

A Case Study of Preservice Agricultural Educators' Social Networks

Introduction, Need for Research and Theoretical Framework

The student teaching internship is the capstone experience for preservice agricultural educators (student teachers). Cooperating teachers shape teacher learning by mentoring student teachers through their student teaching internships (Clark, et al., 2014; McIntyre, Byrd, & Fox 1996). Effective mentoring can help early career teachers get a successful start in the classroom (He, 2010). Helping student teachers build social support networks by introducing them to the community is one of seventeen best practices for mentoring behaviors (Nesbitt et al., 2022). Gaining insight into agricultural education preservice teachers' social networks and the role cooperating teachers play in these networks may be one piece of the puzzle that could help aid in teacher recruitment and retention.

The theoretical framework for this research was Garland and Alestalo's (2014) Social Network Theory, which focuses on understanding the strength and benefits of social connections. Garland and Alestalo (2014) purport having a diverse web of connections is essential for acquiring advice, remaining on top of emerging information, and staying on course for career success.

Methodology

The purpose of this instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) was to describe how preservice teachers establish connections with parents and community members. Our research objectives aimed to understand preservice teachers' social networks and describe the role cooperating teachers play within that social network. We used the bounded system of the University of Missouri agricultural education student teachers completing their internships and graduating in the spring of 2025. This cohort of student teachers included seven females and one male, ranging in age from 20-23 years old. We viewed this research through a social constructivist interpretive framework, assuming meaning for individuals is constructed through their interactions with others, the world around them, and how they interpret those interactions (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Two members of our research team are faculty members in Agricultural Education at the University of Missouri who previously taught in high school classrooms, and the third is an undergraduate researcher studying Agricultural Education. Data sources for this case study research included an hour-long face-to-face semi-structured focus group interview, two reflective writing activities, two hour-long observations of student teachers in a community setting, field notes, and reflective memos. We analyzed all data using Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method of data analysis. We utilized a variety of data sources and multiple investigators to provide triangulation and validate data (Stake, 1995). We continually asked ourselves, "Do we have an accurate description of the case?" and "Do we have it right?" (Stake, 1995).

Findings

Theme 1: Gaining Community Exposure through Cooperating Teachers: Cooperating teachers helped facilitate student teachers' connections to the community by involving them in various events. These events included alumni meetings, fair board meetings, and various school and FFA functions. One participant stated, *"I went to (Student Teaching Community's) trivia night before my internship even started. My cooperating teacher walked me around and I got to meet some community members and parents which was really cool."* Student teachers found personal introductions by cooperating teachers useful for establishing initial connection with parents and community members. However, the primary support participants received from their cooperating teachers was in the form of feedback on lesson planning and classroom teaching. Helping student teachers connect to the community and expand their network was less of a priority.

Theme 2: Attempting to Engage with Community Independently: Student teachers independently sought to connect with the community members through various means. They attended church services, school sporting events, and ate at local restaurants. One participant shared, *"I went to a local coffee shop one day when we had snow."* These efforts demonstrated their initiative to integrate into the community and build relationships outside the formal school environment. These initiatives, however, were not always fruitful. One participant stated, *"A retired ag teacher in the area told me that they would help me prepare and train an agronomy team since I have very limited knowledge of that contest. I reached out and have not heard anything from them."* Several stated they had *"no idea"* how to get connected in the community.

Theme 3: Relying on Support from Pre-established Social Network: Student teachers depended on significant support from their pre-existing social networks, including parents, friends, and siblings. One participant shared, *"I call my parents or they call me once a day. They listen to me tell them a bunch of ideas. Really, I just need somebody to talk to."* This support often came in the form of reassurance and emotional backing, which student teachers reported helped them navigate the challenges of their teaching internships.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Although this research cannot be generalized, lessons learned may be transferable to other settings and situations (Erickson, 1986). This study highlights the critical role that cooperating teachers play in introducing students to community, which is an important mentoring behavior (Nesbitt, 2022). By involving student teachers in various community events, cooperating teachers help bridge the gap between the school district and the broader community. Findings suggest student teachers feel it is also important to seek community connections independently, but many are concerned about how to establish these connections. Cooperating teachers were focused on helping student teachers learn to teach in the classroom but did not prioritize helping student teachers further develop community connections or expand their social networks. Instead, student teachers valued and relied on social support from pre-existing social networks to help them *"get through"* student teaching. We recommend the development of training programs that highlight the value of community connections for current and future agriculture teachers. Considering nearly half of teachers in the United States leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018), research should be conducted to determine to what extent community connections and social support networks influence teacher retention and career satisfaction.

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