

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

**IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF THE STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE AS
PERCEIVED BY TEACHER EDUCATORS AND FORMER STUDENT
TEACHERS IN ILLINOIS**

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by

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Significance of the Study

The quality of agricultural education programs in the secondary public schools in the United States greatly depended on the effectiveness of the teacher preparation programs and the teachers that these programs produce (McGhee & Cheek, 1989). Entry of student teachers into the agriculture teaching field was important given the demand for the teachers. Camp (2000) stated that there is a growing need for certified agriculture teachers in the United States. Teacher education programs must supply their graduates with up-to-date curriculum and experiences (Burton, 1988). Student teachers must have a satisfying experience in order to retain these prospective teachers in to the agriculture education teaching field (Rome & Moss, 1990). Teacher educators and former student teachers of the teacher education program were helpful in supplying the teacher education program with data used in making improvements, additions, and deletions (Wentling, 1980).

Harlin, Edwards, and Briers (2002) conducted a study of similar nature, but the data collected did not include teacher educator perceptions; only student teacher perceptions of the important elements of the student teaching experience were included. Rather, this particular study seeks to determine important elements of student teaching and important practices for placing student teachers in Illinois agricultural education. The information gained from the perceptions could be used by teacher education programs in making future decisions about the placement of student teachers with cooperating teachers and schools. Teacher education programs could choose placement criteria based on the teacher educators' and student teachers' ratings of the important elements of the student teaching experience. The student teaching experience, if properly conducted, was extremely important to the student teacher and had an impact on the student teacher's future decision of entering the teaching profession (Conant, 1963).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose was to determine important elements of student teaching experience as perceived by teacher educators and former student teachers in Illinois.

Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed for the study:

1. What were the personal and professional characteristics of teacher educators of agriculture in Illinois?
2. What were the personal and professional characteristics of student teachers of agriculture in Illinois?
3. What were the teacher educator perceptions of important elements of a cooperating center and teacher?
4. What were the student teacher perceptions of their cooperating center and teacher?
5. What was the quality of the student teaching experience as perceived by student teachers in Illinois agricultural education?

Research Design

The research was *ex post facto* in nature due to the fact that the causes were studied after the student teaching experience. All student teachers surveyed had completed the student teaching experience in the 2001-2003 academic school years.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study consisted of agriculture teacher preparation programs in Illinois. For each program, data were sought from practicing head teacher educators and teacher educators in Illinois as defined by the 2002 American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) directory (Dyer, 2002). There were 4 teacher education programs as of September 10, 2003 according to the AAAE directory. Two subgroups from each teacher education program were used. The first subgroup consisted of recent graduates of the teacher education program in the 2001-2003 academic school years. The second subgroup consisted of: 1) head teacher educators at each institution, and 2) faculty with responsibilities in the student teacher placement or supervisory process (“teacher educators”).

Instrumentation

Two different mail questionnaires were used for teacher educators and recent graduates of the program. The teacher educator survey attempted to assess the teacher educator perceptions of the important characteristics and criteria when choosing a cooperating school and teacher. The researcher contacted FCAE to gather contact information to those student teachers graduating from the program in the academic years Fall 2001 to Spring 2003. The faculty involved in the teacher education program answered those questions pertaining to important elements of the cooperating center and teacher. The student teacher survey attempted to discover the student teacher’s overall experience in regard to similar constructs contained in the Local Program of Success Guide maintained by National FFA: 1) Classroom and Laboratory Instruction, 2) Supervised Agriculture Experience Program, 3) Student Leadership Development, 4) School and Community Relationships, and 5) Cooperating Teacher and Student Teacher Relationships (National FFA Organization, 2003). Each student teacher survey was coded as to the university or college from which the respondent graduated.

All instruments sent to teacher educators at each of the three universities responded to the questions, thus yielding a 100 percent response rate. Additionally, 91 student teacher instruments were sent out. Of the 91 student teachers, 58 responded for a 64% response rate. To account for nonresponse error, the researcher randomly contacted 20 nonrespondents and asked a series of demographic questions. Respondents and nonrespondents were compared using a chi-square test. The researcher concluded that there were no statistically significant differences in any of the questions; therefore, the responding sample was deemed to be representative of the population of student teachers in Illinois.

Findings

Research Question One

A description of the demographics of the teacher educators was deemed necessary to get a snapshot of the population. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Selected Characteristics of Teacher Educators in Illinois (N = 6)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	5	83.3
Female	1	16.7
Ethnicity		
African-American	1	16.7
Anglo	5	83.3
Hispanic	0	0.0
Native-American/Alaskan	0	0.0
Professorial Ranking		
Instructor/Lecturer	0	0.0
Associate Professor	0	0.0
Assistant Professor	4	66.7
Professor	1	16.7
Other	1	16.7
Tenure Status		
Tenured	2	33.3
Not Tenured, but Tenure Track	4	66.7
Not Tenure Track		
Highest Degree Earned		
Ph.D.	6	100.0
Ed.D.	0	0.0
MS, MA, MBA	0	0.0

Research Question Two

A description of the demographics of the student teachers was deemed necessary to get a snapshot of the population. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Selected Characteristics of Student Teachers (N = 58)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	33	56.9
Female	25	43.1

Table 2
Continued

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
22 to 25 years	30	51.7
26 to 29 years	21	36.2
30 to 35 years	3	5.2
> 35 years	4	6.9
Ethnicity		
African-American	1	1.7
Anglo	57	98.3
Hispanic	0	0.0
Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Teacher Certification		
Through an Accredited University in Illinois	51	87.9
Through an Accredited University Outside of Illinois	1	1.7
Provisionally or Alternatively Certified	6	10.4
Years Teaching Agriculture		
1 to 2	33	57.9
3 to 5	23	40.4
6 or more	1	1.7
Size of Schools Student Teaches Taught In		
500 or Less Students	42	81.0
501 to 900 Students	6	11.5
901 to 1200 Students	1	1.8
1200 or More Students	3	5.7
Number of Classrooms Student Teachers Had at Their Cooperating Schools		
One Classroom	33	63.5
Two Classrooms	16	30.8
Three Classrooms	2	3.8
More Than Three Classrooms	1	1.9
Facilities Student Teachers' Cooperating Schools Contained		
Agriculture Mechanics Laboratory	48	92.3
Greenhouse	33	63.5
Some Other Horticulture Facility	10	19.2
Meats Laboratory	0	0.0
Aquaculture Facility	20	38.5
Land Laboratory	33	63.5
Project Center/Feeding Facility	2	3.8

Research Question Three

Table 3 gives the teacher educators' perceptions of important elements of a cooperating center. The results are presented as both individual and an aggregate of the three universities in Illinois, excluding Illinois State University. The top rankings indicated that a cooperating center with technology infrastructure in place was important.

Table 3

Perceptions of Teacher Educators Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Center Should Have:	Individual			Aggregate (School)			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Student access to World Wide Web	6	5.00	0.0	3	5.00	0.0	1
Access to World Wide Web	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
Email access	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
An active FFA chapter	6	4.50	.55	3	4.61	.35	3
Used only once a year	6	3.83	1.17	3	3.89	.19	4
Located in a comprehensive high school	6	3.5	1.04	3	3.83	1.04	5
A clean safety record	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.78	.38	6
A requirement for all students to participate in a SAE	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.78	.38	6
Agriculture mechanics laboratory	6	3.67	.82	3	3.72	.25	7
Cooperation from local administration	6	3.83	.98	3	3.67	.58	8
Greenhouse / horticulture facilities	6	3.83	.75	3	3.61	.67	9
A record of outstanding accomplishments	6	3.33	1.03	3	3.50	.50	10
An updated library	6	3.17	.98	3	3.17	.29	11
Aquaculture facility	6	3.5	1.04	3	3.17	1.04	11
Project center for SAE projects	6	3.00	1.26	3	2.89	1.01	12
A student teacher ratio of 75 or fewer students to one teacher	6	2.83	.75	3	2.89	.19	12

Table 3
Continued

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Center Should Have:	Individual			Aggregate (School)			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Land laboratory	6	2.83	.98	3	2.78	1.07	13
A multiple teacher agriculture department	6	3.5	1.04	3	2.00	0.0	14
Meats laboratory	6	2.00	.63	3	2.00	0.0	14

* Scale: 1= unimportant, 2= of little importance, 3= moderately important, 4 = important, and 5 = very important

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 4 illustrates the teacher educator perceptions of the cooperating teacher. As shown, teacher educators felt it was important for the cooperating teacher to be an excellent role model, have a positive attitude, and provide frequent evaluations to their student teachers.

Table 4

Perceptions of Teacher Educators Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Teacher

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Teacher Should :	Individually			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Be a good role model	6	5.00	0.0	3	5.00	0.0	1
Have a positive attitude	6	5.00	0.0	3	5.00	0.0	1
Provide frequent evaluations and feedback to the student teacher	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
Practice good student management skills in both the classroom and laboratory environment	6	4.83	.41	3	4.67	.58	3

Table 4
Continued

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Teacher Should :	Individually			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Display continual professional growth	6	4.50	.55	3	4.44	.51	4
Communicate clear expectations to the student teacher	6	4.50	.55	3	4.44	.51	4
Practice a variety of teaching methodology	6	4.50	.55	3	4.39	.35	5
Be willing to be a mentor	6	4.67	.81	3	4.33	1.15	6
Have discipline policies in place	6	4.33	.82	3	4.33	.58	6
Support other school activities	6	4.00	.89	3	4.28	.86	7
Practice good housekeeping in the classroom and laboratory	6	4.17	.98	3	4.22	.69	8
Train Leadership Development and Career Development Event teams to reinforce student learning	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.83	.76	9
Have a teaching style observed by the teacher education program	6	3.83	.75	3	3.72	.75	10
Be willing to make daily changes for student teachers	6	3.50	1.05	3	3.72	.94	10
Dress in an exemplary manner	6	3.50	.84	3	3.67	.58	11
Assist the student teacher in job placement	6	3.00	.63	3	3.06	.42	12

*Scale: 1= unimportant, 2= of little importance, 3= moderately important, 4 = important, and 5 = very important

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Research Question 4

Tables 5 through 9 give the student teachers' perceptions of important elements of a cooperating center. Each of the elements was categorized in to constructs similar to that of the National FFA Local Program Success Guide. The results are presented as both individual and an aggregate of the four universities in Illinois, including Illinois State University.

Table 5

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center (Classroom and Laboratory Instruction)

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
A daily and systematic routine for classroom and laboratory instruction	52	4.26	.91	4	4.24	.12	1
A discipline management plan used in a structured environment	52	4.19	1.08	4	4.21	.20	2
Current technology used in instruction	52	4.09	.97	4	4.10	.16	3
Creative teaching methods as a basis for day-to-day instruction (i.e.) use of multimedia and varied teaching techniques	52	3.94	1.10	4	3.96	.27	4

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 6

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center (Supervised Agricultural Experience Program)

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Project supervision and explanation of this commitment	52	4.09	.90	4	4.08	.33	1

Table 6
Continued

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
All students meeting the state SAEP requirements, with accurate recordbooks	52	3.62	1.28	4	3.67	.17	3

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 7

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center (Student Leadership Development – LDEs, CDE's and other FFA Activities)

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Cooperating teachers who were familiar with current rules for participation in events (i.e.) CDEs and LDEs	52	4.65	.62	4	4.66	.19	1
Opportunities for the student teacher to judge or monitor a district or area LDE	52	4.50	.85	4	4.49	.25	2
A history of successful participation	52	4.44	.73	4	4.45	.19	3
Resources to train a competitive team	52	4.44	.80	4	4.44	.29	4
Cooperating teachers who delegated the training of at least one team to the student teacher	52	4.36	1.02	4	4.42	.28	5
Student participation in advanced awards and degrees on the district, area, state, and national levels	52	4.42	.89	4	4.36	.27	6
These activities as essentials for a balanced program	52	4.34	.83	4	4.29	.20	7

Table 7
Continued

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Strong classroom instruction in student leadership development	52	3.94	1.05	4	3.89	.22	8

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 8

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center (School and Community Relationships)

My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
A cooperating teacher who supported activities in the community (i.e.) service organizations	52	4.53	.61	4	4.57	.17	1
A spirit of professional cooperating among teachers	52	4.38	.79	4	4.41	.23	2
Recognized integrity of the cooperating teacher and program	52	4.34	.90	4	4.39	.16	3
Availability of facilities (i.e.) computer labs, shops, school farm	52	4.30	.89	4	4.31	.17	4
Departmental support organizations (i.e.) advisory councils, booster clubs, and alumni	52	4.26	.87	4	4.25	.14	5
Community service projects	52	4.07	.99	4	4.12	.23	6
School administrators who were involved in program activities	52	4.01	1.09	4	3.90	.38	7

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 9

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center (Cooperating Teacher and Student Teacher Relationships)

Important Elements My Cooperating Center had:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
A cooperating teacher who was willing to be my mentor	52	4.48	1.01	4	4.47	.25	1
A cooperating teacher who had a positive attitude	52	4.46	.99	4	4.46	.19	2
A cooperating teacher who was a “good” role model to me	52	4.36	1.04	4	4.38	.27	3
“Reinforcement” techniques in teaching (i.e.) pace, reteaching, retesting, and accommodation of various learning styles	52	4.11	1.16	4	4.14	.27	4
A cooperating teacher who communicated clear expectations to me as the student teacher	52	4.15	1.22	4	4.07	.29	5
Discipline policies that were in place and enforced	52	4.07	1.20	4	4.04	.21	6
A cooperating teacher who provided frequent evaluations and feedback to me as the student teacher	52	4.05	1.33	4	3.95	.40	7

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree
 ** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Research Question 5

Table 10 displays the student teachers’ perceptions regarding the quality of their overall student teaching experience. The results are presented as both individual and an aggregate of the four universities in Illinois, including Illinois State University. The former student teachers indicated that their cooperating teachers were helpful and that their experience was meaningful and the most valuable component of the teacher education program. Many stated that student teaching was unrealistic to actually working in their own program.

Table 10

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding the Quality of Their Student Teaching Experience

Important Elements Overall Student Teaching Experience:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
My cooperating teacher was helpful	52	4.46	1.03	4	4.49	.35	1
As a student teacher, I learned much from my student teaching experience	52	4.42	.93	4	4.42	.23	2
Student teaching is the most valuable component of the teacher education program	52	4.34	1.01	4	4.41	.53	3
Student teaching was a positive experience	52	4.38	1.03	4	4.39	.22	4
My cooperating center was an excellent facility	52	4.42	.95	4	4.36	.31	5
I was thoroughly pleased with my overall student teaching experience	52	4.23	1.08	4	4.27	.29	6
Student teaching is a realistic example of actual teaching	52	4.34	1.00	4	3.94	.38	7

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions in this study, recommendations have been made in two specific areas. These are 1) recommendations for practice and 2) recommendations for further research.

Recommendations for practice have been developed and are presented as follows:

1. Student teaching in agriculture in Illinois should continue. Data indicate that student teaching was a positive experience for most student teacher respondents. This recommendation concurs with the research conducted by Rome and Moss (1990) who found that student teachers strongly agreed that student teaching was a positive experience.
2. Teacher educators should determine what the ideal cooperating teacher and cooperating school should possess and use these multiple measures to place

- student teachers in the most “ideal” cooperating center. This recommendation concurs with research conducted by Deeds and Barrick (1986) and Norris and Larke (1989).
3. Teacher educators should research cooperating schools, cooperating teachers, and student teachers to find the “ideal” situation for the student teacher. This is in consensus with research conducted by Abel, Ansel, Hauwiller, and Sparapani (1986) which states that new cooperating centers and cooperating teachers should be selected on several qualifications and criteria. These include cooperating teachers that have a willingness to devote time each day to the student teacher, have an ability to motivate students, are well organized, and have an interest in professional improvement. The researchers also state that the cooperating center should be selected on the quality of the supervised agriculture experience program, the physical facilities and condition of equipment, the curriculum offered, and the extent of activity of the FFA program.
 4. Data indicate that student teachers’ cooperating centers contained local access to technology and student access to the World Wide Web and email. A majority of the student teachers indicated that their cooperating center placement was within a very active FFA program. Teacher education programs should continue to place student teachers in these settings because these elements may be related to the quality of experience of the student teacher.

Recommendations as a result of this study for further research have been developed and include:

1. Refine the student teaching placement process by collecting the same data from “current” student teachers both before and after the actual student teaching experience.
2. Develop a series of discussion groups of agriculture teacher education faculty to determine “Ideal Student Teaching Placement Practices.”
3. Student teaching documents from agriculture teacher education programs should be compared for innovative ideas and similarities. From these, a model set of student teaching elements should be prepared and disseminated for use in the agricultural education profession.
4. Qualitative (case study) measures should be used to examine how student teachers feel about how they were placed in a cooperating center, both before and after student teaching. It should be determined how the student teacher was placed, whether the teacher education program chose a cooperating center for them or the student teacher chose a center, or some other placement methodology was used, and compare this (using qualitative measures) with the quality of experience that the student teacher received.
5. Traditional student teaching should be compared to alternative certification field experience programs to determine if differences occur in the quality of these experiences related to continuing in the teaching field.

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