

School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers' Comfort Levels in Students' Identities

Stephen C. Cole
California State University, Chico
sccole1@csuchico.edu

Jessica M. Toombs
California State University, Chico
jmtoombs@csuchico.edu

400 W 1st Street
Chico, CA 95929
530-898-5844

The secondary student population is more diverse than at any point in US history (Cottrell, 2021). However, some educators may not be fully equipped to teach and advise students in various circumstances, which can lead to students being overlooked or feeling disconnected from the curriculum (Halpern et al., 2022). Many school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers are ill-prepared to instruct and mentor lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth (Price & Edwards, 2024). Establishing a healthy environment where all students are seen and heard has been shown to support overall student success (Cottrell, 2021). Diversity embedded in curriculum can help provide a positive environment and respect to others within agricultural education (Taylor, 2021). By recognizing and responding to students' intersectionality, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive SBAE environment which caters to success and belonging for all students. Social distance theory guided this study. Social distance theory purposes to explain how perceived differences impacts our comfort in working with others in increasing proximities (Albrecht et al., 1982). The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of California SBAE teachers in fostering an inclusive environment for diverse student populations. The specific research objective was to describe the differences in California SBAE teachers' comfort levels in working with students who identify as gay, low income, and/or Hispanic.

Methodology

A Bogardus Social Distance Scale was designed to meet the purpose and objective of this study. This approach asks participants to rate their comfortability in working with others in an increasing proximity (Maurer & Keim, 2018). Reflecting Vincent and Austin (2021), eight student profiles were developed with identities chosen to represent the diversity of California's SBAE student population (M. Patton, personal communication, September 10, 2024). Each profile was assigned a combination of middle class or low income, White or Hispanic, and straight or gay identities. Students 1, 2, 3, and 4 were described as middle class while Students 5, 6, 7, and 8 were described as low income. Students 1, 2, 5, and 6 were described as White and Students 3, 4, 7, and 8 were described as Hispanic. Students 1, 3, 5, and 7 were described as straight with Students 2, 4, 6, and 8 described as gay. Post-hoc reliability returned Cronbach's alpha values of 0.94 to 0.98 for each student profile, indicating a reliable instrument. Face and content validity was established through review by two experts in SBAE and survey research.

Participants were recruited through the statewide SBAE teacher email listserv. There were 965 SBAE teachers in California during the 2024-2025 school year (M. Patton, personal communication, September 10, 2024). A total of 122 responses were collected for a 12.64% response rate. Of these, 23 responses were omitted either due to not meeting participation criteria or a large number of missing items resulting in 99 usable responses. No statistically significant differences were found when comparing early and late responses. The data showed that 84% of the agricultural educators who responded to the survey were straight (heterosexual) with the remaining 16% responded as LGBTQ. 87% identified as middle class. 87% identified as White and 12% as Hispanic. Even though participants were advised their responses would remain anonymous, we recognize social desirability bias may impact these self-reported data.

Findings

Table 1 below displays the findings of this study. Student profiles 2, 4, 6, and 8 returned the highest levels of discomfort and most variability amongst participants.

Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations for Student Profiles Across Proximities

	How comfortable would you feel with this student in the following situations?											
	In School		In Class		FFA Member		Competitive Event		Chapter Officer		Overnight Trip	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Student 1	1.29	0.81	1.27	0.79	1.27	0.79	1.30	0.82	1.34	0.86	1.41	0.93
Student 2	1.31	0.75	1.29	0.75	1.27	0.71	1.35	0.80	1.40	0.91	1.79	1.17
Student 3	1.26	0.72	1.22	0.70	1.23	0.70	1.25	0.72	1.27	0.73	1.33	0.81
Student 4	1.33	0.82	1.31	0.82	1.31	0.82	1.38	0.89	1.41	0.92	1.79	1.12
Student 5	1.24	0.72	1.21	0.69	1.21	0.69	1.26	0.72	1.26	0.72	1.33	0.80
Student 6	1.30	0.75	1.26	0.73	1.26	0.72	1.38	0.86	1.36	0.86	1.79	1.15
Student 7	1.24	0.72	1.21	0.69	1.21	0.69	1.25	0.71	1.27	0.73	1.37	0.82
Student 8	1.34	0.87	1.30	0.82	1.30	0.82	1.42	0.93	1.40	0.92	1.79	1.15

Note. 1 = Extremely Comfortable, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Extremely Uncomfortable

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Overall, SBAE teachers were comfortable in teaching and advising students with all identities in all proximities. However, some differences did emerge. The data indicated teachers had the most apprehensive responses to their roles in relation to the student profiles identifying as gay (2,4,6, and 8). These student profiles returned the highest means and standard deviations when active in a competitive event, serving as a chapter officer, and attending an overnight trip. Social distance theory would describe competing in a competitive event as the tipping point in SBAE teachers' comfort level in teaching and advising gay students as there is an increase in mean scores in comparison to proximities with a lesser degree of closeness (Wark & Galliher, 2007). These profiles were the only data points with a standard deviation greater than 1.00, indicating the most variability amongst responses on items representing gay students on overnight trips.

In California, 10.3% of the students from public middle and high schools identify as LGBTQ (Choi et al., 2017). Approximately 1,000,000 youth are enrolled in secondary agricultural education programs where 4.5% of the students identify as LGBTQ (Murray et al., 2020). California Agricultural Teachers' Association, teacher preparation programs, and district personnel should continue their efforts in incorporating multicultural professional development and offer guidance for SBAE teachers in supporting their LGBTQ students on overnight trips. Additional research should be conducted with student profiles reflecting the demographics of identified populations.

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