

Teacher Beliefs of Relatedness Within School-Based Agricultural Education Programs

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Introduction/Need for Research

School-based agricultural education (SBAE) has robust experiences to offer students and SBAE teachers are tasked with determining how to select activities to motivate students to learn and participate. The motivation of students is essential, such that Deci (2009) asserts that education is impossible without motivation. Research has demonstrated that motivation is impacted by the relationships and experiences during their school day and within their SBAE program (Anderson, 2013; Ball et al, 2016; Bowling, 2018; Green, 2001; Klassen, et. al., 2012). Research in recent years has mainly focused on how motivation is supported within educational settings. Gasser et al.n (2018) state that the level of emotional support shown within the classroom allows students to feel safe to engage within their classroom or program. Quin (2017) was able to demonstrate that secondary student engagement is driven by their connection to their teacher. Thus, this study aims to explore in detail the beliefs that agricultural educators hold in regard to relationships or relatedness within SBAE programs and how their beliefs influence the motivational strategies utilized to motivate students. This topic has not been directly addressed within SBAE research, and studies examining student motivation and engagement within agricultural education are few (Anderson, 2013).

Theoretical Lens

We utilized a constructivist philosophical perspective and theoretical lens of Self Determination Theory (SDT). Specifically, this study focused on the psychological needs of relatedness. Relatedness is defined as feeling a sense of belonging within a context (Deci, 1991). SDT provided a lens in which to frame the relationships discussed within the SBAE programs and the constructivist lens allowed for the emergence of the data. As former high school SBAE teachers and current SBAE teacher preparation educators, we bracketed our biases in the study.

Methods

For this study, we utilized a phenomenological methodology that sought to explore the central phenomenon of beliefs agriscience teachers possess regarding student relatedness (Moustakas, 1994). To identify potential participants we contacted three Department of Education district supervisors to identify teachers who taught for a minimum of five years, supported relatedness within their programs, and represented a variety of demographic characteristics such as age, years teaching, sex, certification type held, and local of school. From their recommendation, we purposively sampled eight agriscience teachers ($n = 8$). Of the teachers interviewed, three were male and five were female; teachers interviewed for the study were from all over the state. We collected data through semi-structured one-on-one video-conference interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed through the three-phase process of horizontalization, identification of meaning units, and clustering of themes (Moustakas, 1994). Trustworthiness was held through various strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results/Findings

Through the data analysis, four major themes emerged as the pieces of SBAE relatedness was described in detail by instructors: SBAE program “culture” built on relatedness, engagement is key to relatedness, agriculture teachers are the role models for students, and teamwork is key to developing relatedness.

The first theme that emerged was a “culture” built on relatedness. All of the teachers

viewed relatedness as the foundation for their program and the program's culture. Participant "Cheryl" shared about her program's culture that "many students within my program don't have any other place to fit in at school; ag class and FFA serves as their 'school family' and that inclusiveness and family environment becomes the culture that we all share together."

Participant "Susan" discussed how having multiple teachers and a larger number of courses allows students to find a place within the culture of their program. "Susan" expanded by sharing that students in her program "will typically gravitate toward one of our areas (ag science or ag mechanics). "Susan", as well as other teachers in a team teaching environment, identified this situation as a way to allow inclusion for more students.

The second theme that emerged was that engagement is key to relatedness; this includes relationships between the teacher and students and between students. Engagement must occur between the teacher and among students; however, engagement must be with other important adults to the SBAE program, the community the program is within, and with other surrounding SBAE programs. Participant, "Ben" stated "I see community impact (at our fair) as thousands of people walk through our display that week and the students want to make sure that our display looks great. The students care because of our relationship [with the community]." All of the teachers in the study commented that the better the relationship they had with their students, the more engaged the students became in the program.

The third theme that emerged was that agriculture teachers are the role models of relatedness and must demonstrate their continuous expectations in regard to relatedness. This being said, the teacher must model respect, care, and serve as an all-around role model for their students. The students look up to them and need support in knowing what these concepts look like within relationships. Participant "Beth" stated, "I treat my students like adults in my classroom...they have a great deal of freedom but are responsible for their actions."

The fourth theme that emerged was that teamwork is key to developing relatedness within an SBAE program. The teachers felt that this meant that their students enjoy working together and that working together makes students feel more comfortable within their program. It was noted though, in almost all of the participant interviews, that students always prefer to work with their friends. Participant "Bob" stated, "Trying to get teams of students working together, like my FFA Officer Team, to know that they are a team and work well together is huge."

Conclusions

From these findings, we were able to derive detailed, direct descriptions that allow us to discern that not only is relatedness important to student engagement in SBAE, but it is essential. The four themes that were derived from this research study all centered around the fact that the teacher-student and student-student relationships are key to creating relatedness, if relatedness is successful then the engagement in the program will improve. This also highlights the importance that should be placed on teachers of agriculture to offer experiences that students are interested in, and for teachers to have a desire to connect with their students.

Recommendations/Impact on Profession

From this study, we recommend that teachers of agriculture intentionally create relationships with their students and promote students to have positive connections within themselves. Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers perceive that their ability to serve as a role model is a large part of what can allow relatedness to flourish in their program, which leads to the inclusive environment that many participants referred to in the study.

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