

Preservice Teacher Perceptions of the Role of an Agriculture Teacher during Their Early Field Experience

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Abstract

School-based agriculture teachers (SBAE) hold many roles inside and outside of the school. Identifying and understanding the many roles an agriculture teacher may have in their career is an important part of an early field experience (EFE). In this study, EFE students (n = 18) submitted written reflections focused on the role of an agriculture teacher. Open coding of the preservice teacher reflections revealed five themes including work-life balance, public relations, role of an FFA advisor, student success, and school responsibilities. Codes within these five themes indicate a student-centered approach among agriculture teachers. Additionally, EFE students described many school responsibilities outside of the agriculture program that may contribute to a work-life imbalance among agriculture teachers. It is recommended that teacher education programs have current practicing teachers be engaged as part of the preparation process for pre-service students to learn about agriculture teacher roles. Consideration needs to be taken when selecting EFE sites to ensure students are receiving a quality experience, which reinforces the teacher preparation program objectives.

Keywords: early field experience; pre-service teachers; teacher roles

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Introduction

In addition to classroom instruction, agriculture teachers fill numerous roles within and outside of the school (Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2014). Talbert and his colleagues (2014) identified 10 major roles and responsibilities of school-based agricultural educators. The 10 roles and responsibilities include (a) being a school team member, (b) planning and developing a program, (c) preparing to teach class, (d) delivering instruction, (e) evaluating student progress, (f) advising student organizations, (g) supervising student experiences, (h) relating to the public, and (i) lifestyle (Talbert et al., 2014). Beyond these 10 major roles, agricultural teachers are constantly obtaining more responsibilities with their position (Sorensen & McKim, 2014).

Torres, Ulmer, and Aschenbrener (2008) concluded successful school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs require agriculture teachers to fill broader roles and responsibilities beyond planning and teaching. Although time dedicated to planning, teaching, and administrative tasks remain constant, seasonal activities such as FFA and CDE preparation demand additional time from agriculture teachers (Torres, et al., 2008; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Sorensen, McKim, Velez, 2017). The added responsibility of FFA, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE) and classroom duties create a work week longer than 40 hours for most teachers (Murray et al., 2011). According to Burris and Keller (2008), teachers perceive necessary and varying competencies to include classroom teaching methods,

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maintaining a classroom environment for a lab class, advising FFA members, working with parents, and assessing student learning.

Robinson, Kelsey, and Terry (2013) found students have a limited understanding of effective agriculture teachers' roles when they enter a teacher preparation program. However, preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with strong preconceived notions regarding effective teaching (Robinson et al. 2013). According to Rosenshine and Furst (1971), effective teachers need to have clarity; variability; enthusiasm and be task-oriented. "Therefore, instructors should consider a wider variety of early field experiences that challenge their beliefs about teaching," (Robinson et al. 2013, p. 136).

Early field experiences (EFE) are meant to provide future educators opportunities to familiarize themselves with teaching and decrease anxiety prior to entering the teaching profession (Scherer, 1979). Guyton and Byrd (2000) indicated an EFE includes any school experience that occurs prior to student teaching. A well-developed EFE experience allows a preservice student to experience what it means to begin thinking as a teacher (Carter & Anders, 1996). Potentially, the most significant attribute of an EFE is to provide opportunities to observe a practicing teacher (Smalley & Retallick, 2012). Smalley and Retallick (2012) outlined, at minimum, EFEs need to provide a clear purpose and activities that can be documented. Knowles and Cole (1996) shared that the EFE learning process allows the teacher to be better prepared as a critical thinker and problem solver.

Throughout an EFE, students often seek to understand the role of an agricultural educator as they explore opportunities to enter the profession. Darling-Hammond (1999) found 30% of in-service teachers leave the profession within the first five years. In addition, Johnson (2004) found the attrition rate of in-service teachers leaving the profession to be as high as 50%. Being able to develop a balance between work and family roles is a challenging task for agriculture teachers (Crutchfield, Ritz, & Burris, 2013). With agriculture teachers spending many hours at work, it leaves little time for other roles (Lawver, 2007).

The American Association for Agricultural Education's (AAAE) National Research Agenda Research Priority 5 focuses on efficient and effective agricultural education programs (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). AAAE's Research Priority 5 contains suggestions for agriculture teacher preparation including the structure of field-based experiences, an emphasis on cultural diversity, as well as technical abilities of preservice teachers to contribute the effectiveness of agricultural education programs (Thoron, Myers, & Barrick, 2016). Considering the depth and breadth of the roles and responsibilities of an agriculture teacher, a need exists to identify and assess how preservice teacher education students perceive agricultural education teacher roles during the students' EFE placement.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework is Retallick and Miller's (2010) structure and content model of EFE in teacher education (Figure 1). The EFE model consists of four major components, including foundation, organization, implementation, and assessment. The foundation component includes teacher education standards and a conceptual framework, which explains the basis for EFE. Organization includes documents, placement, and experiences that can be embedded or stand-alone. Implementation includes (a) interaction among EFE participants, university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and peers; (b) orientation to EFE outcomes and learning strategies; (c) outcomes; and (d) learning strategies necessary to accomplish the outcomes. The model also includes learner-centered, as well as programmatic assessment.

Outcomes is one area of focus within the implementation component of the EFE model. This area provides students with authentic learning, which should take place early and often (Retallick & Miller, 2010). One initial outcome for an EFE focuses on career exploration (McIntyre, 1983). Oftentimes students have gained exposure in the exploration phase, which has allowed them to gain additional experience. The additional EFE provides preservice students an opportunity to gain real-world experiences in the classroom. This opportunity allows a student to develop and transition towards becoming a teacher (Knowles & Cole, 1996). Additionally, experiences provided to students will allow them to expand their knowledge of career opportunities. The specific outcome from the EFE model addressed in this study was career exploration.

Miller and Wilson (2010) identified examples of career awareness and exploratory experiences. The examples of career awareness and exploratory experiences included a list of an agriculture teacher's daily tasks, observing the roles of an agriculture teacher, reviewing the school organization and operations, comparing demographic characteristics of students in the program versus the school, determining the focus of the agriculture program, analyzing the views of the program, listing instructional resources, describing professional concerns of teachers, assisting in daily classroom routines, team teaching a lesson, assisting in supervising learning activities, and maintaining a daily journal of reflections. Shippy (1981) identified 10 competency categories, which included program planning, development, and evaluation; planning of instruction; execution of instruction; evaluation of instruction; student vocational organizations; supervised occupational experience; management; guidance; school community relations; and professional roles and development. Learning to become an effective teacher through experiences and exploration is envisioned as a continuum of professional experiences that has been depicted as a complex, life-long process (National Research Council, 2000).

Purpose and Objectives

In this study, preservice students explored what it means to be an agricultural educator. The purpose of this study was to identify EFE students' perceptions of agricultural teacher's roles based on reflective journaling. Specific research objectives were:

1. Identify themes based on the perception of EFE students regarding agriculture teaching roles.
2. Describe how EFE students make meaning of a SBAE teacher's role.

Methods

The participants in this qualitative study were enrolled in an (EFE) course ($n=18$). This course is one of the first opportunities for agricultural teacher education students to observe a School-Based Agriculture Education (SBAE) classroom. The students in this study included 13 female and five male students. Fourteen participants were sophomore and four junior level students. The [COURSE] is an academic credit course in agricultural teacher education consisting of field placement in a SBAE program. The course included 40 hours of observation, completing reflections on 10 required observations, as well as required daily reflections submitted as a portfolio. One of the required observation reflections included a focus on the agricultural teacher's role.

All students participating in this course had been enrolled in a SBAE program. Pre-service students were required to: observe at a school they had not attended, with an agricultural education teacher that had not taught them, and with a teacher who had more than two years of teaching experience. Students were encouraged to observe in a school different than their SBAE experience. For example, students who had attended small rural schools were encouraged to observe agriculture teachers in larger school districts.

To investigate the objectives in this study, the required observation of the agricultural teacher's role were open-coded and categorized as emerging themes. A basic qualitative approach was utilized for this

study as defined by Merriam (2009). Merriam contended that basic qualitative studies are the “most common form of qualitative research found in education” (2009, p. 23). To promote trustworthiness of results, the researchers employed established qualitative methods. In this study, the researchers used dialogue and written statements to identify and articulate potential biases and assumptions related to the research (Merriam, 2009), and determined it was appropriate to move forward with the examination of this topic.

As reflections were reviewed, responses were open-coded by each individual researcher. The codes identified were compared and a master list of codes was created (Merriam, 2009). These codes were grouped using axial coding, categorized systematically, and informed by the study’s purpose (Merriam, 2009). Student reflections were re-read, and categories refined, revised, and consolidated as analysis continued. Finally, primary categories or themes were named. The findings were cautiously analyzed, and statements were contemplated before being subjected in the final draft. Trustworthiness and reliability of data were established through a research log and peer review of data analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Bracketing is an important step in qualitative research, which strengthens the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2009). It is essential that researchers acknowledge personal experience to identify any biases or pre-dispositions (Merriam, 2009). Both researchers in this study have taught SBAE in a public-school setting and are currently higher education educators. One researcher was directly involved with EFE students while serving as the [UNIVERSITY] teacher education coordinator. The other researcher served as the instructor for the course. Credibility was enhanced by peer debriefings and coder review throughout the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Results

The undergraduate students who took part in the early field-based experience course in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters ($n=18$), and a majority were college sophomore females. Through qualitative analysis, five main themes emerged from this study: work-life balance, public relations, role of an FFA advisor, success of the student, and school responsibilities.

Work-Life Balance

Reflections completed by the students described wanting to have a balance in their life between work and family. One area that students focused on within the work-life balance theme was the issue of time. One student wrote, “The one thing that stood out to me the most was how much time TEACHER put into his program.” Another student wrote, “I want the best for them [students] but I cannot sacrifice my well-being, family life, and leisure time to them either and need to maintain a balance.” Students also observed teachers being involved in activities outside of school and wrote, “One thing about these teachers is that they care very deeply about their families and have many other activities and places to be outside of school.” Another student added, “TEACHER day began at 7:30 a.m., and nearly went to 6 p.m. each night leading up to District and State FFA contests, yet the professional relationships that he maintained with so many simply amazed me.”

Public Relations

Students realized the deep connection an agricultural education teacher has to the community while participating in their EFE experience. A student wrote, “I believe teachers are a public relations agent to the community because they talk to the parents on a more frequent basis than most other school officials.” Another student indicated, “[TEACHER] connects to the community in multiple ways, but one of the ways that I was able to see firsthand was him bringing in agricultural industry professionals to speak to both Ag Business and Ag Careers classes each Friday.” Another student viewed public relations as, “Teachers

directly shape the community through serving as community role models and helping cultivate young individuals who are successful and respectable members of the community and the society as an entirety.”

FFA Advisor Responsibilities

Students viewed the role of the advisor as, “It is their job to make sure they [students] get engaged and prepare themselves for their future.” Another student viewed the role of the advisor as, “To supervise chapter activities year-round, inform prospective students and parents about FFA, instruct students in leadership and personal development, and build school culture...” A second student indicated, “The FFA schedule depends on the time of year and how involved the students were in a particular chapter.”

Students also viewed the FFA advisor responsibilities outside of the school, such as coordinating events at the local county fair. “He helps coordinate events for the youth in the community and really puts a lot of time making sure things run smoothly.” Another student indicated, “While this does not mean they care about teaching or their students any less, they will not be found in their classrooms doing a whole lot of extra work after 3:30. I think this is okay for someone who has been teaching for a fair number of years.”

Student Success

The theme that focused on the success of students was evident in two similar yet different ways. Some of the study’s participants described student success as learning the information presented by the agriculture teacher, while other participants related stories of the agriculture teachers mentoring students.

One EFE student described the role of the agriculture teacher as providing support and encouragement to students. Although this student identified encouragement within the context of homework or other concerns the student may have. If a student comes to them with worry regarding a homework assignment or anything else, it is the teacher’s job to provide the extra support and encouragement so that the student is truly reaching their optimal potential in every situation.

EFE students also described encouraging students to have new experiences. For example, “[Teacher] was always trying to encourage students to participate in FFA events even if they have never done it before.”

Other EFE students described being aware of students’ environment and challenges. For example, “Teachers need to be aware of their surroundings and the challenges that their students might be facing.” Similarly, another participant described supporting students as they face challenges. “Teachers must also fill the role of being a mediator and supporter when issues and challenges like this present themselves.”

EFE students also described agriculture teachers as being role models as contributing to student success. For example, one EFE student mentioned, “[Teacher] is a role model for all his students and has to present himself professionally to his students and the public.” Another EFE student described their cooperating teacher’s perception of being a role model, “[Teacher] had told me that he believes the first role of the teacher is to build trust among the students and himself.”

In addition to broadly connecting with and encouraging students, some EFE students identified specific mentoring relationships with individual students. One EFE student described the individual focus of her cooperating teacher as “my teacher goes above and beyond and cares about the success of their students by ensuring they are successful in and outside of the classroom as she works with them one on one.” Another area in which [Teacher] interacted with her students was in ‘counseling’ them and, “They [students] often went to her after school and scheduled meetings with her to hear her opinion and advice regarding school, Supervised Agricultural Experiences, and life in general.” Another EFE student described a specific interaction she witnessed, “While I was there multiple students asked [teacher] to write a reference letter.”

School Responsibilities

Planning and delivering instruction were an important part of the agriculture teachers' role according to EFE students. One student commented, "I would say first and foremost a teacher is a person who delivers valuable information to his/her students in a professional manner." Another student stated, "Both of the agricultural teachers are responsible to create lesson plans for all of their classes and stay up to par maintaining those classes and their schedules." Additionally, agriculture teachers may be responsible for planning and instruction in other subjects. One student commented, "He is also the industrial tech teacher, in addition to teaching agriculture." Another student also described professional development within the role of an agriculture teacher. This student stated, "I knew that teachers were expected to attend professional development, but I wasn't sure how often."

EFE students observed teachers performing duties within the school that were not directly related to instruction or planning for the courses they taught. For example, "They also have duties such as lunchroom and bus duty, supervise students, and coaching." Supervising lunch appeared to be a common responsibility that was observed among agriculture teachers. One student stated, "She also supervised lunch every three weeks to ensure that students were following school rules, were safe, and did not leave huge messes at their tables." Another student mentioned, "[Teacher] talked about being on lunch duty and how it is a cycle between the teachers."

The school responsibilities of agriculture teachers may also include coaching or sponsoring clubs and organizations. One student stated, "[Teacher] serves as an FFA advisor, as well as a wrestling coach. In addition to this, he is a senior advisor, [School] Ambassador advisor, National Honor Society advisor, serves on the intervention team, and is a commentator for the various sporting events. Another EFE student mentioned that the agriculture teacher they observed, "Is the leader of the National Honor Society Sponsor, which means he is in charge of the honor students and taking them to on different trips."

Discussion, Recommendation, and Implications

The purpose of the study was to identify themes that emerged from EFE student reflections focused on a specific observation. The intent was not to generalize the results to all preservice students, but rather to describe the population of students who took part in this EFE. Caution should be taken to not generalize the results to broader populations.

Talbert et al. (2014) identified preparing to teach class and delivering instruction as two major roles of an agriculture teacher. However, these EFE students did not discuss specific lessons or content that was taught during their observation. Rather, the EFE students focused on describing how the agriculture teacher encouraged the students to be more engaged in the complete SBAE program, as well as agriculture teachers encouraging the personal growth of their students. However, the EFE students did not specifically define what they considered to be student success. College and career readiness is one measure of student success that could be purposefully included within agriculture teacher preparation programs. College and career readiness may provide preservice teachers a framework to define student success. EFE students appear to have observed a student-centered focus as a common trait among agriculture teachers. The descriptions students included that were coded as the student success theme, identify both a focus on student success, as well as individual student success as being a focus of the cooperating agriculture teachers that were observed during the early field experience.

Career exploration was the desired outcome of the student's EFE to provide skill development and application of knowledge (Retallick and Miller, 2010). Students experiences within this EFE provided them exposure to the roles of a teacher, which extends beyond classroom teaching. The roles highlighted by the

students provided exposure to real-world experiences and allowed students to begin the transition to a teaching role (Knowles & Cole, 1996).

The FFA advisor responsibility theme was like the student success theme in that EFE students identified student engagement, as well as preparing students for the future within the context of FFA as the advisor's responsibility. Additionally, the role of the advisor included supervising chapter activities and coordinating events for FFA, as well as the school and community. Torres, et al. (2008) noted seasonal differences in FFA and CDE preparation, but no notable differences were specifically identified among these EFE students. This is consistent with research from Robinson, et al. (2013) who found EFE students have a limited understanding of the depth and breadth of an agriculture teacher.

Talbert, et al. (2014) identified being a school team member as a role and responsibility of a school-based agriculture teacher. EFE students observed school responsibilities, which included planning and teaching agricultural courses, as well as additional responsibilities agriculture teachers had within the school. These additional responsibilities, beyond agricultural course preparation, included lunch and bus duty, coaching, advising other clubs, and professional development. School duty rotations and professional development are common responsibilities teachers may have regardless of the subject they teach. However, it was noted that additional responsibilities were described by some EFE students such as coaching wrestling or advising the National Honor Society.

Additional research should be conducted to identify the reason agriculture teachers take on additional coaching or advising duties beyond the scope of the SBAE program, and if these additional responsibilities contribute to an even greater lack of work-life balance among agriculture teachers. It is possible that additional coaching or advising responsibilities may contribute to teacher attrition related to work-life balance even if the agriculture teacher accepts additional responsibilities voluntarily.

The findings of this study are limited to the study participants but can provide some insight on student's perceptions of EFE observations. Teacher educators need to be purposeful in building on initial coursework through their EFE. Further recommendations suggest that preservice students become involved in additional experiences after the completion of their EFE, such as volunteering in the classroom, judging events, and assisting at county fairs to further develop their understanding of the role of an agriculture teacher. Additionally, it is recommended that teacher education programs have current practicing teachers, or a panel of teachers serve as guest lecturers to focus on the many roles of an agriculture teacher. Consideration needs to be taken when selecting EFE sites to ensure the student is receiving a quality experience that reinforces the objectives of the teacher preparation program. Future research is also recommended to compare student perceptions from their EFE and student teaching experience. Additionally, comparisons could be made with early career teachers as they begin their professional career.

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