

Fighting the First-Year Blues One Postcard at a Time

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Research indicates teachers show more symptoms of psychological and physical stress compared to other occupational groups (Reichl et al., 2014). Moir's (1999) Phases of First-Year Teachers further explain the emotions attached to these symptoms. Additionally, research related to social support (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) provides insight to address growing concerns surrounding recruitment and retention within the SBAE profession (Eck & Edwards, 2019). Positive events are perceived to decrease high levels of stress according to Cohen and Hoberman (1983). Therefore, efforts are needed to increase positive events as supported by Anderson and Iwanicki's (1984) findings that teacher motivation has a significant influence on burnout. Similarly, Moser and McKim (2020) sought to understand SBAE teacher burnout through the lens of Teacher Connectivity. Their research is provided insight associated with the recruitment and retention of SBAE teachers (Moser & McKim, 2021). Specifically, Moser and McKim (2020) found connections among SBAE teachers to be a significant predictor of career commitment. Social connections, as cited by Stephens et al. (2011), provide desired feelings of belongingness in personal and professional lives. Lamm et al. (2017) found relationship history influenced both the structure and outcome of mentoring relationships. She recommended participants establish mentoring relationships with individuals with whom they do not have previous connections to expand their network with new relationships. The need for this innovation was grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and specifically in the need for love and belonging (McLeod, 2018). Love and belongingness needs refer to a person's need for interpersonal relationships, feeling connected, and being part of a group (McLeod, 2018).

How it Works

During the 2021-2022 school year, students at Oklahoma State University sought to positively impact morale of SBAE teachers by writing and mailing handwritten notes to the teachers. First-year SBAE teachers (n=43) were targeted for the fall 2021. Teachers' workplace mailing addresses were obtained through The Oklahoma Career and Technical Education office. Agricultural education graduate students designed two postcards for this purpose. The first postcard included the printed message "Best wishes in your 1st year in the best career!" Preservice SBAE teachers enrolled in AGED3103 wrote encouraging messages on the postcard at the beginning of a laboratory session for the class. Postcards were mailed in September of 2021.

The second postcard, to be mailed after the first of the year, was created with a *You've Got This* theme. The goal of this mailing was to address the disillusionment phase (Moir, 1999) of first-year teachers. Preservice SBAE teachers enrolled in AGED3203 wrote encouraging messages to the first-year SBAE teachers and the cards were mailed in February of 2022.

Response to Innovation

Throughout the 2021-2022 school year, a total of 86 postcards were sent to first-year SBAE teachers in Oklahoma. First-year teachers from each area were asked to share their thoughts about receiving the cards. Respondents state they felt connected with and appreciated by the preservice teachers (see Table 1). These responses support the needs of humans in belongingness as discussed Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2018).

Table 1

Responses from first-year In-service SBAE Teachers on the Postcards they Received Based on Oklahoma FFA Area

Oklahoma FFA Area	Response	Type of Teacher Certification
Northwest	"Getting that made me feel welcome and allowed me to know I had a huge support group for success."	Oklahoma Panhandle State University Traditional Graduate
Southwest	"Receiving a card from OSU was very encouraging, especially receiving it from a close friend."	Oklahoma State University Traditional Graduate
Northeast	"I actually have it hanging up in my office! It was so thoughtful, and it gave me a little boost of self-confidence and excitement, while also easing some nerves, to start off my first year."	Alternatively Certified
Southeast	"Receiving a postcard wishing me a great first year was such a thoughtful gesture. It made me feel seen and appreciated."	Oklahoma State University Traditional Graduate
Central	"It made me feel appreciated and seen."	Oklahoma State University Traditional Graduate

Future Plans

Faculty and graduate students in the program intend to continue having preservice teachers send encouraging messages to first-year teachers in upcoming years. Feedback received suggests the postcards make a positive impact which aligns with research recommendations. Responses also encourage expanding the reach of the project to all SBAE teachers in Oklahoma. Feedback gathered from teachers who received postcards helps to support the purpose behind the idea. Feedback shows that teachers appreciate feeling seen, appreciated, and supported. More formalized research should be conducted to measure the impact of postcards on in-service teachers and the preservice teachers involved in the process.

Resources Needed

Graduate students used Adobe InDesign to design the postcards used for this project. Other design programs can be utilized effectively for this step of the process. Postcards were sent to Oklahoma Career and Technical Education office for printing. A total of 100 postcards were printed (fall 2021 and spring 2022) for a total cost of \$53. Mailing labels were created using Microsoft Word and printed on labels at a cost of \$10. Preservice SBAE teachers enrolled in lab sections of professional education courses wrote messages to each of the first-year teachers and attached mailing labels. Postcards were then mailed to the addresses provided by Oklahoma Career and Technical Education office through university postal services for an estimated \$70 in postage.

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