

Factors Associated with Developing an Understanding of SOEP as Perceived by Oregon Vocational Agriculture Teachers

Ray Herren, Assistant Professor
Lee Cole, Associate Professor
Agricultural Education
Oregon State University

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In recent years, much concern has been expressed by agricultural educators over the reduced emphasis on the supervised occupational experience programs (SOEP) in high school vocational agriculture programs. A California study revealed that teacher support of the vocational agriculture program was significantly related to student participation in SOEP (Leising, 1983). Harris and Newcomb (1983) found that in Texas quality of SOE was directly related to the teachers' view of the importance of occupational experience and to their attitude toward supervision of SOEP. A national study revealed that vocational agriculture teachers who have a more positive attitude toward SOEP have a higher proportion of students who conduct SOEP's (Reneau, Roider, Legacy & Stitt, 1984). Herren and Cole (1984) concluded that in Oregon there were philosophical differences concerning SOEP between teachers whose programs strongly emphasize SOEP and teachers whose programs do not. Assuming that the philosophy of SOEP is based on an understanding of the concepts underlying SOEP, it was concluded that a study was needed to determine where teachers develop their understanding of SOEP.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of the study was to determine the sources of Oregon vocational agriculture teachers' understanding of the concepts of SOEP. It was felt that once the factors most influential in developing an understanding of SOEP could be determined, instructional emphasis could then be placed on those areas resulting in more effective training in SOEP. Specific objectives were to determine:

1. The perception of vocational agriculture teachers regarding the importance of various factors in developing their understanding of SOEP.
2. What differences exist in the perceptions of the importance of various factors in developing an understanding of SOEP between vocational agriculture teachers trained in Oregon and those trained in other states.
3. What differences exist in the perceptions of the importance of various factors in developing an understanding of SOEP between vocational agriculture teachers who conduct strong programs in SOE and those who conduct weak programs in SOE.

Methodology

The population was the 125 vocational agriculture teachers in Oregon. A randomized sample of 95 teachers was selected to insure a sufficient observation in each of two groups that were selected based on the strength of the teacher's SOE program. Teachers were divided into the two groups based on data obtained from the instrument. Criteria for those in the "strong" program group were that (a) 70% or more of the

students in the program conducted SOE programs; (b) students were required to have an SOEP agreement; and (c) two or more visits were made per year to each student with an active SOEP. Criterion for the "weak" group was that 30% or less of the students in the program conducted an SOEP. The data were analyzed using the entire sample and also by stratifying the sample into two groups representing the "strong" programs and the "weak" programs.

An instrument was developed and tested for validity using a seven-member panel of experts consisting of teacher educators, graduate students and state department of education staff. The instrument was then field tested using current vocational agriculture teachers who were not a part of the study. An initial mailing and two follow-ups produced a 91% return. Since there was only a 9% non-response, bias from non respondents was not considered critical (Borg & Gall, 1979). The data were analyzed using t-tests, frequency counts and means.

Findings

Objective One

A nineteen-item segment of the instrument used a five-point graded scale to elicit the perception of the teachers regarding the importance of various factors in developing their understanding of the SOEP component of the vocational agriculture program. The scale used the following ranking: 1=did not contribute; 2=fairly important; 3=important; 4=very important; 5=extremely important. The factors perceived by the teachers in the sample as being the most important contributors to their understanding of SOEP were: (1) FFA awards program (proficiency awards, contests, etc.); (2) the vocational agriculture teachers' own high school SOE program; (3) observing other vocational agriculture teachers; (4) direct instruction or advice from other vo-ag teachers; and (5) following the example set at their student teaching center. The factors considered least important were: (15) State Department of Education supervision; (16) The Agricultural Education Magazine and other professional publications; (17) school administrators' advice and supervision; (18) local FFA Alumni advice and assistance; and (19) regional vocational coordinators' advice and supervision (see Table 1).

Objective Two

In order to determine if there were differences in the perceptions of vocational agriculture teachers trained in Oregon and those trained in other states, a t-test was administered to compare responses to all of the 19 items of the instrument. There were no significant differences found between the importance ratings of the 53 teachers trained at Oregon State University and the ratings of 33 teachers trained at 16 other universities across the nation.

Objective Three

To determine if differences exist in the perceptions of the importance of various factors in developing an understanding of SOEP between vocational agriculture teachers who conduct "strong" SOE programs and those teachers who conduct "weak" SOE programs, a t-test was administered comparing importance ratings on all of the 19 items. Thirty of the teachers in the sample were in the "strong" SOE program group, and 27 teachers were in the "weak" SOE program group. The remainder of the sample was not used as they represented an intermediate area between the "strong" program and the "weak" program. An analysis of the data

Table 1

Rank Order Listing of Means and Standard Deviations of Factors Associated with the Development of Understanding of SOEP

Rank	Item	Mean ^a	N	S.D.
1	FFA awards program	3.72	85	1.08
2	The teachers' own high school SOEP experiences	3.64	67	1.44
3	Observing other vo-ag teachers	3.58	85	1.13
4	Direct advice and/or instruction from other vo-ag teachers	3.52	86	1.03
5	Following example set at student teaching center	3.49	79	1.24
6	Conferences and conventions attended	3.42	82	1.12
7	Undergraduate classroom instruction	3.01	81	1.25
8	Local job descriptions/input from local employers	2.86	81	1.33
9	Following example set at junior block center	2.82	49	1.50
10	FFA promotional literature and program materials	2.81	83	1.11
11	Local advisory council advice and assistance	2.69	78	1.24
12	First- and second-year teacher visits	2.63	67	1.22
12	First-year teacher seminars	2.63	64	1.22
14	Graduate courses	2.53	74	1.09
15	State department of education supervision	2.37	62	1.24
16	Ag Ed Magazine & other professional publications	2.26	76	1.11
17	School administrators' advice and supervision	2.06	71	1.31
18	Local FFA alumni advice and assistance	1.71	44	1.24
19	Regional vocational coordinator's advice and supervision	1.62	61	1.05

^a1=Did not contribute; 2=Fairly important; 3=important; 4=Very important; 5=Extremely important.

revealed no significant differences between the two groups on any of the 19 items on the instrument.

Conclusions

1. The most important factors in determining an understanding of the importance of SOEP appear to be those of an informal nature such as FFA awards programs, the teacher's own high school SOEP and peer relationships with other vocational agriculture teachers. Formal course work on the undergraduate and graduate levels were not perceived as being very important.

2. Vocational agriculture teachers trained at Oregon State University and vocational agriculture teachers trained at other institutions have no disagreement as to which factors were most important in developing an understanding of SOEP.

3. Vocational agriculture teachers who conduct strong SOE programs agree with those vocational agriculture teachers who conduct weak programs as to the factors most important in developing an understanding of the importance of SOE programs.

Recommendations

1. Both the undergraduate and graduate courses at Oregon State University should be re-examined as to content concerning philosophies about the SOEP component of the vocational agriculture program. Since other vocational agriculture teachers seem to have such an important impact on the developing of an understanding of SOE, those teachers who conduct strong SOE programs should be used to provide classroom instruction on SOEP.

2. Since both conferences and peer teacher advice were rated as important, use should be made of vocational agriculture teachers who conduct "strong" SOE programs at summer conference in both formal and informal training sessions.

3. Since the second most important factor was found to be the teachers' own high school SOEP, emphasis should be placed on recruiting students into teacher preparation programs who were enrolled in high school vocational programs that strongly emphasized SOEP.

4. FFA award programs should continue to be closely related to SOE programs and thus continue to strengthen teachers' understanding of SOEP.

5. Since one of the top five factors involved in the development of the understanding of the concept of SOEP was the student teacher center, care should be taken to ensure that student teachers are placed in centers that conduct "strong" SOE programs.

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