

Early Career Teachers' Struggles with Lack of Practical Skills

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

It is estimated that 41% of educators abandon their teaching career within the first five years of teaching (Solomonson et al., 2019). Moreover, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped 35% in recent years (Lynch, 2018). Teaching agricultural science is even more challenging when considering the multifaceted roles of an agricultural educator (Roberts & Dyer, 2004). Agricultural teachers have a number of roles and responsibilities extending beyond the classroom in the areas of FFA, SAE, and overall program management. In order to decrease School Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) teacher attrition rates an examination of those programs is needed in regard to pre-service teacher preparation for the multifaceted roles of an agricultural educator. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the undergraduate experiences of alumni at Texas A&M University-Commerce and to examine how those experiences influenced the participants' early career teacher experiences. Specifically, this study aligns with the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda's Research Priority 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs.

The theoretical underpinning of this study was a convergence of the human capital theory (HCT), self-efficacy theory (SET), and social cognitive theory (SCT). HCT posits individuals are capable of being developed (Haynes et al., 2014). Teacher preparation programs have the opportunity to develop human capital in their students via courses and experiences (Haynes et al., 2014). Self-efficacy is one's personal perceptions concerning their ability to plan and carry out certain activities (Bandura, 1977). As such, effective teaching is related to a teacher's own perceptions of their ability to teach (Eck et al., 2019). Social cognitive theory postulates that an individual's acquisition of knowledge is directly related to the observation of others through social interactions and experiences (Bandura, 2005; Frost, 2019). Therefore, early career educator experiences can be improved even through an indirect positive experience (Bandura, 1977).

Methods

A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture a first-hand account of the participants and a purposive sampling technique was utilized to attain a sample of five participants where both a depth and diversity of perspectives would be offered (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected using two semi-structured interviews. The questions posed during the interview were open-ended and developed from prior research of the Standards for School-Based Agricultural Education Teacher Preparation Programs (AAAE, 2020). The second round of interviews were designed to mirror the first while requesting that the participants reflect on and answer follow-up questions from the first interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, approximately 90 minutes in length, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and provided to the participant for review for member checking. The second set of interview questions served to further examine emerging themes.

Results

An area of concern shared by each of the participants include the need for SBAE teachers to have a more practical set of knowledge and skills when they begin their career. For example, Charley shared she, “learned a lot in college but I didn’t learn enough about the showing side and how to deal with giving medications and diagnosing animals when they have urinary calculi or stuff like that.” Charley went on to express the lack of skills leaves her feeling inadequate as a teacher but believes learning how to do things that fall into an SBAE teacher’s duties such as select, feed, groom, fit, haul, and show steers, heifers, hogs, lambs, goats, chickens, and rabbits would be useful.

Earl echoed this lack of confidence with practical aspects of teaching agricultural science, “I can tell you every part of a ruminant’s stomach but I can’t tell you how to feed a show steer. That is something I would add, I wish that I knew how to take care of livestock projects.” Alena shared she felt unprepared for SAEs, “I wish I would have learned more about record books and how to apply for Greenhand, Lone Star, and American Degrees.” Charley also agreed that understanding more about the required record book keeping process is necessary. Charley shared, “We were taught how to manage the financials, how not to mess up, how to always keep your receipts, that was really good. But what I need help with, right now, is record books.”

Bonnie shared that understanding when to buy animals for a fair or show, knowing some breeders, how to feed, and other basics including major and county show validation paperwork and entry forms is a “big deal” to her job. Daniel stated he felt like he “failed” the students in his program because he did not understand how to plan an SAE and was only able to help those students who were already experienced in SAEs.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This study identified the need for SBAE teacher preparation programs to provide a more practical set of knowledge, skills, and experiences to pre-service agricultural education students. The lack of undergraduate preparation in the areas of understanding how to facilitate meaningful practical education resulted in low self-efficacy and a deficiency in human capital during the early career teaching experience. The participants needed more training and experience in the areas of livestock exhibition, SAEs, record bookkeeping for FFA scholarship and award programs and administrative tasks associated with leading an agricultural education program. This study provides evidence that lack of self-efficacy in early career teachers can be directly traced to their teacher preparation process. Tippens et al. (2013) research also found that when underprepared teachers struggle with self-efficacy, the experience leads to teacher burnout. The issues presented here are issues that can be addressed during the undergraduate teacher preparation process. Teacher preparation programs include more practical learning environments, methodologies, and skillset development opportunities. We recommend similar studies be replicated regionally to determine if other groups of early career SBAE teachers experience similar issues.

We, as a professional organization, need to have focused conversations on best practices for preparing preservice teachers to effectively facilitate practical learning experiences and to include, in those conversations, potential but necessary shifts in curriculum.

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