

Mentorship, Relationship-Building, and Experiential Learning: Insights Gained from Pre-Service AFNR Teacher Internship Reflections Through the ASSET Program

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Introduction

To prepare the next generation of agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) educators, professional development programs for students have been widely encouraged and implemented across the agriculture education discipline (Henderson et al., 2023). The ASSET program not only supports student success but also aims to address the national shortage of agricultural educators and pre-service AFNR teachers (Eck & Edwards, 2019). Established in 2024 through a five-year USDA NIFA grant, our Research and Extension Experience for Undergraduates (REEU) program recruited 10 pre-service AFNR teachers from across Texas to complete an eight-week summer internship. Interns were placed with mentor agriculture teachers to shadow and gain practical exposure to teaching agriculture.

During their internships, ASSET program participants completed reflective statements using the Describe, Explain, and Articulate Learning (DEAL) model (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Reflective journaling strategies have been widely adopted in agricultural education to encourage students to assess their experiences, think critically, and deepen their professional identity (Ingles & Retallick, 2025). Each student completed up to six reflections throughout the internship from eight available prompts. This poster presents the results of a thematic analysis of those reflections, guided by the research question: What core learning outcomes and professional insights do pre-service AFNR teachers articulate through reflective statements following an eight-week agricultural education internship experience?

Theoretical Framework

Although the ASSET program is inherently experiential, we specifically employed Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) to analyze students' reflective statements. ELT posits that learning is a lifelong process built upon cumulative experiences (Kolb, 1984). Through reflection and critical assessment, transformative learning occurs, allowing learners to actively construct knowledge that can be applied holistically. ELT has been widely adopted in agricultural education due to its hands-on nature and practical relevance (Baker et al., 2012).

Methods

This study explored emerging themes from the reflections of 10 pre-service AFNR teachers who participated in an eight-week summer agricultural education internship through the ASSET program. Students were provided with eight reflection prompts focused on initial impressions, mentorship and guidance, leadership and communication, problem-solving and adaptability, professional development and growth, student engagement and teaching strategies, and self-identity and purpose as an educator. Only one prompt, *final reflections and lessons learned*, was mandatory.

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted, beginning with open coding and followed by constant comparison to identify key themes (Schilling, 2006). An audit trail containing raw data and coding excerpts was maintained to ensure participant confidentiality and provide a reference point if needed. Memos were kept throughout the process, and a peer debriefing session was conducted to review initial codes and confirm the final themes (Schilling, 2006).

Results

Five key themes emerged from the analysis: value of mentorship, learner-centered teaching, supportive learning environments, transformative experiences, and building relationships. **Value of Mentorship:** Students consistently praised their cooperating teachers for the support, guidance, and professional skill development they received. **Learner-Centered Teaching:** Reflections emphasized a desire to lead classrooms driven by student engagement. One student noted, “Engaging students means more than just delivering content, but instead empowering them to take ownership of their learning, goals, and growth.” **Supportive Learning Environments:** After observing mentor teachers’ examples of patience, time management, and classroom management, students expressed a strong commitment to fostering similarly supportive atmospheres in their future classrooms. **Transformative Experiences:** Interns participated in conferences and events such as the Texas FFA State Convention and Area Leadership Camp, which had a profound impact on their professional growth and defined this theme. **Building Relationships:** Students highlighted the importance of forming meaningful connections with peers, mentors, and students. One intern reflected, “Collaborating... showed me the importance of building trust and positive relationships with students outside of a formal classroom setting.”

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Pre-service AFNR teachers reflected on the value of mentorship, learner-centered teaching, and relationship-building, which together fostered supportive learning environments and transformative experiences. Given that four of the five themes were relationship-oriented, REEU programs should emphasize the development of soft skills such as communication, patience, and problem-solving. These findings affirm the importance of reflective practices in agricultural education (Henderson et al., 2023; Ingles & Retallick, 2025). Through structured reflection, interns were able to make sense of their experiences, completing the full experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). We strongly recommend continuing to include reflective components in student internships to allow interns to process and articulate their learning.

Based on our findings, the ASSET program offers valuable paid summer internship experiences that enhance classroom engagement and expand the preparation and transferable skills of pre-service agricultural educators (Sairls, 2024). Additionally, REEU programs help alleviate initial apprehension students may face when entering the workforce (Donaldson et al., 2023). Future research should incorporate both qualitative and quantitative strategies to further evaluate the broader implications of AFNR REEU internships for students and the agricultural education community.

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