

Exploring Collaborative Planning Strategies in Multi-Teacher SBAE Programs

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Introduction and Literature Review

Program planning is an important but complex undertaking for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers (Smith & Smalley, 2018; Touchstone, 2015). The three-component model is the recognized framework used to guide teachers in identifying the foundational activities and tasks associated with an effective SBAE program, consisting of: 1) classroom and laboratory instruction, 2) leadership development and FFA, and 3) experiential learning and supervised agricultural experience (SAE) (Croom, 2008; Phipps et al., 2008). Yet, the responsibilities of a SBAE program far surpass these three areas; there are a lot of other functions that must be attended to on a day-to-day basis to ensure program sustainability (Smith & Smalley, 2018). Other program tasks include marketing, professional growth, evaluation, and community partnerships (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2023; Smith & Smalley, 2018). Maintaining a total program mindset can be overwhelming but is important to ensuring sustainability and longevity (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021). These efforts demand energy from an educator, and can lead to retention challenges if they are not supported (Smith & Smalley, 2018).

Program plans are essential to ensure the success, organization, and transparency of the program within the three components and beyond (Fisher, 2010; Manley & Zinser, 2012; Smith & Smalley, 2018), and they inspire a shared vision for growth and sustainability. Despite the challenges of program planning, there are limited resources and professional development for SBAE programs to utilize in coordinating program planning efforts. Within the limited literature regarding SBAE program planning, there has been little reporting on program planning strategies adopted by multi-teacher programs. The U.S. is home to 15,005 SBAE teachers at 9,202 schools, resulting in the average SBAE program having 1.6 teachers (Smith et al., 2025), and while many programs only have one SBAE teacher, when two or more teachers are present, this results in more opinions, values, and ideas to be considered when designing and planning programming. When working collaboratively on significant tasks, such as program and instructional planning efforts, having organized systems and strategies in place ensures all voices are heard, resulting in harmony and cohesion (Salas et al., 2008). Leveraging one another's strengths can result in maximum success, benefiting students and community members (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). There is a gap in the literature within SBAE program planning, specifically for multi-teacher programs. This study seeks a clearer understanding of what strategies work most effectively and calls attention to the development of resources to help multi-teacher programs thrive.

Theoretical Framework

Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior guided the study; within this study, this theory explores the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) of participants related to collaboration in a multi-teacher SBAE program. We sought to examine beliefs about collaboration (attitudes), the expectations they feel placed on them regarding collaboration (subjective norms), and their perceived belief in their ability to engage in collaboration (PBC). The attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC of participants influence their intentions to collaborate with their co-workers, and can ultimately influence their actions (Ajzen, 1991). The framework guided the development of questions and the analysis of the interview data.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study addresses the research question: What are the collaborative program planning strategies and experiences utilized by SBAE teachers who teach in SBAE programs with multiple teachers? This question is warranted because program planning and coordination is a significant barrier and problem for SBAE teachers (Smith & Smalley, 2018; Touchstone, 2015), and there is an existing gap in the literature in this area. The purpose of this study was to examine the collaborative program planning strategies and experiences which lend themselves to designing effective and sustainable SBAE programs. Key research questions included:

1. What roles do those in a multi-teacher SBAE program take on to accomplish their goals?
2. How do SBAE teachers interact with a shared vision for the direction of a program?

Methods

We acknowledge our background in SBAE teacher preparation and our experiences working in single- and multi-teacher SBAE programs, along with our pragmatic epistemology. Pragmatists ask questions which lend themselves to practical solutions that can benefit others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The questions in the study were aligned with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). To assure the validity of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), interview questions were reviewed by a panel of experts with background in qualitative inquiry and program planning (Bryant, 2025) to ensure it was aligned with its purpose and framework (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample Questions Included in Interview Guide and Connection to the Framework (Ajzen, 1991)

Question	Theory Connection
How would you describe an effective multi-teacher SBAE program?	Attitudes
How do you feel about your collaborative efforts in your program?	Attitudes
Do any external stakeholders place expectations upon your program?	Subjective Norms
How would you assess your ability to manage an effective program?	PBC

Participants

Participants consisted of SBAE teachers who work in a multi-teacher program (Table 2). A list of teachers in multi-teacher programs from Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota was obtained; 15 potential teachers were randomly selected and 7 teachers agreed to participate. No additional participants were invited as data saturation was reached after 7 interviews based on a codebook, audit trail, and saturation chart (Mwita, 2022). Each participant agreed to their participation and indicated their consent to being recorded. Interviews were hosted and transcribed via Zoom.

Table 2

Demographics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Years of Teaching	Gender	Program Pseudonym	Teachers in Program
Bailee	13	Female	Johnston	3
Hannah	8	Female	Cedar Valley	2
Laura	5	Female	Drumming	3
Lily	5	Female	Fall River	2
Mike	28	Male	Hammond	2
Rachel	6	Female	Mapleton	4
Wendy	3	Female	Hillcrest	2

Data Collection and Analysis

To protect participant privacy, all were asked to connect from a private location. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for their names, and the names of their schools. Names and pseudonyms were tracked in a key, but this key and any hard-copy notes taken during interviews, were destroyed after data analysis to maintain privacy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We employed an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to analyze data, with three levels analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016): 1) reviewing transcripts, 2) isolating codes into categories, and 3) the emergence of themes. A qualitative codebook assisted in organizing quotes, codes, categories, and themes and ensuring saturation was reached (Mwita, 2022). To ensure readability while emphasizing what the respondents are saying, rather than how they are saying it, quotes were transcribed using intelligent verbatim (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To establish trustworthiness, we engaged in peer debriefing (Spall, 1998) and member checking occurred via clarifying questions and verification of themes and quotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Coordinating program efforts in a multi-teacher program can be a complex undertaking, as additional perspectives can create additional interpersonal dynamics, and the need for intentional efforts to have conversations about program planning. However, these perspectives also can open the door to new opportunities that would not be available to programs with only one educator. Mike shared, “Working in a multi-teacher program is like being on a baseball team. Everybody has roles and strengths, and you’ve got to try to work together for the common goal.” This analogy is a common sentiment shared among participants and lays a foundation for the themes.

Theme #1: Pitchers and Catchers—Recognizing the Value of Roles

Subtheme #1: Focusing on Roles Maximizes Strengths

Similar to a baseball team having positions which require unique strengths and talents, the topic of maximizing strengths came up in each interview. Some do this formally, while others do it a little more informally. Laura shared, “At the beginning of every year, we do a division of responsibility to an extent. It's this big spreadsheet. We reference it all year long.” Yet, Bailee mentioned these roles “... come more naturally as the year goes on depending on life and school responsibilities.” Regardless of this division being formal or informal, Rachel shared, “Splitting up responsibilities offers variety and makes the program more manageable.” Wendy and Hannah both alluded to several strategies of how this is done, including allowing each teacher to be the point contact or leader for specific FFA events and dividing teaching responsibilities based on strengths. By identifying and maximizing strengths in planning efforts, educators focus on areas of talent and make the program more feasible and efficient.

Subtheme #2: Only Nine Innings and Twelve Months—Time Constraints

Succeeding in a short, 9-inning game requires time and practice year-round, just as planning an effective program demands a lot of an educator’s already busy and chaotic schedule year-round. Laura’s program spreadsheet accounts for the amount of time that is expected to be invested into each task so complexity is taken into account when dividing responsibilities. Despite this, time is still limited for educators. While planning is important, it is difficult to fit program planning conversations into an already full schedule. Lily shared, “For long-term, big picture planning, we definitely don't do as much as we should. It's hard to find the time.” Rachel suggested perhaps this is since teachers are constantly moving from one task to the next. “It feels like anytime we

get together, we are just trying to figure out what's next. We ask, 'Hey, we have this deadline, what do we need to do now?'" Bailee mentioned frustrations in not being able to even find time to even discuss or plan routine tasks or events, let alone long-term or program planning.

Theme #2: Collaboration Leads to Achieving Visions

Subtheme #1: Achieving Harmony with Teammates

Collaboration in program planning efforts can lead to a greater sense of harmony, not only with a team or departmental setting, but also harmony within oneself. Lily mentioned, "When I was working with my last co-teacher, we weren't really collaborating. I felt stressed, overwhelmed, and upset at times; but that's because the collaboration was not present." Teachers report collaboration can alleviate some of these feelings. Wendy appreciates that she and her co-teacher have spent time together to build trust and friendship, and model this for their students. Further, Mike and his co-teacher have found that collaboration and the division of program responsibilities has at least helped them achieve some additional balance in their personal life.

Even though we can divide events, and we don't have to be at everything, we still find ourselves at a lot of the same events. But within each event, we may break up the duties. At the county fair, my co-teacher works the beef show, and I work the dairy show. We're both at the fair, but I'm there in the morning, and he's there in the afternoon.

Subtheme #2: The Referee Can Cause Challenges

Similar to a referee ensuring integrity in a game, administrators oversee the daily operations of a school. Although administrators have a lot of tasks and responsibilities, teachers reported their administrators' perspectives influence the direction and potential of the SBAE program. Participants described their administrators' general misunderstanding of SBAE. Rachel shared, "We feel a lack of understanding from administration about the three-circle model." This lack of understanding, and the complex relationships between classroom, leadership development, and experiential learning, can misguide decisions which can impact the program. These misinformed decisions can ultimately impact student or community experiences. Lily agreed with Rachel, and added, "We include the district because we have to. We would love to offer some different classes, and then the district will either say yes or no. More likely, they'll say no." Teachers noted that administrative involvement may alleviate misinformation to a degree. However, teachers maintained that the additional input from these internal stakeholders can add a layer of complexity. Teachers believed that these complexities ultimately make it difficult for them to collaboratively plan a robust, context-driven program.

Subtheme #3: The Program's Biggest Fans—External Stakeholders

Along with administrator collaborations, teachers working in multi-teacher programs also reported using other key stakeholders in designing and planning their programming efforts; these are some of the program's biggest supporters and fans. It was noted that listening to these stakeholders has afforded educators the ability to ensure the program meets the needs of the industry, community, and students it serves. Mike shared, "We have an advisory council and we get some ideas from them, but most of the time, they say, 'Oh, that's cool that you guys are doing that in the school.' They just tell us to go for it." Teachers believe sharing program plans with advisory council members, including industry representatives and local agribusiness owners, can allow these stakeholders to provide outside perspective to shaping the direction of the program, while also considering ways they could assist programs in achieving those goals.

In addition to industry and community partners, teachers believed students offer vast experiences which can be considered by teachers as they plan their programs. Hannah commented on the value of engaging students in classroom and FFA climate surveys each semester to guide the development and refinement of the program. Likewise, Lily shared, “When it comes to day-by-day or year-by-year planning, I try to include student voices, especially when it comes to FFA.” Involving students with planning FFA activities can be a great way to ensure student voices are being represented, and that the student-led ideals of the organization ring true.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teachers welcomed and appreciated the opportunity to collaborate in their program, indicating it leads to a greater sense of harmony and balance (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Salas et al., 2008), and ensures strengths are leveraged. In a time when teacher burnout continues to increase (Smith & Smalley, 2018), the opportunity for teachers to collaborate in a positive, nurturing environment can have implications for teacher retention and reduce teacher turnover within SBAE programs.

RQ 1: What roles do those in a multi-teacher program take on to accomplish their goals?

When working in a multi-teacher program, teachers reported taking on a variety of roles to accomplish goals. Participants indicated these roles and behaviors are based on a shared understanding of one another’s attitudes about specific areas and their strengths (Ajzen, 1991). Since there are many responsibilities a SBAE program faces outside of the traditional three components many recognize (Croom, 2008; Phipps et al., 2008; Smith & Smalley, 2018), there are opportunities for many types of strengths and talents to shine, and for each teacher to play a unique role within the program. Participants recognized it is important for SBAE teachers to have the opportunity to strategize ways they can fulfill these responsibilities. However, despite the felt need for these conversations, a lack of time was cited as a significant barrier in doing so.

RQ 2: How do SBAE teachers interact with a shared vision for the direction of a program?

Educators reported using effective collaboration skills to interact with a shared vision for the direction of the program. These interactions are informed by the input and expectations of internal stakeholders, including administrators, and external stakeholders (Ajzen, 1991). A program’s vision ought to be aligned with the needs of the community (Roberts & Ball, 2009). Collaborative efforts are influenced both on a program-level, and on a day-to-day-level. Effective communication with stakeholders and among one another can assist in facilitating collaboration; but it goes deeper than this. Participants recognized having a shared understanding and respect for one another, and being sensitive to the needs of stakeholders is a recommended first step (Roberts & Ball, 2009); truly unifying together as a team can have critical impacts on individual students, and for programs as a whole (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Salas et al., 2008).

Recommendations

Future research should address our limitation of a small sample size and frame by using a larger sample representing more than just two states. Further, focus groups with all educators from the same program may reveal insights on the perceived contributions and dynamics of each teacher, and better understand their attitudes toward collaboration (Ajzen, 1991). For professional practice, state or NAAE leaders should explore hosting multi-teacher program summer retreats for educators to have paid time to plan the year ahead. [STATE] has offered similar retreats which three participants referred to; these could be helpful to offer on a national scale.

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