

**A Silver-Lining: Constructive Outcomes of the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by  
Early-Career Agriculture Teachers**

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### **Introduction/Framework**

When the global COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, it transformed the U.S. educational landscape as schools across the country were forced to move from in-person to remote instruction (Daniel, 2020). The lack of preparedness caused panic and stress for teachers and students who were not equipped for this large-scale shift in learning (Eck et al., 2021). Teachers reported numerous challenges, and individual schools created unique issues for teachers and students, including a lack of access to buildings and facilities, creating barriers to resources and making it more difficult to plan (Ermis et al., 2022; McKim & Sorenson, 2020). Student motivation was also an obstacle as the challenges of remote instruction impacted every student, and many schools moved to inconsequential grading policies for the final nine weeks of the semester (McKim et al., 2021).

While many teachers struggled to adapt to remote learning, this transition further challenged early career teachers, who likely felt added stress and job dissatisfaction in their first year (McKim & Sorenson, 2020). While first-year teachers are found to have more enthusiasm and energy than other career stages, they reported needing more support in time management, work-life balance, and teacher leadership (Shoulders et al., 2021). The combination of transitioning to remote instruction, lack of FFA and SAE activities, and the personal stress caused by the pandemic contributed to agriculture teachers reporting a significant decline in job satisfaction in the weeks and months after the COVID-19 shutdown. According to Ermis et al. (2022), novice agriculture teachers may have been even more susceptible to the impacts of remote instruction during the pandemic than our middle and late-career teachers. Several studies have examined the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but few, if any, have focused on the positive outcomes experienced by early-career agriculture teachers during this time.

This study was conceptualized around the development of early career teachers as leaders during the global COVID-19 pandemic using Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) Leadership Development for Teachers (LDT) model. The LDT model's principles are especially relevant for beginning teachers facing unprecedented disruptions in education. The rapid shift to online and hybrid learning environments required teachers to adopt innovative practices, share expertise, and collaborate extensively to ensure student engagement and learning continuity (Daniel, 2020; Eck et al., 2021). This model provided a guiding lens for understanding how early career agriculture teachers navigated the complex demands of teaching during the pandemic, emphasizing their role as adaptive leaders within their schools.

### **Purpose and Methods**

The purpose of our qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of first-year agriculture teachers during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Specifically, we wanted to identify any positive outcomes experienced due to the pandemic. A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study in order to provide a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals (Creswell, 2013). Of the two types of phenomenological studies, transcendental phenomenology was chosen for the purpose of analysis by reducing the overall data into significant statements and combining those statements into themes (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted via Zoom with nine first-year agriculture teachers in 2021. Participants included two males and seven females. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team and then analyzed for themes and statements regarding the phenomenon using an open coding approach. In accordance with IRB

protocols, we removed all identifying information of participants and assigned them each a pseudonym. Reliability and validity were established by following credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability guidelines from Lincoln and Guba (1985).

### Findings

Two themes emerged through the data analysis. The first theme to emerge was **Prioritizing the Classroom and Investment in Teaching**. One unique advantage our participants experienced was the amount of time they had to invest in teaching their first year. Mackenzie shared, “Being able to focus on ‘teacher things’ like classroom management and lessons this year and getting that under my belt so that next year, hopefully, maybe we can do some of the more fun ag teacher activities has been awesome.” While the lack of FFA activities and lowered engagement in SAE was certainly a challenge, many teachers mentioned that they were actually able to spend more time finding their own pace, managing their own schedule, and having more time to engage in the classroom without the added stress of attending FFA events. Morgan stated, “Honestly, it has gone way better than I ever could have imagined. Everyone was warning me, your first year is going to be so rough. You’re going to be staying at the school till 10:00 at night.” She was happy to report that those predictions didn’t come to fruition. John candidly shared, “I think down the road, I’m going to be thankful for what I’ve done in the classroom this year and all the work I’ve put in preparing in the classroom. I think it’s just gonna be better down the road.”

The second theme to emerge was **Triumphs in Embracing Technology**. When asked about the positive aspects of the pandemic and how they might influence agricultural education, six of our nine teachers reported a new benefit in using technology and online platforms. Teachers like Hannah stated, “Since the beginning of the pandemic, I’ve gotten a lot better at online teaching and working online platforms.” Zoey reported, “We’ve been able to make it more interactive and engaging for students, so it’s shown its value.” John reported seeing specific benefits to online instruction in his classroom, stating, “I do think it [online learning] has provided some opportunities for higher level kids to kind of get prepared for the college setup.” Several of these novice teachers reported their new love for Google Classroom and how they foresee using it throughout their teaching careers.

### Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

While the pandemic had countless adverse effects on individuals, some significant silver linings were shared by our group of teachers. For many of them, the most valuable outcome of the pandemic was being able to focus solely on their teaching. Some teachers found the lack of FFA events to attend a breath of fresh air as it allowed them to focus on their teaching jobs for one year without the chaos of training multiple teams, keeping track of SAE projects, or traveling outside of contract hours. The amount of time they had to invest in their teaching, focus on their plans, and allow themselves to be immersed in their classrooms was invaluable. This group also reported that the requirement to embrace technology was the biggest benefit coming out of such a challenging time. While adapting to technology was certainly a challenge, teachers were able to learn new skills in technology and embrace this change as young educators (McKim et al., 2021). Teachers were able to learn, adapt to, and implement various teaching strategies through their use of technology. Our teachers were able to use technology to share lessons, create videos, adapt content, engage students, and organize materials. The long-term use of this technology will impact future generations of teachers and students for years to come. One recommendation for practice would be for university pre-service programs to include pedagogy training on how to teach in a virtual environment and use these newer online technologies.

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