

Aiming for keeps: Targeted professional development and teacher commitment

Erin K. Gorter

Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
805-756-5362
ekthomps@calpoly.edu

Jana Russell

Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
509-885-6278
jrusse07@calpoly.edu

Sierra Taylor

Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
916-365-6611
sitaylor@calpoly.edu

Aiming for keeps: Targeted professional development and teacher commitment

Introduction

Commitment is a general state of psychological attachment rarely explored in teachers of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) (Blau, 1985; Gorter, 2018). Level of commitment is linked with persistence when faced with challenges, explains intent to leave a profession, and is related to teacher performance (Bishop, 1990; Crosswell & Elliott, 2004). Fu (2011) identified three underlying constructs affecting professional commitment: identity, planning, and resilience. This qualitative study focused on exploring change in professional commitment after targeted professional development designed for teachers of SBAE. This research aligned with the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda's priority five as efficient and effective agricultural education programs are aimed at those entering SBAE classrooms as teachers (Roberts, Harder & Brashears, 2016). Teachers within these classrooms must be committed toward the profession to continue to provide high-quality programs.

Theoretical Framework

The model of teacher change provided the framework for this inquiry (Guskey, 2002). Teacher development should be targeted and the ultimate goal is change in teacher beliefs (Guskey, 2002). Only the individual will be able to contextualize the change in relation to his or her own educational environment (Boylan, Coldwell, Maxwell, & Jordan, 2018).

Methodology

Phenomenology drove this qualitative exploration of participant ($N = 6$) perceptions following an international experience designed for teachers of SBAE (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants answered a series of semi-structured interview questions regarding their perceived change in professional commitment. These questions were developed using commitment factors of identity, planning, and resilience (Fu, 2011). With consent, responses were recorded and transcribed through an outside service. Qualitative methods call for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). Utilizing multiple sources of input, audit trails, and the elicitation of direct quotations to create thick description aided in the methodological soundness of this study, which utilized constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "Themeing the Data" was deemed appropriate as interviews dealt with participants' "psychological world of beliefs, constructs, identity development, and emotional experiences" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 200).

Results and Findings

Three themes emerged regarding how the teachers perceived change in their own identity, planning, and resilience in the profession of teaching SBAE:

Theme 1: Seeing Different Perspectives

- “If you asked me what was sustainable agriculture, I would have told you that it had to be economically stable, environmentally stable, and it had to produce enough food. . . After the trip I added. . . Understanding and honoring the social, cultural aspect of a farming.”
- “Just kind of puts things into perspective. That we, we do have a lot. . . our students have a lot of opportunities at all levels.”
- “You have this assumption that Ecuador agriculture is not as evolved as ours. . . it’s just different because their cultures are different. Their climates are different. Their landscape is so different, what they use is advanced for their circumstances.”

Theme 2: Connecting with Others

- “Okay, well I’m not the only one having this issue. Somebody else in Ecuador is also having this issue.”
- “Connecting with people professionally. . . allows you to kind of open new doors. . . to continue to grow professionally.”
- “I feel like I’m more eager and more comfortable with asking veteran teachers for help or learning from others. . . it’s also made me want to collaborate with people. . . and learning what they do in their programs locally and what other states do.”

Theme 3: Reflecting

- “I’m more open to reflecting on why. Like what am I doing wrong? What do I need to do to make sure I meet their needs so that they master the content?”
- “Trying to keep an open mind about culture and backgrounds...and also just realizing the importance of what we are doing.”
- “They’re doing amazing things with their kids and they don’t complain about it. So you have no room to complain yourself.”

Conclusions

No blatant themes emerged regarding participant commitment to the profession of teaching SBAE, yet individual constructs of resiliency and identity emerged as perceived as positively impacted. Planning did not emerge. Participants in this professional development event described change in their own perspectives in relation to how they perceived their identity as teachers of SBAE and of agriculture as a whole. Further, they recognized change in how they are able to reflect as educators and interact with other teachers of SBAE. Transcriptions did reveal participants appeared to foster their own resiliency through renewed need for, and ability to, reflect as well as an invigorated focus on the importance of their roles as SBAE teachers.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Professional development has the ability to move teachers of SBAE along a continuum of professional growth evidenced by change in teacher beliefs (Guskey, 2002). Professional development experiences appear to change the way teachers perceive their professional identity and how they interact with other educators. Finally, a renewed resiliency when faced with challenges as an educator appeared to evolve during the professional development experience. These findings lend themselves to further exploration of how specific professional development may strengthen professional commitment among teachers of SBAE.

References

- Blau, G. (1985). The measurement and prediction of career commitment. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 58(4), 277-288. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8325.1985.tb00201.x
- Blau, G., & Lunz, M. (1998). Testing the incremental effect of professional commitment on intent to leave one's profession beyond the effects of external, personal, and work-related variables. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 52(2), 260-269. doi:10.1006/jvbe.1997.1601
- Boylan, M., Coldwell, M., Maxwell, B., & Jordan, J. (2018). Rethinking models of professional learning as tools: A conceptual analysis to inform research and practice. *Professional development in Education*, 44(1), 120-139. doi:10.1080/19415257.22017.1306789
- Colarelli, S. M., & Bishop, R. C. (1990). Career commitment: Functions, correlates, and management. *Group & Organization Management*, 15(2), 158-176. doi:10.1177/105960119001500203
- Crosswell, L. J., & R. G. Elliott. (2004). *Committed teachers, passionate teachers: The dimension of passion associated with teacher commitment and engagement*. Paper presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Fu, J. (2011). Understanding career commitment of IT professionals: Perspectives of push-pull-mooring framework and investment model. *International Journal of Information Management*, 31, 279-293. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2010.08.008
- Gorter, E. K. (2018). *Exploration of global perspectives, teacher passion, and professional commitment of second stage agriculture teachers in the western United States* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Texas Tech University Electronic Thesis & Dissertations.
- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3/4), 381-391. doi:10.1080/135406002100000512
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2007). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 114, 15-25. doi:10.1002/ev.223
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Fourth edition. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020*. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Third edition. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.