

Growing Our Own: SBAE Teacher Recruitment in the Classroom

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teacher shortage is a historical challenge that continues to persist (Eck & Edwards, 2019). During the 2023-2024 school year, 107 SBAE teaching positions were not filled, with 35 remaining open due to unavailability of qualified teachers (Smith et al., 2025). Furthermore, research recognized recruiting of new SBAE teachers as a major challenge facing the profession over the next decade (Estepp et al., 2024). Previous involvement in SBAE programs and encouragement from SBAE teachers have been identified as factors impacting the decision to become a SBAE teacher (Ingram et al., 2018; Lawver & Torres, 2012). With SBAE teachers serving as influential career role models for their students, they are likely key to solving the recruitment problem (Swafford & Anderson, 2020). However, few studies have determined which strategies SBAE teachers use to recruit or their opinions on best practices, providing the need for this study. The purpose of this study was to investigate experiences influencing current SBAE teachers' perceptions of their role in recruiting the next generation of SBAE teachers. The following questions guided our study:

1. What strategies do SBAE teachers use to recruit their students to the profession?
2. What strategies could the SBAE community implement to improve recruitment?

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) served as the lens for data interpretation in this study. TPB posits that behavioral intentions are influenced by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. As part of a larger study, we were interested in examining how SBAE teacher attitudes toward recruiting for the profession align with their actions in the classroom. We also hoped to identify subjective norms and perceived behavioral control through the interview and discussion.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of SBAE teachers regarding recruitment of students as potential SBAE teachers. Purposive sampling of early-, mid-, and late-career SBAE teachers in Arkansas who entered the profession through traditional or alternative certification routes was used to ensure a wide range of perspectives from participants (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). Fifteen SBAE teachers agreed to participate in four semi-structured focus group interviews served as the primary data source (Moustakas, 1994). Focus group interviews were conducted by career stage and certification pathway: traditionally certified early-, mid-, late-career teachers, and an alternatively certified group (any career stage). Questions were broad and open-ended, designed to elicit reflection and dialogue. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, were conducted on Zoom, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data were de-identified by assigning pseudonyms to participants, then all data were manually reviewed (Saldaña, 2013). Iterative rounds of data analysis included an initial read and re-read followed by deductive, holistic, and pattern coding methods (Christians & Carey, 1989; Saldaña, 2013). Following theme development, a qualitative research colleague independently analyzed transcripts to enhance credibility, followed by *in vivo* coding to preserve participants' authentic voices and contextual meaning of statements.

Results

One over-arching theme emerged addressing the first research question: *honesty and transparency*. SBAE teachers described a variety of strategies used to encourage students to pursue careers in SBAE. They emphasized the importance of honesty and transparency when mentoring students, providing learning opportunities, and fostering potential. Participants believed open discussions about the realities of the profession, including time and travel requirements, work-life balance, family/spousal support, and lesson planning was essential for their students to make an informed career decision to teach agriculture. Karen, an early-career teacher shared that whenever students ask questions such as: “Why did you chose to be an ag teacher?” she tries to be as insightful as possible. Olga, a mid-career teacher, shared, “If they ask me a question, they’re getting a real answer.” And Van, a late-career teacher was frank when sharing he has recruited students to the profession and they entered the career “...with their eyes wide open, because they knew exactly what they were getting into!”

The second research question explored SBAE teachers’ lived experiences related to strategies the SBAE community could use to improve recruitment. One theme emerged: *involvement*. This theme reflects the participants’ desire to see the SBAE community become more intentional in efforts to involve students in activities aimed at recruiting them to the profession. Olga shared, “I think there needs to be something through FFA that gives kids a chance to try teaching lessons and facilitating an activity. That’s what CDEs and LDEs are all about; a way to try it before you do it.” Chantal agreed with including agricultural education in the classroom and CDEs: “We bring in guest speakers, and we talk about all the different careers in our classes...we have all these CDE events like poultry judging and livestock judging but we don’t have an agricultural education career development event”. She believed this could facilitate conversation with students about the career. Sebastian suggested universities work together to promote the profession, in addition to Teach Ag Day, to expose young people to SBAE teaching.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Participants of this study believed SBAE teachers should participate in recruiting future teachers from their own programs, supporting findings of previous research (Ingram et al., 2018; Lawver & Torres, 2012; Swafford & Anderson, 2020). According to Ajzen’s (1991) TPB, this belief translated into action. Participants recruited students from their programs by having honest and transparent conversation as indicated by Van’s experience. Conceivably having accurate information up front when making the decision is important for retention. It is also possible these conversations could discourage students from entering the career, depending on the teachers’ feelings at any given time. This should be further investigated. Our participants also believed involving students in the SBAE teaching process through events such as an agricultural education CDE, teaching about the career in class, and attending coordinated university events promoting the profession would be good practices for recruiting. While Arkansas does not currently have an agricultural education CDE, other states do. A study tracking subsequent entrance into the SBAE teaching profession could shed light on the effectiveness of this CDE. We recommend university teacher preparation programs, state FFA staff, and SBAE professional teaching organizations utilize current SBAE teachers to help with future recruitment of SBAE teachers. Curriculum on SBAE teaching careers would benefit current teachers.

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