

Competition as an Instructional Approach in School-Based, Agricultural Education (SBAE): A Historical Review

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the historical role of competition as an instructional approach in SBAE. Pragmatism was found to be the philosophical underpinning of competition in SBAE, and the influences of William James and John Dewey were described. The growth of new National FFA contests was presaged by seminal legislative acts such as the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, the Vocational Education Act of 1963, and by educational reforms in the 1980s. We also identified and discussed the challenges associated with using competition as an instructional approach. Based on the profession's longstanding concerns about competition at the expense of instruction, i.e., prizing winning over learning, it was recommended that SBAE's stakeholders continue to examine the educational merits of its competitive activities to revise, alleviate, or add such as may be needed.

Keywords: career and leadership development events; competition; federal legislation; FFA contests; pragmatism

Introduction

The history of SBAE is steeped with the tradition of youth engaged in competitions. The early success of agricultural youth participating in competitive judging events on state and national levels presaged the formation of what is known today as the National FFA Organization (Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2014; Tenney, 1977; Tummons, Simonsen, & Martin, 2017). The rich history of competition in SBAE grew amidst some ambiguity from scholars of educational psychology and other disciplines as to its value as an instructional approach (Dewey, 1900; Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1974; May & Doob, 1937). By the time of enactment of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917, many states had begun to form their own associations for pre-college students studying agriculture. Along with the promotion of vocational agriculture, a common objective for these junior farmer associations and young farmer clubs was to bring about social engagement for rural youth (Tenney, 1977). To accomplish this social objective, these organizations conducted cooperative events such as father-son banquets, leadership conferences, and activities modeled after adult farm organizations as ways for their members to develop leadership skills (Tenney, 1977). These events were accompanied by a variety of early competitions and award programs.

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One of the earliest examples of youth competition in agriculture emerged at the turn of the 20th century with corn club contests (Uricchio, Moore, & Coley, 2013). In addition, the popularity of statewide livestock and dairy judging competitions led to the first National Congress of Vocational Agriculture Students in 1926 at Kansas City, Missouri (Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017). The first congress included 1,524 boys from 22 different states (Tenney, 1977). Today, competition in SBAE is evident in career development events (CDEs), leadership development events (LDEs), supervised agricultural experience (SAE) awards, scholarships, livestock exhibitions, agricultural mechanics exhibitions, and FFA members holding leadership positions on local, state, and national levels. The National FFA Organization currently offers 19 national CDEs and seven LDEs, five levels of FFA degrees, six divisions of Agriscience Fair competition, four star awards, 47 proficiency awards, three levels of national chapter awards, and more than \$2.6 million in scholarships to its members each year (National FFA Organization, 2016, 2017). Competition in FFA continues to be popular among its members. A nationwide study by Talbert and Balschweid (2006) reported that 7 in 10 FFA members had participated in a CDE on some level.

The Educational Value of Competition

The educational value of competition as a motivational approach supporting student achievement is, and has been, a subject of debate among educational scholars for more than a century (Ames, 1981; Clifford, 1971; Deutsch, 1949; Dewey, 1900; Johnson & Johnson, 1974; May & Doob, 1937; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Leading up to World War II, the climate of social science research in the United States favored the ideals of individual achievement and competition, and cautioned against the notion of collectivism, and group activity. May's and Doob's (1937) work, as promulgated by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), pushed back against this sentiment:

Leaders of thought at the present time nearly all agree that the Western World competition has produced a rich technological culture which now, because of radically altered conditions, can be enjoyed by men only if they learn to displace the no longer productive competitive practices with the new, as yet only partially discovered, cooperative ways of living. (pp. 2-3)

However, May and Doob (1937) also recognized the merits of competition. They proposed that public schools in America were primarily a competitive system that brought about more efficient work and achievement in children, and named grades, examinations, seating arrangements, and school athletics as examples. On the other hand, to foster a more cooperative and cohesive society, John Dewey (1900) sought to promote a school and classroom environment inclined to cooperation. Dewey (1900) criticized the American ideal of competition and stated:

Indeed, almost the only measure for success is a competitive one, in the bad sense of the term – a comparison of results in the recitation or in the examination to see which child has succeeded in getting ahead of others in storing up, in accumulating, the maximum of information. (p. 29)

Moreover, according to Deutsch (1949), if a group or an individual in a purely competitive situation achieves its goal, a separate group or individual is unable to achieve all or some of its objectives. Deutsch (1949) granted that a purely negatively correlated competition was rare, and that competitive situations are complex. The complex nature of competition among different programs of SBAE, between individual students, among groups or teams of students, and by FFA chapters makes it difficult to measure its effectiveness as an instructional approach (Knobloch,

Brady, Orvis, & Carroll, 2016). It is important to note that most of the competitive activities in SBAE were designed to supplement classroom and laboratory instruction and offered to students on a voluntary basis, including career and leadership development events (National FFA Organization, 2017). The *National FFA Career and Leadership Development Handbook* (2016) stated:

National events should reflect instruction that currently takes place in the entire agricultural education program. . . . Events are intended to be an outgrowth of instruction. Also, it is appropriate for the national organization to develop events and awards that stimulate instruction in emerging areas that reflect both current and future community, national and global workforce needs. (p. iv)

Research applied to competitions in SBAE, particularly to CDEs, has measured the perceptions of students, of agricultural education teachers, of parents, and of administrators to examine perceived purpose and benefits, to explore coaching and recruitment strategies, and to assess students' motivations to participate (Ball, Bowling, & Bird, 2016; Croom, Moore, & Armbrister, 2009; Knobloch et al., 2016; Lundry, Ramsey, Edwards, & Robinson, 2015; Russell, Robinson, & Kelsey, 2009). An incomplete understanding of the intracurricular nature of FFA activities by the public, and perhaps even by the stakeholders involved in agricultural education, has clouded, or, in some instances, misrepresented the presumed educational value of such (Bell, 1985). An examination of the history of student competitions in agricultural education, including philosophical underpinnings, may bring to light their origin and evolution as an approach for supporting learning in SBAE and provide implications and recommendations for future application and research.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the historical role of competition as an instructional approach in SBAE. Three research questions guided this study: (a) What was the philosophical underpinning of competition as an instructional approach in SBAE? (b) What major events led to the growth of competitions as learning venues in SBAE? (c) What challenges have been identified with using competition as an instructional approach in SBAE?

Methods and Procedure

The research questions in this study were answered using historical research methods (McDowell, 2002). McDowell's (2002) principles for conducting historical research guided the methodology for this study. According to McDowell (2002), "historical research represents a systematic enquiry into the past and an attempt to separate true from [fictionalized] accounts of historical events, based upon the examination of a wide range of relevant source material" (p. 5).

Primary and secondary sources were collected through a variety of Oklahoma State University's online library databases. Key search terms included combinations of agricultural education, FFA, and vocational agriculture paired with the terms career development events, competition, contests, judging events, and leadership development events. Primary sources included National FFA convention proceedings, the *Official FFA Manual*, the National FFA Organization's official Web site, National FFA Organization archival records and photographs, and archived articles from *The Agricultural Education Magazine*. Secondary sources included peer-refereed journal articles, books from selected philosophers, and books about agricultural education and the National FFA Organization. The sources were subjected to external criticism for authenticity and internal criticism for accuracy (McDowell, 2002). The manuscript was initially

prepared as an outline draft to organize the sources of data into thematic subjects that addressed the research questions. The outline served to organize the sources in a chronological sequence (McDowell, 2002).

Findings

Research Question #1 – What was the philosophical underpinning of competition as an instructional approach in SBAE?

Even though studies on the effectiveness of competition in education have produced ambiguous results (Johnson & Johnson, 1974; Johnson & Johnson, 1994), American culture, especially in the public school system, has been described often as *competitive* (Dewey, 1900; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; May & Doob, 1937). Early instructional approaches for youth in vocational agriculture were no exception (Stimson, 1933; Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017).

Grounded in Pragmatism

The origins of competitions for youth in agricultural education were based on the philosophical perspective of pragmatism (Berry, 1924; Croom, 2008; Howe, 1910; Stimson, 1933; Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Uricchio et al., 2013). Vocational education in the early 20th century concentrated on skill acquisition and solving real-world problems to supply a more prepared workforce, including human capital for the agriculture sector (Talbert et al., 2014). Rufus Stimson (1933), father of the home project method, and a student of William James at Harvard University, described how he believed James would have viewed the early learning approaches to agricultural education:

How James would have gloried in the rich resources now to be found in our projects and other supervised practice, in our ‘related’ laboratory and field trip studies; our automobile and other farm shop work; our judging practice and contests; our freehand and scale drawing; our public speaking preparations and contests; our thrift work; our whole program of FFA self-educative activities. (p. 100)

Stimson and Lathrop (1954) credited the work of William James and John Dewey for their influence on early vocational agriculture programs’ pragmatic approaches to instruction through projects and problem solving. Although he was a critic of competition in schools, Dewey (1910) considered the development of good judgment a fundamental aim of education:

To be a good judge is to have a sense of the relative, indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation; to know what to let go as of no account; what to eliminate as irrelevant; what to retain as conducive to outcome; what to emphasize as a clue to the difficulty. This power, in ordinary matters, we call *knack, tact, cleverness*; in important affairs, *insight, discernment* [emphasis in the original]. (p. 104)

It was through home projects, contests, and judging events that young boys and girls were able to develop their abilities to assess and evaluate differences, and make reasoned decisions (Berry, 1924; Howe, 1910; Uricchio et al., 2013). In the early 20th century, boys’ and girls’ agricultural clubs grew in popularity throughout rural America. Competitions related to useful skills such as growing corn and fruits, canning, or bread-making were used to motivate youth to improve their skills in farming and homemaking (Eaton, 1994; Howe, 1910; Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Uricchio et al., 2013). Berry (1924) promoted student demonstrations such as culling hens, egg grading, soil testing, tool sharpening, as well as the handling and storage of agricultural products.

Uricchio et al. (2013) reported that the first documented corn club was established during 1900 in Illinois with the goal of improving meeting attendance at farmers' institutes, however, the greatest impacts were increased corn yields and making real-world connections to the public school curriculum. Seaman A. Knapp, the father of Extension, helped to systematically grow the corn club movement as an agent in the Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work division of the United States Department of Agriculture (Uricchio et al., 2013). According to Knapp (1910), "my ideal of education is that of practical sense, leadership. Get that sense into a boy and he will take up farming" (p. 6).

Layton S. Hawkins (1919), a former member of the Federal Board for Vocational Education, authored what is now known as the FFA motto: "Learning to Do. Doing to Learn. Earning to Live. Living to Serve" (p. 137). Hawkins's (1919) motto reflected a pragmatic philosophical view that would be adopted as one of FFA's most prominent and enduring traditions, and was evident in students' home projects, contests, and community service activities. According to Talbert et al., (2014) "it reflects the pragmatic philosophy of work prevalent when C. H. Lane, the first National FFA Advisor, recommended it to the National FFA Convention delegates" (p. 400).

Central to all of the early contests and judging events was the intent to support vocational agriculture instruction, with the specific aim of linking school life to home life and to the real world (Croom, 2008; Hummel & Hummel, 1913; Johnson, 1948; Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017; Uricchio et al., 2013). Tuttle (1914), a Cornell University professor of rural education, described the early agricultural competitions for boys and girls in New York:

Since the fundamental purpose of this competitive work is the development of boys and girls through the doing of practical things, it constitutes a real part of the educational life, and as such should be organized and directed by the established educational authorities. (p. 110)

Similar to home projects and experiments, contests were used as a way to expose students to challenging problems, hard work, and skill development (Hummel & Hummel, 1913). Howe (1910) described how the value of vocational agriculture courses in public schools appeared to be magnified by activities associated with the early youth-focused, agricultural clubs:

Setting aside the question whether boys' and girls' agricultural clubs may eventually be superseded by more permanent organic developments in general public education, they have at least an undoubted value at the present time and seem to be an important, if not necessary, link in the evolution toward a more efficient educational system. (pp. 6-7)

One objective of corn clubs was to aid teachers and their school systems as an educational approach to improving rural life (Uricchio et al., 2013). Uricchio et al. (2013) concluded that the clubs' "objectives included a need to provide vocational training for boys, encourage more scientific farming methods, vitalize public education in rural areas, and foment public interest in agriculture" (p. 233).

Research Question #2 – What major events led to the growth of competitions as learning venues in SBAE?

The timeline marking growth in the number of competitions in SBAE, known for decades as *contests*, can be characterized by an initial period of rapid growth, followed by an extended interval with little change, and a steady increase in their number during the last 40 years. Table 1

provides a summary of the year each national contest was first held at a National FFA Convention according to the respective convention's proceedings. Also included are the initial five contests that originally took place at the National Congress of Vocational Agriculture Students in the 1920s (Tenney, 1977; see Table 1) before the establishment of FFA. The first public speaking contest was added in 1930, and the next contest, agricultural mechanics, was not added until 42 years later (see Table 1). Six new contests were added in the 1970s, one in the 1980s, eight in the 1990s, and six from 2000 to the present (see Table 1).

Table 1

Chronological Emergence of Contests and Career and Leadership Development Events in SBAE

Original name	Current name	Year initiated
Dairy cattle judging ^a	Dairy cattle management and evaluation	1925
Livestock judging ^a	Livestock evaluation	1926
Meats judging ^a	Meats evaluation and technology	1926
Milk quality and dairy foods ^a	Milk quality and products	1926
Poultry judging ^a	Poultry evaluation	1926
Public speaking	Prepared public speaking	1930
Agricultural mechanics	Ag technology and mechanical systems	1972
Horticulture ^b		1974
Farm business management	Farm and agribusiness management	1976
Floriculture	Floriculture	1979
Nursery/landscape	Nursery/landscape	1979
Extemporaneous contest	Extemporaneous public speaking	1979
Forestry contest	Forestry	1985
Agricultural sales	Agricultural sales	1991
Parliamentary procedure	Parliamentary procedure	1992
Marketing plan project	Marketing plan	1993
Horse contest	Horse evaluation	1994
Food science and technology	Food science and technology	1997
Agricultural issues forum	Agricultural issues	1997
Environment and natural resources	Environmental and natural resources	1999
Creed speaking	Creed speaking	1999

Agricultural communications	Agricultural communications	2000
Dairy handlers activity	Dairy handlers activity	2000
Agronomy	Agronomy	2001
Job interview	Employment skills	2001
Veterinary science	Veterinary science	2012
Conduct of chapter meetings	Conduct of chapter meetings	2017

Note. Information retrieved from the National FFA Organization (2016); National FFA Convention Proceedings 1931 to 2012; and Tenney (1977). ^aThese contests preceded the establishment of FFA. ^bThe Horticulture contest was discontinued in 1979.

Smith-Hughes Act and the National Congress of Vocational Agriculture Students

As the popularity of boys' and girls' agricultural clubs continued to increase, the first major event that led to the growth of contests in SBAE occurred with the enactment of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. The Smith-Hughes Act provided federal funds for the preparation of teachers in vocational agriculture (Stimson & Lathrop, 1954). With funding and training for the formal teaching of agriculture in public schools, interest in contests for vocational students subsequently grew. Prior to establishment of the National FFA Organization, many states began to host judging contests for students in the early decades of the 20th century. A variety of vocational agriculture clubs for youth and state associations formed across the country in states such as Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York (Tenney, 1977). These organizations hosted meetings, service activities, as well as leadership training and judging events (Tenney, 1977). Statewide judging events took place in Alabama and Virginia as early as 1919 (Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017). C. H. Lane chaired a committee tasked with organizing the first national dairy contest for vocational youth to take place during the National Dairy Show at Indianapolis, Indiana in 1925 (Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Tummons et al., 2017).

In 1926, the American Royal hosted more than 2,000 registered boys and girls in 4-H and vocational education, of which 1,300 participated in the first national livestock judging contest for youth in agriculture (Tummons et al., 2017). The immediate success of judging contests at the National Congress of Vocational Agriculture Students in 1926 demonstrated a nationwide interest in competitions for agricultural youth (Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017). Stimson and Lathrop (1954) described the popularity of judging contests: "1928 is chiefly notable as the year when judging and judging contests as activities of high school agriculture pupils reached their zenith" (p. 46).

The National Congress sponsored the National FFA contests until 1936. The National FFA Convention of 1936 hosted what was referred to as National Contests for Students of Vocational Agriculture (Tenney, 1977). Tummons et al. (2017) described the important role that judging events from the National Congress, along with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 and various boys' and girls' clubs, played in formation of the National FFA Organization as well as the establishment of lasting traditions that still exist today. According to the minutes of the first National FFA Convention in 1928, the second item for the national program of work was to "encourage and foster national judging contests" (Groseclose, 1929, p. 9).

Rise of Competition and Achievement Ideals

In response to the popularity of cooperative education advocates such as John Dewey and later William Heard Kilpatrick, a concerted effort from business groups, including Du Pont, General Motors, and U.S. Steel Corporation, countered with their own campaign in favor of individual achievement as their interpretation of the *ideal American way of life*. In the Depression era, major business groups, such as the American Liberty League, formed in 1934, and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), rose to prominence as they promoted the approach of interpersonal competition to educators. The approach gained momentum in the 1940s and 1950s and was eventually considered a traditional form of student-to-student interaction by the 1960s (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). In other words, *Social Darwinism*, or *survival of the fittest*, became a popular ideal in many public schools (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; May & Doob, 1937; Pepitone, 1980).

World War II and the years leading up to it may have fostered a cultural norm that emphasized production and results, rather than the attainment of knowledge. The educational trend continued to be focused on student success and achievement (Pepitone, 1980; Smith, 1944). To this point, Pepitone (1980) concluded “the suddenness of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the later American involvement in diverse theaters of war required that large masses of people be immediately readied and assigned to different service branches and governmental agencies” (p. 17). Except for public speaking, National FFA contests were halted during the war and resumed in 1947 (Tenney, 1977). A period of more than 40 years without any new contests on the national level occurred from 1930 until 1972 (National FFA Organization, 2015; Tenney, 1977; see Table 1). One explanation for this gap may have been a lack of funding during the Great Depression era, and the greater priority of mobilizing resources toward the war effort. According to Tenney (1977), “one of the major problems faced by the FFA in the administration of awards and contest programs was obtaining funds for appropriate awards on the national, state and local levels” (p. 132). More financial support arrived with formation of the National FFA Foundation in 1944 (Tenney, 1977). As more funds appeared from sponsorships, award programs such as the National FFA contests continued to increase. As of 1977, \$104,199 was allocated by the National FFA Foundation for national contest awards (Tenney, 1977). In addition, flexibility on the use of federal funds was extended by the Vocational Education Act of 1947, which also provided teachers the ability to supervise off-campus FFA activities by supporting their travel (Croom, 2008; Hawkins, Prosser, & Wright, 1951).

Vocational Education Act of 1963

Another milestone event that contributed to the growth of FFA contests was the Vocational Education Act (VEA) of 1963 (P.L. #88-210), which formally expanded the scope of vocational agriculture to include off-farm agricultural occupations and enterprises (National Research Council [NRC], 1988). The act’s declaration of purpose stated that people, including high school students, “will have ready access to vocational training or retraining which is of high quality, which is realistic in the light of actual or anticipated opportunities for gainful employment” (VEA, 1963, p. 403). Rather than funding programs of vocational education from earmarked grants, going forward vocational agriculture had to compete for funds with seven other occupational areas, and labor market projections would dictate state funding allocations (NRC, 1988).

The response from agricultural education administrators to the 1963 act was largely positive. The April and July issues of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* featured the themes “Guidance for off-farm occupations” (Woodin, 1964a, p. 217), and “Our Place in Vocational Education” (Woodin, 1964c, p. 1), respectively. Bunten (1964), a former state supervisor of vocational agriculture in Nevada and member of the National FFA Board of Directors, stated: “The new legislation has removed the barrier of training for off-farm, agriculture-based occupations. It

has opened up a whole new vista of vocational education in agriculture” (p. 4). Woodin (1964b) asserted that “the passage of the National Vocational Education Act of 1963 represent[ed] a great milestone in vocational education. Through its provisions vocational education will be made available to more people in a more complex world of work” (p. 172). In the case of North Carolina, Bullard (1964) described a new curriculum plan for vocational agriculture that included upper level courses in agricultural business, agricultural mechanics, and ornamental horticulture to appeal to the growing number of students seeking off-farm occupations. FFA membership exceeded 400,000 for the first time after 1964 (Tenney, 1977). In the 12 years after the enactment of the Vocational Education Act of 1963, national contests would be added regarding agricultural mechanics, horticulture, and farm business management (Tenney, 1977; see Table 1).

Education Reforms of the 1980s

A movement toward improving public education came in the wake of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* report’s release (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). The report criticized U.S. public education for its increasing mediocrity, and made suggestions to lengthen school days, reform course requirements for graduation, and return focus to basic skills and subjects (NCEE, 1983; NRC, 1988). It also set in motion an education reform movement, which brought about a shift in the philosophy and identity of what was known then as vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America (NRC, 1988).

More emphasis on students attaining basic employment competencies was fomented by enactment of the Carl Perkins Act of 1984, which included “problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial development and attitudes, and practical applications of scientific concepts and experimental methods,” as benchmarks for success in vocational education (NRC, 1988, p. 59). The National Council for Agricultural Education (NCAE) was also formed in 1984 to develop strategies for SBAE with leadership from agricultural education instructors, administrators, teacher educators, and other stakeholders (Case & Whitaker, 1998; NCAE, 2015). S. J. Gartin (1985) called for FFA contests to be evaluated and updated to reflect the growing variety of students’ interests and occupational goals, and also suggested that contests, as an outgrowth of instruction, should be reviewed and changed in the same manner as curriculum. Smith (1987) reported that the National FFA contests had been operating without any educational objectives or administrative criteria for adding, changing, or continuing specific events. Smith (1987) also recommended more research on the effectiveness of contests as instructional tools, and that the National FFA Board of Directors approve any objectives or criteria for such, and related information made available to interested stakeholders.

In 1988, the NRC specifically addressed the instructional goals and necessary policy changes needed for SBAE with its publication *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education*. The Council’s report set forth recommendations for SBAE to teach both vocational agriculture and agricultural literacy to address changing student demographics, challenges in the agriculture industry, and the rapid growth of technology in agriculture (NRC, 1988). The Council found that much of the instruction focused on training for employment in production agriculture was outdated and largely unchanged since passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (NRC, 1988). The Council also criticized the tendencies of many vocational agriculture teachers to make production-oriented FFA contests and awards a higher priority than providing high quality classroom instruction (NRC, 1988). The NRC (1988) further recommended:

The FFA should revise the nature, focus, and award structure of its contests and activities to open more new categories of competition in areas outside production agriculture; reduce

the number of production-oriented activities and programs; attract minorities and girls . . . ; and minimize absences and conflicts with regular school programs. (pp. 44-45)

The May 1989 issue of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* featured the theme “The Profession Reacts” with multiple articles addressing the NRC’s (1988) report. Zurbrick (1989) stated: “It would certainly seem that the time is right to take a look at the total agricultural education program and make significant adjustments to meet the emerging needs of our changing clientele” (p. 3). Cox, McCormick, and Miller (1989) pointed to a transition needed from strictly occupational-based instruction toward a more holistic view of SBAE. Cox et al. (1989) stated: “There appears to be surfacing a new broadened mission of agricultural education—a mission which now addresses ‘agricultural education’ in lieu of only ‘vocational education’ in agriculture” (p. 9). In support, Moore (1989) asserted “the FFA is considered sacred by many agricultural educators, yet it has undergone numerous changes in the past. . . . The changes in the past to the FFA have been beneficial; the changes suggested in the future should also be beneficial” (p. 18). The NRC’s recommendations signaled the many changes soon to come for FFA and its contests.

Further Growth and Changes

The delegates at the 1988 National FFA Convention voted in favor of several constitutional amendments that would update the organization’s image, most notably changing the official name from “Future Farmers of America” to “National FFA Organization” and “vocational agriculture” to “agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 1988). The 1994 convention proceedings made the first official reference to contests as “Career Development Events” (National FFA Organization, 1994). At the national convention held in 1995, the committee on career success activities recommended a CDE mission statement and provided this example text: “The purpose of Career Development Events is to enhance members’ skills necessary for their lifelong endeavors and to allow them to gain abilities to enhance career success” (National FFA Organization, 1995, p. 58). Eight new CDEs were added in the decade after the NRC’s report, and many focused on leadership skills and competencies for employment, including agricultural issues forum, agricultural sales, marketing plan, and parliamentary procedure. The 2017 convention would mark the first year contests were referred to as Career Development Events *and* Leadership Development Events, and the conduct of chapter meetings LDE was to be offered (National FFA Organization, 2016).

Research Question #3 – What challenges have been identified with using competition as an instructional approach in SBAE?

No shortage of criticism was directed at the competitions experienced by youth in SBAE over the years. Early organizers warned against their misuse and potential adverse effects such could have on youth development. Liberty Hyde Bailey (1915) cautioned against the dangers of agricultural contests, and especially with students’ ownership of work and reward structures: “The fundamental consideration is that all this kind of work is educational. . . . The primary consideration is the effect on the child” (Bailey, 1915, p. 302). Eaton (1994) also described some of the challenges:

However, boys’ and girls’ clubs were sporadically established and ‘learning by doing’ under the stimulus of competition was mainly employed. Many of the contests held before 1900 for rural youth were scattered and lasted for a year or two. There was no emphasis on continuity of effort. (p. 11)

According to S. A. Gartin (1985), “among professionals of agricultural education, there is probably no issue that arouses more vigorous discussion than whether contests are a value to the vocational agriculture program” (p. 4). Much of the controversy was associated with the effects of competition taking priority over instruction. Teachers and teacher educators highlighted the hazards of competition in SBAE over many decades (Bell, 1985; Bunger, 1948; Deyoe, 1948; Dillingham, 1976; Gadda, 1978; Johnson, 1948; Key, 1977, 1978; Mayfield, 1978; Schumann, 1977; Wilson, 1958). Bunger (1948) acknowledged the controversy surrounding contests in vocational agriculture, criticized their inconsistent objectives across local, state, and national levels, and asserted that “[i]f the present rate of emphasis continues to be placed on contests there is extreme danger that they will become an end in themselves and will not serve as an intended means to an end” (p. 183).

However, Bunger (1948) praised the award system used by National FFA contests, and by many states at that time, of rating teams and individuals rather than providing a numerical ranking. He suggested that all local and state contests follow a rating system to eliminate the adverse effects of competition and instead promote skill development and competence. Johnson (1948) also acknowledged that “the value and justification of contests as a part of our educational program in vocational agriculture has been questioned on numerous occasions” (p. 76). And Johnson (1948) added:

. . . in these . . . contests is the tendency to highlight the winning team in each contest to the degree that some teachers, some administrators, and portions of the public assume that winning contests is the chief criterion of success for a teacher or department. (p. 75)

In perhaps the most outspokenly negative view of competition, Wilson (1958) called for the elimination of all contests in vocational agriculture and listed 19 problems resulting from competitions, including too much time away from instruction, lower motivation for learning, dishonest practices, and the neglect of students not participating. Wilson (1958) continued: “Contests are in opposition to the objectives of FFA. One of the major objectives is to foster cooperation . . . yet there are few if any national or state activities that promote cooperation. . . . One supervisor said, ‘we cooperate to hold contests’” (p. 198). In the same issue of *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, Gray (1958) countered this argument and promoted the value of contests, but also addressed the issues he viewed as problematic, i.e., too many contests existed for one teacher to train students, and the selection of team members meant the exclusion of other students.

Dillingham (1976) promoted the practice of ethical behavior, and criticized instructors who abused the rules for competitions: “As you examine your vocational agriculture organization at the local, district, area, state or national level you will find the individual rare indeed who has not bent to the temptation of taking a short-cut through dishonest effort” (p. 183). Schumann (1977) reproved the practice of teaching only a select few team members in a class, and leaving the remaining students with “busy work” (p. 55). According to Schumann (1977), “the contest should be the means to an end, and not an end in itself. It should be part of a well-organized program of vocational agriculture and should contribute toward the accomplishment of the overall program objectives” (p. 65).

Key (1978) recognized the controversy associated with too much competition and the “monster” (p. 52) that creates for a teacher. Mayfield (1978) claimed “the problem is that the noteworthy objective is sometimes lost because of Lombardi’s ‘winning is the only thing’ philosophy. Contests were designed as an educational tool; winning was secondary. The priorities today, however, may be reversing” (p. 54). Mayfield (1978) described three major categories of instructors in terms of approaches to teaching and training for contests. The *fervent coach* has a

win at all costs philosophy and is primarily concerned with winning trophies; their “students believe they are enrolled in judging class” (Mayfield, 1978, p. 54). The *active coach* incorporates contest material into classroom instruction, but additional work takes place after class, and learning is the highest priority. The *passive coach* rarely takes part in competition, and his or her teams are often unprepared (Mayfield, 1978). Another point of concern for contests was the amount of instructional time lost due to their pursuit. Deyoe (1948) argued against the excessive time spent on contests for questionable purposes: “[T]hey generate interest in the participant and capture the attention of the public. However, this may be, we are not justified in spending a lot of effort and time on these activities solely for these purposes” (p. 75). And Mulcahy (1998) cautioned that the “tail should not wag the dog” (p. 13), i.e., FFA events such as CDEs should not take precedence over providing a comprehensive program of SBAE.

Key (1977) also described how the abuse of contests and related preparations can lead to students performing poorly in school. Herren (1984) found that the 1981 National FFA Livestock Judging contestants and their advisors reported an average of 48.5 practice sessions, and 9.34 contests in which they had participated that year. Herren (1984) concluded that, although most teams did not spend extreme amounts of time dedicated to contest preparation, the top placing teams reporting as many as 200 practice sessions and 42 contests “may have [had] difficulty carrying out a well-rounded program” (p. 19). Bell (1985) also opposed the gratuitous amount of time that contests pulled students and teachers away from instruction. Moreover, Bell (1985) noted the often misunderstood intracurricular design of FFA within vocational agriculture instruction:

If the intracurricular nature of FFA in the vocational agriculture/agribusiness program is such and [an] explicitly stated aim, why do public school administrators and the public view student participation in FFA contests in a similar perspective as students participating in extracurricular athletic and/or music contests? (p. 5)

Contests in SBAE were originally established to *support instruction* in the classroom and laboratory. In accord, Johnson (1948) stated “[agricultural] educators are pretty well agreed that contests should be an outgrowth and a part of organized instruction that aids the student to become established successfully . . .” (p. 76). Gray (1958) touted the value of contests in regard to motivating students toward the instructional goals of vocational agriculture. Further, Spell (1978) promoted contest curriculum for use in instruction, given that all students are involved and the lessons motivate students to learn. In addition, Gadda (1978) called for instructors to connect contests to specific employment opportunities, and said that “merely to conduct a competitive activity without a clear notion of how it contributes to the development of occupational competencies is sheer folly” (p. 55).

Conclusions

The use of competitions in SBAE as an instructional approach was grounded in the philosophical perspective of pragmatism. Early founders and influential figures in SBAE and FFA credited scholars such as William James and John Dewey as inspiration for their pragmatic approaches to instruction, including the use of competitions (Berry, 1924; Getman, 1932; Hawkins et al., 1951; Stimson, 1933; Stimson & Lathrop, 1954). Contests began as a way to provide youth with authentic experiences in making decisions, solving real-world problems, and improving their farming practices (Berry, 1924; Howe, 1910; Uricchio et al., 2013). Contests preceded formation of the National FFA Organization and have maintained a prominent position among the many traditions of SBAE (Stimson & Lathrop, 1954; Tenney, 1977; Tummons et al., 2017).

After enactment of the Smith-Hughes Act, the first national contests for youth in vocational agriculture were judging events hosted by the National Congress of Vocational Agriculture Students (Tummons et al., 2017). With the exception of public speaking in 1930, no new contests were added to the original five that preceded the organization's founding until more than 40 years later (see Table 1). Several historical events led to the growth of student opportunities in SBAE, including a larger variety of National FFA contests. For example, a number of new contests were established in the years following federal legislative acts such as the Vocational Education Act of 1963 and the Carl Perkins Act of 1984 (NRC, 1988; VEA, 1963). Educational initiatives and stakeholders' support for SBAE also fomented the growth of new FFA contests. For instance, formation of the National FFA Foundation in 1944 and the NCAE in 1984, as well as release of the NRC's study *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education* were seminal events that presaged periods of considerable growth in FFA contests. Changing their names from *Contests* to *Career Development Events* signaled efforts to update the labeling, and, in some cases, content and standards of competitive activities to meet the needs of students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and interests while also addressing significant shifts in the nation's agriculture sector (Crabtree, 1998; National FFA Organization, 1994).

Competitions for youth in agriculture were met with challenges and criticisms early in their formation (Bailey, 1915; Eaton, 1994). The hazards associated with contests as an instructional approach in SBAE have been well-documented. Some of the prominent concerns associated with contests included inconsistent educational objectives, lost instructional time for both teachers and students, undermining student motivation through flawed reward systems, and an excessive emphasis on winning (Bell, 1985; Bunger, 1948; Deyoe, 1948; Dillingham, 1976; Gadda, 1978; Johnson, 1948; Key, 1977, 1978; Mayfield, 1978; Schumann, 1977; Wilson, 1958).

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Historical evidence suggests that the inappropriate use of contests may have adversely affected the motivation and instruction of some students. The NRC (1988) summarized this problem:

Based on evidence and testimony, the committee finds that some vocational agriculture teachers are unduly driven by a desire to help students excel in traditional production-oriented FFA contests and award programs. These teachers tend to place less emphasis on delivering agricultural instruction in the classroom, updating curricula, or involving the business community in the vocational agriculture program. (p. 43).

However, competitive events continue to hold a prominent position in SBAE (Curry, Falk, Warner, & Park, 2017; Talbert & Balschweid, 2006). The National FFA Organization's (2017) stated goals for CDEs/LDEs to foster "college and career readiness skills" (p. 66) and to "develop critical-thinking skills, effective decision-making skills, foster teamwork and promote communication while recognizing the value of ethical competition and individual achievement" (p. 66) continue to reflect the philosophical perspective of pragmatism. However, additional research is needed to examine whether CDEs/LDEs are meeting these established goals. Researchers should investigate if and how SBAE teachers are using the events as an approach to support the instruction of prescribed curriculum, and whether significant and positive relationships exist regarding student motivation and achievement as well as career choice and progress afterward. Teacher educators and supervisors of SBAE programs should emphasize the appropriate educational objectives of competitive events to preservice and inservice teachers and warn against hazards associated with the contrary. Further, FFA advisors and providers of competitions should examine their current award structures and assess the effectiveness of such in meeting the instructional goals of SBAE.

Looking to the future, SBAE's stakeholders should ask themselves several questions regarding praxis: (a) Are existing FFA competitions clearly aligned with the educational objectives of SBAE? (b) Are these competitions appropriate tools for motivating students to learn SBAE's curriculum? (c) What changes may be needed to existing competitive events to meet the learning needs, interests, and diversity of today's students? (d) Do teacher evaluation and recognition approaches properly recognize high quality instruction over students winning competitive events? Instructors, teacher educators, state staff, FFA officials, and industry partners should collaborate to evaluate the educational merits of competitive activities to ensure SBAE's continued relevance and success.

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