

## **Community Influences on First-Year Agriculture Teacher Identity Development**

### **Introduction**

Agriculture teachers, as specialty subject teachers, have a distinct, disciplinary identity (Feser & Haak, 2023; Shoulders, 2018; Shoulders & Myers, 2011). A well-formed teacher identity is central to teacher longevity (Milford & Reed, 2024; Traini et al., 2021). As agriculture teacher identity is distinct and disciplinary, agriculture teacher identity and identity formation warrant further exploration. Studies have suggested the feeling of distinction may lead agricultural educators to isolate themselves from other teachers (Shoulders & Myers, 2011; Shoulders, 2018), which is detrimental to connectivity within schools and communities. As connectivity has been shown to have positive impacts on teacher longevity (DeLay & Washburn, 2013; Moser & McKim, 2020), exploring teacher identity and identity formation may help us learn how to encourage feelings of belonging in teachers and, thus, keep teachers teaching.

Teacher identity is not formed in a vacuum. Agriculture teachers are often deeply embedded within their communities; how they interact with interest holders in their communities impacts their perception of the profession as well as their own identity development (Traini et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). Further, tensions between the teacher and their community interest holders may be stressful (Haddad et al., 2023), especially as teachers begin to learn and navigate social and political environments within their schools and communities. Stress may be compounded for early career teachers, especially first-year teachers; Disberger et al. (2023) shared first-year teachers are often expected to perform as veteran teachers, despite having less career experience. This lofty expectation may tax early career teachers, especially as they navigate who they are as a teacher and the teacher they would like to become. Because of the integrated nature of agriculture teachers and their communities, it is important to further explore how school and community members (i.e., administrators, alumni members, and students) impact teacher identity development (Hong et al., 2024).

As a teacher's first year is a pivotal moment as a professional and a time wherein identities are being navigated and explored within community contexts (Hong et al., 2024; Milford & Reed, 2024), the research team partnered with a first-year teacher, Curtis, as he explored his identity as an agriculture teacher. Curtis, a teacher and FFA Advisor at Towne High School (THS), navigated his teacher identity over the course of the 2024-2025 school year. THS is home to one of the oldest FFA Chapters in [State] and has a longstanding history of success. Per participants, the school-based agricultural education (SBAE) program at THS has been led by many well-regarded agriculture teachers. Due to the program's longevity and record, there are many people in Towne who have an interest in the THS SBAE program. Therefore, THS and Curtis make for an excellent case to explore how a first-year teacher's identity develops as they navigate their landscape of practice. Thus, the research question is: How is a first-year teacher's identity impacted by their landscape of practice?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed landscapes of practice theory (Wenger-Treyner & Wenger-Treyner, 2015) to examine how Curtis's navigation of his communities and landscape of practice (LoP) informed his identity development over time. LoPs are local and contextual, characterized by the people within them. In this case, the members of the LoP are Curtis's supporters, whether

administrators, students, or alumni. As practitioners engage with their LoP, their competence is evaluated by interest holders who they are interacting with. In this case, Curtis's competence was being evaluated by Alumni and Friends members, administrators, students, parents, etc. In LoP theory, competence is more than its definition; competence is judged based on how a professional engages with their LoP, how well they align with LoP members, and how easily they can imagine being within the LoP environment. Professionals, like Curtis, imagine, engage, and align with their LoP in a variety of ways. Imagination, or thinking about how you fit into a LoP, has been shown to be the most common amid early career professionals (Balmer et al., 2015), and Curtis is a first-year teacher. Therefore, utilizing LoP theory as a lens for examining how Curtis is building his identity is advantageous for exploring identity evaluation mechanisms.

### **Methods**

In keeping with quality case study design (Merriam, 1998; Mott & Haddad, 2025), this case study sought immersion within Curtis's school environment. The lead researcher was Curtis's field instructor; due to their experience with Curtis and his school/community, it was clear his first year at THS would present a rich case. This study spanned the duration of the 2024-2025 school year. Various methods of data generation were employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via teleconference, phone, and/or in person and served as a primary data point. Purposively selected interviewees included Curtis, his spouse (Emma), his principal (Todd), four key Alumni and Friends supporters (Diane, Gary, Jen, Ron), and a former THS teacher and community member (Luke). Curtis was interviewed in person eight times during the school year; his interviews averaged 65 minutes. Adult stakeholders were interviewed once each for an average of 51 minutes. A focus group was also conducted with four students currently enrolled in Curtis's classes (Anna, Beth, Matt, Nick); this was 40 minutes long. In addition to interviews, 78 of Curtis's TikToks were analyzed, averaging a length of 16 seconds. Analyzing TikToks provided an aspect of triangulation (Merriam, 1998) to ensure Curtis's social media reflected what was shared otherwise; his account focuses on his class experiences. Additional documentation, field notes, and immersion (i.e., attending community events, serving on Curtis's advisory board) also assisted with triangulation. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Data generated were compiled and analyzed via open and axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method was employed to ensure codes were appropriately sorted (Glaser, 1965). After being reviewed by the lead researcher, codes were examined and negotiated by the research team to verify data and further credibility (Morse, 2018). LoP theory was utilized in code categorization, as codes related to either alignment, engagement, or imagination, but was not used to code deductively.

### **Findings & Discussion**

The categories explored pertain to Curtis's alignment, engagement, or imagination with or within his LoP. Each category and its respective codes are presented together, with a broader view provided at the end to illustrate how these findings coalesce.

#### **Alignment**

THS, Curtis, and his supporters were shown to have a great deal of alignment; supporter ideas of what made a successful SBAE program were largely in agreement with Curtis's vision, allowing for a variety of synergies between Curtis and his interest holders. Curtis's supporters had *Good*

*Intentions*, with Diane saying, “I would like to think I'm helping [Curtis] more than I'm hurting.” These good intentions were possible due to the alignment between interest holders and Curtis himself. There was evidence of the *Community Supporting Teacher*, with Curtis sharing, “Yeah, it's my program, but I'm not the not the one doing everything.” His supporters, whether students or alum, were trying to help him achieve programmatic goals. There was a great deal of evidence supporting *Synergy Between Teacher and Interest Holder*, with Curtis sharing, “So it was nice to see her perspective too, because I think she sees a lot of the things that I see, which is nice to have from alumni.” Todd was also very supportive of Curtis, aiding him as his principal. He encouraged Curtis to have autonomy while balancing the input of other interest holders: “The input from those other groups is wonderful, and their help can be invaluable. But he [Curtis] is the ag science teacher. He is the FFA leader.” This support from administration was helpful in scenarios wherein Curtis needed administrative backing on decisions. Curtis and his supporters were on the same page about a great deal of programmatic goals, growth opportunities, and philosophies, which helped Curtis to work with his community and develop a positive teacher identity. Furthermore, this alignment may have helped community members perceive Curtis as competent, as they shared many ideals.

This alignment was not simply present – it was also *felt*. There was a pronounced *Feeling of Support* reported by Curtis throughout, and Emma shared, “[Curtis] knows I'm always there to help us figure out the logistics.” Emma’s support – along with support from others – resulted in a distinct feeling of belonging and comfort with THS and its community. Another major source of support within his LoP was other agriculture teachers in the county, with Curtis sharing, “Yeah, I mean, it's just the group of people we have is good and makes it a good environment. They answer the questions, they step up and help.” Curtis was always willing to ask questions, and there were people in his community who were able to help him find answers and aid.

### **Imagination**

Throughout his time as a first-year teacher, Curtis imagined what it meant to be THS’s agriculture teacher and FFA advisor. His definition of teaching agriculture and being a first-year teacher was stretched by the ideas of others around him. Throughout his identity journey, Curtis was confronted by his and other’s perceptions of *Expectations for Agriculture Teachers*. Luke shared, “You take this place over, you better do the crap they're doing because [community members] expect you to do crap.” Other expectations for THS’s agriculture teacher were more philosophical, like Todd sharing, “I'm not organized enough to be an ag teacher,” or Ron saying, “You gotta be a special type of crazy to be an ag teacher. Trust me.” In this way, the expectations surrounding the agriculture teacher are both concrete (i.e., the expectation you continue the program of activities from before) and more abstract (i.e., you should be organized, you need to be a little crazy). These were navigated by Curtis as he worked to figure out who he was as a teacher, going into the year with an understanding and conflict between himself and what he felt it meant to be a *First-Year Teacher*. He shared, “I appreciate the fact that a lot of people do not see me as a first-year teacher, but I don't want them to overlook the fact that I'm a first-year teacher.” Being a first-year teacher was a core part of his identity, and a means of giving himself grace – which was also extended by his students, who acknowledged he would change as a teacher over time. Yet, there is also something Curtis was aware of which was different; a sort of looming presence of expectations he needed to navigate, despite it being his first year.

This ties into Curtis's perceptions of *Imagination vs. Reality*, a common code throughout this experience. Curtis was imagining what things meant or how they would manifest, and things wouldn't go as he'd imagined. Regarding a new greenhouse, he shared, "I did not imagine it would be this much of a headache, but we're making progress." Throughout his first year, Curtis needed to reconcile himself to these events which were different from anticipated and work that reality into his identity as a teacher, confronting challenges to his professional competence.

### **Engagement**

Curtis seized many opportunities to engage with his LoP and the people in it. Core facets of Curtis's teacher identity stem from his engagement philosophy, and his supporters saw and shared this. Engagement happened in various areas of Curtis's LoP, but his focus was often on himself and how he was interacting with his students. As Curtis engaged with students, he learned a lot about who he wanted to be as an agriculture teacher. Curtis is incredibly student-centered, with his primary goal being *Supporting Students*; he shared, "So I just want to be able to have conversations and come up with ideas and come up with a solution for the problems that the kids are facing." Curtis's students saw him as someone who was always seeking solutions, too. As he supported students, Curtis was also *Seeking Success*. Beth shared, "either he's going to help us because he has expertise or even if he doesn't, he'll find someone like even for outside of FFA stuff." This dedication to students and success was evident even as Curtis admitted he was still *Figuring Himself Out*. During one of our interviews, he shared, "I feel better than I did at the start of the semester. Ask me again in three weeks." There were periods of time where he felt like he had it together and others where he didn't. This was reiterated throughout the course of the school year, and Curtis often expressed his *Desire to Engage* with students and his community. Diane shared, "He's a, he's a good leader in the class. I feel like he makes the kids feel comfortable. He's kind of got a silly side to him that I feel [her children] really appreciate." This comfort with himself in his classroom was beneficial for many parties.

As in any classroom, there were moments where Curtis felt the tensions of teaching. A great deal of Curtis's identity as a teacher was tested in the classroom, and he found himself navigating *Student Expectations*. Along with ensuring his grading policy was fair and tailoring projects to meet student needs and interests, Curtis reflected upon the student focus group, acknowledging some emotions which come with tough days of teaching: "I'm glad that they picked up on [my mood change] because, yeah, I do get pissed off and I stop. I just... I can't tolerate being disrespectful and that will burn out really fast." Classroom actions have impacts on who teachers feel they *can* be, and Curtis's naturally silly self wasn't always allowed to be present.

As he was engaging with his LoP, Curtis felt a sense of *Ownership* over his program. This feeling of responsibility was complicated, sometimes empowering and sometimes not. Todd shared, "But I got to know him, and he never wants to be a burden. I'm like, dude, there are things you got to cue me in on because I can help." This was a reminder Curtis had someone in his corner. This was helpful when Curtis's engagement meant taking risks; Curtis often had some *Comfort with Risk*, saying, "I'm trying to not... I tried to really go into this with an open mind because I am, you know, new. It's a new concept. Cool. Let's give it a shot." Curtis is an innovator, and taking risks can help to find solutions. Being comfortable with risk-taking can be challenging when having ownership over an SBAE program, but because of his supporters, Curtis was more comfortable with taking risks.

### **How a LoP Impacts Teacher Identity**

The research question for this study was: How is a first-year teacher's identity impacted by their LoP? When taken together, this study presents findings which help us understand the mechanisms within a LoP which inform teacher identity. These findings demonstrate how identity navigation is something done alongside others, not in isolation. Furthermore, invisible ideas and concepts surrounding what it means to teach agriculture and lead an SBAE program also had to be navigated throughout the year. At the end of his first year, Curtis and his supporters were setting things in place to ensure Curtis's longevity as a teacher at THS, and hoping Curtis would stay in their community for years to come.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

This case study focused on one specific teacher within his localized community context. While the insights drawn from this case may be transferable, they will not necessarily apply to every community context in the same way. Furthermore, Curtis's case is characterized by rich synergies between himself and his stakeholders, which may be incredibly unique for a first-year teacher; this case feels like a best-case scenario and has been classified as an extreme/deviant case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) by the research team. Regardless of the uniqueness of Curtis and his community context, this study demonstrates how teacher identity formation may be influenced.

A teacher's community context and their LoP shape the development of their professional identity. Curtis's competence as THS's agriculture teacher and FFA advisor was judged against a set of standards which largely aligned with Curtis's own perceptions of what being the leader of an SBAE program were. Haddad et al. (2023) suggested tension between agriculture teachers and their communities may lead to negative consequences, and Curtis's case seems to confirm the opposite may also be true. When there were areas of tension, especially regarding contests and student success within them, Curtis worked to have explicit conversations to manage expectations from community members and mitigate potential harm to his perception of competence in this way. As blue banners, dollars generated, more student enrollment, and high FFA participation are often seen as a metrics of a successful (or competent) agriculture teacher (Traini et al., 2019), this preemptive action may have spared Curtis some heartache down the road. Furthermore, Curtis was willing to see himself as an agriculture teacher first and an FFA advisor second, which may have helped insulate him from some expectations regarding what kind of agriculture teacher he ought to be. Additionally, supporters like Diane bought into what Curtis was trying to do, assisting him with grant-writing to help the program. Finally, with agriculture teachers often isolating themselves from others (Shoulders & Myers, 2011), Curtis's synergistic community may have helped alleviate some of this isolation and help him be retained within THS and its community, especially as his community cultivated feelings of belonging.

After this case study, we have recommendations for researchers and practitioners. For researchers, we recommend further exploration of agriculture teacher identity development within community contexts. Better understanding the mechanisms of teacher identity development may inform supports for teachers as they are navigating their developing identity. For practitioners and supporters, we recommend seeking synergies within your environment. This could look like finding ways to navigate relationships to emphasize synergy, or intentionally seeking/creating synergies. Having explicit conversations may also be helpful, as values are not always clear, and alignment between interest holders and teachers seem especially important.

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