

A Model of School-Based Agricultural Education Teacher Identity Formation

Catlin M. Goodwin, Michigan State University

Aaron J. McKim, Michigan State University

Introduction & Purpose

School based agricultural education (SBAE) is resilient (Haddad et al., 2023), capable of withstanding change while maintaining its identity and purpose (Folke et al., 2010). This is evidenced by SBAE continually refining its objectives to align with contemporary social issues (McKim et al., 2017). However, SBAE has not always navigated challenges in a desirable way. For example, SBAE scholars have warned about the shortage of qualified teachers (Camp et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2024; Woodin, 1967) and persistent lack of diversity (Barajas et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Martin & Kitchel, 2013; Murray et al., 2020; Smith, 2022) for decades.

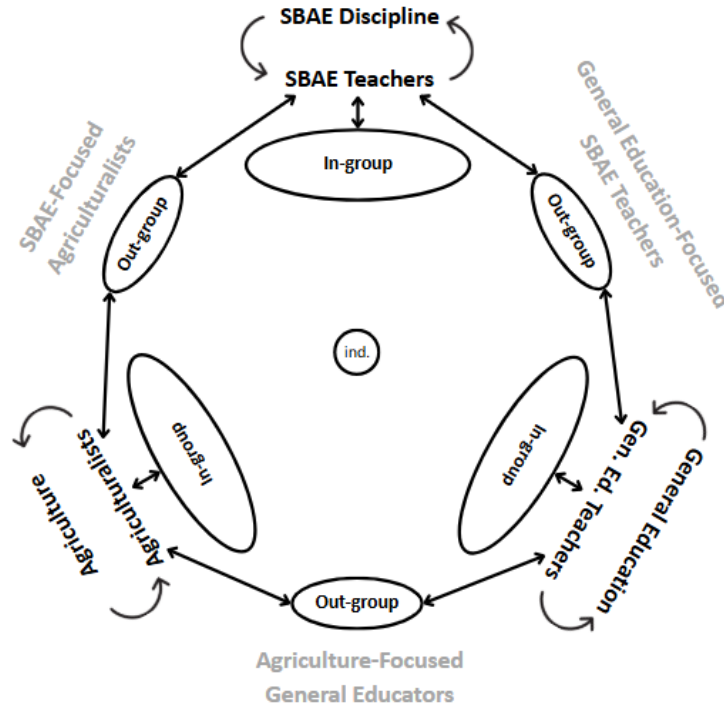
Shoulders (2018) asserted, "professional identity could assist in impacting the challenges within agricultural education" (p. 287). Professional identity, or *occupational identity*, is an individuals' understanding of their self and occupation (Ashforth et al., 2008). Existing occupational identity research in SBAE takes a linear approach. These studies provide valuable insights into teachers enacting their identities. However, persistent problems are signs of complex adaptive systems (Meadows, 2008). Challenges in these systems require complexity approaches, which view systems as non-linear and unpredictable (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Turner & Baker, 2019). Using a complexity approach, this conceptual study explores relationships between occupational identity and persistent challenges in SBAE.

Model of SBAE Teacher Identity Formation

The model of SBAE teacher identity formation (see Figure 1) was created via a synthesis of literature spanning multiple disciplines, drawing from psychological process models of identification (Ashforth et al., 2008), social identity theory (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), complexity theory (Byrne, 2002; Turner & Baker, 2019), and SBAE scholarship (Haddad et al., 2023; Shoulders, 2018).

Figure 1

Model of SBAE Teacher Identity Formation



The model includes multiple systems (i.e., SBAE discipline, agriculture, and general education), aligning with the occupational identities experienced by SBAE teachers (Shoulders & Myers, 2011) and the landscape of systems with which SBAE teachers interact. Within each system, there are in-groups and out-groups. Social identity theory describes in-groups as having comparatively more “status or prestige” (Hogg, 2016, p. 7). In SBAE, in-group individuals have stronger occupational identities, prioritizing their SBAE teacher identity over other identity components. In-groups have more influence over occupational norms (Hogg, 2016). For example, if in-group teachers use experiential learning methods, those norms become part of the SBAE teacher identity. To fit within the occupation, newer SBAE teachers are influenced to use those same methods. This occurs through sensebreaking, sensegiving, and sensemaking between the individual and the system’s understanding of the occupational identity (Ashforth et al., 2008). Sensebreaking and sensegiving are top-down approaches in which a higher system level influences a lower level (Ashforth et al., 2008). Sensebreaking makes an individual question their sense of self, illuminating a gap to be filled (Pratt, 2000). Once a gap is identified, the higher level guides the individual in rebuilding the self in ways which replicate in-group characteristics (Ashforth et al., 2008). Upon receiving sensegiving messages, the individual engages in sensemaking, interpreting how others respond to their enacted identity (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Outgroups represent individuals who share identity ties to multiple occupational identities (see Figure 1), but do not strongly resemble the normative attitudes and behaviors of one occupational identity. When an individual views the self as a composite of different identities, it

is known as multiple identification (Ashforth et al., 2008). The outgroup labeled *SBAE-focused agriculturalists* provides an example of multiple identification, emphasizing how an individual may share occupational identities between two communities (e.g., a local farmer who is an alternatively certified teacher). Out-group individuals are influenced by the norms of their respective occupational communities; however, may feel less strongly connected to either. Therefore, they may feel fewer systemic expectations based on occupational identity and may be less susceptible to sensegiving practices. Instead, out-group individuals may feel more freedom to engage in sensemaking which allows for greater expression of their multiple identities.

Reciprocal relationships exist between the occupation and the discipline (see Figure 1). As SBAE teachers make sense of and engage in their occupation, they influence the identity of the SBAE discipline. For example, it is a norm among SBAE teachers to develop partnerships with community members and organizations. As such, SBAE stakeholders expect community partnerships and, thus, become part of the discipline's identity. To maintain that identity, the discipline reinforces norms through sensebreaking and sensegiving. For sensebreaking, stakeholders may challenge teachers to aspire to stronger community partnerships. Then, to reinforce the discipline's identity, SBAE organizations engage in sensegiving by including community partnerships as criteria for awards (NAAE, 2025; National FFA Organization, 2025). As recipients of these sensebreaking and sensegiving messages, teachers understand what it means to be a SBAE teacher, adjusting their practices to maintain alignment.

Implications for Persistent Challenges

When examined with a complexity lens, the model of SBAE teacher identity formation provides valuable insights which have implications for the persistent challenges experienced in SBAE.

Teacher Shortage

For decades, SBAE stakeholders have been challenged with a shortage of qualified teachers (Camp et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2024; Woodin, 1967). Many scholars have linked teacher turnover and an imbalance between work and life demands (Clemons et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2011; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Solomonson et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2016, 2017; Traini et al., 2020, 2021). Desired or expected success has been found to drive teachers toward lofty workloads (Clemons et al., 2021; Traini et al., 2019; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). For example, many teachers conceptualize success as awards and recognition (Clemons et al., 2021; Traini et al., 2019; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). Traini et al. (2019) clearly summarized the relationship between these notions of success and work-life balance, stating, “competitive feelings quickly erode any chance of creating work-life balance” (p. 246).

Reified notions of success demonstrate the role of SBAE teachers and other stakeholders in forming the SBAE teacher identity. The in-group devotes more time and energy to achieving positive student outcomes by offering more student opportunities or coaching winning students and teams. As other SBAE teachers aspire to be part of the in-group, they may be influenced to prioritize similar behaviors. These individuals are subjected to sensebreaking from the discipline; for example, a teacher may consider all the sensegiving messages they receive (e.g., professional development highlighting student outcomes, social media posts of other teachers) and begin to

adapt their behavior by consistently adding more to become aligned to their understanding of being a SBAE teacher. Concurrently, they inform others what it means to be a SBAE teacher. In this way, the attributes demonstrated by the in-group become recognized as the norms of the SBAE teacher identity and are used to perpetuate those perspectives and behaviors within the occupation.

When individuals receive feedback suggesting SBAE requires significant sensebreaking, and exuberant time and effort, the individual may leave the SBAE teacher occupation. Alternatively, individuals may engage in the occupation only to recognize an incompatibility between the occupational identity and their other identities. Identities of particular interest include those associated with intimate partners and children. Combined with the pressures of increased workload to achieve occupational success, the imbalance between work and family may push some teachers away from the occupation (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). Membership with other social identity groups is also an important factor in the teacher shortage challenge. For example, individuals may be strongly attached to their identities as artists, hobbyists, or members of other local organizations. Through sensebreaking and sensegiving, individuals are socialized to give more of their time to the occupation, leaving little room for other identities.

Lack of Diversity and Inclusion

Existing scholarship points to a disparity between races and ethnicities and gender identification within SBAE, noting most teachers and students identify as White, non-Hispanic (Jones et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2024;) and cis gender (Smith et al., 2024). When individuals do not see others like them, they may feel the occupation is not accessible (Goodwin & McKendree, 2024). Further, evidence suggests when individuals with marginalized identities *are* recognized within SBAE, they are ostracized to out-group membership. For example, through a study conducted by Jones and colleagues (2021), a Black, retired SBAE teacher shared after the FFA's absorption of the NFA, "we got left out of everything" (p. 44). Additionally, Murray and colleagues (2020) describe the omission of LGBTQ youth and adults in SBAE scholarship as a challenge to inclusion.

These challenges stem from the value and belief systems upheld by the dominant cultures within the discipline. Conventional agriculture values, often based on agrarian ideologies, center qualities of independence and tradition, which are present in a variety of SBAE contexts (Martin et al., 2022; Martin & Kitchel, 2013). The reciprocal relationships described in the model of SBAE teacher identity formation illustrate the tendency of the dominant culture to inform beliefs and behaviors of individuals and, through their influence, reinforce the culture in the occupational and disciplinary identities. For example, a study by Martin et al. (2022) discussed potential implications of agrarian populism values held by university students studying SBAE. Martin and colleagues (2022) suggest, without explicit examination of their values, SBAE teachers may not be able to reach audiences with different values. We go further to say, the values SBAE teachers project become the values which are prioritized and reinforced by the discipline through sensebreaking and sensegiving.

Perhaps more alarming, those individuals with marginalized identities who choose to stay in the SBAE teacher occupation may adapt their identity, realigning toward the values, beliefs, and

behaviors of the dominant group in attempt to receive recognition as a competent professional. By excluding individuals with marginalized identities from the SBAE teacher occupation or divesting the unique identities individuals bring to the occupation, the values, behaviors, supports, and barriers of the SBAE discipline remain unchanged, thus reinforcing the presence and strength of the dominant demographic identities and perpetuating a lack of diversity.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The model of SBAE teacher identity formation serves as a conceptual framework for examining how individuals negotiate alignment among their multiple identities within a dynamic landscape of practice. We offer the following recommendations aimed at supporting SBAE teachers and other stakeholders. These recommendations contribute to broader efforts addressing ongoing challenges in the field, including the teacher shortage and need for greater diversity.

Recommendations for Practice

Identity formation is dynamic; thus, SBAE teachers may benefit from reflecting upon their core identities and values at different career stages. Teacher educators may incorporate identity-related reflections into coursework to create space for preservice educators to examine the “non-negotiable” components of their identity and how their imagined and experienced SBAE landscapes allow them to, or prevent them from, enacting those identities.

SBAE stakeholders are encouraged to critically reflect upon the stories and exemplars they share to consider how SBAE teachers may interpret the feedback as a meaning making tool. Consider sharing stories from a variety of sources, representing individuals with marginalized identities who enact fewer normative behaviors. The creation of affinity spaces, or social groups within the SBAE teacher occupation where individuals with specific personal identities can gather, share and feel a sense of belonging with the broader group may also encourage connectivity across in- and out-group members.

Future Directions and Recommendations for Research

Our plans for future research include conducting case studies using the model as a framework to explore how preservice teachers experience sensebreaking, sensegiving, and sensemaking during identity formation in the SBAE landscape. Additional research could explore how individuals with specific personal or social identities experience changes in identity formation. As the model describes dynamics which influence across scales of a system, future research may use the model to explore trends in the discipline or how social and disciplinary change may occur through in-group and out-group social mobility or social creativity (Hogg, 2016). Alternatively, the model may be used to explore system structures and functions which help the system remain resilient, especially in the more persistent challenges experienced by the discipline.

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