

Utah New Teachers: Need for Professional Development

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Introduction/Need for Research

Since the Smith Hughes Act of 1917, school based agricultural education (SBAE) has faced a shortage of qualified agriculture teachers in the United States (Eck & Edwards, 2019). Most recently, Lawver et al., (2018) concluded that shortages still exist today. The teacher shortage is a result of poor recruitment as well as retention. In terms of retention, Walker (2002) found that over 40% of SBAE teachers leave the profession within six years of beginning. Therefore, focusing on the challenges and needs of beginning SBAE teachers is important. Touchstone (2015) explained that by identifying needs of teachers and then providing them with professional development opportunities that addresses those needs, teacher retention might be increased. The purpose of this study is to identify the professional development needs of first year agriculture teachers in the state of Utah.

Conceptual Framework

SBAE teachers face the numerous tasks, roles, and responsibilities that all teachers are challenged with, plus they are tasked with a multitude of other responsibilities, such as conducting and managing FFA responsibilities, conducting supervised agricultural experience (SAE) activities, and building relationships with community partners (Torres et al., 2008). The three-circle model was therefore used as the conceptual framework to guide this reach. This model represents a complete agricultural education program, which includes classroom instruction, FFA and SAE, and illustrates the overlap of these areas within the learning process (Croom, 2008). In order to provide support for beginning teachers, it is important to understand their professional development needs within each area of the three-circle model.

Methodology

Researchers collected data at the Utah New Agriculture Teacher Workshop where participants ($n = 10$) were given a 30-item needs assessment survey. The survey prompted participants to rank both the “importance” and “ability” level of each item (Borich, 1980) on a five-point scale (1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high*). The items in the survey were situated within the three-circle model and covered relevant topics to first year agriculture teachers related to classroom (e.g., classroom management), FFA (e.g., working with FFA officers), SAE (e.g., integrating the AET management system for student record keeping), personal (e.g., balancing work and life roles), and community (e.g., utilizing community volunteers). The researchers developed the instrument items based on previous needs assessment literature within agricultural education (DiBenedetto, 2018; Edwards & Briers, 1999; Garton & Chung, 1997; Layfield & Dobbins, 2002; Sorensen et al., 2014). Data were analyzed using the Borich Needs Assessment Model (Borich, 1980). Researchers entered data into a Microsoft Excel-based Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS) calculator to determine the greatest need area for professional development of the first-year agricultural teachers (McKim & Saucier, 2011).

Results/Findings

The MWDS for each of the 30 items ranged from 1.44 to 12.50. All MWDS were positive, indicating each item could be considered a professional development need. The top five professional development needs as indicated by the first-year teachers included balancing work and life roles, implementing classroom management strategies, managing student discipline, motivating students to learn, and time management (Table 1). The items with the lowest need for professional development were; managing program equipment and supplies, supervising student SAE programs, preparing local CDE/LDE teams, completing paperwork/reports, and conducting local FFA chapter activities. Of the top ten professional development needs of these beginning teachers, two related to personal areas, seven related to classroom teaching, one related to FFA, and none related to SAE.

Table 1

Top Ten Professional Development Needs of First-Year Agriculture Teachers in Utah

Survey Item	Program Area	MWDS
Balancing work and life roles	Personal	12.50
Implementing classroom management strategies	Classroom	9.60
Managing student discipline	Classroom	9.31
Motivating students to learn	Classroom	9.31
Time management	Personal	8.23
Communicating with parents	Classroom	7.76
Engaging students in lessons	Classroom	7.20
Utilizing community volunteers	Community	7.02
Teaching students with varying levels of achievement and/or ability	Classroom	6.30
Preparing FFA award applications	FFA	6.05

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Because of the low participant numbers, findings are not generalizable beyond the population of this study. It is clear from this research that first-year teachers need additional training, primarily in regards to classroom teaching and personal life areas. The most pressing need among first year teachers in Utah was balancing work and life roles, which has been found to be a need in other needs assessment studies as well (Sorensen et al. 2014) and suggests continued training is needed as well as recommendations to the profession for changes to happen to increase work-life balance. It is interesting that SAE related items and all but one FFA item did not emerge as a top need among SBAE teachers in this study, despite being a common professional development need among SBAE teachers for years (DiBenedetto et al., 2018). More research is needed to determine how and why this finding might differ from what has been found in other studies. Furthermore, the majority of classroom area items needed for professional development centered around classroom management and discipline, which is a common theme found in SBAE needs assessment literature (DiBenedetto et al., 2018). Findings from this study are important and impactful for SBAE teacher educators in Utah as it provides a focus for training preservice teachers. It also provides a training guide for state leaders and the teacher's association involved with providing professional development training to new teachers.

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