Teacher Education Programs: Perceptions of Early Career Agriculture Education Teachers

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Introduction

Researchers agree that the preservice teacher education programs have an impact on beginning teachers' sense of teaching efficacy (Whittington, McConnell, & Knobloch, 2006). Ross, Cousins, and Gadalla (1996) further noted adequate preservice teacher preparation may influence teaching efficacy by reducing uncertainty about one's ability to perform teaching behaviors. Additionally, Rubeck and Enochs (1991) found university level coursework related to future teaching requirements predicted teaching efficacy. Supporting this, Ross (1992) found evidence that teachers' sense of efficacy increased when they had received learning opportunities that improved their teaching skills. Darling-Hammond, Chung and Frelow (2002) reported that teachers who felt better prepared were more likely to believe they could more effectively manage their classrooms while teaching all students to high levels. Conversely, teachers who felt underprepared were more likely to feel uncertain about their abilities to teach their students (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002) and less likely to remain in the profession (Coladarci, 1992; Evans & Trimble, 1986). Therefore, to be used as a factor to predict teaching efficacy, an examination of the perceptions of beginning agricultural education regarding their preservice teacher education program is warranted.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers' sense of efficacy, which is grounded in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, refers to a teacher's judgment of this or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Bandura (1986) indicated that the environment surrounding an individual influences their behaviors and beliefs. Environmental influences, including instruction and modeling, modify human expectations, beliefs, and cognitive abilities. Bandura (1977) noted "most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed" (p. 22). Within in a preservice teacher education program students are provided opportunities to model appropriate teaching behaviors. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory was used to guide this study to describe the perceptions held by early career agriculture education teachers toward their preservice teacher education program.

Methods

This descriptive study used survey research methods to summarize participant demographic characteristics and perceptions held by the respondents toward their preservice teacher education program. The data included in this study was part of a larger project examining the teaching efficacy beliefs of beginning agricultural education teachers. Specific to this study, the internet-based instrument contained two sections. In section one respondents were asked to use a five-point summated rated (Likert-type; 10 items) scale to rate their perceptions toward their preservice teacher education program. The instrument was researcher developed and was based upon the National Quality Program Standards for Secondary (Grades 9-12) Agricultural

Education established by The National Council for Agricultural Education (2009). Section two consisted of demographic questions relating the teacher's age, gender, and years of experience.

The population for the study (*N*=199) included secondary agriculture education teacher in Missouri and Kansas who had not completed more than five years teaching agricultural education, and were licensed through an approved program. Teacher names and contact information were obtained from each state's department of education. Nonresponse error was controlled by comparing on-time (*N*=103) respondents to late (*N*=77) respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983). No significant differences were found between the two groups; therefore, the data were combined, resulting in a final response rate of 83.4% (*N*=166). Data were collected using the internet survey provider SurveyMonkey® during June and July following the procedures outlined by Dillman et al. (2009).

Findings

The typical beginning teacher was between 23 and 27 years of age and had taught agricultural education slightly less than three (2.69) years. Ninety of the respondents were female (54%), and 76 (46%) were male. According to the overall mean score for the scale (*M* = 3.47, *SD* = .80), the beginning agriculture teachers indicated their teacher education program adequately prepared them to teach agricultural education. The early career teachers indicated they were well prepared to "pursue professional growth through continued participation in professional development" (*M* = 3.76, *SD* = 1.00), "deliver curriculum in an integrated model that incorporates classroom and laboratory instruction, experiential learning, and leadership & personal development" (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = .93), "provide students with opportunities for the development and application of knowledge and skills" (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = .91), and "assess student learning" (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = .88). On the other hand, the teachers indicated they were least prepared to "utilize advisory councils to determine areas for program improvement," (*M* = 3.09, *SD* = 1.14) and "manage students supervised agricultural experience programs" (*M* = 3.07, *SD* = 1.10).

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The present findings suggest early career teachers viewed their preservice teacher education program adequately prepared them to teach. Most notably, they felt well prepared to deliver curriculum in the traditional three-circle model. But specifically, however, the beginning teachers indicated they were least prepared to manage student supervised agricultural experience programs. As it relates to teaching efficacy, this finding is not surprising. Wolf (2011), noted beginning agricultural education teachers "were the least efficacious in the SAE domain" (p. 172). Since prior researchers have indicated adequate teacher preparation may influence teaching efficacy (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996), "perhaps more emphasis should be placed on the SAE domain during teacher preparation and student teaching" (Wolf, p. 172, 2011). Doerfert (2011) noted teacher preparation programs must remain current to better prepare preservice teachers for entry into the profession. To remain current, teacher preparation programs should incorporate perceptions of recent graduates into their program evaluations in order to make the necessary revisions and updates to better prepare future teachers.

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