

Inspired to Teach: Perceptions of School-based Agricultural Education Teachers

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Introduction

Current data reveals that the United States educational system has been and continues to experience a shortage of qualified teachers across subject areas. Four main factors are a decline in students enrolling in teacher preparation programs, lower student-to-teacher ratios, increasing numbers of students enrolled, and high attrition (Sutcher et al., 2019). These same shortages are occurring for experienced agricultural educators needed for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs across the nation (Camp et al., 2002). Unfilled positions have led to individuals entering the profession through alternative routes. In 2020, 13.5% of first-year agricultural teachers were alternatively licensed (Foster et al., 2020).

Inspiration has been described as an individual apprehending something because of an influence beyond the self (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Further inspiration can be broken into transcendence, evocation, and motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Ismail and Miller (2021) found that teachers were influenced to join the profession due to encouragement from others and personal reasons. Understanding what inspires individuals to become SBAE teachers can help the profession understand better ways to recruit students into preservice SBAE programs. By increasing the enrollment in SBAE preservice programs, we can begin to combat the shortage of qualified teachers.

Purpose

This study aimed to evaluate the inspirations that led individuals to become school-based agricultural educators in New Mexico. The following objectives were utilized to address this purpose:

- 1) Identify the demographic characteristics of New Mexico SBAE teachers.
- 2) Determine New Mexico SBAE teachers' current view of the profession.
- 3) Determine New Mexico SBAE teachers' motivation factors to enter the profession.
- 4) Determine New Mexico SBAE teachers' perceptions on inspiring others to enter the profession.

Method

The research design was quantitative and descriptive. An online questionnaire was distributed to 130 New Mexico agriculture teachers. The list of emails was obtained from the New Mexico FFA list server. The questionnaire was conducted through Qualtrics and followed the Tailored Design Method for Internet Surveys (Dillman et al., 2014). The questionnaire consisted of eight multiple-choice questions and 32 Likert-type questions. All Likert-type questions used a four-point scale with 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. Multiple choice questions collected data on teachers' current school population, demographics, and context. The Likert-type questions were divided into three categories: current view of the profession, motivation factors, and inspiring others to teach. Data were analyzed through Qualtrics and SPSS.

Results

A total of 82 usable responses were obtained for a response rate of 63.07%. Respondents SBAE programs were 54.9% rural (population <2,500), 26.8% small town (population between

2,500 and 25,000), 13.4% large town (population above 25,000 outside a metropolitan area), 2.4% suburban (territory outside a principal city and inside urbanized area with a population <100,000), 1.2% small city (population less than 100,000), and 1.2% city (population >100,000). Ninety-eight percent were traditional public schools, with only 1% public charter. The respondents' schools were 46.3% Majority Hispanics, 23.2% majority white/non-Hispanic, 15.9% heterogeneous, and 9.8% American Indian/Alaska Native. The socioeconomic context of the respondents' schools was 41.5% low socioeconomic, 36.6% lower to middle-income, 17.1% middle income, and 4.9% middle to upper income. Respondents represented the early, mid, and late-career professionals with 11% in year 1, 17.1% in years 2-3, 14.6% in years 4-5, 15.9% in years 6-10, 9.8% in years 11-15, and 31.7% in 16 or more years. The majority of respondents, 69.5%, went through traditional undergraduate programs. Meanwhile, 15.9% went through a state alternative licensure program, and 4.9% went through a university alternative licensure program. The highest level of education for respondents was bachelor's degree 56.3%, master's degree 42.6%, and educational specialist 1.3%.

Most respondents agreed agricultural teaching was an honorable profession, 74.7%. Additionally, 94.7% of respondents agreed they were proud of their occupation as an agricultural teacher. Eighty-four percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed there is concern over the declining public perceptions of agricultural teaching. Furthermore, 98% felt agricultural teachers should be invested in their students' overall welfare. Seventy percent of respondents were inspired to become a teacher by a teacher, 66% of which were secondary teachers. Cooperating teachers impacted the decision of 56% of the respondents. An overwhelming 72.8% of respondents were inspired to become agricultural educators through their FFA experience. Many respondents see themselves as role models to students for the agricultural teaching profession: 62.2% *strongly agree*, 36.6% *agree*, and 1.2% *strongly disagree*. Only 67% of respondents actively encourage their students to become agricultural teachers. However, 87% initiate positive conversations about the agricultural teaching profession with their students. Only 8.7% discourage their students from becoming agricultural teachers. All respondents believe agricultural teachers play a vital role in shaping our nation's future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In New Mexico, SBAE teachers have a positive view of the profession but believe there is a decline in public perception. It is evident by this data that [state] SBAE teachers are inspired by their secondary teachers to enter the profession. While Cooperating teachers were stated as inspiring over half of the individuals to enter the profession, Kasperbauer and Roberts (2007) found that this is not predictive of the decision to teach. The data also suggests that FFA programs are crucial in inspiring individuals to become SBAE teachers. This data agrees with the study by Ingram et al. (2018), which found that agricultural teachers and FFA programs are principal factors in influencing individuals to join the profession. As we continue to find ways to recruit more students into SBAE preservice programs, we need to adjust our focus to aiding our current secondary teachers, SBAE, and core classrooms with strategies to inspire their current students. Teachers must know their influence on students choosing teaching as a profession. Furthermore, when selecting school sites for preservice candidates, cooperating teachers must be selected with intention. The FFA programs within each state need to continue implementing career development events and leadership training that will encourage and motivate students to become SBAE teachers.

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