Journal of Agricultural Education
Volume 46, Number 2, pp. 36 – 46
DOI: 10.5032/jae.2005.02036

THE ASPIRATIONS OF FARM PARENTS AND PRE-ADOLESCENT CHILDREN FOR GENERATIONAL SUCCESSION OF THE FAMILY FARM

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Abstract

The continued vitality and sustainability of the agricultural sector and of the communities that support it require that qualified individuals devote themselves to farming and rural life. As such, the purpose of the study was to explore the aspirations of parents and pre-adolescents in regard to succession on the family farm. Fifty farm families throughout Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin served as the sample for this descriptive correlational study. More children than parents indicated that they had no plans to pursue farming as a career choice. There was a marginally significant relationship between parental and children's aspirations to succeed the family farm. Parental strategies for encouraging and discouraging farming are presented, and implications are discussed.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

While American agriculture maintains its reputation as one of the most efficient production systems in the world (National Research Council, 1995), research has indicated that rural communities are in decline (Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, 1991; O'Hare, 1988). There has been a significant out migration of the population in rural communities, rural education has often been considered inferior to its urban and suburban counterparts, and in general, there is a low morale or sense of depression in many rural communities (Feser & Sweeny, 1998; O'Hare, 1988). One key link to the demoralization in rural communities and even American life as a whole is the steady decline in the number of farming families (Beale, 2000; Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, 1991; Gibbs, 1994; Feser & Sweeny; Strange, 1988). The continued vitality and sustainability of the agricultural sector and of the communities that support it require that qualified individuals devote themselves to farming and rural life.

Unlike many other businesses, the vitality and sustainability of farming generally depends on familial connections between generations. Since farmers typically inherit or marry their land, farm families often depend on at least one child from the new generation to take over the family farm (Elder & Conger, 2000; Salamon, 1992; Salamon, Gengenbacher, & Penas, 1986). The early roots of intergenerational succession, central to the continued existence of family farms, are the core concern of this study, and form the conceptual framework. The retention of youth on farms has become a pressing problem for rural communities, rural education, and farm families in particular (Beale, 2000; Gibbs, 1994), because farming does not appeal to youth as it did prior to the farm crisis of the 1980's (Strange, 1988). Agricultural sectors beyond farming are impacted by this out migration of youth from rural communities as well. Russell (1993), referring to an impending "brain drain" in agriculture, noted an increased need for highly qualified individuals in the food, fiber, and natural resources sectors yet few individuals with agricultural backgrounds or experiences step forward to fill those positions.

While adolescence is a crucial phase for making decisions about future plans, some researchers have called for examinations of

younger farm children (Van Hook, 1990). Super and Bohn (1970) noted that children develop notions of what they like to do or feel that they can do at a very young age. Further, Scanlon, Yoder, and Hoover (1989) indicated that youth perceptions about and subsequent decisions regarding careers in agriculture are formed at or before the junior high level. Thus, from a developmental viewpoint, the investigation of *pre-adolescent* children's decisions to remain on the farm could inform a body of literature that has previously focused on adolescents.

An investigation of pre-adolescent decisions would be remiss without considering the influence of parents. In spite of a thriving youth culture in the U.S. that de-emphasizes adult influence, most conventional wisdom holds that parents have a great impact on their children's development as well as their performance in school, decision-making, and even future success in life. Developmental theories provide support for such claims and subsequently form the theoretical underpinnings of this study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1963; & Vygotsky, 1981).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) indicates the influence of five different levels of environmental factors on individual development, with the family as the principal microsystem or immediate context in which development takes place. Thus, the ways that parents feel, think, and socialize their pre-adolescent children about farming create a central context in which pre-adolescents think about and interact with the farm. A decade earlier, Erikson (1963) had noted that an individual's identity in a vocational sense directly depends upon experiences in the context of the family. This provides further support that the ways that parents explicitly or implicitly encourage or discourage farming as a career could greatly impact youths' decisions to farm later. Finally, Vygotsky (1981) posited that individual cognitive and social development occurs in the context of interactions with other people. He argued that "[s]ocial relationships or relationships among people genetically underlie all higher functions and relationships" (p. 163). Pre-adolescent's decisions, aspirations, and plans to assume the family farm are examples of higher cognitive functions that are based on social relationships and activities. In synthesizing each of these theoretical contributions, it stands to reason that pre-adolescent children appropriate their thinking about farming in the context of their relationships with their parents. Thus parental aspirations for their pre-adolescent children in regard to farming are likely to directly or indirectly impact a child's aspirations to remain on the farm or pursue an agriculture related career.

The final link in the theoretical framework for this study is derived from theories of motivation. According to achievement motivation theory (McClelland, 1961), aspirations are a subset of the desire to perform to high standards of excellence. Youth aspirations are defined as the child's abilities to set goals and work toward those goals (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). A child's aspirations are a reflection of what they wish to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and subsequently guide a number of factors that impact what they will eventually do in life (Walberg, 1989). Since it has been postulated that teachers, parents, peers, and others influence an individual's desire to set goals and achieve excellence (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996), it stands to reason that parents could likely be an influencing factor on their pre-adolescent children's aspirations.

Research indicates much lower career and educational aspirations for rural youth, versus their urban and suburban counterparts, among both youth and their parents (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989). Among rural *farm* youth however, it was reported that compared to rural non-farm youth, rural farm youth had more academic success, reported higher levels of involvement in extracurricular activities, and experienced a greater sense of social ties and attachment with parents and their families in general (Schonert-Reichel, Elliott, & Bills, 1993). While this finding is important, there is a limited research base on the aspirations of rural farm youth, particularly of younger children and *pre-adolescents*.

The sum of research on youth retention in rural communities and farms has focused on factors related to college attendance among adolescents including social support,

less well-educated community members, parental expectations, and the academic involvement and aspirations of youths (Gibbs, 1994; McGrath, Swisher, & Elder, 2001; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). There is paucity in the research regarding *parents'* aspirations for their pre-adolescent children to succeed the family farm. An investigation of both *parental* and *pre-adolescent* aspirations in regard to succession of the family farm could serve to inform a research and practice base concerned with retaining qualified individuals in the food, fiber, and natural resources sectors and the continued vitality of America's rural communities.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to explore the aspirations of parents and pre-adolescents in regard to succession on the family farm. The following research questions were used to guide the study: (1) What are parents' and pre-adolescents' aspirations in regard to the succession of the family farm; (2) What are the relationships between parents' and pre-adolescents' aspirations for succession of the family farm; and (3) In what ways do parents encourage or discourage farming as a career choice for their pre-adolescent children?

Methods and Procedures

The population for this study included 1700 farm families throughout Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin who served as panelists for the *Farm Research Institute*, which is a marketing research institution for rural and farm-related research issues. Fifty participants, of the total membership in this panel, who had children between the ages of seven and 12 living at home were randomly selected as a sub-sample of this population.

This study is part of a larger research project on operator characteristics, parenting, parent-child relationships, future plans, and stresses entitled, *Parents as Resources for Youth Success in Farm Families* (Wiley, Bogg, & Ho, 2001). Results from a subset of data were analyzed, and in the interest of brevity, the larger study is not described. Each farm family was mailed a set of questionnaires, which included open-ended questions for the self-identified farm operator, and open-ended questions for a pre-adolescent child (if there was more than one preadolescent child, parents were asked to choose one as the "focal child" for purposes of this study). While there are possible limitations to the parent selection of the focal child for this study, one advantage to the research is that it is likely that in most cases, a parent would select the child that is the most capable of completing the survey as the focal child.

A postage-paid envelope was provided for returning the questionnaires. A pre-notice consent to participate was mailed, and follow-up procedures for the instruments consisted of a mailed reminder card and a phone follow-up (Dillman, 2000). While all 50 families agreed to participate in the study, ultimately, 47 of those families returned the surveys resulting in a 94% response rate. All three families who did not participate cited unexpected business as the reason for not returning survey packets.

An expert panel of three university researchers and three farm couples reviewed the full questionnaires for content and face validity. The edited instruments were piloted with a focus group of six farmers. Their feedback was used to further refine the constructs and questions for the population. Establishing test-retest reliability for these questions was deemed unnecessary and inappropriate given that the constructions are fluid by nature (Krathwohl, 1998).

The farm operator (in all cases this was the father) was asked to indicate how important it was to him that the focal child takes over the farm at some future date. The available responses were "not important at all," "somewhat important," and very important." They also were asked to provide open-ended responses to several questions. The first was to describe their plans, if any, for having the focal child farm with them or take over the farm. If it was not important to them that their child takes over the farm, they were asked to describe how they were discouraging that child from farming. Finally, if it was not important to them that their child takes over the farm, they were asked to describe the ways, if any that they

encourage or plan to encourage the focal child to consider other careers.

The focal pre-adolescent child in the family was asked to complete a youth questionnaire. One question asked youth "What do you think you would like to do after high school?" Respondents could check all that applied from a list that included "farm," "college," and "I don't know yet." They could also write in their own response in a blank line beside "other." A separate envelope was provided for the youth survey. Parents were asked to allow their children to fill out the youth survey privately and seal it in the return envelope without parental inspection.

The data for this mixed-methods study were analyzed and interpreted from a post-positivist epistemological stance (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). For objectives one and two, descriptive statistics and a McNemar matched pairs analysis were utilized. An alpha level of .10 was established a priori, due to the small sample size in the study. For objective three, open-ended responses were coded to seek an understanding regarding the ways in which parents either encourage or discourage their pre-adolescent children to succeed the family farm as well as ways in which they encouraged the pre-adolescent to pursue other careers. A word processor was used to help create organizers to systematize and summarize the qualitative data. Several coding passes, made in an iterative and emergent fashion, were used to reduce the qualitative data from three open-ended questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 1998; and Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers created a coding scheme of the major concepts, central ideas, or related responses (Glesne, 1999). Trustworthiness and believability was established through the use of peer debriefing, an audit trail, and a reflexive journal (Donmoyer, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Results

For the pre-adolescent questionnaire, there were 43% (*N*=20) female and 57% male respondents (*N*=27). There were no differences between males and females in response. For the operator questionnaire, all respondents were males as previously indicated. The average number of acres farmers operated, including owned and rented was 785, with a range of 20-4000 acres. On average, the operators had been farming for 21 years, and had three children still living at home on the farm.

Objective one was to determine parents' and pre-adolescent children's aspirations for succession of the family farm (Table 1). Twenty-two (47%) parents responded that it was somewhat or very important that their child take over the family farm. Twenty-five (53%) parents indicated that it was not important at all that their child take over the family farm. Conversely, 13 children (28%) aspired to farm after high school while 34 children (72%) indicated that they did not aspire to farm. Two children did not respond to the item on the questionnaire.

Table 1
Parent and Child Aspirations for Children to Farm (*N*=47)

	Important/Plan to Farm		Not Important/No Plan to farm	
Family Member	*f*	%	*f*	%
Parent	22	46.8	25	53.2
[a]Child	13	27.7	34	72.3

[a]Two children did not respond to this question on the survey.

Objective two was to understand the relationships between parent and child aspirations to succeed the family farm. A McNemar test for matched pairs was utilized to determine if there was a relationship between parents who felt that it was important for children to take over the family farm and children's plans to farm after high school (Table 2). In the families of the 25 parents who indicated that it was not important for their children to take over the family farm, 18 children indicated that they did not want to farm after high school while seven had plans to farm after high school. Further, of the 22 parents who indicated that it was important for their children to succeed the family farm, six children planned to farm and 16 had no plans to pursue farming after high school. The McNemar analysis yielded a value of 3.52, which was marginally significant at the .10 alpha level.

Table 2
Contingency Table by Parental Aspirations and Child Aspirations to Farm

	Youth Plans to Farm After High School				
	No		Yes		
Parental Importance for Child to Farm	*f*	%	*f*	%	Total
Not Important	18	52.9	7	53.8	25
Somewhat/Very Important	16	47.1	6	46.2	22
Total	34	72.3	13	27.7	47

Q_M (1, N=47) = 3.52, p>.10

The third objective was to seek a deeper understanding of the ways in which parents either encouraged or discouraged their children to succeed the family farm. Parents were asked to respond to three, open-ended questions, including, (1) if it is important for your child to go into farming, what are ways that you encourage or plan to encourage your child to farm?, and (2) if it is not at all important for your child to go into farming, what are the ways that you encourage or plan to encourage this child NOT to farm, and (3) what are the ways that you encourage or plan to encourage your child to consider other careers? The following themes emerged from the coded responses.

Twenty-two of the 47 farm operators indicated that it was either somewhat or very important for their child to take over the family farm. Fathers indicated a variety of strategies for encouraging their pre-adolescent children to farm, i.e., teaching farm knowledge and skills, providing financial support, allowing freedom of personal choice, experiencing the joys of farming as a lifestyle, and supporting agricultural endeavors outside of farming. Descriptions of the emergent themes are as follows.

Teaching: Teaching, directly and indirectly, was an important strategy for parents to encourage farming. Fourteen parents indicated that they encouraged their pre-adolescent to farm by involving them in day to day farming activities, taking them along for rides on the tractor or doing chores, teaching them farming skills, or having them help with the farm work. In addition to general labor, parents taught cognitive skills related to farming, for example, one parent indicated that they "include their child in the decision process" related to the farm.

Entrepreneurship: Beyond merely working on the farm or watching parents work, pre-adolescent children were encouraged to farm through financial and entrepreneurial means. Ten parents indicated

that they paid children for working on the farm, gave them ownership of individual projects or various aspects of the farm operation, or included them in the financial processes related to the farm. One parent stated that they, "reward farm labor with wages or income from sale of commodities." In regard to ways in which parents encouraged entrepreneurship, one parent indicated, "He wanted to raise chickens, so we bought and moved a chicken house and are helping [him] learn about chickens."

Personal Choice: Six of the parents who responded that it was important for their child to farm indicated that pre-adolescent children have to arrive at the decision to farm on their own. They indicated the large commitment associated with farming, and the necessity of entering into farming of one's own choice. One parent who wanted their pre-adolescent to farm admitted, "Farm life is something you have to have in your veins. It has to be the person's decision to farm from the start." In addition, parents indicated that they try to nurture their pre-adolescent child's individual interests as they relate to farming.

Experience Joy of Farming as a Lifestyle: Seven parents noted that they allow their children to experience the joys associated with farming and encounter the fun activities that farming and rural life entails. Parents agreed that while farming is hard work, children should be allowed to have fun and see that they do not have to work all of the time. In regard to the ways in which they allowed pre-adolescent children to experience the joys of farm life, one parent noted that they, "let him/her know they can make an enjoyable living farming…not all work…have time off to enjoy hobbies, family get-togethers, etc." Finally, parents indicated that children must learn to love farming as a way of life if they are to be committed to assuming the responsibilities of the farm.

Supporting Off-Farm Agricultural Endeavors: While many of the themes related to encouraging farming involved pre-adolescent children's direct experiences on the farm, five parents noted that they encouraged farming through off-farm endeavors. Parents indicated that one way to encourage farming was to promote the importance of a Baccalaureate degree in an agricultural field. Agricultural youth organizations such as 4-H were also mentioned as a way for pre-adolescent children to experience off-farm endeavors related to agriculture. As stated by one parent, "4-H is good at giving them a taste of different areas." Further, three parents indicated that they would support their pre-adolescents' decisions to pursue other careers and return to farming later in life.

One undoubtedly important material mechanism to encourage farming is to provide requisite financial support. Some parents indicated that they had made or were making financial plans for children to take over the farm. Of the 22 parents who responded that it was somewhat or very important for one of their children to succeed the family farm in the future, 10 indicated that they have made no plans (financial or otherwise) for their children to take over the farm in the future. For the parents who had or were making financial plans for pre-adolescent children to succeed the family farm several prominent themes emerged, i.e., expanding the operation to accommodate more families, gradual transitions to ownership, and general financial management strategies. Each of these will be further described.

Expansion of the Operation: Eight parents indicated that they had made or were making plans for the farm to expand in order to accommodate more families. Specific examples included expanding machinery and technology, building houses for children on the farm, or physically expanding the size and scope of the operation. One parent noted, "we have worked to build our operation to a size that will support more than one family and requires the labor input of several men."

Transitions to Ownership: Parents also noted the need to make the transition of the farm from their own personal ownership to that of their children. Plans for pre-adolescent children to transition to the farm were noted as either a gradual process over an extended period of time, or as an immediate sales transaction of the operation to the child who wanted to farm. In regard to the gradual transition of ownership, one parent noted that they would, "Slowly work

him or her into the operation over a period of time. They can build up their equity so they will be in a position to take on more responsibility."

Financial Management: Six parents indicated that general financial planning practices were also important for supporting children to assume the family farm. Personal debt management, building savings accounts to pay children's college tuition and other expenses, or setting up trust funds for children were general ways in which they managed finances to provide pre-adolescent children with the financial means to take over the farm. In regard to financial management one parent responded, "We have a savings account established for college education expenses and will encourage him to learn as much as possible to contribute to the farm."

While farming was an important endeavor for these farming parents, some noted that they did not aspire for their child to assume the family farm. Parents discouraged farming by encouraging personal choice, teaching their children about the disadvantages of farming, encouraging their pre-adolescent children to attend college, promoting career awareness and individual exploration outside of farming, and directly forbidding farming as a career option.

Personal Choice: For parents who felt that it was not important for their child to go into farming (n=25), 20 noted that they did not directly encourage or discourage farming. Rather, many of these parents noted that they supported the child's right to explore and make a personal choice in regard to farming. Some parents, as a part of encouraging personal choice, indicated that they provided children with information regarding the advantages and disadvantages of farming to guide children through the decision-making process. One parent noted, "We are allowing her to make her own choice. We are providing her with any information she needs to make that choice."

Disadvantages of Farming: Parents who explicitly discouraged farming stated that they noted the disadvantages of farming as a career such as low pay, long hours, lack of insurance and retirement benefits, and no paid vacations. One parent indicated that, "Farming is great but there is so much out there that is also enjoyable and the pay is much better with added benefits."

Encourage Education: Some parents who directly discouraged farming as a career promoted education as a way to leave the farm. For one parent, "getting a good education" was termed "the way out". The parent also noted, "I hope our children will desire to live in a rural area, grow big gardens, but not farm full time."

Career awareness and Individual Exploration: Parents indicated exposing children to a variety of careers through reading, community activities, career days, or Sunday school, as a way to support off-farm endeavors. Further, parents indicated that they encouraged pre-adolescent children to explore a "bigger world." They exposed children to a variety of activities and interests and encouraged pre-adolescent children to explore individual talents. As a way of encouraging off-farm careers, one parent indicated that he "will intentionally expose this child to any or all career opportunities and will never lord it over him that he 'must' farm for a living."

Forbid Farming: One parent noted that he would directly forbid farming, direct the children to get off-farm jobs, and require college in order to encourage his children to pursue other careers.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

For objective one, the aspirations of parents and pre-adolescent children in regard to succession of the family farm, more children than parents indicated that they had no plans to pursue farming as a career choice. While nearly three-fourths of pre-adolescent children responded that they did not want to pursue farming as a career, almost half of parents noted that it was either very important or somewhat important for their child to succeed the family farm. There is a discrepancy between parental desires and their child's aspirations in regard to farming as a career choice. This finding is interesting in light of Erikson's (1963) notions of family influences on the individual's vocational identity. In light of Scanlon, Yoder, and Hoover's (1989)

conclusions that youth decisions regarding careers in agriculture are formed at or before the junior high level, it is clear that the youth in this study do not aspire to farm after high school. Further research with pre-adolescent children is recommended to determine children's aspirations to pursue agricultural related careers and activities in addition to farming, as well as the reasons *why* children aspire to particular career endeavors.

Objective two was to describe the relationships between parents' and pre-adolescents' aspirations for succession of the family farm. The McNemar matched pairs test for association revealed a relationship that was marginally significant at the .10 alpha level. Thus, there is a trend for some significant relationship between parents' and children's aspirations for pre-adolescent children to succeed the family farm. The findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size in this study; it is possible that a larger sample could have yielded more statistically meaningful results. This finding tentatively implies that at the pre-adolescent phase of development, parents' wishes do influence children to some extent. On the surface, this conclusion would provide support to the influences that ecological (Bronfenbrennar, 1979), identity development (Erikson, 1963), and cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1981) theories assert. The trend level significant relationship may also indicate that parental wishes and home-environment influence children, but in conjunction with other factors in their home environment (Wiley, Bogg, & Ho, 2001). For example, children may be influenced less by what a parent says about future farming and more by how much that parent seems to enjoy their own work on the farm. Some parents may give children unintentional "mixed messages" about farming that are at least as influential as their aspirations for their children. Further research with larger sample sizes is recommended to explore the relationships between the parent's and the pre-adolescent child's aspirations for succession of the family farm.

In regard to objective three, which was to explore the ways in which parents encouraged or discouraged pre-adolescent children to succeed the family farm, several conclusions emerged from a synthesis of the coded themes. First, parents *encouraged* farming by equipping pre-adolescent children with knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to farming and farm life. Parents taught specific farm production and entrepreneurial skills and decision-making strategies through direct experience of working on the farm and owning farm-related projects. Further, parents developed their pre-adolescents' specific dispositions to farm by allowing them to experience joys related to farm life, and to arrive at the decision to farm through personal choice and career exploration. As such, this finding appears to be in line with Erikson's (1963) notions that the individual's identity development in the vocational sense is related to direct experiences within the context of the family. Finally, parents equipped children with the physical mechanisms to farm by making financial preparations for inter-generational succession of the farm. Expanding the operation to support additional families, financial planning for ownership transitions, and sound financial management practices were all mechanisms whereby parents prepared to make the possibility of farming a financial reality for their children. The findings associated with the ways in which parents encourage farming imply that parents both extrinsically and intrinsically encouraged farming as a career choice for their pre-adolescent children. The choice to farm, as encouraged by parents, was viewed as knowledge and development of particular skill sets, through internalizing farming as a personal decision and way of life, and by developing the financial means to make the choice to farm a physical reality for children. Further research is recommended to examine the impact of specific experiences on pre-adolescent career aspirations. Since parents seemed to encourage farming by both direct (or external) and indirect (or internal) methods, further research is warranted on the impact of both direct and indirect or extrinsic and intrinsic factors as they impact youth aspirations to farm or explore other agricultural endeavors.

In regard to the ways in which some parents *discouraged* farming, it was concluded from a synthesis of emerging themes that while parents supported personal choice among their children, they outwardly encouraged children to "escape" or pursue a "better way of life". Only one parent in the study indicated that they would directly forbid farming as a career choice for their child, and the majority of parents indicated that personal choice was of paramount importance for the child's decision to farm. However, parents who discouraged farming also encouraged career exploration, education, and experiencing a "bigger world" as mechanisms for children to leave the farm. Parents who discouraged farming focused on informing children about the disadvantages related to farming as a career and encouraged them to explore endeavors that would remove them from farming. Anecdotally, parents want what is best for their children. The findings from this theme imply that parents view farming as a hardship and want their children to pursue career endeavors that are more personally and financially rewarding. As the average age of the American farmer continues to climb, this finding further implies that the human capital to support farms and farming communities will continue to decrease (Beale, 2000; Gibbs, 1994). Further research is recommended to investigate the ways in which farm operators and farm families are either encouraged or discouraged by farming as a career and its influence on children's life and career aspirations.

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