

Defining the Legend: A Profile-Based Study Using Narratives in Agricultural Education

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Introduction/Need for Research

In agricultural education, some teachers leave a lasting impact and are described as “legends”. While this title is often used in retirement speeches and award ceremonies, it has not been defined in academic literature. Agricultural educators are recognized not only for their instructional effectiveness but also for the mentorship and service they provide through classroom teaching, FFA advising, and SAE supervision (Thompson & Schumacher, 1998). The profession values influence and relationship-building as they are central to the culture (Tubbs, 2015). While teacher effectiveness and retention have been widely studied (Cano & Miller, 1992; Roberts & Dyer, 2004), the concept of legacy remains unexplored. In a field where many remain for decades (Roberts & Dyer, 2004), understanding how legacy is defined may offer critical insights for teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention, which are key to combating concerns of ongoing teacher shortages (Eck & Edwards, 2019; Moser & McKim, 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to build a profile of a legendary agricultural educator by identifying the common characteristics and milestones highlighted in their personal and professional narratives. Two research questions guided this study: (RQ1) What personal and professional characteristics are consistently described in the narratives of agricultural educators regarded as “legendary”?, and (RQ2) What key milestones and experiences do legendary agricultural educators identify as pivotal to their careers and legacies?

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the legacy and lifework theory, which blends the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) and the generativity theory (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) describes how individuals form vocational identity through narrative reflection. Generativity theory (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) explains the desire to leave a meaningful impact on future generations. These frameworks offer a lens through which to examine how agricultural educators construct their identities, define pivotal moments, and interpret the values that have shaped their careers.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a narrative design approach to explore the personal and professional narratives of nationally recognized agricultural educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were purposively selected based on their experience, recognized contributions, and record of student success, with additional participants identified through snowball sampling. Four educators were interviewed remotely via Zoom in two rounds to gather detailed career milestones and verify their stories (Riessman, 2008). These interviews aimed to identify the personal and professional characteristics, as well as the key milestones and experiences, of a legendary educator. All the recordings were transcribed and analyzed in three phases. Open and in vivo coding first identified emergent concepts and milestones, which were then grouped using axial coding to reveal thematic connections and inform their timelines (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, thematic analysis synthesized these into overarching themes directly addressing the research questions. To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, multiple strategies were employed. Member checking allowed participants to review and verify the accuracy of their narratives and interpretations, strengthening the credibility of the results (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Analytic memos were systematically recorded to capture the researcher's reflections, decisions, and emergent patterns, thereby supporting both dependability and confirmability.

Results/Findings

Four themes were found from the timeline narratives of the participants: *education, recognition and awards, contributions, and turning points*. All four participants completed similar *educational* experiences, which included traditional teacher education programs that led to their teaching certification. Two held bachelor's degrees in agricultural education, while two also had advanced degrees, including master's and doctoral degrees in the field. For many, the path toward becoming an educator began early through mentorship. Participant 3 shared, "About my junior year, one of those guys said, you know, you need to be an ag teacher...that's what started me," referring to encouragement received from a student teacher at their school during high school. Each participant noted professional *recognition and awards*, including honors such as "Teacher of the Year," at a regional, state, or national level. *Contributions* to students and the profession were a defining theme. All four participants experienced success at the national level in FFA. Three coached national champion Career Development Event (CDE) teams, and three supported national proficiency award finalists and winners. One participant had multiple national agriscience fair winners. Yet, despite these accolades, one participant expressed humility, saying, "I am about half embarrassed to tell you the truth," suggesting that recognition was not their primary motivation. Common *turning points* reported by participants were temporarily leaving agricultural education and becoming a parent. For example, participant 4 left the profession to run a ranch but said the experience "totally recalibrated what I was doing," later returning with a renewed focus on real-world application. Participant 2 shared, "When I had my own son... that kind of changes you too, because you start looking at stuff from the standpoint." Each of these turning points was described as influential in shaping their outlook and educational mentality.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact

The timeline narratives revealed that legendary agricultural educators share common traits, including traditional teacher preparation, a record of student achievement, and sustained contributions to the profession. All four participants were recognized not only for coaching national FFA champions but also for their dedication to students and excellence in teaching, which are all core values in agricultural education (Thompson & Schumacher, 1998; Tubbs, 2015). These findings suggest that a "legend" is shaped by a combination of classroom effectiveness, impact on students, and involvement in the agricultural education community. Turning points such as becoming a parent or temporarily leaving the profession also revealed that these educators are resilient. The study supports legacy and lifework theory, illustrating how educators construct vocational identity through pivotal moments and a desire to leave a lasting impact (Savickas, 2005; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). By capturing and analyzing their career journeys, agricultural education can inform stronger strategies for teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. Further research, utilizing longitudinal and comparative studies, could reveal how legacy develops over time and across contexts, helping agricultural education programs intentionally cultivate the qualities that sustain the profession.

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