

A Case Study of Preservice Agricultural Educators' Social Networks

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The student teaching internship is a key experience for preservice agricultural educators (student teachers) where they apply knowledge in authentic learning environments. Cooperating teachers shape student learning by mentoring students through their teaching internships (Clark, et al., 2015; McIntyre, & Byrd 1996). Effective mentoring can help early career teachers get a successful start in the classroom (He, 2010). One key component of mentoring is community connection. Mentors should help student teachers build social support networks by introducing them to the community (Nesbitt et al., 2022). Gaining insight into agricultural education preservice teachers' social networks and the role cooperating teachers play in these networks may be one piece of the puzzle to facilitate teacher recruitment and retention.

The need to find the missing puzzle pieces is becoming increasingly urgent. The agricultural education profession faces a persistent teacher shortage, with nearly one in four new hires entering the classroom through alternative certification or without full licensure (Smith et al., 2023). Without effective strategies to support and retain early career teachers, programs risk losing qualified educators. While mentoring programs have shown promise in improving teacher efficacy and retention (Frederiksen, 2020), they often overlook a critical dimension of teacher success: the ability to build meaningful relationships with parents and community members. In Agricultural Education, community relationships are foundational to facilitate implementation of the 3-circle model. Yet little is known about how preservice teachers begin to form community networks during their internships, or how cooperating teachers support this process.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how preservice agricultural educators develop social networks within their placement communities and the role cooperating teachers play in facilitating those connections. Understanding these dynamics is essential to strengthening teacher preparation and improving long-term retention in the profession. Researchers framed this study with Garland & Alestalo's (2014) Social Network Theory, which focuses on understanding the strengths and benefits of social connections. Garland & Alestalo (2014) purport that having a diverse web of connections is essential for acquiring advice, remaining on top of emerging information, and staying on course for career success.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore how preservice agricultural education teachers develop social connections during their student teaching internship. Considering ongoing concerns about teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in Agricultural Education, this study aimed to understand how cooperating teachers facilitate these connections and how student teachers navigate community engagement independently.

Guided by Garland and Alestalo's (2014) Social Network Theory, which emphasizes the importance of diverse and meaningful social ties for professional success, this research aimed to illuminate the processes through which student teachers build and sustain social networks within their placement communities. Social networks are not only critical for professional development, but also for ensuring a sense of belonging during a challenging transition.

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Describe how preservice Agricultural Education teachers establish connections with parents and community members during their student teaching internships.
2. Examine the role of cooperating teachers in supporting or facilitating the development of these social networks.
3. Identify strategies preservice teachers employ independently to engage with their communities and the challenges they encounter in doing so.
4. Explore the extent to which preservice teachers rely on pre-existing social networks for emotional and professional support during their internships.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social dimensions of teacher preparation, including preparation of cooperating teachers. We hope to offer practical insights for enhancing mentorship practices and community integration in Agricultural Education programs.

Methods

This qualitative research used an instrumental case study design (Stake, 2005) to describe how preservice teachers establish connections with parents and community members. We used the bounded system of the University of Missouri Agricultural Education student teachers completing their internships and graduating in the spring of 2025. This cohort of student teachers included seven females and one male, ranging in age from 20-23 years old. We analyzed through a social constructivist interpretive framework, assuming meaning for individuals is constructed through their interactions with others, the world around them, and how they interpret those interactions (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This allowed the research team to view each participant as an individual, exploring processes and experiences that influenced their social networks while student teaching. This manuscript's lead researcher is a graduate student in agricultural education. Two members of the research team are Agricultural Education faculty who previously taught in high school classrooms, and another is a graduate student in Agricultural Education.

Data sources for this case study research included multiple qualitative methods designed to capture the depth of preservice teachers' experiences. A one-hour face-to-face focus group interview was conducted with eight agricultural education student teachers from the University of Missouri during the second month of their student teaching internship. This semi-structured interview explored the student teachers' social networks and the role of cooperating teachers in supporting those networks. Additionally, two reflective writing activities were collected: the first, administered during the second week of student teaching, asked participants to describe their daily schedules, while the second, conducted in the fourth week, focused on their current social support systems. We conducted four one-hour observations as student teachers attended

community events, with attention to the research questions and theoretical framework. Individual follow-up interviews were conducted one month after the internship to gain further insight. Throughout all phases of the study, the research team also recorded field notes and reflective memos to support data triangulation and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

We analyzed all data using Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method of data analysis, as suggested by Merriam (2009). First, we carried out initial coding, where we identified important aspects (codes) in the data. Next, we synthesized and narrowed down these codes. Following this step, we conducted axial coding, where we established relationships between the codes. Finally, we used selective coding to identify themes which describe how student teachers build connections with community members. We utilized a variety of data sources and multiple investigators to provide triangulation and credibility. We continually asked ourselves, "Do we have an accurate description of the case?" and "Do we have it right?" (Stake, 1995).

Findings

Theme 1: Gaining Community Exposure through Cooperating Teachers

Cooperating teachers served as initial gatekeepers to the community, offering student teachers their first opportunities to engage with local stakeholders. These introductions often occurred at structured events such as alumni meetings, trivia nights, and school sports. Alison recalled, "Miss Brown kind of walked me around. I got to meet a lot of community members and parents, which was really cool. It was probably one of the first times that I got to interact with community members."

However, the level of intentionality in these introductions varied. Some cooperating teachers actively facilitated connections, while others offered minimal guidance. Emma described a lack of preparation, "I was told that there were gonna be parents there, and that was it. That was really intimidating because I literally don't even know anybody in this part of the state." This ambiguity often left student teachers feeling unprepared and anxious, especially when expected to navigate unfamiliar social settings independently.

Several participants noted that while cooperating teachers were instrumental in classroom instruction, community integration was not always prioritized. Ally shared, "Miss Vincent always provided me with really great feedback on my teaching and lesson planning which really helped and motivated me in some ways." Ally also mentioned she had only attended one community event throughout her student teaching. "Really, the only event we attended was the county fair board meeting and I was disappointed with it. Miss Vincent never goes to it, so we really only went, so I could say I attended a community event. They didn't even give us a chance to introduce ourselves. I was pretty bummed about that." There was a great deal of variation in how intentionally cooperating teachers helped connect their students with the community.

Theme 2: Attempting to Engage with Community Independently

In the absence of consistent facilitation by cooperating teachers, student teachers often took it upon themselves to try and build community connections. These efforts were varied and included attending local events, frequenting community spaces, and leveraging informal encounters. Calvin

described a proactive approach, “I stopped by one of the local feed stores one day and talked to the manager there. Just trying to introduce myself and make a quick connection that I may need later.” Ally shared a more casual but meaningful experience, “I went to a coffee shop and one of the baristas there is a former teacher. Once I told them who I was, they were super welcoming and wanted to know all about me and my experiences.”

These independent efforts often reflected a strong desire to integrate into the community, but efforts were not always fruitful. Alison recounted, “I met this retired ag teacher, and he told me they would help me train an agronomy team. I reached out a couple times and still have not heard anything from him.” This experience highlights the unpredictability of informal networking and the difficulty of establishing trust.

Student teachers also expressed uncertainty about how to initiate relationships. Emma admitted, “I have no idea how to just walk up to someone I have never met. I’m very nervous about it. I think it’s going to just have to force myself and be intentional about it.” Anna echoed this sentiment, describing the challenge of crafting a professional identity, “I’m struggling to build a professional elevator pitch. It’s hard because I don’t know how much to share.”

These reflections underscore the emotional demands involved in community engagement. Without clear guidance, student teachers were left to navigate complex social dynamics, often feeling like outsiders. As Terri put it, “I just feel like I don’t have anything to do. It’s kind of lonely. I go to school, I go to the grocery store, I go home and think about school the next day.” This sense of isolation was compounded by the impermanent nature of student teaching placements, with many participants feeling like temporary visitors rather than integrated members of the community.

Theme 3: Relying on Support from Pre-established Social Networks

Given the challenges of building new relationships, student teachers leaned heavily on their existing support systems. These networks were mainly comprised of family, friends, and significant others outside the community. These relationships provided emotional stability and practical life advice. Melanie shared, “I call my parents, or they call me once a day. I just need somebody to talk to.” Alison described a touching moment, “My aunt made a point to bake me some banana bread and chocolate chip cookies. That was a really sweet moment for me, and I could just feel her love and support.”

Living arrangements also played a crucial role in shaping these support systems. Emma, who was living with family friends of her agriculture teacher, noted, “The people I’m living with have been so supportive. We just talk every day, and they always make it a point to ask if I’m doing okay.” Living situations often created an informal network that offered reassurance and a sense of belonging, helping to fill an emotional gap for student teachers who were otherwise engaging only in professional environments.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

While case study research focuses on a bounded system and does not allow us to generalize (Merriam, 2009), much can be learned from this case and potentially transferred to a

new situation (Erickson, 1986). This study highlights the critical role cooperating teachers could play in community connections, which is an important mentoring behavior (Nesbitt, 2022).

Cooperating teachers can help “open the door” to community partnerships by introducing community members to student teachers at events. Specific community interactions included fair boards, community meetings, and local businesses. Cooperating teachers were focused on helping student teachers learn to teach in the classroom, but did not prioritize helping them develop community connections or expanding social networks. To what extent should non-teaching roles of agriculture teachers be expected of the cooperating teacher and internship?

Student teachers reported their social networks were critical for them completing their student teaching. This supports Garland and Alestalo’s (2014) Social Network Theory, which highlights how individuals benefit from both the structure and quality of their interpersonal connections. Student teachers wanted to integrate into their student teaching community. Students wanted help beyond an introduction from cooperating teachers; they saw importance in seeking community connections independently but felt ill-prepared to establish these connections. Student teachers valued and relied on social support from pre-existing social networks to help them “*get through*” student teaching. Who else is coaching student teachers?

We recommend cooperating teachers introduce student teachers to key community stakeholders early in the internship and provide explicit coaching on community relations, using tools such as a community contact checklist to guide these interactions. By involving student teachers in various community events, cooperating teachers can teach students to help bridge the gap between the school district and the broader community. We recommend cooperating teachers provide more explicit coaching on developing community relationships beyond an introduction. Why did cooperating teachers not prioritize coaching community connections? Do teachers have meaningful community connections? Can they coach others to develop these?

Teacher preparation programs should incorporate targeted training on relationship-building with parents and community members, including practical strategies, real-world case studies, and opportunities for experiential learning through partnerships with local organizations. Structured early field experiences should include shadowing opportunities at community events, paired with reflective activities to deepen learning. Disberger et al. (2022) recommend induction programs incorporate evolving curriculum that address the dynamic needs of beginning teachers, including opportunities for reflection, mentorship, and community interaction.

Future research should explore how community connections and social support networks influence teacher retention and satisfaction. In the context of Agricultural Education, learning to build connections during student teaching may be a key factor in improving teacher retention. Studies should examine both cooperating teacher and student teacher perspectives on the value of community engagement, as well as effective strategies for building relationships. Do cooperating teachers themselves value or know how to build community partnerships? Is there a relationship between community engagement and teacher retention?

Further inquiry is needed into how teacher preparation programs support community integration, and how structured mentorship and networking opportunities contribute to preservice teachers’ social network development. Longitudinal studies could also provide insight into the long-term benefits of strong community ties for early career teachers.

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