A Case Study of Mid-Career School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers' Job Stress, Coping Skills, and Support Needed

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Introduction

Occupational stress has long been a concern of employers, particularly within the American workforce. However, there is inconsistency about causes, effects, and preventative measures one can implement to reduce job stress. According to the 2011 Stress in the Workplace survey, over one-third of employees considered themselves stressed out during a workday, and one in five reported a high rate of stress daily (APA, 2011). Within education, teacher stress has been correlated with both job satisfaction and burnout (Lopez, Bolano, Marino, & Pol, 2010). At its worst, stress-related illnesses including fatigue contribute to teacher absenteeism and are concerning for the overall well-being of educators and students (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1986). Teachers who are stressed or burned out may project a negative consequence onto their students.

School-based agricultural educators are not immune to burnout or stress; they utilize physical, emotional and intellectual resources to be effective in their classroom (Cano, 1990). Extended hours needed for success in the classroom, FFA, and Supervised Agriculture Experience (SAE) combined with laboratory hazards and days away from the classroom easily lead to a higher chance of burnout (Croom, 2003). School-based agricultural educators are just as vulnerable, if not more so, to the detriments of job stress as they progress through the various teaching career phases because of the extra demands and responsibilities placed on them by students, parents, administrators, and the community. Mid-career teachers may be further impacted by other external factors, such as familial changes or continuing education; these factors may cause increased stress and lead to attrition.

Theoretical Framework

Huberman's research on teachers' professional life cycles helps frame this research (1993). Through his efforts, Huberman identified five main phases within a teacher's professional life cycle (see Figure 1): Career Entry, Stabilization, Experimentation, Serenity/Conservation and Disengagement. Teachers at each phase face job stress from time to time. In each, teachers have a unique set of needs, challenges, and opportunities.

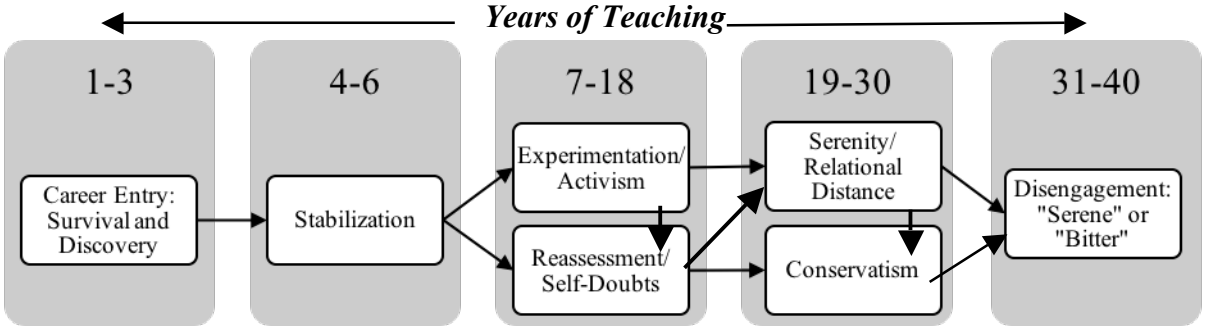

Figure 1: Huberman's Teaching Career Cycle Model

Methodology

This qualitative descriptive case study sought to identify challenges and stresses faced by mid-career school-based agricultural education teachers and what coping skills and resources, if any,

are utilized to overcome the challenges. In this case study, mid-career was defined as 7-15 years of teaching experience to align with the National Association of Agricultural Educators' XLR8 program, although this range does not align perfectly with Huberman's model. Seven current school-based agricultural education teachers in three Midwest states (Iowa, Minnesota, and North Dakota) were individually interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording application, field notes were taken, then recordings were transcribed verbatim to be analyzed further. Hortizontalization and coding were used to analyze the data; categories were formed from the coded data. Patterns were sought and interpreted as themes.

Results/Findings

Each participant identified his or her own set of challenges and stressors. At the same time, certain professional challenges were common among all participants. Particularly, a lack of understanding about what agricultural education can do for students, technology in the classroom, and student behavior surfaced as consistent challenges. A lack of understanding within school administration, staff, and community members regarding the nature of and opportunities within agricultural education was the most prominent challenge cited. Beyond challenges faced by participants in their career, personal balance, job security, and changing positions and/or school districts were identified as additional stress factors. While challenges and stresses were openly shared, each participant identified students as one of the biggest rewards and reasons they continue. Participants also credited support from colleagues within their school and state agricultural education association, participation in professional development, and hobbies or outside interests as major coping mechanisms during stressful times. Mentorship programs were not identified as particularly helpful. When asked about support and resources which may ease job stress, teacher participants identified two major themes: involvement in professional organizations and cohorts, and the importance of being able to work efficiently.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

As a result of these findings, agricultural education leaders can become more aware of what mid-career agricultural educators face and encourage others to utilize the coping strategies suggested when faced with stressors of their own. While a number of these challenges may be experienced through all of the professional life cycle phases, as Huberman (1993) wrote, these particular challenges expressed by the participants may be more recognizable for mid-career teachers. Teachers have different professional development needs as they experience the phases of their career life cycle; this means targeted professional opportunities should be available in each phase. Many mid-career teachers are in a phase where they are feeling confident about their skills yet ready to experiment with their curriculum (Huberman, 1993). They require a different type of professional development than a novice teacher who wants to learn more content or a late-career teacher who is preparing to leave the profession.

Further research should focus on agricultural education teachers in other phases of the career life cycle and involve teachers outside the Midwest region. Moreover, further studies could take a quantitative approach, perhaps exploring the rate of teacher burnout and other associated events. Additional research should also study teachers who have left, or plan to leave the profession, and evaluate their stress or burnout rates prior to leaving; this will provide data for administrators and other educators to recognize warning signs and take action before a teacher leaves the profession.

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