

What Do They Want? Examining Student Teacher Decision Making

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Introduction/Need for Research

Student teaching is a pivotal component of teacher preparation. Previous studies in agricultural education have focused on several facets of student teaching, including student teacher attitudes and experiences. However, limited research has targeted how teacher candidates are placed within agricultural education with only two studies focusing on this topic from the early 1990s (Deeds, Flowers, & Arrington, 1991; Norris, Larke, & Briers, 1990). The requirements for placement sites and cooperating teachers differ by state and institution. In [State], minimal requirements exist for cooperating teachers and placement sites. Currently, student teachers in the agricultural education program select the top three programs where they would like to student teach with varying amounts of guidance from the agricultural education teacher education program. With the current free-choice environment for placement site selection at [University], an understanding of how student teachers made decisions in the selection of a placement site was sought to provide guidance and support to student teachers in the future.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in career decision-making literature and Stumpf, Colarelli and Hartman's (1983) model of career exploration. According to the Stumpf et al. (1983) model, the four components of the exploration process include: (1) where one explores, (2) how one explores, (3) how much one explores, and (4) what one explores (i.e., the focus of exploration). Stumpf et al.'s (1983) model of career exploration was a suitable framework for this study as the concepts connect to the process teacher candidates utilize while making a decision regarding student teacher placement.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized interviews to understand the decision-making process teacher candidates underwent choosing their student teaching placement site. The participants were randomly selected from all subjects who had enrolled in the agricultural education licensure program at [University] from 2010 through 2016 ($n = 40$). Of the participants who opted in, all had completed an undergraduate agricultural content area degree and then completed a graduate program to earn their agriculture teaching license and master's degree. The researchers conducted nine interviews using a semi-structured protocol. The interview questions included, "What was most important in your decision and why", "Did you feel supported in making your choice? By whom?", "Talk about how student teaching went for you", and more. Interviews were transcribed and data were coded using both deduction and induction following recommendations by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results

Four main themes emerged we labeled as selection criteria, the exploration process, making the decision, and reflection on the process or outcome. Our findings align with previous career decision-making literature suggesting the decision-making process is complex, individuals vary in degree of decidedness, and decidedness develops over time (Krieschok, 1998).

Selection criteria included personal beliefs, perceived barriers, and/or personal filters. Students' previous experiences, including their involvement with a secondary agriculture

program and their perception of a quality program, influenced their selection criteria. Location was also identified as a filter and/or barrier, depending on whether they sought a location geographically near where they wanted to teach in the future, or used student teaching as an opportunity to move away from home and experience a new region of the state. Additionally, teacher candidates used their own knowledge or abilities as a filter in choosing a placement site. One student indicated, "...I wanted a balance of my strengths, and then I also wanted to really be challenged in an area that I knew that I wasn't very good at."

The exploration process was defined by how or from whom the participants sought information to inform their decision-making. Participants utilized various methods to locate information which varied from a detailed process to those who used a limited number of resources, consistent with findings in career decision-making literature (Krieshok, 1998). Nearly all of the participants indicated talking with someone associated with the teacher education program. However, teacher candidates also relied on recommendations from agriculture teachers in the state and through connections made at the [State] FFA Convention or other related events.

As participants made their decisions, criteria that factored into the final decision included classes that would be taught, the desire to push personal boundaries and expectations, added benefits of one placement over another, and personal influences. Teacher candidates considered the personality and gender of potential cooperating teachers, teacher involvement in the state association and FFA, as well as personal relationships.

Reflection has been identified as important to the learning process (Walters, Seidel, & Gardner, 1994), and in this case, the opportunity to reflect on the student teaching experience provided some hindsight that is helpful for future decision-makers. Participants noted they wish they would not have allowed location to hinder their decision and advocated for learning about concepts related to overall program management they were unfamiliar with, especially FFA.

Discussion and Implications

The decision-making process for student teaching placement by the teacher candidate is complex. The findings of this study can assist teacher education programs and teacher candidates in selecting a placement site. In a perfect world, a student would arrive for advising about student teacher placement open to all of the available options for placement. Students who seek advising arrive after having already filtered their choices based on a number of factors including location, beliefs about programs, or perceived needs. Teacher candidates enter the process with established perceptions of programs and possibly with disproportionate access to information as they determine their selection criteria. During the exploration process, teacher candidates rely on a variety of individuals for input but ultimately depend on the university supervisor to assist in making their decision. This understanding of the decision-making process has the potential to enhance programmatic support for teacher candidates in the selection of their student teaching placement site. While these findings are not generalizable outside of the candidates in this study, future research should explore teacher candidates' decision-making processes across varied programs and institutions.

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