

The Impacts of Balance, Engagement, and Commitment of Alabama SBAE Retention

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Introduction

Retaining school-based agricultural (SBAE) classroom teachers has been a longstanding challenge (Foster et al., 2020; Moore & Camp, 1979; Shen, 1997). Agricultural education teachers are in the profession by choice despite experiencing increased demands and conflict created by professional and personal life expectations (Crutchfield, 2010). Many SBAE teachers choose to leave the classroom within five years because of increased demands and conflicts between personal and professional life expectations (Clemons et al., 2021). The high attrition rate of SBAE teachers has significant consequences for school districts, including increased costs for recruitment, community, and training of new teachers. Additionally, teacher turnover can negatively impact school morale, organizational stability, and growth. Despite the increasing demand for SBAE teachers, the supply of qualified candidates has declined due to various factors. Low pre-service teacher enrollment and the challenges faced by new teachers have strained SBAE program development. Understanding why teachers stay in the profession and how professional organizations can support teacher longevity is crucial for addressing the retention crisis. By addressing these factors, schools and professional organizations can create a more supportive environment and increase the likelihood of retaining SBAE teachers. This study investigated the factors influencing the interconnectedness of Alabama SBAE teachers' work engagement, balance, commitment, and decision to remain in the agricultural education classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Motivational theories examine the underlying factors that drive human behavior at the confluence of decisions, actions, and behaviors. This study was guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2008), which explores the psychological needs that influence an individual's motivation and well-being. Deci and Ryan (2008) reported that individuals are intrinsically motivated to pursue activities that satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of this study, SDT provided a theoretical lens through which to understand how SBAE teachers' decisions to remain in the profession are influenced by their perceived fulfillment of these fundamental needs.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design, consistent with Fowler's (2013) approach. This study was driven by The objectives of this study were: 1) Identify the factors contributing to the retention of SBAE teachers in Alabama and 2) Assess the statistical differences of gender factors that may contribute to the retention of SBAE teachers in Alabama. The data collection instrument was adapted from Crutchfield's (2010) work with permission. A pilot study was conducted with 18 Alabama SBAE teachers to assess the instrument's reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for work engagement ($\alpha = .83$), work-life balance ($\alpha = .88$), occupational commitment ($\alpha = .77$), and agricultural education factors ($\alpha = .85$). The target population for this study consisted of 308 SBAE teachers employed in Alabama during the 2023-2024 school year. Pre-announcements were made during the district

SBAE teacher meetings to inform participants about the study, the instrument, and data collection procedures. The final instrument was distributed via a Qualtrics link sent to the Alabama agricultural education teacher listserv. A Likert-type interval measurement scale (Lindner & Lindner, 2024) was used to capture participant responses ranging from: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) neither agree or disagree, 4) agree, and 5) strongly agree. The final response was 128 completed instruments. Partially completed instruments were removed from the study. Four follow-up email reminders were sent to the potential participants following Dillman et al. (2014) recommendations.

Findings

The participants of this study were primarily male ($f = 93$, 73.00%) SBAE teachers. Years of total teaching experience were organized by three categories: early-career (0-5 years' experience), mid-career (6-15 years'), and late-career (more than 15 years'). Participants were 25% ($f = 32$) early-career teachers, 36% ($f = 46$) mid-career teachers, and 40% ($f = 50$) late-career teachers. Objective one addressed factors contributing to SBAE teacher retention and revealed that SBAE teachers generally expressed satisfaction with their work, finding it meaningful and challenging. However, they also reported struggles with work-life balance, often sacrificing personal time and interests to meet professional demands. While most participants expressed commitment to their chosen profession, some indicated dissatisfaction and a desire to pursue different occupations. Alabama-specific retention factors were also analyzed. Participants reported receiving support from school administrators, receiving health and retirement benefits, increasing their salaries, and having positive relationships with SBAE students, FFA members, and their communities. Objective two investigated statistical differences between genders contributing to the retention of SBAE teachers. Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests indicated that male and female respondents prioritized health benefits, administrative support, salary increases, and student relationships for remaining in the SBAE classroom. Analysis identified five statistically significant (significance *a priori* at the $p = 0.05$ level) findings when comparing male and female respondents: work-life balance, $t(126) = 2.56, p = .01$; FFA affiliate membership dues paid by the Alabama legislature, $t(126) = -1.98, p = .04$; extended school year contract grant provided by the Alabama legislature, $t(126) = -2.59, p = .01$; assistance with awards, applications, and contests offered by the Alabama FFA Association, $t(126) = 2.89, p = <.01$; and support of administrators, and CTE directors, $t(126) = -2.41, p = .01$.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This study examined factors influencing the retention of agricultural education teachers in Alabama. Findings suggest that Alabama-specific factors, such as curriculum availability, resources, FFA opportunities, and administrative policies, were more important for teacher retention than work-life balance. While work-life balance was not a primary concern, however, balance influences SBAE teacher retention. Qualitative research can provide deeper insights into these factors, and comparing findings across states can identify common challenges and effective strategies. These findings suggest that while both genders value similar factors, there are distinct gender-specific considerations that may influence retention decisions among SBAE teachers. Future research should explore "work-life compatibility" and gender-specific factors influencing retention.

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