

Why Ag Ed? Examining the Motives to Teach Agriculture among Non-SBAE Students

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Introduction and Need for Study

With a lack of qualified school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers across the country (Smith, Lawver & Foster, 2018), the need to effectively recruit is paramount. For years the main method of recruiting agricultural teachers has been through SBAE programs. However, some make their way into the agricultural education profession who themselves never enrolled in SBAE in their high school years (henceforth referred to as non-SABE students). Despite this and the recommendation from research (Lawver & Torres, 2012; Marx, Smith, Smalley, & Miller, 2017), there is a dearth of literature exploring recruitment from outside of SBAE. Little is known about the motivations that influence non-SBAE students to pursue a career in agricultural education and more research is needed. Understanding the motives of non-SBAE students to pursue a career in agricultural education can lead to effective efforts in recruitment of a more diverse population of individuals to fill the nation's demand for agriculture teachers.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

One conceptual model used to describe the factors influencing an individual's choice to teach is The Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice®, Watt & Richardson, 2007). The FIT-Choice® model was developed from themes emerging from both the teacher education and the career choice literature to help explain why individuals choose teaching as a career choice. Later, Lawver (2009; Lawver & Torres, 2012) utilized Watt and Richardson's (2007) FIT-choice® model among agricultural educators to develop a conceptual model specific to agricultural education to explain career choice among individuals choosing to become agriculture teachers.

Purpose and Methods

This qualitative, phenomenological research study sought to identify the motives for choosing agricultural education as a major and career despite having never participated in SBAE or FFA in high school. Participants ($n = 6$) for this study were selected as they met the research criteria: (a) undergraduate pre-service agricultural education major; (b) never participated in SBAE in high school. One semi-structured focus-group interview was conducted with the participants during the spring 2018 semester. The 75 minute interview consisted of questions that addressed motivations for pursuing agricultural education as a major and career. The focus-group interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data collected were analyzed and coded for thematic content. Two separate researchers performed the coding process with constant checks for accuracy and reliability in coding. The process of coding was performed using open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with the researchers renaming and situating themes within the FIT-choice model during the final selective coding stage.

Findings

This study aimed to understand the motives for non-SBAE students to choose agriculture education for their major and career. Through data analysis, three major themes aligning with the

FIT-choice model emerged, which include influencers, previous experience, and values. Pseudonyms are used in reporting the data through quotes.

Theme 1: Influencers: Participants shared examples of people (e.g., friends, teachers, and parents) in their lives who influenced them to major in agriculture education and spoke positively about it as a career choice. This theme aligns with the *socialization influence* from the FIT-Choice model. Jamie discussed how her friends in other agriculture majors at college influenced her to switch her major to agricultural education, “[my friend] invited me to the ice cream event at the college and said, ‘have you ever thought about agriculture?’ and then he grabbed a [professor] and we just started talking about agricultural education.”

Theme 2: Previous Experience: The second theme aligns with the *task perception influence* of the FIT-Choice model, and is broken into two sub-themes: (a) previous experience in agriculture; and (b) previous experience in teaching. The participants expressed positive experiences in agriculture at home and wanted to have it be a part of their future in some way. They expressed confidence in being able to perform agriculturally related tasks. Regarding his previous agriculture experience, Chuck said, “I grew up around agriculture my entire life... we grew up in the middle of huge fields in a small town...all of these experiences made me want to stay with agriculture in some way or another as an adult.” The next sub-theme of previous experience in teaching refers to the participants having positive previous teaching experiences, which have bolstered their desire to be a teacher. Jim said, “I get a thrill when students don’t get it...and you work with them and then they get it, there is this light that comes on...and I really enjoy that.”

Theme 3: Values: The participants expressed a strong desire to make a positive difference in the lives of other people and wanted a career that aligned to their lifestyle goals as well. The participants perceive that teaching agriculture fits with their life goals. Aaron said “Teaching was the field I chose because I have always enjoyed helping students learn and develop themselves.” Brian said “I saw my dad’s lifestyle as a teacher, and I thought it would fit the kind of lifestyle that I wanted in the future, so I made the jump.”

Conclusions/Recommendations/Impact

Themes from our data analysis aligned with the constructs of the FIT-choice model for agricultural education (Lawver, 2009), which suggests non-SBAE students do not differ from traditional SBAE students regarding their motives for pursuing agricultural education as a career. Similar to findings in other career-choice research among traditional SBAE students, our findings also indicated non-SBAE students (1) had a strong passion for agriculture *and* teaching, (2) possessed a desire to make a difference in the lives of students, and (3) were positively encouraged by key influencers to pursue agricultural education (Ingram, Sorensen, & Warnick, 2017). Based on these findings, we recommend those within SBAE at all levels (influencers) develop innovative ways to positively interact with non-SBAE populations of students. Through these interactions, we are confident more students will be exposed to the reality and viability of agricultural education as a career choice. We acknowledge the small sample size limitation with this study and therefore we recommend similar research in other states be conducted with non-SBAE preservice agriculture teachers to increase the generalizability of these findings. If large enough samples can be obtained, quantitative research should be conducted to empirically test the FIT-choice model among non-SBAE populations. As we broaden our efforts to recruit outside of SBAE, we will be better positioned to alleviate the agriculture teacher shortage crisis, and to make a greater impact on the lives of a more diverse population of students.

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