

**Pronoun Preparedness of Preservice, School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers:
Baseline Analysis of Their Knowledge and Preparedness Regarding Gender Pronouns**

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Introduction

“As educators, we can take small steps to make sure all students feel welcome and affirmed in our schools regardless of their gender identity” (Cross & Hillier, 2021, para. 1). However, many K-12 teachers in the United States are ill-prepared to teach lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ+), and non-gender conforming youth (Clark, 2009). Using gender neutral language is an easy way to help transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students feel included and supported (Matsuno, 2019). Mallinson and Inscoe (2020) asserted that “language isn’t just talk” (para. 2). They described how language can reveal and enforce stereotypes. Language also often challenges the norms and conventions of society, and the use of gender inclusive language shows that we value equality and are advancing social progress for all genders (Mallinson & Inscoe, 2020). Mallinson and Inscoe (2020) contended that “. . . linguistic efforts have raised awareness of gendered linguistic bias in ways that have had direct social impact” (para. 3). LGBTQ+ students are in classrooms across the United States and schools should develop strategies for creating inclusive learning environments (Hall, 2021). Hall (2021) identified steps for enhancing inclusivity in career and technical education classrooms that include: responding to anti-LGBTQ+ language by students and faculty, learning the terms associated with the LGBTQ+ community, normalizing the use of gender pronouns, and using inclusive language.

The American Association for Agricultural Education identified “Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs” as an area of importance in its 2016-2020 National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 42). However, literature on gender-inclusive language in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) is rather sparse (Murray et al., 2020). Murray et al. (2020) concluded that few studies, with a focus on sexuality, had been published in the field’s major journals. With little research available regarding gender pronouns and the LGBTQ+ community in SBAE, this question remains: How knowledgeable and prepared are preservice teachers to deal with situations involving gender pronouns and TGD students in their programs?

This study is a longitudinal descriptive-exploratory investigation. Our overall goal is to assess students’ knowledge and attitude over time as they matriculate through their teacher preparation program. The purpose of this portion was to determine the baseline knowledge and preparedness of preservice SBAE teachers regarding gender pronouns and included two research objectives: (1) determine the knowledge of preservice SBAE teachers regarding gender pronouns, and (2) determine the preparedness of preservice SBAE teachers to understand and properly use gender pronouns at the end of their first three-credit hour course on teaching methods for SBAE.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

A three-part conceptual framework was created to guide this study. The steps in the framework include: (1) gender pronoun knowledge and preparedness, (2) proper use of gender pronouns, and (3) perceived benefits of proper use are realized. Bandura’s social cognitive theory posits that a person will be more willing to adopt an action or object if they perceive benefits exist (Vasta, 1989). Making preservice teachers aware of the benefits to their students when they feel comfortable in a learning space supports the need for gender pronouns curriculum in teacher

preparation. During their preparation at Oklahoma State University, teacher aspirants engage in campus events and limited course activities on issues regarding the inclusivity of members of the LGBTQ+ community. These experiences may play a role in building their knowledge of gender pronouns and prepare them for learning situations that involve using such while student teaching and as inservice teachers but to what extent or the resulting impact is not well understood.

Methods

The participants for this initial observation included 45 preservice SBAE students enrolled in AGED3103/5203: Foundations and Philosophy of Teaching Agricultural Education at Oklahoma State University during the Fall semester of 2021. All students were asked to participate. They completed a questionnaire developed using Qualtrics. It included six, Likert-type questions measuring perceptions of their knowledge and preparedness regarding gender pronouns on a seven-point agreement scale: 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*. An open-ended question asked the participants to explain their attitudes regarding gender pronouns and related usage in SBAE, and questions were asked to describe their personal characteristics.

Results

Slightly more than one-half, 26, of the students responded. The participants perceived being moderately knowledgeable of gender pronouns ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.09$), and the participants agreed they were somewhat prepared to use gender pronouns in their SBAE programs ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.67$). However, they perceived being only slightly prepared by their teacher preparation program regarding gender pronouns ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.54$). When asked to share their thoughts on teachers' use of gender pronouns in SBAE, responses mostly indicated that students perceived it was important. One participant stated: "I think it is very important to consider gender pronouns in the classroom." Another's response indicated feeling unprepared to address gender pronouns in the classroom: "I, myself, need to learn the gender pronouns and learn how to handle students of different genders." While others also explained that it was important to learn about gender pronouns, another participant plainly said: "I think boys are boys and girls are girls."

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Participants' responses showed as a group they perceived the knowledge and preparedness of SBAE teachers regarding gender pronouns is important. They, however, felt somewhat ill-prepared by their teacher preparation program. Results support findings of Clark (2009) that teachers often enter classrooms unprepared to teach LGBTQ+ students. For practice, it is recommended that a diversity and inclusion instructional unit be taught to SBAE preservice students at Oklahoma State University. The unit should provide content on gender pronouns, how to make TGD students feel welcome and comfortable in their SBAE programs, and case studies to better prepare them for experiences they may encounter involving gender pronouns and TGD students. We recommend that other teacher education programs assess the preparedness of their students. We also recommend doing a similar study with inservice SBAE teachers. As our longitudinal study progresses, findings may identify if participants become more knowledgeable and prepared for gender pronoun usage while matriculating through coursework, undergoing campus and community events, experiencing other life activities, or a combination of such by comparing their responses at critical points of the teacher preparation program.

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