

**Teaching in Pajamas: New Teacher's Reflections About Teaching Through A
Pandemic**

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Introduction / Need for Research

The mode of instruction used by early career agriculture teachers (ECATs) was disrupted by the California Governor’s Executive Order on March 19, 2020 (Exec. Order No. N-33-20, 2020). In the interest of public safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all state residents were ordered to “stay at home or at their place of residence except as needed to maintain continuity of operations of the federal critical infrastructure sectors...” (Exec. Order No. N-33-20, 2020, p. 1). For more than a century, teachers in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) have taught in-person through hands-on learning experiences. The shift in state guidelines prevented the normal functioning of this traditional SBAE model. According to Education Week (Milman, 2020), “These are not normal teaching and learning conditions. What we are experiencing now is emergency remote teaching...” (p. 1). In response, SBAE programs were expected to instantly transition to instruction online (Easterly et al., 2021). In California the transition ranged from remaining in full in-person instruction with a modified schedule to fully virtual. Given the immediate, variable, and drastic shift in teaching paradigm it is important to understand how this event is affecting teachers just beginning their careers.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

Two theories informed the development of this study and analysis data: Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1994) and Pedagogical Design Capacity (Brown, 2003). Human Capital Theory explains both individuals’ decisions to invest in education and training and the pattern it has on their lifetime earnings (Becker, 1994). We framed this study to consider that agriculture teachers intuitively, regardless of circumstance, invest in their craft to be knowledgeable about their content, skilled in pedagogy, and constantly learning to remain relevant. Additionally, we coupled Human Capital Theory with the theory of Pedagogical Design Capacity (PDC), which posits that teachers have a certain capacity to identify and utilize available resources for instructional design (Brown, 2003). Combined, these two theoretical lenses help look at the experiences of ECATs during a pandemic with the understanding that they are invested enough in their own professional growth to persevere through a shift in teaching practice, and that they will utilize all resources to achieve the best end for their students. Together, these theories inform a perspective about how the stay-at-home mandate may have influenced their experiences and reflection on experience.

Methodology

The objective of this study was to understand how ECATs dealt with the experience of shifting teaching practice during the early stages of COVID-19. The subjects of this study were 52 first and second year ECATs participating in an induction program specifically designed for agriculture teachers in California. Based on data collected by the California Department of Education (Wieghat, personal communication, December 18, 2020), this group represents 45% of the state’s first and second year teachers. Data were extracted from the formal monthly induction reports for February, March, and April of 2020. Utilizing the Dedoose platform, an initial codebook was developed utilizing 14 most prevalent themes present in ECAT reflections. The authors engaged in a coding exercise with incomplete sample data from the population of induction participants. To calibrate consistent coding and tests of inter-rater reliability were taken to measure alignment. The monthly reports featured 156 usable reflections and each was coded twice by a separate reviewer. Codes were then ranked by frequency of use and attached to

descriptor data for month, gender, region, and year in the induction program.

Results/Findings

The demographic makeup of participants revealed that 74% of the group are female, compared with 63% statewide. Fifty-one percent of the teachers were in their first year of teaching and 49% were in their second. The analysis of the reflections yielded 2504 coded excerpts. The most frequently used codes were Goals (267), Reaction to Mandates (244), Positive Emotional Response (239), Negative Emotional Response (236), and Classroom Management (195). The Goals code was expected as the writing prompt is directed toward ECAT's goals. A number of coded excerpts had distinct trends over the three-month span. Adapting to Technology, Adapting Pedagogy, Negative Emotional Response, and Reaction to Mandates increased in frequency from February through April. The Classroom Management code appeared frequently early in the time frame (February), declined (March), then peaked again toward the end (April). Goals, Positive Emotional Response, and FFA Program Management declined in frequency over the three-month period.

Conclusions

This study allowed the reflections of novice SBAE teachers to be identified and analyzed, shedding light on the most frequent experiences had by ECATs during the initial response to COVID-19. During the shift of teaching practice, the data suggest that as effects from the COVID-19 progressed participants expressed varying degrees of impact on their experience. Most notably, participants discussed classroom-related goals and how those goals were impacted negatively during the transition. For example, as participants reacted to mandates placed on their capacity to teach participants expressed a basal level of concern with classroom management prior to the pandemic (February), lost focus on it at the onset of pandemic restrictions (March), and then regained focus in April as they began to cope with their new teaching environment. Through the theoretical perspectives that guide this study, data suggest that ECATs experienced the transition in teaching during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic with increased emotional and regulatory burden. However, data also suggest that once ECATs were able to overcome initial burdens on their teaching (Reaction to Mandates) by investing, sometimes begrudgingly, in new skills (Adapting Pedagogy and Adapting to Technology) to meet the needs of their students, in their new environments.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

The full impact of COVID-19 on ECATs will not be known for quite some time. However, this study sheds some light on the coping strategies ECATs implement to be effective in their craft and the willing investment they make when influenced by forces beyond their control. Further research is required to understand the context that shades in ECAT's reflections on experience, and what effective teaching through a pandemic looks like in SBAE for this population of teachers. First-year teachers, for example, have yet to experience a full calendar year of teaching in a traditional (face-to-face) setting. What skill sets and experiences will they find important for their careers--absent those imposed on them by society or teacher preparation programs? And considering previous work on this topic (Easterly et al., 2020), how will the wellbeing of teachers be considered in the topic of career investment? Given the hands-on approach common to the discipline, the sudden shift in teaching practices presented participants with significant challenges relative to content delivery and student engagement. We recommend researchers and teacher preparation programs provide greater emphasis on teaching with technology, adaptable pedagogy, and the power and use of emotion during emergent situations.

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