

IMPROVEMENT IN AGRICULTURE THROUGH THE ASSISTANCE OF VOCATIONAL-AGRICULTURE INSTRUCTORS

MELVIN HENDERSON

University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois

Perhaps this paper could be summarized by the five following statements: (1) Permanent improvement in agriculture is closely associated with education. (2) Vocational-agriculture instructors, because of their training and opportunities for almost daily intimate contact with farm boys and their parents, are in a position to render signal service in improving agriculture. (3) The majority of vocational-agriculture instructors are recognized by the farmers in their communities as being capable leaders. (4) There is a sincere desire on the part of the vocational-agriculture instructors to do all in their power to improve agricultural conditions. And (5) There are several reasons why more assistance is not being given by the vocational-agriculture instructors in programs seeking improvements in agriculture. Perhaps it would be desirable to consider each of these statements in a little more detail.

Permanent improvement in agriculture is closely associated with education. The development and use of improved varieties of seeds, the improvement in the design of farm machinery, and improved farming practices have been the result of education. Teaching occurs when the behavior of an individual is changed. The mere distribution of information is not necessarily teaching. The development of desirable attitudes while not limited to the school, has been considered for years as one of the functions of education and certainly few would attempt to deny that teachers, with their background and training in education and psychology should be qualified to undertake this important educational phase of the work. To mold the thinking and attitudes of an individual so that these will be most valuable for the individual and for society is an art. Proper attitudes play an important part in the objective of a satisfying farm life. Surely permanent improvement in agriculture is closely associated with education.

Vocational-agriculture instructors, because of their training and because of their opportunities for almost daily intimate contacts with farm boys and their parents, are in a position to render signal service in improving agriculture. No other teacher in the entire school system has as good an opportunity to become as intimately acquainted with his students, with their home conditions, their ambitions and desires, and their disappointments and sorrows. He usually enjoys the confidence of the boy and his parents. He is in a key position to reach the farmer and to make suggestions. He visits the boys at their homes; he talks to the parents; often he has the older brothers in part-time classes and the fathers in the adult evening classes. His area of influence may not be as large as that of other agricultural workers, but he often exerts more influence in his local community than do those other workers having larger areas. What individual in the community as much as he, enjoys such opportunities for intimate contact with those upon whom the burden for improvement in agriculture must finally rest?

The majority of these instructors are recognized by the farmers in their communities as being capable leaders. The very fact that 56 vocational-agriculture instructors in Illinois have been in the same position for 10 years or longer is an indication as to how well they are meeting the demands placed upon them, especially when one considers that there were only 137 vocational-agriculture departments in Illinois 10 years ago. It is true that the ability of a leader cannot be measured entirely by years in a given position. In this case we have to consider the vocational-agriculture instructor as intimately associated with his employers, acting as their instructor which makes the generally-satisfactory, long-time tenure seem all the more remarkable.

There is a sincere desire on the part of the vocational-agriculture instructor to do all in his power to improve agricultural conditions. The wise instructor appreciates the responsibility that rests upon him when farmers come to him for advice. He realizes that many will follow his advice and that results will prove whether the advice was good. His home is in the local community which he serves and if he wishes to continue that home and merit advancement, he must satisfactorily advise those who seek his advice.

There are several reasons why more assistance is not being given by the vocational-agriculture instructors to programs for improvement in agriculture. One of the reasons is undoubtedly due to the fact that those in charge of preparing informational material for the teacher do not appreciate his problems and the situation which he faces. Probably much of the published material which is reaching the agriculture instructors represents a sincere effort to improve agricultural conditions and to provide material suitable for use by the teachers. It is a regrettable fact that many of these efforts have more or less failed. Teachers frequently remark that they receive such a mass of material that they do not open it. They may hasten to add that some of it is quite satisfactory but will admit that they do not have time to select out the material that can be used. In a few

isolated cases there is perhaps another reason why more assistance is not being given by vocational-agriculture instructors in programs seeking improvements in agriculture. This relates to petty jealousy either on the part of those directing some program or on the part of the vocational-agriculture instructor. Such cases are, however, rare in Illinois.

I have attempted to show that permanent improvement in agriculture is closely associated, if not dependent upon, education; that vocational-agriculture instructors, because of their training and intimate contacts with farm boys and their parents, are in a position to render outstanding service in improving agriculture; that the majority are recognized by the farmers in their communities as being capable local leaders and that there is a sincere desire on the part of the vocational-agriculture instructor to do all in his power to improve agricultural conditions. Certainly we all hope that vocational-agriculture instructors and those charged with the responsibilities of various programs for agricultural improvement will work together in the future even more harmoniously than in the past, and that, insofar as funds, time, and ability will permit, every effort will be made to improve teaching aids with the assistance of the vocational-agriculture instructors.
