

**Am I a Leader? Virginia SBAE Teacher View of Leadership Identity in Rural  
Communities**

Ashlee P. Sullivan, Doctoral Student  
Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
925 Prices Fork Road, Blacksburg, VA, 24060  
asullivan@vt.edu

D. Brett Milliken, Collegiate Assistant Professor  
Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
925 Prices Fork Road, Blacksburg, VA, 24060  
bmilliken@vt.edu

Hannah Sunderman, Assistant Professor  
Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
925 Prices Fork Road, Blacksburg, VA, 24060  
hsunderman@vt.edu

## **Am I a Leader? Virginia SBAE Teacher View of Leadership Identity in Rural Communities**

*The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to understand the motivating factors that lead School-Based Agriculture Education (SBAE) teachers to teach in rural areas; and second, to explore if and how SBAE teachers perceive themselves as leaders in their rural communities. We utilized a deductive, phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of SBAE teachers in response to the two purposes. Participants included six SBAE teachers serving rural areas of Virginia. Participants were identified based on the program's rurality, specifically populations of <5,000. Two themes emerged related to the first research question: rural upbringing and comfort, and convenience and family needs. Two key findings emerged related to the second research question: leadership as a sense of place and community connection. Three SBAE teachers perceived themselves as rural community leaders, whereas three did not, revealing varied perceptions of rural community leadership amongst SBAE teachers. Recommendations for future research and practice include a focus on developing SBAE teachers' sense of community and generative leadership capacities, and on transferring the behaviors of rural SBAE teachers into leader identity.*

### **Introduction and Literature Review**

Rural communities are vital in sustaining the nation's agricultural landscape, yet they face persistent challenges, including population migration, barriers to educational development and attainment, and limited workforce access (Coughlin et al., 2019; Gowda et al., 2018). In addition to these challenges, rural citizens have lower levels of educational and economic attainment compared to their urban counterparts (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2025). Career and technical education (CTE), including school-based agricultural education (SBAE), serves as a crucial avenue for individuals, particularly those in rural areas or of lower socioeconomic status, to develop workforce-relevant and attainable skills (USDA, 2023). Thus, CTE programs play a central role in supporting rural communities, making a significant contribution to a stable and well-prepared workforce (Urban & Goldring, 2025).

In the 2024-2025 school year alone, 33 states declared a teacher shortage in CTE programs (Learning Policy Institute, 2025), with rural schools facing a particularly high vacancy rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Recruiting and retaining teachers, regardless of the subject, is an ever-present challenge in the educational landscape. In general education, only one-third of teacher candidates have noted a desire to teach in a rural school (Oyen & Schweinle, 2022). Within SBAE, this issue is even more pronounced, as agricultural education college graduates are less willing to enter the teaching profession than ever before (Eck & Edwards, 2019). As approximately 60% of SBAE programs reside in rural areas (Rubenstein et al., 2023), the future of SBAE programs depends heavily on teacher retention.

Rural schools inhabit an essential space within rural communities, functioning not only as social and cultural anchors but also as institutions that foster a stronger sense of purpose and value in education among students and community members (Lyson, 2002; Shamah, 2011; Sipple et al., 2019). As powerful forces in the community, the leadership development of school teachers, staff, and the administration is necessary for community thriving. While the role of rural school

principals as leaders has been studied (Preston & Barnes, 2017), the role of teachers as rural community leaders has had limited exploration. As rural schools are considered a central part of the rural community (Showalter et al., 2019), teachers can harness a deeper connection as fellow influencers in the community's system (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Starrett et al., 2021). With this community-centred mindset, rural teachers can have a positive impact on the communities in which they teach (Goodpaster et al., 2012).

As agricultural teacher educators, policy leaders, and school districts seek to address SBAE teacher retention efforts, it is essential to consider the foundation of SBAE—its deep roots within rural school settings (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Special attention should be made to understand the motivating factors that attract or deter an SBAE teacher's choice to teach in a rural setting, and further, how they view themselves as a key component and leader within their rural community. Given the challenges of rural areas and the central role SBAE teachers play in rural education, it is critical to explore what motivates them to teach in these contexts and how they perceive their leadership within these communities. Rural schools and students often benefit from small class sizes and a surrounding close-knit community, which can foster a sense of belonging (Olsen et al., 2022). Despite these benefits, rural schools face challenges, including rising poverty, teacher shortages, and funding gaps (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Likewise, teachers in rural areas face additional obstacles, including adapting curricula to local needs, managing diverse student backgrounds, and fostering an inclusive environment for all students (Li et al., 2024; Ligoyligoy, 2025; Short & Martin, 2005). These obstacles can increase the need for professional development opportunities and community engagement among rural teachers (Ai et al., 2022; Sandoval-Obando et al., 2022).

SBAE teachers, particularly those in rural school settings, also face added challenges. The multifaceted style of SBAE requires teachers to assume roles outside the classroom, including FFA advising and managing various Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects (Torres et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2020). The additional responsibilities of SBAE teachers can increase stress and burnout, contributing to attrition within the profession (Smith & Smalley, 2018), regardless of teaching experience (Chenevey et al., 2008; Schmidt et al., 2022; Solomonson et al., 2018). The Conceptual Model of Support for SBAE emphasizes the importance of addressing basic human needs and professional identity, aiming to foster a positive personal and professional identity and support SBAE teacher retention (Marsh et al., 2025). SBAE teachers' identities are shaped not only by their roles as educators but also by their identities as change agents within their communities (Delnero & Montgomery, 2001; Roberts & Dyer, 2004).

Personal backgrounds and experiences, such as an upbringing in a rural area or pre-service training activities, can influence the identity formation of rural teachers (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Lian et al., 2023). Similarly, school culture and community relations contribute to teacher identity formation (Edwards & Edwards, 2017; Li et al., 2024). Descriptive factors of teachers, like gender, years of teaching experience, and chosen subject area, also shape teacher identity formation (Kavrayici, 2020). With these factors in mind, emotional resilience, agency, and cultural competence are critical for rural teachers to navigate and serve their rural communities (Karnopp, 2022; Sun & Huang, 2024; Woods, 2004).

In addition to rural teacher identity formation, leadership identity (LI) influences how rural SBAE teachers perceive themselves within their communities. LI refers to individuals internalizing their identity as a leader, receiving recognition of the leader identity from others, and being collectively endorsed as a leader within a particular context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Leadership development has been explored in rural contexts (Etuk et al., 2013; Kaufman & Rudd, 2006), research on LI in rural school settings remains scarce. Although LI is essential for all community leaders to enact and sustain leadership behaviors, leadership derived from a sense of place is crucial for those living and employed in rural areas (Budge, 2006). Individuals who live or work in rural communities are uniquely attuned to local needs (Uddin et al., 2021), giving rural leaders, such as SBAE teachers, an advantage in understanding and addressing rural challenges. Therefore, in response to the lack of previous research on LI in rural areas and in acknowledgement of the leadership role SBAE teachers have in rural communities, the current research focused on understanding the motivating factors of SBAE teachers to live and work in rural areas and their perceptions of their leadership identity in their rural community.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

LI conceptualizes leadership as an identity process in which individuals create mutually reinforcing identities as leaders and followers (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Identity work is conceptualized as a process of claiming and granting, in which individuals “claim” a leader identity and others “grant” the leader identity, collectively forming a leader-follower relationship (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This reciprocal process of role adoption and endorsement occurs within organizational or contextual frames, as leadership identities are claimed and granted with specific cultural and social contexts in mind. For example, a rural school teacher might experience their LI development through affirmation of their leadership in their relationships with students, colleagues, and administration, thus contributing to the teacher claiming the identity of a leader within their community.

Although LI is highly contextualized, Marks (2015) argued that leadership scholarship has placed little emphasis on community leadership. Therefore, Marks (2015) introduced community leadership as a concept that focuses on becoming part of the local community, playing a role within it, and helping to effect collective change, which may foster a community leadership identity (i.e., a leadership identity contextualized specifically within the community). Although Marks (2015) originally applied the concept of community leadership to college students’ identity, the same notion may be extended to SBAE, as SBAE teachers’ leadership identity can be contextualized within the community in which they teach. In the present study, LI, specifically community LI, served as the theoretical framework for examining SBAE teachers’ self-perceptions of their leadership development within their rural community, in relation to their unique position as SBAE teachers.

### **Purpose & Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study is two-fold: 1) to understand Virginia SBAE teachers’ motivation to teach in rural areas and 2) to explore Virginia SBAE teachers’ perceptions of themselves as leaders in their rural communities. A deductive phenomenological qualitative

study was conducted to address the following questions, thereby enabling the researchers to present the findings holistically.

- RQ 1) What factors influence Virginia SBAE teachers' decision to teach in rural areas?*  
*RQ 2) How do Virginia SBAE teachers perceive themselves as leaders within their rural community?*

## Methods

We employed a deductive phenomenological approach (van Manen, 2016; van Manen, 2023) to explore the phenomenon of interest: rural Virginia SBAE teachers' experiences in rural communities, specifically their LI in those communities and the factors that motivated them to live and work there. By employing a qualitative methodology, we examined the experiences through an open lens, thereby gaining insight into the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The current study aimed to explore Virginia SBAE teachers' motivation to teach in rural areas and their perceptions of themselves as rural community leaders. Therefore, we employed purposive sampling to ensure that participants' unique experiences and credibility regarding the phenomenon of interest (i.e., teachers in a rural SBAE program; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were represented. The research team used a public roster of the Virginia Association of Agricultural Educators and determined participants' rurality based on the location of the high school where they were employed. Rural programs were defined as those in places with populations of <5,000, according to the USDA (2025). Once the review of qualifications was completed, two professionals, a member of the association's staff and a teacher educator at a credentialing university, identified individuals who could share experiences as teachers within a rural SBAE program setting, which is in line with purposive sampling methods (Palinkas et al., 2016). After identifying potential participants, the research team recruited 30 individuals via email. Six Virginia SBAE teachers agreed to participate. While the number of participants is limited, prior qualitative studies in agricultural education have demonstrated that rich, trustworthy findings can emerge from a smaller participant pool (Kleihauer et al., 2013; Murphrey et al., 2016; Ramstad & Smalley, 2025). The six participants included four women (Cassandra, Grace, LeAnn, and Taylor) and two men (Dylan and Robert) with 6–22 years of experience teaching in rural schools, representing communities ranging from 430 to 4,384 residents across four of the six state agricultural education association regions (Regions I, II, III, and VI).

To enable participants to share their experiences and perspectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews to provide structure, facilitate redirection, and pursue deeper lines of questioning as needed to align with the research questions and objectives (e.g., *What influenced you to move to a rural area? Describe how you see yourself as a community leader.*). A graduate student completed one-hour, qualitative interviews via Zoom. Interviews were recorded, downloaded, and uploaded to Rev for text transcription. Data were analyzed using the Dedoose Qualitative Analysis Software. The research questions were designed to examine rural LI and the motivations of SBAE teachers living in a rural community in Virginia. The Institutional Review Board approved the research at Virginia Tech.

Data analysis was conducted in two cycles. First, the researchers independently coded the transcripts and discussed their interpretations, thereby deepening their understanding of the data.

The data analysis cycle included one session of independent open coding, where researchers identified 115 significant statements. Researchers then employed inductive coding, assigning descriptive codes to the significant statements without predefining categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Silverman, 2020). For example, participants who reported motivations to teach stemming from their upbringing were assigned the code “rural upbringing”. Researchers understood that additional codes or sub-codes may emerge from the findings (Creswell, 2013). Through reflexivity, dialogue, and iterative cycles, researchers compared codes to identify the study's main findings. The second cycle of analysis employed pattern coding to identify underlying patterns in participants’ varying motivators. For example, “community relationships” and “community support” were categorized as “community connection”, which emerged as a subtheme. Across the two research questions, four themes emerged.

## Findings

The current study had two research questions. First, what factors influence Virginia SBAE teachers’ decision to teach in rural areas? Second, how do Virginia SBAE teachers perceive themselves or their role as leaders within their rural community? To aid interpretation of participants’ experiences, the data were analyzed and organized by research question before being considered collectively in implications for SBAE teachers, programs, and the field.

### **RQ 1: What factors influence Virginia SBAE teachers’ decision to teach in rural areas?**

Related to RQ1, two key findings emerged as the motivators for Virginia SBAE teachers to teach in rural areas: a) *rural upbringing and comfort*, and b) *convenience and family needs*. First, SBAE teachers reflected on their rural backgrounds as a motivator for teaching in a rural program. Second, SBAE teachers highlighted factors that influenced their decision, including external benefits for themselves and loved ones.

#### ***Rural Upbringing & Comfort***

For SBAE teachers in rural communities, their upbringing in rural communities was described as a significant factor in their decision to teach SBAE in the same or a similar community. LeAnn described the type of environment she wanted to teach and live in as a “smaller county, small town kind of feel, I’ve lived in this community my whole life.” Similarly, Robert’s upbringing in a rural area fostered a sense of familiarity compared with more urban areas. In Robert’s words, “If I get into more urban areas, it doesn’t take long until I feel out of place. It’s nice to experience that for a bit, but I think it [rural areas] feels safer, feels better...it’s what I am used to.”

This idea of a rural upbringing and comfort in rural areas was salient to participants. Although Cassandra was raised in a different area from where she currently teaches, she still held an innate desire to be involved in a rural setting: “Honestly, I couldn’t really see myself anywhere else other than in a rural community... I knew I wanted to farm and be involved in agriculture.” Grace’s involvement in her middle school agriculture program and love for her community led her to teach in the same program where her journey began:

When I was in sixth grade, I took the exact class that I'm teaching now and fell in love with it. It was a class I could actually survive in... there was just a spark that hit, and then I took it all four years in high school, and pretty much since sixth grade, I was like, "That's what I want to do, I want to be an ag teacher"...It's where I grew up. It's where I live... I could literally walk here if I wanted...I love the community.

In sum, the participants were inclined to teach in rural areas, whether the area was the same as or different from the one in which they had grown up, as this aligned with the living experience they sought and with which they were comfortable. A rural upbringing shaped many participants' teaching placements, but practical considerations such as family needs also played a significant role.

### *Convenience & Family Needs*

When considering where to teach, participants indicated that familial or spousal needs or convenience for themselves or others was a primary consideration. Convenience and family need considerations included proximity, pay, and cost of living. For Taylor, it was the limited surrounding options to teach agriculture and the desire to keep her family close:

So, what keeps me here, there's not a lot of options, so really, if I wanted to teach ag somewhere else, I'd be looking at either going fairly far or to a smaller district that doesn't pay as well...And my kids go here, my kids come to school with me... I want to keep that continuity for my children.

In talking about proximity to her work environment, LeAnn stated, "It was important to me to teach in the community that I live in. I think having those ties to your local community is just important...it builds an identity for your program." Robert relocated out of family need and a general preference for rural areas:

I taught in Pennsylvania for 10 years, and then my wife was taking classes at [seminary], which is close to here, and so we started looking for a position in this area. It was like mid-summer until it opened up, and so I guess it was partially just out of a need, of trying to do that... The big staying point has just been the area and the people.

For Dylan, teaching in a close, rural area allowed him to continue his family's beef cattle operation amid teaching agriculture, stating, "We live on a farm, we raise purebred Charolais cattle, and the kids are starting to show and do that." In sum, participants identified two primary factors that motivated their decision to teach and work in rural areas: attraction to rural communities and family or convenience priorities.

### **RQ 2: How do Virginia SBAE teachers perceive their role as leaders within the rural community?**

In response to the second research question, participants articulated varied perceptions of their roles as leaders within their rural communities. While three participants identified themselves as community leaders because of their leadership roles, three others did not. Leann viewed herself

as a community leader, using her skills to serve her community: “I’ve always just kind of been drawn to taking a leadership role... I do think that I am a leader in my community in that regard.” Taylor, for example, did not see herself as a community leader and felt like an outsider when she joined the community, making it difficult for her to feel connected: “I don’t know that I specifically see myself as a community leader... When I moved to [county], I really felt like everybody had been there for 200 years and I had just showed up... I felt very much on the outside of things.”

Beyond their community leadership identity, participants reported two key findings related to the rural community leadership of SBAE teachers. The first theme was *leadership as sense of place*, which described how SBAE teachers reflected on their own efforts to serve and noted the efforts of other agriculture teachers and community members they viewed as leaders. The first theme encompassed two subthemes: a) *observations of leadership* and b) *the role of an ag educator in the community*. The second theme was *community connection*, in which participants noted that community support inspired them to connect students with their surroundings. The second theme had two subthemes: a) *community support*, and b) *connecting students to the community*.

### ***Leadership as a Sense of Place***

SBAE teachers in rural areas generally defined leadership through formal leadership positions on local or county boards and organizations. Some participants believed, through their efforts to serve the community, their students might be inspired to do the same. Robert felt the most important role of an agriculture teacher is to serve the community. In his words:

I think our biggest role is to teach students to give back to their community to serve. I tried to do that personally, you know, through some civic organizations that I volunteer with, but also get students engaged in those things. I think most would agree that a lot of our organizations, even churches and civic groups, are struggling for volunteers or are aging. So, I see a lot of that as inspiring young people to assist in those organizations and to get a start that will hopefully continue throughout their life.

Overall, participants indicated their leadership role in the community was best demonstrated through involvement in organizations outside their SBAE program, such as school boards, county Farm Bureau, or youth sporting organizations.

**Observations of Leadership.** Participants expressed mixed perceptions of their leadership roles in rural communities, often identifying as community leaders through formal positions. Several participants also highlighted the exemplary leadership of other local SBAE teachers, describing it as deeply rooted and influential within their communities. LeAnn noted her strengths of organization and troubleshooting, aligning those strengths with local groups she serves. LeAnn attributed what she’s learned in her FFA experience to her perception of herself as a leader, “A lot of the leadership skills that I learned personally from FFA have helped me to be successful in those roles... knowing how to prioritize and problem solve. A lot of those skills lead really well to serving your community.” Taylor struggled to define herself as a leader but hoped others would recognize her efforts to serve her students as the agriculture teacher and the impact she sought to make: “I hope that people see me for the opportunities that I try to give my students in

that way... I don't know that I specifically see myself as a leader, but hopefully as an important part of this community."

Similarly, Grace acknowledged her shortcomings in engaging with the community but also recognized her increasing efforts to ask questions and connect with those close to her. She stated, "Sometimes I worry that I'm not as good as I should be at the community side. I'm getting better at it... I have learned just simply ask questions, find ways to get connected with parents." When looking beyond herself, Taylor mentioned another local agriculture teacher who is deeply rooted in the area and admired by his community:

When I think of him, he's super embedded. He actually lives in the county I live in, but he teaches there, and he's taught in [town] forever... He's like super important... I know at one point, they were starting to make noise about him or his program, and people just raised hell for him. People see him as integral to that school, integral to those students, and as an important part of their experiences.

Some teachers didn't see themselves as community leaders because they didn't hold formal leadership titles, or because they felt their role and responsibilities as an agriculture teacher would not lead them to identify as a rural community leader. SBAE teachers' perceptions of leadership were primarily framed in formal rather than informal terms.

**The Role of an Ag Educator in the Community.** Although participants may or may not have viewed themselves as rural community leaders, they recognized that an SBAE teacher should set an example in their community. As SBAE teachers observed other agricultural educators in surrounding counties and areas, they were prompted to think more broadly about the role an agricultural teacher should play in the community. Dylan mentioned how the agriculture teachers' responsibilities and connections extend beyond their students:

The ag teacher is one of the only people in a rural community who has responsibilities, not only to the students, but I guess the families, too, through SAE projects and other things like that. As an ag teacher, even across Virginia, you get to know these families, especially in a rural setting.

Illustrating the role of agricultural educators in the community through her observation of others, Cassandra acknowledged the leadership a fellow agriculture teacher has taken to serve on local, agricultural, or natural resource boards:

I see ag teachers that are on Farm Bureau boards. I see ag teachers that are on soil and water conservation boards. A recent young man that I worked with in a couple different roles as an ag teacher, he just ran for his school board. I see all of these ag teachers that do step up to different industry boards, those associated with our profession, as well as local needs like school boards, town councils, things like that.

Outlining the importance of positive examples in agricultural education, Robert elaborated on his views of agricultural teachers serving as role models for students and as a bridge linking students to their community, "A lot of our students are not engaged in a lot of different things, so we tend

to be that role model and that connection to the community...[so students] see the importance of doing those things within the community.” Interpreting the influence an agriculture teacher may have on their rural community, Taylor discussed the role of an agriculture teacher in a rural area and the position they may have, “People in very rural counties... really, really, really love their ag teachers...they’re near celebrities... People really feel that they’re extremely important in the community and in the school system itself.” Overall, participants described how agricultural educators assume responsibilities beyond the classroom to practice servant leadership and address the influence SBAE teachers can have on their students and, in turn, on their communities.

### ***Community Connection***

Community connection informed SBAE teachers’ leader identity in different ways for participants who identified as community leaders and those who did not. For participants who identified as community leaders, community support and connection reinforced their responsibilities as SBAE teachers, inspiring them to take action and seek assistance from local Farm Bureaus and civic groups. Conversely, the participants who did not view themselves as community leaders framed community support as benefiting their students and the program, rather than as reflecting their own leadership. Although they expressed gratitude for the various types of support they received, they viewed these actions as part of their role as an SBAE teacher, rather than as leadership behaviors. The interpretation of community connection varied among participants who claimed or did not claim a leader identity.

**Community Assistance.** Participants reported local community members frequently assisted them and their programs, thereby creating new opportunities for students, expanding the department, and expanding their networks. Grace celebrated a local family that provided housing for student livestock projects and introduced her to all that encompasses raising livestock:

When I started teaching, I was not in the show world at all, and we had a family reach out saying, “Would you like to try it?”... They allowed me to come and experience maintaining for the fairs in the summer, and then that following spring, I was able to get a couple kids to come out, and we started by helping with their animals. It was kids that couldn’t house them at their own house or didn’t know how to do it all... Now we have two different groups of people on both sides of the county that are willing to let us use their facilities for kids to house and maintain.

When considering the contributions local agencies have given to his students and program, Dylan reflected on the aid of local organizations and their willingness to make agricultural education accessible for students in the area:

Anytime we need something, the [county] Farm Bureau board sponsors the dues for all of our FFA members every year... I know it sounds like it’s all financial support, but everything is intended to give the children opportunities. And that’s just overwhelming at times, to think back on how much support we actually have.

Community support led LeAnn to remain in her teaching role, as she felt, “we have a lot of community support for the program,” and the support provided opportunities for her program to grow. “I think that’s evidenced by the fact that we’ve gone from a single teacher to a three-teacher department.” In sum, community members readily supported SBAE teachers by providing the support they needed, whether through financial contributions, expanding teachers’ skill sets, creating more accessible student experiences, or advocating for program growth.

**Connecting Students to Community.** SBAE teachers felt overwhelming support from their community, and they wanted to encourage their students to give back to local causes and advocate for their communities. Robert felt the impacts of SBAE were not limited to the classroom alone: “Then you add in the service piece of it, hopefully we’re training and preparing leaders for the future, that will one day be in those leadership roles, locally or beyond.”

Similarly, Dylan believed his role as an SBAE teacher included exposing his students to opportunities in more rural areas similar to their own. When mentioning how he encourages students, he stated, “Hey, there are jobs in rural communities in these areas, here they are. Here’s how you go get them,’ and providing the guidance in that way.” Illustrating the importance of agricultural education and its relevance beyond production agriculture, Grace felt compelled to remind her students that community support may look different from what they interpreted:

Just getting the kids to know that we’re not just farmers. We do a lot more, and then getting them to understand the impact of being a presentable and useful citizen in our county, and what we can do to impact. I mean, we could go to many other places and make a different impact... but if you could do things just in your own county to affect it, it can push things in a bigger direction than you think.

In sum, agricultural educators in rural areas felt a duty to encourage their students not only to serve their local communities but also to pursue jobs in agricultural production and local rural development they may not have considered before.

Overall, participants’ experiences revealed a dynamic relationship between personal history, professional role, and community connection. Participants noted a desire to teach in rural areas, stemming from their rural upbringing or from a desire to be part of a rural community. SBAE teachers were also motivated to teach in rural areas to remain close to their work and support their families’ needs. The desire to teach in a rural SBAE program coincided with participants’ role as SBAE teachers, forming a deeper sense of place and connection to the community. Participants’ sense of place prompted them to reflect on their leadership efforts, including formal versus informal roles, and to identify colleagues who exemplified community leadership. Participants’ perceptions of leadership largely centered on formal leadership roles, such as serving on local boards, and participants expressed identification with the community and a desire for student involvement. These findings illustrate that participants did not claim a leadership identity unless they occupied leadership roles in their communities. Beyond formal leadership positions, as participants became more involved with the community, community members provided increasing support to them, their students, and their programs. This outpouring of support led SBAE teachers to seek to build students’ connections to their community.

### **Discussion and Recommendation**

The purpose of the current study was to explore SBAE teachers' experiences in rural communities, specifically their motivation to teach in rural areas and their perceptions of themselves as community leaders. First, regarding the first research question, the findings support prior research indicating that upbringing in a rural area influences the identity formation of rural teachers (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Lian et al., 2023). Specifically, participants emphasized their personal background in rural communities as a motivator to become a rural SBAE teacher, emphasizing a sense of place as crucial to living and working in rural areas (Budge, 2006). Participants indicated an identification with rurality that fostered a sense of belonging (Olsen et al., 2022).

Regarding the second research question (i.e., participants' perceptions of themselves as community leaders; i.e., their community leadership identity), the emergent results again highlighted participants' sense of place within their community (Delnero & Montgomery, 2001; Roberts & Dyer, 2004) and the support from the community to maintain the SBAE legacy and its deep roots in rural schools (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Participants' sense of place as leaders within their community was reflected in both their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of agricultural educators in general. This illustrates a process of granting leadership identity in which participants perceived their colleagues as community leaders and conferred leadership status on them (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Although participants identified other SBAE teachers whom they believed exemplified rural community leadership, some participants struggled to regard themselves as rural community leaders. Participants' views of leadership were either limited to formal roles and positions or community service efforts, and, at times, illustrated a lack of confidence in their own community leadership as SBAE teachers. Notably, although participants in this study widely described supportive rural communities, not all rural SBAE teachers may receive the same support and affirmation from their communities, which may contribute to limited leadership identity development.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that participants had a deep commitment to their communities, both now and into the future. Inspired by their past experiences of growing up in rural areas, participants articulated a sense of purpose in living, working, and leading within a rural community. Specifically, participants' sense of place and belonging in rural communities was significant for them personally and professionally; however, participants were not content to keep positive feelings and perceptions of rural communities to themselves. Rather, participants sought to extend their sense of place and belonging in the community to their students. Specifically, participants expressed a desire to create a ripple effect in which their students observed them leading in the community and, in response, decided to engage in community activities. The desire to create a ripple effect illustrates participants' commitment to generativity, defined as concern and care for supporting the next generation (Erikson, 1950, 1963). The current findings suggest a connection between a community leadership identity and generativity, which is perhaps unsurprising given that, as leadership identity develops, so does a commitment to sustaining organizations and communities (Komives et al., 2005). The benefits of community leadership and generativity among SBAE teachers are obvious to communities; however, it is unclear whether these behaviors may have unintended negative consequences for individuals,

such as increased stress and burnout, and frequent challenges for SBAE teachers (Smith & Smalley, 2018).

While the findings from this study were not intended to be generalizable, they may offer important insights and future research directions related to the recruitment, retention, and leadership development of rural SBAE teachers, a population essential to the success and well-being of rural areas (Easterly et al., 2022). Specifically, we recommend that future research further examine how rural SBAE teachers' experiences and leadership identity development differ based on the level of support they receive from their communities, as variations in community support may influence leadership identity claiming and granting. For example, although some participants claimed a leadership identity, others did not, despite the work of an SBAE teacher aligning with leadership behaviors. Given the expanded leadership expectations placed on or assumed by rural SBAE teachers, further investigation is warranted into the relationships among community leadership, career satisfaction, stress, and burnout. Considerations regarding sense of belonging and leadership identity as additional factors in rural community leadership relationships should also be explored. Comparative research examining leadership identity development among rural, suburban, and urban SBAE teachers may help identify place-specific leadership skills and needs beyond rural contexts, thereby informing more intentional, place-based leadership development within preservice teacher preparation, early-career experiences, student teaching, and in-service professional development across all career stages. Similarly, professional development addressing informal leadership behaviors (i.e., mentoring, community engagement) should be explored within SBAE. Recommendations for SBAE practice include continued professional development, particularly for mid- and late-career SBAE teachers, with a focus on leadership development related to community leadership identity and generative leadership, with an emphasis on community generativity. Likewise, integrating these leadership concepts into preservice teacher education programs may have implications for teacher retention and migration, relationships that warrant longitudinal examination. Additionally, intentional instruction in service-based learning within SAE programming may support SBAE teachers in fostering student engagement through community-based service and leadership development, integrating teachers' connection to and passion for their communities with their classroom activities.

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