

**The Power of Teacher Agency: How Agricultural Educators Shape and Navigate Educational Policy**

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## Introduction

This study investigates how veteran SBAE teachers understand and enact their agency in the context of school and district-level educational policy. While teacher leadership and advocacy are gaining attention in broader educational research (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), agricultural educators remain underrepresented in studies involving teachers as policy actors. This study fills that gap by exploring how SBAE teachers interpret policies such as curriculum standards, funding and resource allocation, school level procedures and industry credential requirements and respond within their professional contexts as agents. The research centers veteran SBAE teachers who operate at the intersection of leadership, policy implementation, and program development. A phenomenological approach was selected their working environment (Larsen & Adu, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Teacher Agency Model (TAM), developed by Priestley et al., (2015), which conceptualizes teacher agency as a temporally embedded and context-dependent phenomenon. Based on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), TAM identifies three dimensions of agency: iterational (past experiences and values), practical-evaluative (present constraints and affordances), and projective (future aspirations and goals). TAM provides a unique lens for exploring how SBAE teachers navigate policy environments, interpret their roles, and make decisions that reflect both personal and professional commitments. In the context of SBAE, this includes advocating for funding, sustaining local partnerships, and navigating institutional challenges. TAM supports this study by analyzing how teachers' actions are influenced by both their individual abilities and the systems within which they operate.

## Methods

This study occurred at the 2025 Virginia Agriculture Teachers' Summer Conference. A qualitative study was employed using a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of veteran SBAE teachers as they navigate educational policy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Larsen & Adu, 2022). Data was collected through two semi-structured focus groups. Each group included veteran SBAE teachers with at least 10 years of experience (Haddad et al., 2023), selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in school location and program type (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One group had three teachers and the other had four, which aligns with best practices for qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Focus groups were selected for their ability to generate in-depth collaborative conversations, draw out diverse experiences, and allow participants to build on each other's insights (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1996). A semi-structured interview protocol guided each 45-minute focus group and aligned with TAM's three dimensions. All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Data was analyzed thematically and coded inductively using in-vivo coding to capture participants' own language (Saldaña, 2021), followed by focused coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) to group related responses. Axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was employed to relate categories to one another and draw out themes that aligned with TAM and the study's objectives.

## Results

The analysis revealed five central themes reflecting how veteran SBAE teachers understand and enact agency within their schools and districts.

### ***Theme 1: Limited Policy Literacy and Involvement***

Participants displayed varying levels of policy understanding, especially regarding funding allocation, contract negotiations, and district-level procedures. Many noted they had never received formal training in policy interpretation, limiting their confidence and efficacy in

navigating policy structures. “You’re not really involved in [decision-making]. If you aren’t in a particular leadership role - it’s almost like you haven’t been invited to the table.” This theme points to the urgent need teacher inclusion with decision-making and early-career policy training in SBAE teacher preparation programs.

***Theme 2: Teacher Agency and Advocacy Practices***

Despite gaps in formal policy knowledge, many participants described a variety of strategies used to advocate for their programs. Teachers used formal and informal communication strategies, highlighting student achievements, and leveraging relationships with administrators to gain support. “When they see all of that good stuff, they’re willing to fight for you and make sure you have what you need.”

***Theme 3: Institutional Barriers and Structural Constraints***

Participants acknowledged that institutional factors limit their ability to influence educational policy or secure program support. “A 12-month contract would mean a lot for our program—especially if you have animals.” “I would love to have new equipment—instead, that resource has been given to the new CTE center down the road.”

***Theme 4: Stakeholder and Community Engagement***

Community and stakeholder engagement emerged as a crucial support system for SBAE teachers. Teachers described building relationships with alumni, advisory committees, and local businesses to gain access to funding, supplies, and work-based experiences for students. “Connecting students with them [stakeholders] provides more opportunities for job placement and work-based learning.”

***Theme 5: Emotional and Professional Tensions***

An interesting theme that emerged across both focus groups was the emotional burden of advocacy work. Teachers spoke candidly about feeling left out of leadership conversations, experiencing burnout, and working under the pressure of high expectations with little recognition. “It takes you 10 years to get something done... there’s no joy in the victory.”

**Conclusions/Implications**

Participants reported a need for early-career policy training due to their lack of practical knowledge for navigating educational policy structures. They also emphasized the need for greater visibility within their program areas so that leadership can visually understand the scale of what is needed for SBAE programs to succeed. This also leads to the conversation of inequitable resource distribution efforts that are not readily available to SBAE teachers without the support of the advisory committee and other external stakeholders through developed partnerships. All of these processes leave the teacher feeling exhausted under the pressure and expectations to uphold the mission and values of FFA and their agricultural programs within their communities. The findings emphasize the need for systemic changes in agricultural education programming, including teacher preparation, access to policy training, and district-level leadership professional development opportunities to deepen their understanding of the roles of SBAE professionals. The emerged themes also suggest further discussion regarding SBAE teachers’ need for equitable employment contracts and resource distribution. Being included in decision-making structures that directly affect their programs would be transformative for agricultural education. By amplifying the voices of these educators, this study calls for a more inclusive understanding of teacher agency and affirms the need to support SBAE programs and their teachers with additional practical professional development.

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