

# Navigating the Social Landscape of School-Based Agricultural Education: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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## Abstract

*Despite decades of research about the agriculture teacher shortage problem, we still know little about the ways in which secondary agriculture teachers assume their roles and responsibilities as members of social and cultural communities. Expanding how we have historically researched this problem is crucial, especially if we hope to mitigate the teacher shortage problem. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use a hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the experiences of secondary agriculture teachers as they navigate, manage, and attend to the landscape of practice in which they live and work. Our specific research questions included, 1) how do agriculture teachers conceptualize the social landscape of SBAE? and 2) how does the landscape influence the way they go about their work? When interpreting the findings through the theoretical lens of Landscapes of Practice, five themes emerged: 1) multiple accountability partners, 2) different people, different expectations, 3) no room for error, 4) arms race, and 5) validation. Our findings illuminate the struggles agriculture teachers encounter as they manage the different people and practices of their work. As a result, we offer implications and recommendations to help propel the profession forward and pose critical questions to further critique current systems in SBAE.*

**Keywords:** social landscape; school-based agricultural education; phenomenology

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## Introduction and Literature Review

*As someone who is leaving the profession at the end of this school year, I feel quite strongly that our leadership needs to think long and hard about this profession and expectations. There are so many things that I have loved about my career as an Ag Educator. However, it isn't sustainable. The data supports this; there will only be 1 teacher left from my fairly large cohort after this year. When I talk to other teachers, I hear the same thing: I don't know how much longer I will last. When I look at many of the educators who have been around for a while, I either see people constantly pushed to their limit, broken families, or families where only one parent works. I know that you all know and recognize this, yet, nothing is changing systemically. In fact, it seems like the "to-dos" have only increased over the past 5 years. I don't know the answer, I just know that until the workload of this career changes, retention will continue to be a problem. I care passionately about the power of Ag Ed and the impact*

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*it makes on students' lives. I'm genuinely worried that we have created a monster that will result in no Ag teachers left when my kids are in high school. I truly hope that a group of people smarter and wiser than myself will be able to come up with a solution. -Respectfully, Carrie*

In the above email excerpt, a secondary agriculture teacher explains her reasons for exiting the profession after only a few short years. She implores her former professor, the one to whom the letter is addressed, to critically examine the expectations and demands of secondary agriculture teachers and identifies the increasing workload as unsustainable. She charges leaders in the profession to make systematic changes, so the benefits of School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) may continue to impact students across the country. It is with this email, this voice from a young woman whose convictions are both compelling and palpable, that we situate this study.

SBAE in the U.S. is currently facing a crisis as there exists a severe shortage in the number of qualified agriculture teachers to fill open positions (Foster et al., 2015; Kantrovich, 2010; Smith et al., 2016, 2017, 2019). This decade-old problem has continued to beleague the profession for over forty years, with consistent shortages in both the number of agriculture teachers entering the profession as well as the number of those leaving the profession before retirement age (Kantrovich, 2010). In 2018 alone, only 66.9% of the license-eligible completers of teacher preparation programs chose to enter the profession by accepting an agriculture teaching position, and of the 900 teachers who left the profession, only 24.8% did so due to retirement (Smith et al., 2019). While we acknowledge there may be many factors attributed to teacher attrition, sadly, these numbers have fluctuated little in recent years (Foster, et al., 2015; Smith, et al., 2016). Carrie, our passionate yet discouraged emailer, is fully aware of this problem, recognizing that only one agriculture teacher from her student teaching cohort has remained in the profession.

Unlike core subjects and possibly other CTE programs typically taught in schools, school-based agricultural education (SBAE) seeks to “prepare students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems” (Ortiz, 2019, p. 1). With this SBAE mission comes a three-component model that emphasizes leadership development through the National FFA Organization (FFA), experiential learning in both the courses taken and through Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects, and college and career readiness. Carrie believes in this model, stating it makes an impact on the lives of students. Recent research supports her claim, showing the positive benefits of participation in both SBAE and FFA (McKim et al., 2018; Velez et al., 2018).

In an effort to curtail the shortage and continue to offer the benefits of SBAE to students, scholars have devoted significant energy to better understanding the work of agriculture teachers and why they leave before retirement. In sum, agriculture teachers encounter significant challenges as they engage with the demands of the profession, including long work hours, demanding expectations, time spent away from family, and difficulty managing the multiple responsibilities of the job (Baxter et al., 2011; Boone & Boone, 2007, 2009; Fritz & Miller, 2003; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Myers et al., 2005; Paulsen et al., 2015; Rocca & Washburn, 2008; Stair et al., 2012). Agriculture teachers also experience stress as they engage in the profession, particularly when struggling to meet deadlines (Torres et al., 2009), fulfilling FFA and SAE obligations (King et al., 2013), and incorporating experiential learning into their programs (Smith & Smalley, 2018). These stressors may or may not lead to burnout (Chenevey et al., 2008; Croom, 2003; Kitchel et al., 2012; Newcomb et al., 1987) and the ability to manage work and non-work responsibilities (Murray et al., 2011; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2016).

While there is inconsistent evidence that shows agriculture teachers are burned-out and unable to achieve work-life balance, the literature is consistent regarding reasons why agriculture teachers leave the profession before retirement. Not surprisingly, these reasons parallel the literature exploring challenges or problems agriculture teachers face. Overall, agriculture teachers leave the profession due

to the long hours (Dillon, 1978; Lemons et al., 2015; Solomonson et al., 2018), demanding expectations, and multiple responsibilities (Dillon, 1978; Lemons et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2018; Solomonson et al., 2018), the struggle to manage the career along with a family (Lemons et al., 2015; Sorensen et al., 2016; Sorensen et al., 2017; Tippens et al., 2013), and unsupportive administrators (Dillon, 1978; Kelsey, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2018). Conversely, agriculture teachers stay in the profession because they feel they were adequately prepared (Cole, 1984; Edwards & Briers, 2001), are committed to attaining work-life balance, and have supportive administrators, communities, and parents (Clark et al., 2014).

Existing research on the agriculture teacher shortage problem reveals several insights about the challenges of the profession, particularly those associated with managing the multiple responsibilities of the job. This research has taken a largely quantitative approach with the purpose of enhancing preservice and in-service professional development. Unfortunately, despite several decades of research, the agriculture teacher shortage problem persists. Given our understanding of the problem and the research that has investigated it, a logical next step would be to engage in additional research that assumes an alternative perspective. We argue that more must be known about the ways in which agriculture teachers assume their responsibilities as members of social and cultural communities, a perspective that only one study to date has adopted (Traini et al., 2019). Therefore, our current study explored the problem of teacher shortage from an alternative perspective, one which situates agriculture teachers as members of social communities whose identities, decisions, and ways of being are influenced by the people, practices, and communities in which they live and work. Alternative theoretical perspectives, in particular, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) *Landscapes of Practice*, allowed us to conceptualize how professionals learn, make meaning, engage with others, build identity, and position themselves in the world.

### Theoretical Framework

We employed concepts from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) *Landscapes of Practice* to explore the experiences of secondary agriculture teachers as they engage in the practices of the profession. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner postulated learning is a social endeavor through which participants construct identities as they participate in a *landscape of practice*. Landscapes are dynamic and complex compositions of various communities of practices, or groups of people that are formed via mutual engagement in a shared enterprise (Wenger, 1998). As professionals, we engage in and belong to multiple communities of practice that make up a social landscape, each with its own histories, norms, and *regimes of competence*, or socially negotiated criterion which defines legitimacy in a particular community (Wenger, 1998). For example, a high school agriculture teacher might belong to a community of practice associated with their individual school (e.g., a professional development committee comprised of other teachers), a community of other agriculture teachers (e.g., the state's agriculture teacher association), and a community comprised of local agricultural industry leaders (e.g., an advisory board) to name a few. These three communities are unique in that they are comprised of different people and have different goals, practices, and expectations for what is considered competence. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner describe participation and engagement in multiple communities of practices in a landscape as *multimembership*. This is often viewed as difficult identity work as landscapes are political, flat, and diverse (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Landscapes are political and imbued with power, as they are comprised of "competing voices and competing claims of knowledge" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 16). Landscapes are flat in that no individual practice can represent the whole landscape, "practices in a landscape inform and influence each other...relations among practices are at once epistemologically flat, politically unequal, and potentially contestable" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 17). Landscapes are diverse in that meaning is produced in each practice, and boundaries between practices are never unproblematic; they always involve negotiation of how the competence of one community becomes relevant or irrelevant to another community.

For this study, we conceptualized SBAE as a complex and dynamic landscape of practice, consisting of multiple communities of practice and the boundaries between them. Each community has its own participants, histories, norms, and practices; just think of how different the context and practices of a state-wide FFA competition may be from a county fair or a school board meeting. While each community differs from each other, the boundaries between them are not clearly separated but instead murky lines that overlap, intersect, and possibly inform each other. As we think about agriculture teachers traversing this dynamic landscape, they may encounter tensions as they strive to claim competence in each individual community and fulfill the expectations of their job (e.g., striving to attend to the expectations of parents, school administration, peer agriculture teachers, and local agriculture industry simultaneously). Given the dearth of research that explores the ways in which agriculture teachers assume their professional roles and fulfill the demands of the profession, and Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) social learning perspective, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of secondary agriculture teachers as they navigate, manage, and attend to the landscape of practice in which they live and work. Our specific research questions included, 1) *how do agriculture teachers conceptualize the social landscape of SBAE?* and 2) *how does the landscape influence the way they go about their work.*

### Methods

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of secondary agriculture teachers as they navigate *multimembership* in the social landscape of SBAE. Epistemologically, phenomenology is based on personal knowledge and subjectivity and emphasizes the personal perspectives and interpretations of a particular experience (Creswell, 2013). The focus on experience is based on the assumption that human behavior is determined by the experiences in which individuals engage in everyday life rather than an objective physical reality that is removed from the individual (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Phenomenology involves gathering "information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant" (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Phenomenological approaches are notable for bringing forward authentic personal perceptions from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The interpretation and analysis of a collection of such experiences can allow the research to inform, support, or challenge policy and action (Lester, 1999).

Unlike descriptive or transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the idea that one could transcend his/her own presuppositions and biases when examining the lived experiences of individuals; one cannot bracket off the way one identifies with the phenomenon (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This approach aims to understand and interpret rather than simply describe. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interpretations the researcher makes requires a dialectical movement between the parts and the whole. This is called the hermeneutic circle. The premise of the hermeneutic circle is that meaning is holistic; meaning is derived from the entire text (e.g., an interview transcript), not just the sum of its parts. Sloan and Bowe (2014) describe the hermeneutic circle as moving "between part of the text and the whole of the text, to establish truth by discovering phenomena and interpreting them" (p. 1296). Given my (the lead author and the person whom engaged in the primary activities of data collection and analysis) own personal experience with the phenomenon of *multimembership*, of which I outline below, hermeneutic phenomenology is an appropriate choice.

### Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants for a phenomenological study must all have experienced the phenomena under investigation (van Manen, 1990). Given the expansive number of duties and responsibilities required of agriculture teachers, we operated under the assumption that all secondary agriculture teachers in the U.S. engage in *multimembership* across the SBAE landscape. The population consisted of participants who held positions in secondary agricultural education programs across the country during the 2018-2019 academic year. We targeted three main groups of agriculture teachers. The three groups were 1)

agriculture teachers who have won the NAAE Early Career Agriculture Teacher award, 2) agriculture teachers who have won the NAAE Outstanding Agricultural Educator award and 3) agriculture teachers in five Western states (California, Oregon, Idaho, Washington, and Utah) who are in their first ten years of teaching and have won *neither* the NAAE Outstanding Early Career Agriculture Teacher nor the NAAE Outstanding Agricultural Education Teacher award. We selected participants from these three groups for three main reasons. First, we wanted to include individuals who were nationally recognized as “successful” agriculture teachers and take note of any distinctions between them and individuals who had not won awards. Second, we chose to include NAAE winners at early career stages as well as in their mid-late career stages (those that won NAAE Outstanding Agricultural Educator award) to again identify differences in experiences. Any differences could provide implications as to how agriculture teachers in their mid-to-late careers describe *multimembership*. Third, we wanted to collect stories from agriculture teachers who work in different states, where the context is slightly different. In other research approaches (namely quantitative investigations), selecting such a diverse group of participants can challenge the validity of the results. Yet, van Manen (1990) posits participant selection should be based on whether or not individuals have experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, while our group of participants come from diverse backgrounds and contexts, they do meet van Manen’s (1990) criteria.

To recruit participants in the first two groups, their names were obtained from the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) website. To recruit participants in the third group, an email was sent to all agriculture teacher educators in each of the five states asking for a list of five names and emails of current agriculture teachers who met the criteria for the group. Our study contained 12 participants, six male, and six female, who teach in seven states across the U.S., including Oklahoma, Oregon, North Carolina, Washington, Idaho, California, and Utah. All but three participants (Teresa, Allison, & Liberty) were married at the time of data collection. The number of years teaching ranged from two years (Madison & Allison) to twelve years (Teresa). Three participants were NAAE winners (Teresa, Connor, & Paige), and all 12 participants were engaged in SBAE as high school students. Four participants were the only agriculture teacher at their school (Teresa, Connor, Mark, & Natalie). The other participants had one, two, or three additional agriculture teachers at their school.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews via telephone were the primary form of data collection. When developing the protocol, questions were included that would afford participants the opportunity to share their experiences about navigating the multiple demands and expectations of their jobs. These questions were refined after piloting the protocol with four agriculture teachers who were not included in the study. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into Dedoose software for analysis. Data for this study were collected in accordance with [University’s] Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, and all participants voluntarily gave verbal consent.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher’s goal is to interpret the meanings in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher must enter the hermeneutic circle in a “dialectic movement between understanding and explanation” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 149). For this study, we drew from Lindseth and Norberg’s (2004) method for interpreting hermeneutic interview text as the overarching analysis approach and Emerson et al.’s. (2011) method for specific coding and memoing guidelines. van Manen’s (1990) conceptualization of *theme* in phenomenological research was also considered. This process began with naive reading, which involved reading the interview texts several times to grasp the overall meaning and allowing time to develop any thoughts, ideas, and conjectures that emerged (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). This was followed by thematic analysis through a series of open coding, theme selection, and focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011). As this process developed, the individual themes and sub-themes gave way to more comprehensive integrative memos, which sought to “integrate what were previously separate pieces of data and analytic points” (Emerson et al.,

2011, p. 172). These memos built descriptions of certain codes and create linkages between different themes and subthemes. After thematic analysis, each interview was read through as a whole once again, juxtaposing themes and sub-themes with the naïve understandings, remaining cognizant of any pre-understanding of the phenomenon and how this influenced the interpretation. To ensure this did not limit the findings, we engaged in critical reflection, collaborative discourse among co-authors, and written reflexive memos. Then, the selected themes and subthemes were added to the integrative memos, and we explored opportunities to describe these themes in a way that aligned with the research questions (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; van Manen, 1990).

### **Building Quality into the Study**

We drew from Lincoln and Guba's (1988) criteria of *transferability*, *credibility*, and *dependability* to ensure this study was conducted in a rigorous and scientific way. To ensure *transferability* of our findings, we employed thick description by describing the findings in rich detail and grounding claims with ample illustrative quotes from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Geertz, 2008). To ensure our findings are both *credible* and *dependable*, we engaged in collaborative data analysis, which, as van Manen (1990) argued, allows for "deeper insights and understandings" of the themes and thematic descriptions (p. 100). Additionally, we employed member checking as a tool to enhance the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2012) first by asking participants to review their transcripts and offer additional insights and second by asking participants to provide input on an initial draft of the findings (Birt et al., 2016).

Further, Maxwell (2012) posited it is impossible to remove researcher theories, beliefs, and perceptual lenses during the research process. To address this, the researcher must be reflexive throughout the research process by recognizing their positionality in relation to the phenomenon under investigation and that they themselves are merely inscribing *one* reality instead of *the* reality (Emerson et al., 2011). Therefore, I, Haley Traini, as the lead researcher and person who engaged in primary data collection and analysis activities, make explicit my positionality within the study by discussing my experience with the phenomenon and research topic as well as how these experiences have shaped my interpretation of the phenomenon. I come from a family of agriculture teachers, most notably my father, who was an agriculture teacher for 37 years. During my tenure as an agriculture teacher, I spent significant time engaging in the practices of the profession and was highly influenced by the environments and systems in which I worked as well as the people around me. During this time, I encountered significant struggle as I strove to meet the demands of the profession while striving for some semblance of a life outside of work. Also, the ontological and epistemological orientations I brought to this study align with the major tenets of constructivism. I recognize and acknowledge there is a material reality, yet posit individuals have unique realities which are constructed by and from their individual experiences, histories, cultures, environments, etc. (Maxwell, 2012).

### **Limitations**

As a research team, our experiences, participants, and research design influenced the findings of this study, which explored the lived experiences of secondary agriculture teachers in the United States. Each of us has been immersed in the world of SBAE since childhood or adolescence and have been involved in SBAE as high school teachers. All research team members have served as SBAE teacher educators.

This knowledge and these experiences presented both affordances and constraints within our research. For example, during recruitment, we reached out to teacher educators with whom we had already met and interacted at research conferences. Many of them were aware of our research interests, current role, and background. This made for quick responses to emails. In this email, we asked them to generate a list of five agriculture teachers in their first years who had not won a national NAAE award. We did this to mostly ease their task and ensure we would get responses. However, one constraint of this is that we do not know *how* they generated their lists. They could have listed their "best" agriculture

teachers that fit the criteria, the names that came to mind first, or some other way. Yet, given the criteria for finding participants in phenomenological research, we argue this was not detrimental to the study.

Additionally, our experiences and background helped guide data collection. Our decisions were guided by the knowledge of the typical afternoon schedule of agriculture teachers. Specifically, we chose to conduct phone interviews rather than video interviews because we knew video interviews would add additional strain on participants. We wanted them to be able to talk while they were driving home, walking their dog, or cleaning their classroom. This, of course, did not come without challenges as a few phone calls were dropped (when participants lost cell service) or when students interrupted our conversation. Our background also significantly helped us guide the interview conversations. Like any field, agriculture education comes with a host of acronyms, special names, histories, and traditions. We were easily able to capture field notes, create the transcripts, and understand specific aspects of their job (e.g., CDE competitions, chapter officers) during data analysis.

Lastly, this study engaged twelve agriculture teachers representing seven states in hour-long semi-structured interviews. While these interviews certainly afforded rich data, follow-up interviews, additional triangulation, and more participants would have allowed for further insight and confirmation of initial findings.

### Findings

The following section chronicles the lived experiences of agriculture teachers as they managed, attended to, and experienced the different aspects of their job. This evolved as participants shared stories of their work, described to whom they felt accountable, and how these accountability partners (and their respective expectations) influenced their decision-making and identity. This is captured through five themes: 1) *multiple accountability partners*, 2) *different people, different expectations*, 3) *no room for error*, 4) *arms race*, and 5) *validation*. While distinctions and similarities of experiences existed among all participants, below, we share the themes that transcended career stage, state, and NAAE recognition. When distinct differences did emerge, we point them out explicitly in the text.

#### Multiple Accountability Partners

Living in the SBAE landscape requires multiple accountability partners, significant coordination, and long hours. Agriculture teachers in this study felt accountable to many different individuals and parties, including school administration, community members (including Ag Boosters clubs, Ag Advisory clubs, and FFA Alumni chapter members), Career and Technical Education (CTE) liaisons, university partners, other non-agriculture teachers at school, other agriculture teachers at their school, other agriculture teachers in the state, the state Agricultural specialists/liaisons, parents, students, and themselves. While the hierarchy of accountability partners differed among participants, the trend was to place administrators and community members at the top of their respective accountability partner lists. In fact, all twelve participants identified school administrators as individuals to whom they felt accountable, including school principals, assistance/vice principals, superintendents, and CTE liaisons who worked either at the school or at the district office. Likewise, all participants identified various community members as people or groups to whom they are accountable. These included Advisory Board members, Agriculture Boosters clubs (typically parents of students or alumni who fundraise for the chapter), Alumni chapter members, local businesses, and local organizations who either serve in an advising capacity to the program or who support the program through financial and/or material means.

As these agriculture teachers recounted their accountability partners, specifically in reference to community members, other teachers at school, and other agriculture teachers, they often talked about it from a perspective of fear or self-consciousness. Three participants—all of whom are in their first five years—reflected on these feelings of being watched or feeling pressured by different accountability partners. Natalie, particularly felt pressure from the community and other Ag teachers, “I would say

my most, my first answer is my school administration. But I feel pressure from community members, and I would also say I feel pressure from other Ag teachers, as well”. Similarly, Joey felt pressure from other agriculture teachers, particularly those who are involved in the state-wide professional association. He shared, “I feel that I very much report to all Ag teachers because a lot of ag teachers are alphas, and I think there tends to be a lot of critiquing, and, just like their eyes are always on you.”

Attending to these different accountability partners can be challenging. So as to meet the demands of various individuals, fulfill the responsibilities of their jobs, and provide students with various opportunities to be engaged in the agriculture program, participants reported they work long hours, have congested schedules, and encounter significant stress as a result of engaging in their work. Connor noted, “there are only so many hours in the day. We have lots of conflicts with everything ourselves, just with time and everything. School events would be another example of where we meet challenges”. Below we see another example through Paige’s work as she strives to navigate what she calls multiple “moving parts”, “I’m at school until 6:00 or 7:00 PM. But I know it’s not sustainable to do that every day...I definitely haven’t figured out how to manage it perfectly without being stressed about things”.

### **Different People, Different Expectations**

Agriculture teachers in this study not only recognized multiple accountability partners within their work; they also identified that not all of these partners have the same expectations or metrics for success. As Connor put it, “some of them would look at results, an event, and outcomes based on their perspectives and what they’ve seen happen...what resonates with them”. It became clear that, overall, different accountability partners all want program “success.” However, “success” meant different things for different people. Participants were highly aware of these competing expectations, and, depending on their individual school, level of involvement with various partners, relationships with their administrators, and the program/community’s regard for tradition, attending to these different expectations was challenging.

Often, administrators have expectations that are in conflict with the expectations of other parties. Megan said, “admin wants data and test scores, and our alumni and a lot of community members want awards and, you know, student involvement in the community. And so I think what everybody expects and what everybody wants, there are differences”. Expectations from community members to win awards and gain recognition from CDE competitions was also echoed by Natalie, who stated, “it can be really challenging, I feel there is a lot of pressure from community members and your Ag teacher colleagues, to make sure that we’re doing all this FFA stuff, and staying up on that”. Connor felt his community reiterated these same thoughts stating, “They [the community] make a big deal of it. It gets a lot of attention, and that happens whether it’s through social media or the banquet or whatever it is that gets commented on. I think that they mark as a success”. Mark identified the differences in expectations from accountability partners, including his university partners, CTE liaisons, and Farm to School program. After he discussed the different expectations from various accountability partners, he stated, “so it kind of depends on the day of the situation. So there’s a little bit of frustration coming there because I don’t know which direction I should be going because every direction I go seems to be the wrong direction”.

### **No Room for Error**

As participants discussed how they strive to attend to the different accountability partners and their respective expectations, they often spoke about the negative repercussions should they make a mistake or change traditions within their program. These negative repercussions surfaced through feelings of fear, social pressure, threats to remove programmatic funding, or verbal or nonverbal chastisement, and it became evident that little forgiveness would be granted should agriculture teachers mess up in any way. As a newer agriculture teacher in the community, Liberty shared her fear of making changes in the program stating, “honestly, I’d be afraid to kind of walk away or change what I’m doing

because I feel like I'm disappointing people". Megan noted that should she displease parents, they would bypass communicating with her and go straight to the school district, "if parents and their friends are not pleased with things, it's just such a small community that then it would go, anything negative would go straight to the superintendent right away". Unspoken social pressure also existed for participants as they tried to attend to community expectations. This was the case for Natalie, who said, "I guess other things that we're kind of expected to go to with things like literacy night, and farmer's carnival. And it's not required, but it's pretty frowned upon if you don't show up for those things".

Expectations are also tied to funding. For example, Stephen reflected how money is tied to both CTE expectations and administrative expectations, which are different. He noted matter-of-factly, "if I don't do what they want, then my money goes away". Likewise, Connor indicated his various accountability partners directly influenced his decision making as he shared, an administrator expects their school to run well. When life is good, they're good, and when it's not, they're not. Like most bosses, when you don't cause them problems, they're happier". Natalie shared how she would be chastised for failing to attend to each accountability partner fully and worried that there would be consequences of judgment or termination from her job based on the opinions of these different constituents,

And I always feel like I'm in a fishbowl. As Ag teachers, we fall into this kind of role where the community wants us to be involved; but there is this expectation that we should be at everything... I've always just felt like there's a lot of eyes on what the Ag teacher is doing, and what they should or shouldn't be doing.

### **Arms Race**

Within the social landscape of SBAE, there exists a sort of arms race, an unspoken yet ever-present feeling of judgment, comparison, and competition among agriculture teachers to be the best or most successful. To be good or successful is determined by tangible metrics associated with the job (e.g., coaching winning CDE teams, winning teaching awards) as well as visibility, status, and power within the profession (e.g., hosting a workshop where you are seen as the expert, holding a leadership position within the professional association). This makes participants strive to win awards and gain recognition, thereby outperforming each other. This was shared by ten of the participants, both men, and women, as well as new and experienced teachers and was especially prominent in participants who work in California and Oregon. In the below excerpt, Connor described this arms race,

We have this 'cold war - arms race' where everybody feels they are being measured with the expectation. Whether that expectation is that you're going to be just as good as you've always been or better, or that you're going to be just as good as the neighbor next door. So everybody keeps pushing. And even competitive people and people who aren't competitive, [they have] that feeling of comparison.

While Connor named this phenomenon, several other participants described the judgmental and competitive nature of agriculture teaching and how it personally affects how they think about themselves as professionals. Joey succinctly shared his perspective, "it's so competitive, Ag teachers can get so competitive with each other, that sometimes new teachers can get caught up in it and forget that they're human beings". Similarly, Allison struggled with comparison stating, "I'll compare myself to what other Ag teachers in my area doing. That's another thing I haven't figured out yet 'cause I still compare myself all the time and don't feel like I'm doing enough". Natalie shared a similar story stating, "there are some Ag teachers that put a lot of pressure on other Ag teachers, there's this kind of unspoken judgment, that if you don't go to every SAE or CDE in your district, that you are doing something wrong". In the disheartening excerpt below, she pairs comparison and feelings of guilt with the possibility of leaving the profession,

But I feel like I always get caught in this rock and a hard place, I'm doing the right thing by leaving work right now and going to the gym, and taking care of myself and my body; but I should be there until 7:00, because other Ag teachers do. And I kind of have this guilt. I look at other Ag teachers and see what they're doing sometimes. And here I am cooking dinner. And it makes me feel guilty that I should be out there doing the same thing...But like I want to be able to stay in this job, and I feel like if I don't take care of myself, then I won't.

### Validation

Participants in this study thrive on the recognition and validation from others, which plays a pivotal role in how they feel about their competence, level of success, status in the profession, and agriculture teacher identity. Validation comes in many forms, including increases in student growth and achievement, recognition from community members, silences from community members (pending they meet their expectations) or administration (indicating they have autonomy and are content with their decision-making), verbal recognition from various accountability partners, or evidence of "membership" in the profession (via invitation or recognition from more powerful members to various activities) (Wenger-Trayner & Weger-Trayer, 2015). Further, in alignment with Landscapes of Practice, participants do not claim competence in isolation but instead rely on various individuals to deem them successful (Wenger-Trayner & Weger-Trayer, 2015).

This theme emerged largely as participants discussed their own conceptualizations of success, whether or not they identified themselves as successful, and whether or not they think others would see them as successful. Teresa, a veteran teacher, said she especially felt appreciated when her superintendent congratulated her on her recent award at the grocery store, "awards are wonderful, and that's not the reason I do things, but it does make you feel like other people appreciate what they see you are doing". The other veteran teacher in this study, Connor, reflected on how this award served as a way to compare himself to other agriculture teachers. He stated, "It's wanting the scoreboard again... how do I, where do I measure? Where do I fall? How am I doing? Who's doing a better job and what are they doing?". Joey also admitted thriving on validation from others as a source of motivation to continue his work, specifically how meaningful it was to receive validation from a more experienced peer in the state, "I received one of the best comments I have ever gotten from one of my friends. He thinks that I'm one of the top five, if not top three Ag mechanics teachers in the state". Similar to Joey's desire to be seen as good by his fellow agriculture teachers was Eddie, who measured his own success based on validation and membership from more senior peers. He spoke several times of wanting to impress agriculture mechanics teachers whom he admired and consequently, have won several awards with phrases such as, "I'm the young buck, these are old guys, and I gotta impress them".

Other participants, like Megan and Mark, sought validation from parents and members of their community. Mark shared, "it's gratifying to hear comments from parents" in regards to how his students' outlooks have changed. Megan, on the other hand, shared how important recognition from her community is, especially in regards to winning CDE competitions. She commented, "we definitely feel that struggle of wanting, of the community and some particular individuals just really wanting us to have that recognition".

### Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of secondary agriculture teachers as they navigate, manage, and attend to the landscape of practice in which they live and work. Our specific research questions included, *how do agriculture teachers conceptualize the social landscape of SBAE?* and *how does the landscape influence the way they go about their work?* As agriculture teachers in this study described their various roles and responsibilities, to whom they are accountable, and how these individuals influenced their work, five themes emerged 1) *multiple accountability partners*, 2) *different people, different expectations*, 3) *no room for error*, 4) *arms race*, and 5) *validation*.

In this study, it became evident secondary agriculture teachers live and work in a complex social landscape with *multiple accountability partners* who have *different expectations* of them. Living in this landscape is challenging and involves extensive work, long days, feelings of stress and tension, especially as their accountability partners allow *little room for error*. This is consistent with literature that outlines the roles and responsibilities of agriculture teachers (Baxter et al., 2011; Boone & Boone, 2007, 2009; Fritz & Miller, 2003; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Myers et al., 2005; Paulsen et al., 2015; Rocca & Washburn, 2008; Stair et al., 2012) and the trend that they work well beyond 40-hour work weeks (Delnero & Montgomery, 2001; Hainline et al., 2015), undergo stress (Smith & Smalley, 2018; Torres, et al., 2009), and struggle to manage the various responsibilities of the profession (Dillon, 1978; Lemons et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2018; Solomonson et al., 2018). However, until now, the literature did not specifically identify the expectations associated with various accountability partners. We assert this new knowledge not only adds to the literature about the work of agriculture teachers but provides fodder for future research and dialogue about how these different expectations impact agriculture teacher decision-making, identity, and retention. For example, this study concluded participants feel pressure from their peers about winning, being present at FFA events, and engaging their students through a variety of activities. How are these pressures and expectations, both administered and received by agriculture teachers? Does this occur during profession-related events, when they see posts on social media from their peers, or during in-service meetings? Future research could delve into not only this phenomenon but also explore how agriculture teachers are becoming aware of the various expectations the different accountability partners have of them. Moreover, while we now have empirical evidence that illuminates the complexity of the SBAE landscape, we have yet to understand how exactly agriculture teachers reconcile the competing expectations and multiple accountability partners within the landscape. Future research should explore this phenomenon specifically as it may help us to understand the degree to which these factors contribute to their decision to leave the profession.

In addition to research, with a focus on practical application, we recommend having discussions with current teachers around the identification of the accountability partners who influence their programs. Specifically, we recommend workshops that examine areas of alignment and misalignment when it comes to teacher expectations. These workshops should initially include teachers but also should extend to additional program partners as we work to develop a circumspect understanding of the programmatic expectations of all our accountability partners. Meetings with program partners should ask critical questions to identify areas of misalignment with current teachers. These questions should explore partner priorities and how their priorities align with the vision they have for the school, community, profession, and program.

In this study, less-experienced agriculture teachers recounted their accountability partners from the perspective of fear, pressure, or self-consciousness while simultaneously recognizing how receiving *validation* from these individuals was pivotal in how they position themselves as agriculture teachers. This is fitting given Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) claim that regimes of competence are socially negotiated, pull new members into a given community, shape their participation, and contribute to their identity development until they are able to reflect the competency of the community. Unfortunately, participants in this study noted they could not reflect the regime of competence associated with various communities. Because of this, they often felt like failures. Although this is not studied specifically in previous literature, there is some indication these feelings are common for agriculture teachers. Prior literature has identified a lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacy as challenges agriculture teachers face, although these studies do not tie these feelings to anyone or anything in particular (Fritz & Miller, 2003; Paulsen et al., 2015; Stair et al., 2012). What is left to be known is *why* these agriculture teachers live in such fear? How are they experiencing said pressure, specifically from community members and other agriculture teachers? Are they being held to unrealistic expectations? Or are these expectations merely not communicated to new teachers? Future research

could explore connections between the desire and pressure to fulfill the expectations of the profession and agriculture teacher identity development.

To support teachers, and in recognition of the themes of fear, pressure, and self-consciousness, we recommend that teacher training programs and workshops for current teachers specifically train teachers on how to have conversations with accountability partners to explicitly identify their expectations. These conversations might be difficult at times, but if the teachers are equipped with conversational strategies, they will be empowered to effectively engage in pivotal conversations around program expectations. Having these conversations and entering into them with intentionality may help to alleviate fear, pressure, and self-consciousness within our teachers.

In addition to other findings, this study also found agriculture teachers live in a sort of *arms race*, an unspoken yet ever-present feeling of judgment, comparison, and competition among agriculture teachers to be the best or most successful. It is difficult to explain this finding, but it may be related to both the public yet insular nature of SBAE as well as the connectivity of agriculture teachers to each other. Perhaps the public nature of this profession (e.g., the frequency with which agriculture teachers interact with each other at FFA events, professional development conferences, on social media, etc.) serves as a platform for this arms race and amplifies it. This may be what Kitchel et al. (2012) were alluding to when they posed the question, “does the professional culture in agricultural education create a situation where teachers wear their jobs as a badge of honor and scorn others whom they are not performing to the same level?” (p. 38). Perhaps they are hinting at the arms race that emerged in this study. While we would argue a modest sense of competition can be healthy at any workplace, we do wonder at what point competition becomes an invisible arms race where judgment, critique, and pressure cloud all sense of collaboration or community. Further, how do these findings and developing questions relate to the development of a shared repertoire of practices Wegner-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) described as an essential component of healthy communities of practice? Are agriculture teachers effectively working together to cultivate their communities of practice and develop shared knowledge (Wenger et al., 2002), or are communities being fractured through competing interests? More research is needed on this phenomenon, particularly its origin and effects.

As a final observation, in addition to our own desire to understand, this line of inquiry has sparked emotion among participants. We have witnessed intense emotion as the questions raised caused the participants to wrestle with concepts around personal meaning, belonging, fear, and uncertainty. The passion and emotional investment of the participants encourage us as researchers to continue this line of inquiry and develop new knowledge pertaining to how agriculture teachers interact with their work. As we continue to explore the ways in which agriculture teachers navigate the social landscape of SBAE, how can we support and encourage them with the results of our research? What have we learned from our participants that can push our pragmatic understanding and address the systematic change Carrie called for in the email that began this paper? Does the entire system need to be changed, or can we identify and target key components of the landscape that will result in increased teacher retention? While our challenge has persisted for decades, we believe a thoughtful and, at times, critical analysis of the system of agricultural education is overdue. We embrace the challenge and look forward to continuing to ask the questions that need to be asked to increase the longevity and vitality of our profession.

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