

**What Types of Social Support Do  
Early Career School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers Find Most Beneficial?**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

Across the United States, public schools face a continued and increasing shortage of qualified teachers, as not enough students are entering the teaching profession, and teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Sutchter et al., 2019). This problem is particularly salient in agricultural education, where historically, the demand for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers each year far exceeds the supply of new teacher candidates (Eck & Edwards, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). While training new teachers to fill the vacant positions is always a solution to the problem, it may prove more effective to focus on retaining existing teachers. Providing additional support to early career teachers (ECT), or those with less than five years in the profession, may increase their teaching sense of efficacy which in turn may lead to higher teacher retention (Korte & Simonsen, 2018). Moser & McKim (2020) found SBAE connection to other SBAE teachers was related to career commitment.

### **Conceptual Framework**

House (1981) defines social support as a person's relationships with partners, friends, work colleagues, and work supervisors and links increased social support to decreased work stress and increased well-being (p. 7). Korte and Simonsen (2018) developed a conceptual framework describing the connection of social support to teacher sense of efficacy and career commitment, specifically for SBAE teachers. They list the various sources of potential social support for an SBAE teacher, including school-based (school administration, other teachers in their school, other SBAE teachers) and non-school-based (partner, friends, family). However, their framework does not specify or note the varying levels of importance the different types of support may provide for novice teachers, or how the support manifests in those relationships.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of our study was to examine the social support most beneficial to early career SBAE teachers. Our objectives were: (1) Identify specific areas of difficulty for ECTs, and (2) Determine the types of social support ECTs find most beneficial to address these areas of difficulty. Our study aligned with Research Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of the AAAE National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **Methodology**

Our qualitative study utilized a basic interpretive approach guided by a realism epistemological perspective. A basic qualitative study was deemed appropriate as we determined how our participants interpreted and constructed meaning within their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After receiving IRB approval, we acquired a contact list from [STATE] state agricultural education staff and sent a recruitment email to all 126 agriculture teachers in their second to fifth year of teaching. Nineteen ECT's agreed to participate in our study. Consent documentation and demographic information were collected via Qualtrics. Each teacher participated in a semi-structured virtual interview using Zoom in the fall 2022 semester. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data were analyzed using an open-coding technique by each member of our research team. The codes were used to reveal concepts that developed into our final themes. The reliability and validity of the study were achieved through our methods based on the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Our sample included ten teachers with traditional teaching licenses and nine teachers with a provisional, alternate license gained from working at least in an agricultural industry prior to

teaching. Six identified as male, and 13 as female. All identified as white or Caucasian. Five worked in a school with one SBAE teacher, and 14 worked in a multi-teacher program.

### Findings

In order to address the first objective, what do ECTs identify as areas of their jobs that are most difficult, we identified four themes.

**Theme 1: The school environment and classroom climate are instrumental in determining the difficulty of adjusting to teaching as a profession.** Teachers in our sample discussed challenges in classroom management, especially in classes using a shop or lab setting. They also struggled to determine what issues could be handled on their own or what they needed to talk to their principal. ECTs discussed addressing the social-emotional needs of students and the changing needs of students since the COVID pandemic.

**Theme 2: The responsibilities of administering an FFA program provide added challenges not addressed by traditional agricultural education teacher education programs.** ECTs identified challenges in learning administrative aspects of FFA, including knowing and remembering event deadlines, understanding how Career Development Events run, entering information into online database systems, and preparing for FFA awards. Traditionally licensed teachers discussed the pull between learning the principles of educational-related theories and the need-to-know specific details to run an FFA chapter.

**Theme 3: ECTs identified gaps between their knowledge and skills and job expectations.** All teachers in our sample felt that they needed additional knowledge from what their backgrounds and education prepared them to teach. Those with traditional teaching licenses expressed the challenge of unfamiliar content, while those with alternative licenses expressed challenges with understanding educational pedagogy and teaching methods. Many expressed needing additional support for agricultural mechanics curriculum. Some teachers were also teaching middle school courses and did not feel prepared for this audience.

**Theme 4: ECTs struggled to attain a work-life integration with the expected workload.** Teachers talked about the struggle of teaching five, six or seven different class preps a day while finding time to teach new content to themselves before bringing the information to their students. As one teacher stated, “I can only teach myself so much.”

To address the second objective, what assistance do early career teachers find most important to their job success, we identified two themes.

**Theme 1: ECTs prefer support from other SBAE teachers, state staff, and supportive administrators as well as people they know and have existing relationships.** ECTs went to other SBAE teachers, state staff, and supportive administrators with their various work-related needs. They were most comfortable and went first to those teachers and staff they already knew. Support from people they did not know already was not as welcome or important.

**Theme 2: ECT appreciation timely answers to various questions, as they occurred.** Teachers went to the person with the timeliest response and answer to their question. They used email and text messages, the priority being the most efficient method to get a quick response.

### Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

Early career teachers While our interview questions focused almost exclusively on emotional, appraisal, and informational support when interviewees were asked what other support is helpful, the need for additional money came up repeatedly. This fits under the category of instrumental support in the frameworks by House (1981) and Korte & Simonsen (2018) and confirms that the need for tangible items to support SBAE teachers is important, as well as other types of support.

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