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Exploring Cooperation Between Secondary Agricultural Educators and Livestock Extension Agents: A Case Study

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Abstract

Due to the common goal of youth leadership development, there is the opportunity for Cooperative Extension's 4-H clubs and Agricultural Education's FFA chapters to be more effective through cooperation. The qualitative study discussed here used focus groups to explore the level of and perceptions regarding cooperation among agricultural educators and Extension agents. Major themes that positively influenced cooperation were identified as: the relationship between the agricultural educator and Extension agent, the awareness of the other profession, and the understanding and perceptions of cooperation. Findings of this study indicated a lack of collaboration between disciplines.

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

"In many ways a new era is about to begin in the working relationship between agricultural education and Cooperative Extension. Both organizations have suffered budget cuts, but still have a very large clientele to serve. Often times the motto for both has been 'Do more with less.' History indicates that it is possible for the agencies to cooperate" (Hillison, 1996, p. 13).

There is a common theme running through the overall purposes of Cooperative Extension's 4-H clubs and Agricultural Education's FFA chapters, which is youth leadership development. This common theme of educators and Extension agents should encourage the two groups to work together. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that a problem of limited cooperation exists between the disciplines, particularly in youth programming. Cooperation may be further hindered by the competition prevalent between 4-H and FFA. Competition between 4-H clubs and FFA chapters occurs on many levels, from recruitment of students to participation in various competitive events (Hillison, 1996).

Nonetheless, cooperation between these entities is important as resources become more limited. Working together would allow the two groups to develop a greater synergy, and expand opportunities while providing them in a more efficient and effective manner. This further affects youth in both 4-H and FFA by helping them to develop life, leadership, and citizenship skills.

The foundation of the study discussed here is built upon Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation (1949), which involves competition, individualism, and cooperation that all run along a continuum. According to Deutsch, cooperation is a social concept, one that may be limited due to a lack of cooperative knowledge and the motives of those engaged. Moreover, the persistence of cooperation depends upon two outcomes--effectiveness and efficiency and, ultimately, satisfaction of the individuals involved.

So why do people cooperate? According to Triandis (1977), once you identify different individual motivations, you can make inferences regarding an individual's behavior. Furthermore, Triandis notes that the relationship between behavior and motivation is important to help identify why people form cooperative associations or to identify and address a lack of cooperation within specific situations.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of the study was to explore cooperation among agricultural education teachers and Extension agents. The specific objectives were to identify major and minor themes of cooperation among agricultural educators and Extension agents and to compare perceptions of each group toward cooperation.

Methods/Procedures

The target populations for the exploratory study were secondary agricultural educators and Extension agents in Florida. Participants in the study were chosen through a convenience sample from agricultural educators and Extension agents who attended a state 4-H/FFA livestock evaluation contest. This sample provided an accessible population of 12 teachers and agents involved in FFA and 4-H who could adequately address the aforementioned purpose and objectives. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) indicated the contemporary focus group interview generally involves 8-12 individuals who discuss a particular topic while a moderator promotes interaction and assures that discussion remains on the topic of interest.

Focus groups were used to achieve the objectives of the study. Specifically, two separate focus groups were used to isolate perceptions about cooperation experienced between secondary agriculture teachers and 4-H youth development (livestock) Extension agents. After transcription, the data were analyzed and reported using a five-step procedure recommended by Creswell (1998), which included: organization and categorization of data, interpretation of codes, identification of patterns, and synthesis into final results.

Results/Findings

Objective: Identify major and minor themes of cooperation among agricultural educators and Extension agents, and to compare perceptions of agricultural educators and Extension agents toward cooperation.

In analyzing data, researchers identified major and minor themes. After a list was developed, it was organized into three major themes that most effectively described the salient perceptions, while each minor theme was listed under the major theme with which it most strongly aligned. The three major themes were: the relationship between the agricultural educator and Extension agent, the awareness of the other profession, and the understanding and perceptions of cooperation and competition (Table 1).

Table 1.
Major and Minor Themes of Cooperation and Competition

Major Theme 1: Relationship Between Agricultural Educators and Extension Agents	Major Theme 2: Awareness of the Other Profession	Major Theme 3: Understanding and Perceptions of Cooperation and Competition
Underlying Minor Themes		
Relationship history	Relationship history	Time/Commitments
Communication	Communication	Competition between 4-H and FFA
Relationships outside of the	Scheduling problems	Openness of parties

agricultural educator and Extension faculty relationship		involved to cooperate
Openness of parties involved to cooperate	Involvement/history in other profession	Change in perceptions about cooperation among the parties involved
Mutual respect needed for cooperation	Resource sharing	FFA teachers using 4-H for recruitment purposes
	Change in perceptions about cooperation among the parties involved	
	Mutual respect needed for cooperation	

Relationship Between Agricultural Educators and Extension Agents

Both teachers and Extension agents reiterated the importance of having a good working relationship with each other. Specifically, participants emphasized that developing and maintaining an effective relationship involved several different aspects, including mutual respect and essential communication.

Agricultural educators stated they enjoyed cooperating with the Extension agents with whom they have favorable relationships. County and state fairs were the major arenas where most teachers stated that much of this cooperation occurred. At fairs, cooperative efforts centered around sharing resources, including scales, chutes, and other equipment, as well as sharing expertise and knowledge in different areas.

Some counties reported a history of cooperation, whereas others indicated little. In one specific example, the current county Extension agent had also been an agricultural educator in the same county. This led to a great deal of cooperation on several different fronts. According to this Extension agent, "I've grown up in this county, done teaching in this county, done Extension in this county, so I know all the ag teachers very well. . . . But now, since I'm in Extension and they all know me pretty well, we do a lot together."

Other former relationships that improved the chances of cooperation included teachers working with former agricultural education students who are now Extension agents and Extension agents working with current agriculture teachers with whom they attended college. Outside relationships (e.g., agriculture teachers with young children in 4-H) were also noted as having a distinct impact upon interdisciplinary cooperation.

Extension agents indicated there were teachers with whom they cooperated and those with whom they did not. In the situations where there was little or no cooperation, it was noted this was not necessarily due to unfavorable relationships but more aligned with a lack of effective communication. One agent said, "There are some (educators) never calling me because there's not a lot of communication there; we get along, there's just not a lot of sharing of information."

Conversely, one agriculture teacher felt as though the lack of communication could be attributed to the Extension agent. "I was introduced to her (county Extension agent) at the fair; she didn't offer any help, didn't even introduce me to other agents or any of the leaders." Apparently, the teacher felt as though an olive branch had been extended, but not received.

Awareness of Other Profession

A lack of awareness of the other profession was identified as a major barrier to cooperation. This barrier also affected the interpersonal interactions among agricultural educators and Extension agents. Aspects such as a lack of mutual respect, resource sharing, scheduling problems, and currently held perceptions regarding the individuals involved, contributed to the absence of cooperative relationships between the disciplines.

Both groups admitted they did not completely understand the intricacies and responsibilities of the other profession. They indicated this lack of awareness led to misunderstandings by both groups, sometimes resulting in resentment and the perception of the absence of reciprocation in a cooperative relationship. One Extension agent revealed, "The only frustration I run into is that both of our (county's) FFA teachers are some of those that think that their day is from the beginning of the school day until the end and they're interested in having teams--livestock, land judging, etc.--

but they want me to do them."

Understanding and Perceptions of Cooperation and Competition

Both agricultural educators and Extension agents admitted there was competition between 4-H and FFA for members and resources, and within various events. Additionally, each group indicated there was a type of interpersonal competition between disciplines, brought about by the level of openness to cooperate among the parties involved. According to focus group members, this was a direct result of the specific perceptions held by the educators and Extension agents. For several agricultural educators, their perceptions regarding cooperation and competition began as students participating in 4-H and/or FFA. Extension agents expressed a more current negative perception regarding competition with agricultural educators, stemming from an underlying desire for the same youth or "FFA using 4-H for recruitment."

Generally, the more favorable the experiences in either organization, the more likely the individuals were to get involved as adults. In addition, those who participated in both 4-H and FFA were more likely to be involved in strong interdisciplinary cooperative relationships.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Overall, effective cooperative relationships among agricultural educators and Extension agents were limited, but did allow for the accomplishment of a few essential outcomes. Interdisciplinary cooperation would help to streamline and enhance the work of agricultural educators and Extension agents, as well as allow those involved to build upon one another's strengths. Just as important, cooperation would help to improve the leadership opportunities available for youth.

The major themes affecting interdisciplinary cooperation between agriculture teachers and Extension agents included an imperfect relationship between the agricultural educator and the Extension agent, a lack of awareness of the other profession, and the current understandings and perceptions regarding cooperation held by the participants. Each of these themes helped to illustrate why there continues to be difficulties in cooperation between agricultural and Extension educators.

Minor themes that surfaced through the study started with a lack of interdisciplinary communication. Each group appeared to blame the other for the lack of contact. Even through both groups felt communication was an important aspect of cooperation, no ideas were expressed on how to improve interdisciplinary communication. Another minor theme was the prevalence of competition among the youth involved in 4-H and FFA. Tjosvold (1984) noted that competition in and of itself can be useful when it motivates individuals to strive to do their best. However, competition may also work against cooperation, and within this situation it hinders becoming more efficient and effective educators.

Throughout the study, threads of cooperation, but particularly of competition have been illustrated between the disciplines. So one must ask, "Are the agents/teachers primarily concerned with winning competitions or the leadership development of youth?" Fortunately, it was perceptible through the focus group discussion that, while it was a goal of each teacher and agent to have a good, competitive program, helping the youth to develop applicable leadership and life skills was a more imperative goal.

In summary, the exploratory study provided a great deal of rich data regarding the environment of cooperation among a select group of 4-H youth development livestock agents and secondary agriculture teachers. Due to the nature of focus groups, the results of this study may not be generalized to other groups. Still, the need for further research and education regarding these topics is apparent. Using this study as a springboard, future research should continue to focus on the perceptions, attitudes, and motivations behind both groups as it pertains to developing cooperative relationships.

From these future studies, workshops for parents, leaders, and youth members, as well as pre-service and in-service training for teachers and agents could be developed to address how to develop effective cooperative relationships, the benefits and problems associated with each, and ways of incorporating cooperative leadership into current practices. Ideally, future cooperation between agricultural educators and Extension agents will become the standard, not the exception.

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