

“A Tight-Knit Community”: Belonging Among Agriculture Teachers in Ohio

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Introduction

School-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers are essential in preparing students for agricultural careers (The National Council, 2017), but are expected to fulfill a range of roles beyond the classroom (Eck et al., 2019). A common solution offered to support educators is by offering professional development (McKim & McKim, 2023). However, professional development is not always effective (Torres et al., 2010) or adds more expectations for an agriculture teacher to complete (McKim & McKim, 2023).

One theoretical lens for supporting agricultural educators is the concept of social learning. This approach shifts learning from individual knowledge acquisition to community participation, where individuals learn from each other, fostering a sense of belonging and participation (Sfard, 1998). Within SBAE, the collaborative nature of agricultural teachers is highlighted as a critical topic (DeLay & Washburn, 2013). Collaboration and other forms of social learning lead to increased professional commitment (DeLay & Washburn, 2013; Hargreaves, 2001; Rada, 2023) and student performance (Hargreaves, 2001), while decreasing professional isolation (Greiman et al., 2005), and can complement existing professional development (Goddard et al., 2007).

The purpose of this study was to explore the sense of belonging among Ohio agricultural educators grounded in the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the lens of social learning (Sfard, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

We grounded our study in Wenger’s (1998) theory of *communities of practice* by viewing agriscience educators in Ohio as part of a community with its own norms and practices. According to Wenger, a community of practice involves a shared history of learning that is continually developing but also influences how and what members learn. By engaging with others in a community, we reinforce who we are and what we do. Additionally, according to Wenger (1998), “being included in what matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community’s practice,” (p. 74).

Methodology

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the essence of agriscience educators’ sense of belonging within Ohio’s agricultural educators’ community of practice. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected for its focus on meaning-making as well as its acknowledgment of the researcher’s positionality (Cohen et al., 2000; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Secondary agriculture teachers in Ohio were identified as the population. Participants were recruited via an email invitation sent to all individuals listed in the state’s agricultural teacher directory. Educators who expressed interest were contacted, resulting in eight participants (five male, three female), with teaching experience ranging from two to 29 years.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) via Zoom between fall 2023 and spring 2025. Data analysis followed a structural coding approach that involved highlighting conceptually relevant phrases, collapsing similar codes into categories, and generating themes from those categories (Saldaña, 2016). Researchers disclosed their positionality as members of the Ohio agriculture teacher community and engaged in reflexive practices to address potential biases throughout the research process (Charmaz et al., 2018). Trustworthiness was supported through Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability.

Findings

Three themes emerged: (1) *a tight-knit community*, (2) *a seat at the table*, and (3) *influence of belonging*. The findings portray how agriculture teachers in Ohio are conceptualizing the agriculture teacher community of practice, their sense of belonging, and the result of their interactions with the community.

A Tight-Knit Community

Participants framed the agriculture teacher community as anyone who taught secondary agriculture in Ohio, with five of the seven describing the community as “tight-knit.” Helping each other was commonly referenced, whether through sharing teaching resources or advice. Max noted, “Anytime I need anything, I ask somebody... they're more than willing to share...” Most interactions of the community occurred at FFA and agriculture teacher meetings and events. Levi mentioned he would often stay late after meetings to connect with other teachers.

A Seat at the Table

Belonging occurred on a continuum, with participants noting they did not feel like they belonged as strongly early in their careers. Charlotte recalled that at her first summer conferences, “the big names in the room... it was intimidating being in the same room as those people.” Internal doubts, such as not feeling like content or CDE experts, also influenced early feelings of not belonging. Yet all participants shared that they never felt unwanted by the community, and with experience and increased confidence, their sense of belonging increased. Max emphasized that teachers share tools and techniques because of their “common goal... to help the next future generation.” Maya summarized belonging as having “a seat at the table” and being recognized by other teachers.

Influence of Belonging

Belonging most strongly influenced participants through learning from one another, which improved their agriculture programs and students’ experiences. Maya noted that connecting with other teachers “makes me a better teacher.” Belonging also influenced participants’ willingness to stay in the profession. Wyatt shared that “feeling like I belong definitely plays a part” in his decision to stay, and Jack explained that without the ability to talk with peers, he “would’ve been out of this business a long time ago.”

Conclusions

The essence of the sense of belonging for Ohio agricultural educators within the agriculture teacher community of practice is that belonging occurs through engagement with other agricultural educators, often through assisting one another. Overall, participants felt they belonged within the agricultural education community in Ohio. They described the community as “tight-knit,” with members willing to help one another. While each participant indicated at least one moment they felt like they didn’t belong, the more experience they gained within the community provided an increased sense of belonging.

Recommendations

While these findings support the idea of social learning (Sfard, 1998; Wenger, 1998) and support previous research related to agriculture teacher collaboration (DeLay & Washburn, 2013; Moser & McKim, 2020), this study was limited to those who chose to participate. Researchers should seek additional perspectives to strengthen the understanding of belonging and the agriculture teacher community. With the understanding that social learning through communities of practice can support agricultural educators, more insight into how that shared knowledge impacts agricultural students and programs needs to be explored.

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