

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING SUPERVISED EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS: PAST RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTION

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Phipps and Osborne (1988) described supervised experience in agriculture as consisting "of all practical agricultural activities of educational value conducted by students outside of class and laboratory instruction or on school-released time for which systematic instruction and supervision are provided by their teachers, parents, employers, or others" (p. 313).

The National Research Council's Committee on Agricultural Education in Secondary Schools recognized the value of supervised experience and recommended that all students participate in worthwhile supervised agricultural experience (SAE) programs (Committee on Agricultural Education in Secondary Schools, 1988). The committee indicated that these programs should include experience in land laboratories, agricultural mechanics laboratories, greenhouses, nurseries, and other facilities provided by the schools. The committee further recommended that the primary emphasis of SAE should be on learning with an appreciation for earning.

Supervised experience has been a significant component of secondary agriculture programs since their inception. The supervised experience concept has expanded along with agriculture programs to embrace a more diverse clientele and a changing agricultural industry. Despite the changes, supervised experience programs remain an integral component of students' agricultural education.

In past years, much research has been conducted to guide supervised experience effectively. However, there existed a need to compile and synthesize the research findings. This synthesis would serve as a reference that illustrates what is known about supervised experience and as a guide for future actions related to supervised experience. Indicating the importance of such a compilation, Cruickshank (1985) recommended that in order to raise the professional status of teacher education, there be a collection and codification of what is known about teaching and learning theory into some form of index or manual similar to a physician's desk reference.

Information presented in this paper was part of a larger study in which research findings from dissertations and theses related to supervised experience were synthesized into five major categories. The categories were: 1) perceptions and attitudes toward supervised experience, 2) supervised experience and its relation to students' aspirations and performance, 3) teacher characteristics related to supervised experience programs, 4) characteristics of students' supervised experience programs, and 5) special populations and supervised experience. This paper summarizes research findings related to the perceptions of supervised experience program partners (students, parents, school administrators, agriculture teachers, and employers) regarding various aspects of supervised experience in agriculture.

Objective

The objective on which this paper is based was to synthesize research findings related to supervised experience program partners' perceptions regarding: 1) the general benefits of supervised experience and the value of student occupational preparation provided by supervised experience, 2) agriculture teachers' responsibilities for and performance in conducting supervised experience, and 3) the broadened concept of supervised experience.

Procedures

To gather the data to meet the objective, a search was conducted of related dissertations and theses. Studies completed at The Ohio State University were located through a library search. In addition, a search was made of the OSU microfiche collection to identify agricultural education studies completed at other institutions. The 1987-88 and 1988-89 Summaries of Research and Development Activities in Agricultural Education and the proceedings of the 1988, 1989, and 1990 National Agricultural Education Research Meetings and Central States Research Conferences were also used to identify related theses and dissertations.

Findings

Perceptions of supervised experience program partners are reported in three areas. Summary statements are presented with related findings. Despite the partners' differing opinions regarding supervised experience, Cunningham (1964) and Almazzan (1981) report that, overall, supervised experience programs continue to be perceived as beneficial.

Value of Supervised Experience

Summary Statement 1: The majority of school administrators, agricultural employers, and agriculture teachers were generally shown to share positive feelings regarding the value of student occupational preparation provided by supervised experience. However, the findings also indicated that students and their parents often do not value the supervised experience aspect of agricultural education as highly as do the other partners.

Trump (1961) reported that school administrators rated supervised experience highly in areas of farming programs, farming experience, and record keeping. In Basinger's (1954) study, school superintendents rated vocational agriculture programs above average in the area of supervised experience. Hardway (1959) later reported that responding principals rated supervised experience programs sixth in order of importance out of nine items related to the total vocational agriculture program.

Cunningham (1964) indicated that the majority of responding school administrators and personnel from agribusinesses felt that on-the-job training during school hours was a favorable means of guiding students into agricultural occupations. Bingham (1965) reported similar perceptions among agribusiness personnel.

Agriculture teachers rated highly the value of vocational guidance activities provided by supervised experience programs (Cheatham, 1980). The ten most important of these activities were: 1) students learn from mistakes, 2) students build good work habits, 3) students improve job skills, 4) students gain self-confidence, 5) students learn what skills they can perform well, 6) students recognize self-worth, 7) students gain financial experience, 8) students relate subject matter to occupation, 9) students overcome obstacles to achieve goals, and 10) students accept responsibility. Wright (1989) reported findings similar to Cheatham's. Wright indicated that responding agriculture teachers perceived students' development of leadership skills, work habits, self confidence, employment skills, and record keeping skills as part of their supervised experience programs as being of very high importance.

Hedges's (1959) study showed parents to have negative perceptions regarding the value of supervised experience as a component of the total agriculture program. Responding parents rated supervised experience lowest from a list of nine areas of importance related to the agriculture program. The parents indicated that the two characteristics they liked least about the agriculture program were the taking of students away from farm work and the supervised experience project or work associated with the project. The parents stressed the need for student supervised experience programs to be financially successful but did not evaluate their success or failure based on income generated.

A later study indicated a positive shift in parents' perceptions of supervised experience. All but one of 40 SOE related statements received positive ratings from the majority of parents in Rawls's (1978) study. The parents also rated the promotion of responsibility acceptance and the development of self-confidence as being the most beneficial aspects of supervised experience. Sixty-four percent of the parents in this study indicated that a farming program was still the most important type of supervised experience.

The Agriculture Teacher and Supervised Experience

Summary Statement 2: The findings indicated that the agriculture teacher was thought to have the primary obligation for conducting supervised experience activities. The other program partners were also thought to share responsibilities. However, a decline was indicated in the level of agriculture teachers' job satisfaction related to supervised experience responsibilities.

Regarding responsibility performance, program partners gave agriculture teachers mixed ratings. This was illustrated by students' and parents' lack of praise for summer supervisory visits and by the differences of opinions between school administrators and agriculture teachers regarding school-released leave time for supervisory visits.

The majority of responding agriculture teachers and school administrators indicated that supervised experience programs should be planned with annual and long-range goals by the teacher in cooperation with parents and students (Beeman, 1967). Chung (1969) further stated that both experienced teachers and student teachers agreed that participation by the teacher was the most effective means of planning supervised experience programs.

A majority of responding school administrators and agriculture teachers indicated that providing worthwhile experiences, including farm placement for students and assistance in maintaining accurate records, was an obligation of the teacher (McComas, 1962). In order to provide these worthwhile experiences and assure adequate supervision, Brock (1976) reported that urban agriculture teachers were more likely to limit class enrollment than were their rural counterparts.

Findings showed differing opinions existed among program partners regarding the number of teacher visits necessary to adequately supervise students. About three-fourths of responding school administrators and agriculture teachers indicated that at least six visits per year were necessary (McComas, 1962). However, the majority of parents in another study indicated that three to four visits were sufficient (Hedges, 1959).

Studies indicated a lack of consensus between agriculture teachers and school administrators regarding leave time, travel, and administrative duties associated with the teachers' supervisory visits. In Beeman's (1967) study, a majority of school administrators did not favor releasing agriculture teachers from their school duties at 1:00 p.m. for supervisory visits. This compared to none of the agriculture teachers. In the same study, agriculture teachers were much less likely than school administrators to favor requiring the submission of travel agendas for instructional visits. Beeman's study further indicated that administrators were more inclined than were agriculture teachers to favor supervisory visits as being considered extracurricular activities and not part of the regular workload.

Agriculture teachers and school administrators were shown to be in general agreement regarding summer supervised experience programs. Brock (1976) and Williams (1981) reported that responding agriculture teachers placed high value on 12-month supervised experience programs. Williams also stated that 80% of the agriculture teachers in his survey felt that group supervised experience activities should also be provided in the summer, but only 26% reported doing so. Watkins (1981) indicated the majority of responding school administrators felt agriculture teachers should work cooperatively with employers during the summer even though their primary duty was to work directly with students.

The perceived value of summer supervised experience programs was shown to differ between students and their parents and the other program partners. In one study, students indicated they received little help from their agriculture teachers during summer supervised experience programs with moral support and encouragement being the most important benefits received (Watkins, 1981). Parents in this study also rated moral support and encouragement as the most important aspects of summer supervisory visits. However, a majority of the parents did indicate that the experiences and knowledge gained by students during supervised summer work contributed to occupational success and were not available during the regular school year.

An apparent decline in agriculture teachers' job satisfaction related to supervised experience was indicated in several studies. In an early study, agriculture teachers reported the supervision of student projects and summer work as being major contributing factors to them staying in the profession (Clark, 1950). However, a later study showed beginning agriculture teachers were experiencing frustration in planning and developing supervised experience programs as well as getting students to use approved practices (Griffith, 1963). In Collins's (1982) study, agriculture teachers reported receiving only a moderate degree of satisfaction from their work with supervised experience programs.

A Broadened Concept of Supervised Experience

Summary Statement 3: The findings indicated that the majority of agriculture teachers and school administrators perceived a need for expanding the concept and clientele of supervised experience activities. Most agriculture teachers and school administrators were also shown to favor requiring agriculture students to have supervised experience programs.

Brown (1965) reported that the majority of responding agriculture teachers and administrators felt that vocational agriculture programs should be expanded to include nonfarm agricultural occupations.

In a similar study, a majority of responding agriculture teachers indicated that experience in school land laboratories and greenhouses was an acceptable substitute for traditional farming programs (Beeman, 1967).

Most agriculture teachers and school administrators were shown to be in agreement on the issue of requiring students to have supervised experience programs. In Beeman's (1967) study, only about one-fourth of the agriculture teachers and school administrators were not in favor of requiring students to participate in supervised experience programs.

Most agriculture teachers reported increasing numbers of students entering secondary agriculture programs who have difficulty maintaining a traditional supervised experience program due to financial hardships, place of residence, academic ability, or other limiting factors (Lindsey, 1978). The agriculture teachers perceived supervised experience as being beneficial to these limited opportunity students. Lindsey indicated that agriculture teachers perceived themselves as the person most involved in the choosing and evaluation of these students' supervised experience programs. Most of the teachers in this study believed that the experience limited opportunity students gained from supervised experience programs was of more value than was the profit earned. Lindsey also pointed out that the teachers correctly perceived the desire of limited opportunity students to enter farming yet the teachers questioned its feasibility.

Summary

The objective on which this paper is based was to synthesize the findings from dissertations and theses related to the perceptions of supervised experience program partners regarding: 1) the general benefits of supervised experience and the value of student occupational preparation provided by supervised experience; 2) agriculture teachers' responsibilities for and performance in conducting supervised experience; and 3) the broadened concept of supervised experience.

Related to the objective, the research findings indicated that program partners generally regarded supervised experience as being of benefit to students and the agricultural industry. However, not all of the partners valued supervised experience equally. When compared to other partner groups, students and their parents were shown to place less value on supervised experience.

Research findings indicated that responsibilities for conducting supervised experience were thought to be shared among program partners but that the primary responsibility rested with the agriculture teachers. There was a decline noted in agriculture teachers' job satisfaction related to their supervised experience responsibilities.

The findings indicated differences between the perceptions of agriculture teachers and school administrators regarding school-released time for supervisory visits. Differences between these two groups were also reported regarding the increase of agriculture teachers' administrative duties such as filing reports and travel agendas. The agriculture teachers were shown to favor more release time for supervisory visits and less responsibility for paperwork.

When compared to the other partners, students and their parents were reported to place low value on summer supervision. The students and parents perceived that summer supervision was of little value except for student moral support and encouragement.

The findings showed that there has been an increase in the enrollment of limited opportunity students in agriculture programs as perceived by agriculture teachers. The findings also indicated that there have been calls for broadening the concept of supervised experience for several years.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications and recommendations are based on the assumption that program partners' perceptions of supervised experience is the same now as when first reported in the research.

The findings imply that there is a lack of positive communication between students and their parents and agriculture teachers regarding supervised experience. Students and their parents should be made fully aware of the goals of supervised experience and how these goals are achieved. Much effort should also be focused on ensuring that students' supervised experience programs are meaningful and meet the individual student's needs.

The reported decline in agriculture teachers' job satisfaction related to supervised experience responsibilities may be related to an increase in administrative duties and supervisory visits being relegated to primarily an after regular school hours function. Perhaps a decline in quality of supervised experience programs is linked to lower levels of job satisfaction. More research in this area is needed to identify possible causes of job dissatisfaction and means to correct the problem.

The increased enrollment of limited opportunity students in agriculture programs necessitates a broadening of the supervised experience concept. This increased enrollment has implications for agriculture teacher educators. Beginning agriculture teachers must be prepared to utilize innovative supervised experience programs, and practicing teachers must be kept abreast of changes in supervised experience. More limited opportunity students will also require that school and community facilities be used to a greater extent in supervised experience programs.

The findings reported in this paper provide insight into past research and should serve the profession as a reference indicating what is known about one aspect of supervised experience. The compilation and synthesis of other past research findings is needed. These findings provide the profession a basis on which to make decisions and base future research efforts.

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