

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

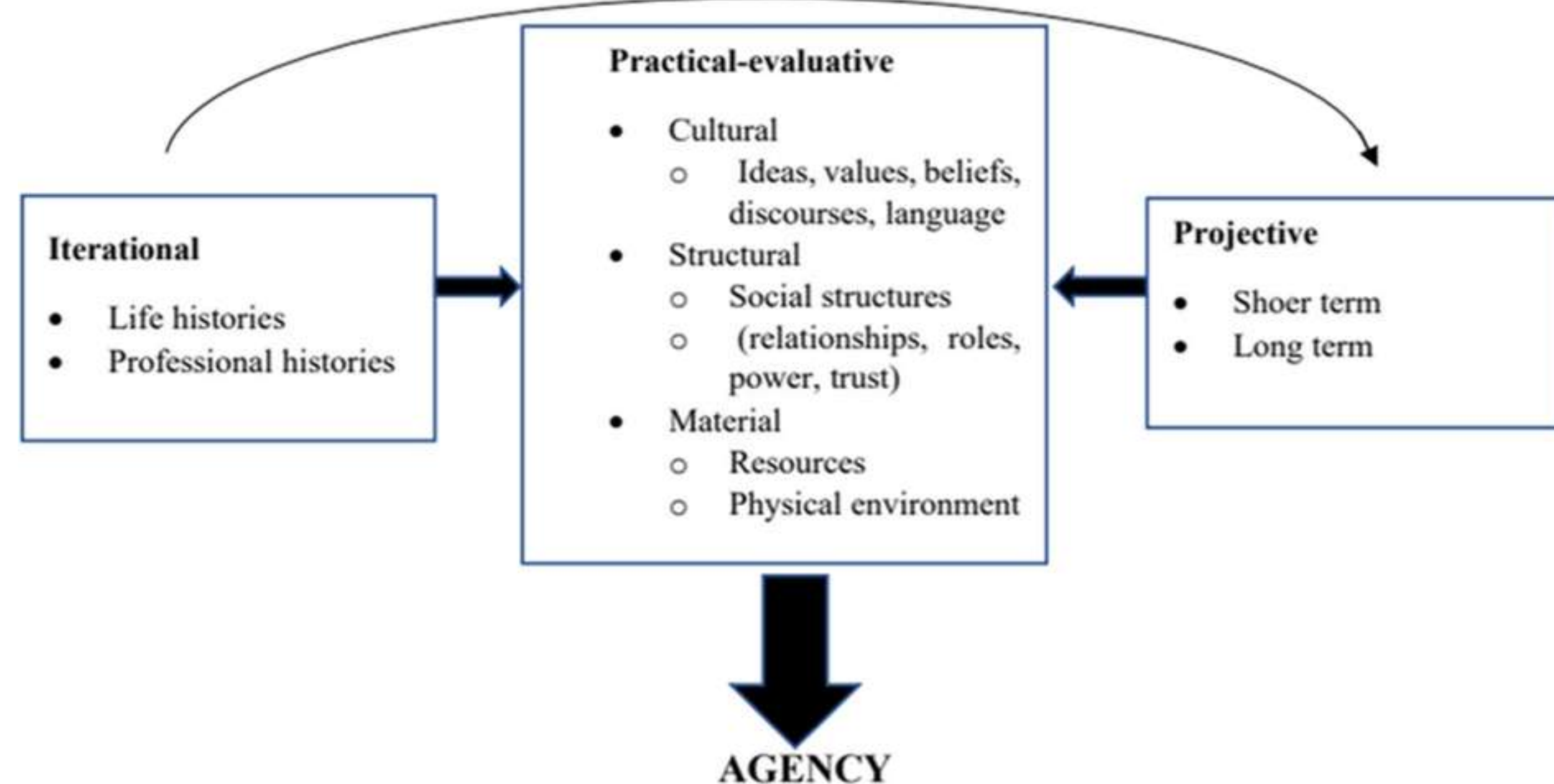
Demikia Taylor, Virginia Tech

Introduction

- While teacher leadership and advocacy are gaining attention in broader educational research (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), agricultural educators remain underrepresented in studies of teachers as policy actors.
- This study fills that gap by exploring how SBAE teachers interpret policies centering veteran SBAE teachers who operate at the intersection of leadership, policy implementation, and program development (Hainline & Smalley, 2023).
- Investigates how veteran SBAE teachers understand and enact their agency in the context of school and district-level educational policy

Theoretical Framework

- Teacher Agency Model (TAM) outlines the capacity of educators to make purposeful choices and take intentional action within their professional environments (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007).
- TAM is viewed not as an individual trait, but as an ecological framework shaped by the interplay of three key dimensions by Emirbayer and Mische (1998).
- Framework provides a lens for exploring how SBAE teachers navigate policy environments, interpret their roles, and make decisions that reflect both personal and professional commitments.
- This study focuses on how veteran teachers navigate institutional structures and how their professional histories, daily practices, and future aspirations shape their capacity to act as agents of change (Priestley et al., 2013).



Results

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

Theme	Description	Key Findings	Participant Quote(s)
1. Limited Policy Literacy and Involvement	Teachers demonstrated limited understanding of educational policy and minimal inclusion in district-level decision-making.	Lack of formal training; uncertainty about funding and contracts; exclusion from leadership conversations	"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."
2. Teacher Agency and Advocacy Practices	Teachers exercised agency through informal advocacy, relationship-building, and intentional communication rather than through formal policy engagement to support their programs.	Increase visibility efforts; showcase student-centered work and activities; build relationships with administrators and leadership.	"When they see all of that good stuff, they're willing to fight for you and make sure you have what you need."
3. Institutional Barriers and Structural Constraints	District policies and institutional structures constrained program sustainability and teacher influence.	Contract limitations; inequitable resource distribution	"I would love to have new equipment—instead that resource has been given to the new CTE center down the road." "A 12-month contract would mean a lot for our program—especially if you have animals."
4. Stakeholder and Community Engagement	External stakeholders served as key sources of networking access, resources, and collective voice for SBAE programs.	Alumni support; advisory committees; local business partnerships; work-based learning opportunities	"Connecting students with them [stakeholders] provides more opportunities for job placement and work-based learning."
5. Emotional and Professional Tensions	Sustained advocacy efforts resulted in emotional strain, fatigue, and a lack of recognition, despite a strong commitment to students.	Burnout language; continue effort; working under pressure of high expectations	"It takes you 10 years to get something done... there's no joy in the victory."

Methodology

- Used a qualitative phenomenological approach with a focus on veteran SBAE teachers' experiences.
- Participants:
 - 7 veteran SBAE teachers
 - Each with 10+ years of teaching experience
 - Represent diverse program settings and needs (urban, suburban & rural)

Data Collection:

- Two focus groups: one with three participants, one with four held during a conference.
- Focus group duration: ~45 minutes
- Used a semi-structured interview guide grounded in the Teacher Agency Model-

1. Past experiences (Iterational)
2. Current constraints/strategies (Practical-Evaluative)
3. Future goals/needs (Projective)

- Sessions were audio recorded & transcribed.
- Inductive coding: Conducted in vivo, focused coding, and axial coding.

Conclusion/Implications

- The findings emphasize the need for systemic changes in teacher preparation, including early career and in-service policy literacy training and CTE training for district-level leadership.
- Inclusion in decision-making structures that directly affect SBAE programs; emotional labor and stress
- General understanding of how teachers can leverage their agency and autonomy to influence policy



References:

