

Building Connectivity: Variables Impacting Teacher Connections

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Introduction, Objective, and Theoretical Framework

Connections within the workplace are essential for employee retention; high levels of connectivity increase employee job satisfaction and organizational success (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). A recent study in SBAE explored SBAE teacher connectivity within four domains: (a) SBAE teacher connections, (b) school connections, (c) community connections, and (d) curricular connections, finding the four connectivity areas predicted 12% of the variance in perceived career commitment (Moser & McKim, 2019). The importance of connectivity necessitates research to better understand this variable within SBAE. Both teacher preparation program type and career stage have been found to be important when considering variables like self-efficacy (McKim & Velez, 2016). Therefore, the stated research objective was to analyze perceived connectivity among SBAE teachers by career stage and teacher preparation program type. Given the focus on connectivity, the Relational Theory of Working (RTW) was used as the theoretical framework for the current study. The RTW brings to light the importance of relationships within the workplace, noting all workplace decisions made by an individual are influenced by connections (Blustein, 2011; Jordan, 2008). The importance of relationships suggests a deeper understanding of how teacher development experiences (e.g., career stage, teacher preparation program type) relate to perceived connectedness will inform interventions seeking to increase the scope and strength of relationships perceived by all SBAE teachers.

Methodology

A simple random sample of 750 SBAE teachers from the target population (i.e., all SBAE teachers in the 2018-2019 school year) was received from the National FFA Organization. Using Dillman's (2007) tailored design method, a total of 237 responses ($n = 237$) were received. The independent variables (i.e., career stage, teacher preparation program type) were measured using demographic data collected on the survey. Career stage was included as a categorical variable (i.e., "Early" = 0-5 years of experience, "Mid" = 6-20 years of experience, and "Late" = 21+ years of experience) and teacher preparation program type was included as a dichotomous variable (i.e., traditional SBAE teacher preparation program or alternative teacher preparation program). The dependent variables were measured using four researcher-developed constructs which included (a) community connectivity – connection to members of the community in which the school resides, (b) curricular connectivity – connection to the SBAE curriculum taught, (c) school connectivity – connection to the non-SBAE teachers and administrators within the school, and (d) SBAE teacher connectivity – connection to peer SBAE teachers internal (if applicable) and external to the school. The four connectivity constructs were found to be reliable using post-hoc analyses (i.e., Cronbach's alphas ranged from .72 to .92). To accomplish the established research objective, the means and standard deviations of the four connectivity constructs were compared by the categories established among the independent variables.

Findings

Teachers with more experience consistently rated their connectivity higher than less-experienced teachers (see Table 1). The differences between late-career stage and early-career stage teachers was starkest within the community connectivity construct where late-career teachers ($M = 5.77$) rated their connectivity 1.25 points higher than early-career teachers ($M = 4.52$).

Table 1. *Years of SBAE Teaching Experience and Connectivity*

Career Stage	SBAE Teacher		Curriculum		School		Community	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Early	4.79	1.30	5.24	0.86	4.14	1.13	4.52	1.44
Mid	5.30	1.24	5.49	0.72	4.62	1.24	5.17	1.21
Late	5.36	1.01	5.69	0.85	4.89	1.08	5.77	0.79
Total	5.14	1.24	5.45	0.81	4.53	1.20	5.07	1.30

Note. “Early” = 0-5 years of experience teaching SBAE; “Mid” = 6-20 years of experience teaching SBAE; and “Late” = 21+ years of experience teaching SBAE. Items scaled from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

With regard to teacher preparation program type, teachers having gone through a traditional SBAE teacher preparation program consistently rated their connectivity higher than alternatively certified teachers (see Table 2). The largest difference between the two groups was found within the SBAE teacher connectivity construct (*M* difference = 0.77) and the smallest difference was found within the curriculum connectivity construct (*M* difference = 0.02).

Table 2. *Teacher Preparation Program Type and Connectivity*

Teacher Preparation	SBAE Teacher		Curriculum		School		Community	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Traditional	5.33	1.26	5.46	0.80	4.57	1.11	5.21	1.23
Alternative	4.56	1.42	5.44	0.86	4.38	1.44	4.64	1.47
Total	5.14	1.24	5.45	0.81	4.53	1.20	5.07	1.30

Note. Items scaled from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Conclusions and Discussion

Trends in the findings suggest it takes time to develop connections, given that more experienced teachers perceived the strongest connectivity among all four constructs. Additionally, when compared to traditionally certified teachers, alternatively certified teachers perceived lower connectivity among all four constructs. This suggests alternatively certified teachers may not “fit” into the norms and/or culture of SBAE as readily as teachers who completed a teacher preparation program. Data suggest experience and career-specific training support relationships in the workplace, which the RTW states is essential for employee retention (Blustein, 2011). Findings are similar to those of other career commitment predictors; specifically, research which found teachers perceived their lowest levels of self-efficacy earliest in their careers (Korte & Simonsen, 2018; McKim & Velez, 2016).

Implications, Recommendations and Impact on Profession

Existing research on connectivity within SBAE (Moser & McKim, 2019) identified the need to (a) implement onboarding experiences for teachers and (b) encourage teachers to participate in mentoring programs to increase connections within schools and the SBAE teacher community. Given the findings of this study, it is evident previous recommendations should be targeted toward novice and alternatively certified teachers – two groups of SBAE teachers feeling the least connected in our profession.

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