

Teaching During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic: A Case Study of Early Career Teachers' Experiences in Secondary Agricultural Education

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Introduction

The year 2020 marked an era of change and necessitated that educators across the globe adapt in new and innovative ways. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators' responsibilities were forced to evolve due to stay-at-home orders, decreased household incomes, sickness, and increased stress (Keels, 2020). These changes have been especially difficult for early career teachers who require additional support during this phase of their professional development (Roberts et al., 2020). For example, during the 2018-2019 school year, 1,020 school-based, agricultural education (SBAE) instructors entered the workforce, which created an influx of new teachers (Foster et al., 2019). Therefore, a need emerged to understand the transitions of early career teachers as they adapted instruction during the global pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's (2011) transition model grounded this investigation. The model seeks to describe the evolution that an individual undergoes as they adapt to a professional transition. The transition model is composed of three primary phases: (a) understanding transitions, (b) coping with transitions, and (c) applying the model to work and life (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg's (2011) lens was appropriate in the current investigation because the COVID-19 global pandemic presented many unanticipated transitions for teachers. In particular, we focused on the second phase, coping with transitions, of Schlossberg's (2011) model to better understand how participants actively applied coping mechanisms during this era of change.

Purpose

This study's purpose was to explore the transitions that early-career SBAE teachers in Louisiana experienced during to the COVID-19 pandemic. One research question guided this investigation: *What influences do early career teachers in Louisiana identify as a result of their transitional experience to teaching virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Methodology

The study used an instrumental case study approach, as participants were bounded by time and place (Stake, 1995). We also built Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) four standards for qualitative quality into the design of this investigation. Following the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data were collected purposefully from early-career SBAE instructors ($n = 12$) in [STATE]. For this purpose of this investigation, early career teachers were defined as having five years or less of teaching experience. Data were collected through a 45-minute, semi-structured focus group interview ($n = 7$), and written narratives composed by five participants. Data were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Data were then coded using in-vivo, emotion, and description coding approaches during our initial analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Thereafter, we used an axial coding approach to create themes and theoretical coding to interpret our findings through Schlossberg's (2011) model. Through the process, four themes emerged.

Findings

Our findings were interpreted using Schlossberg (2011) coping strategies using four themes: (1) situation, (2) self, (3) supports, and (4) strategies. In the first theme, situation, Julia and John explained how their unique circumstances during the pandemic resulted in them feeling more “stress[ed], unsure, and uncertain.” Julia, who teaches at the Louisiana School of the Deaf and Blind, where students live on campus, stated: “my school actually sent home all of our students...we have a lot of accommodations...it was really stressful.” Matt shared his experience working to establish agriculture classes virtually by explaining: “[I] just threw my hands up in the air and said I'm going to try this again next year.” The second theme, self, represented how the participants used coping mechanisms to influence their transitions during the pandemic. For example, John explained: “as an early career teacher, one of the things that [was] stressed... is adaptability... I firmly believe that this [the pandemic] was more of a confidence booster.” Sarah also expressed: “just do the best you can with the cards you've been dealt, and we've been dealt COVID-19 cards.”

The next emergent theme, supports, reflected the external support systems available to participants during their time of transition into a virtual teaching format. Participants indicated that support was offered by their school systems through providing resources such as Chromebooks so they could provide resources and distribute work to students. The largest source of support articulated by the early career teachers was the Louisiana Agriculture Teacher's Association. Julia explained: “our state has done a great job of [adapting agricultural education] events the best way they can.” The last theme, strategies, indicated the approaches that participants used to address and reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on their teaching. The early career teachers shared that they used new software to engage students such as: (a) Blackboard, (b) Google Classroom, (c) Remind101 messaging, and (d) Zoom. Participants also shared their strategies of maintaining the three-circle model while at a distance. In particular, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE) emerged as a component that many teachers expressed improved due to the pandemic. Emily shared, “I feel that this pandemic g[ave] the SAE component a chance to grow.”

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on the Profession

In this investigation, we provided insight into how early career teachers coped with transitions during the COVID-19 global pandemic. We concluded that such could be interpreted using Schlossberg's (2011) transition model through four themes of meaning: (1) situation, (2) self, (3) supports, and (4) strategies. Although the challenges introduced in 2020 were unprecedented, the early career teachers reported they drew upon various coping mechanisms to successfully facilitate student learning during the pandemic. Moving forward, we recommend that additional research seek to explore the most successful delivery strategies for teaching secondary agricultural education students at a distance. Because the early career teachers in this study reported they placed a greater focus on SAEs during this period, future research should also examine the best practices for supervising these projects virtually.

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