teaching career and my

family,” “creating a balance between my teaching career and graduate education,” “I did not have enough time for my family,” “I spent too much time at my job,” “I did not have enough time for a social life,” and “creating a balance between my teaching career and marriage.”

Dealing with special needs students was a current problem for nine respondents 17.6% (Table 1). Only three respondents (5.9%) indicated special needs students were a problem as a beginning teacher. Respondents provided the following problem statements: “inclusion was used for too many special needs students,” “too many special needs students were mainstreamed,” “I was not prepared to deal with special needs students,” “special education teachers expect special needs students to be ‘given’ grades,” and “my program was a dumping ground for special needs students with behavioral problems.”

### **Conclusions/Recommendations/ Implications**

#### *Conclusions and Discussion*

Administrative support was a major problem for agricultural education teachers in West Virginia. Nearly 50% of the respondents indicated administrative support was a problem for them as a beginning teacher. Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated they currently experience problems with administrative support. This situation was consistent with the findings of a number of researchers including Fox and Certo (1999); Gersten et al. (1995); Mundt and Connors (1999); Self (2001); Sultana (2002); and Veenman (1987).

Two areas closely associated with administrative support, facilities/equipment and budgets/funding, were also identified as problems by beginning and experienced teachers. Once again the findings from this study were consistent with the results of previous research (Farrington, 1980; Heath-Camp et al., 1992; Veenman, 1987).

Beginning teachers were likely to have problems in the area of student discipline. One-third of the respondents reported problems with student discipline. Respondents were more likely to experience

problems with discipline as a beginning teacher than their experienced counterparts. Discipline was identified in the literature as a problem teachers encounter (Godley et al., 1985; Heath-Camp et al., 1992; Karge, 1993; Self, 2001; Talbert et al., 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Veenman, 1987).

Respondents, particularly beginning teachers, struggled with class preparations and developing a course of instruction. Twenty-five percent of beginning teachers experienced problems with class preparations and over sixteen percent experienced problems with the development of a course of instruction. Lesson planning and preparation of a course of instruction were identified in the literature as problems teachers encounter (Heath-Camp et al., 1992; Talbert et al., 1994).

Both beginning and experienced teachers struggled with time management and paperwork. Nearly one third of the experienced teachers and one fourth of the beginning teachers listed both topics as problems. Time management (Heath-Camp et al., 1992; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Talbert et al., 1994; Veenman, 1987) and paperwork (Karge, 1993; Mundt & Connors; Veenman) have been identified in the literature as problems teachers encounter.

There was a group of four problem areas that were more prevalent for beginning teachers. Beginning teachers were more likely to have problems in the areas of self confidence, the mechanics and number of class preparations, preparing a course of instruction, and the reputation of their predecessor. To a lesser degree, beginning teachers were more likely to experience problems with discipline and facilities/equipment than experienced teachers.

#### *Recommendations*

Additional research should be conducted to determine the extent and describe the nature of each of the problems. This could be accomplished by conducting case studies where the subjects could participate in a series of in-depth interviews. In addition, school administrators and colleagues of the teacher should be interviewed. This would provide the

researcher with detailed information of the problem and how the problem could be resolved.

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. By adequately preparing teachers, at the preservice and entry levels, to handle the potential problems of agricultural education teachers, the profession can increase job satisfaction and reduce teacher attrition.

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