

Factors influencing the decision of Illinois school-based agricultural education teachers to remain in the profession

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Introduction

Teacher attrition is a persistent problem within agricultural education in the United States (Solomonson et al., 2021). The problem deepens as teacher attrition is analyzed in terms of gender. Seventy-five percent of new agriculture education graduates who are hired as teachers are female (Smith et al., 2022). Female teachers are known to leave the profession at a rate two percent higher than their male colleagues (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Research within agricultural education has examined teacher attrition specific to the field (Allen, 2005), but most research has focused on factors motivating individuals to leave the classroom instead of what causes them to stay. No research has linked those staying factors with types of support needed by younger female teachers.

Conceptual Framework

The model used for the conceptual framework in this study relies on work developed by Tippens et al. (2013) and Solomonson et al. (2021). Tippens et al. (2013) explored teacher retention by investigating the factors of compensation, working conditions, family and personal factors, and employment factors in teachers' decisions to leave the profession. Solomonson et al. (2021) expanded on the work by Tippens et al. (2013) by examining these factors in teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.

Methodology

An exploratory mixed-methods design was used to carry out this study; the qualitative phase was completed with female agriculture teachers who had been in the profession 20 or more years. Findings from these interviews served as the basis for the development of a survey instrument, which was subsequently administered (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The purpose of the qualitative component of this study was to discover perceptions of late career female teachers about factors allowing them to persist in the classroom. Eight teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured format. An inductive approach to the analysis was used as the researcher sought to generate new explanations from the data (Patton, 2015) to build the quantitative survey in the next phase.

Using the areas identified in the interviews, questions were formed to develop the survey instrument for this phase. The survey sought to identify areas of support most needed by early career female agriculture teachers (less than five years of teaching) to retain them in the profession. To answer the quantitative research question, a survey design was used. Because the quantitative research question focused on support needed by early career female teachers of agriculture, the quantitative survey instrument was distributed to female agriculture teachers who have taught for less than five years. Using a list of qualifying participants provided by National FFA, a survey link was sent through email to all participants. Qualtrics software was used to administer and collect survey data. A total of 153 teachers responded to the request to complete the survey, for a 32% response rate.

Results/Findings

The qualitative analysis provided the following themes: staying at the same school, community expectations, family support, description of typical school day/hours worked, different expectations of male and female agriculture teachers, student impact, consideration of leaving the profession, and motivation for staying.

The quantitative data was collected and analyzed based on the following themes which includes, demographics, family support, factors related to burnout, mentorship, typical day/planning coursework and working with individuals outside of the agricultural program. Among the demographics, the largest number of respondents reported teaching for five years (29.6%) and the average years of teaching for all respondents was 3.4 years. A large portion of participants either agreed (54.9%) or strongly agreed (26.8%) that their family was supportive of the hours they spent teaching agriculture. Regarding burnout, 42.8% of respondents agreed that burnout had made them consider leaving teaching, and 44.1% of respondents disagreed that their teacher education program spent time preparing them to be mentally healthy while teaching. Regarding support, 51.0% of respondents strongly agreed that they have at least one agriculture teacher that they can go to for support and concerning student impact, 52.9% agreed that they feel that they have a positive impact on their students. Additionally, 69.9% indicated that they had considered a career within the agriculture industry instead of teaching.

Conclusions

Retaining teachers first starts with understanding those factors which motivate teachers to stay in the classroom and enhancing those motivators for incoming and early career teachers. Solomonson et al.'s (2021) work displays the interaction of personal factors, working conditions, teacher development, and compensation into the decision of the agriculture teacher to either remain in the profession or pursue a different career. Family, administration, support, and working conditions all arose from the model as specific points of consideration through the data gathered. Assisting teachers with these factors has the potential to make the most impact on their longevity within the profession and ultimately reduce the gap between the need for qualified agriculture teachers and the number of teachers available to fill those gaps.

Agriculture teachers continue to take on more and more responsibilities, and it is that more and more that push them into attrition. It is going to take the influence of an outside entity to reduce these responsibilities and allow the agriculture teacher to feel confident in the decision to remain.

Recommendations

First, reducing course preparations for new teachers is vital to reduce stress. Beginning teachers should be assigned fewer courses in their first years and gradually increase their load as they gain experience and resources. Second, state-generated curriculum and planning documents would provide guidance on what to teach in each course, reducing the stress associated with lesson planning. Third, curriculum-focused professional development opportunities can offer new teachers the curriculum and training necessary to teach a full agricultural course. Finally, providing FFA time during the school day is recommended to help teachers manage their extracurricular responsibilities. Schools could consider allocating protected time during the day for FFA duties, reducing the stress of balancing after-hours commitments with teaching responsibilities.

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