

Factors Contributing to Attrition as Reported by Leavers of Secondary Agriculture Programs

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Abstract

There exists in our profession a persistent shortage of quality teachers in our high school agricultural education classrooms. A multitude of studies have identified challenges faced by agriculture teachers, however, few, if any, have investigated reasons for attrition by directly asking leavers why they left. This study sought to identify reasons for leaving the profession as perceived by former high school agriculture teachers. Nine former secondary agriculture teachers were interviewed. Themes emerging from this qualitative case study include 1) passions for the profession, 2) alternative opportunities, 3) expectations, 4) burdens, retrospectively and 5) people. Teachers were passionate about their students, their content area and competition inherent in agricultural education. All of the participants had chosen to accept alternative employment opportunities. Former teachers recalled having high expectations for themselves and their career, and perceiving others to have high expectations as well. The teachers recalled the burdens of their job retrospectively, and people played an integral role in their career as well as their decision to leave the profession. Former teachers were satisfied while teaching, but found greater benefit in alternative opportunities. Recommendations include encouraging realistic expectations, developing mentor programs for novice teachers, and strengthening the benefits of remaining in the profession.

Keywords: attrition, leavers, former agriculture teachers

In January, 2013, the National Council for Agricultural Education hosted the Agricultural Education Summit with the theme “Recruitment and Retention of Teachers for School Based Agricultural Education.” This initiative comes 13 years after their 2000 publication *The Reinventing of Agricultural Education for the year 2020*, which outlined four goals. The first goal was “An abundance of highly motivated, well-educated teachers in all disciplines, pre-kindergarten through adult, providing agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems education” (The National Council for Agricultural Education, 2000, p. 4). The first corresponding objective was that leaders in agricultural education ensure a sufficient quantity of qualified agriculture teachers (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2000). The American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) has reiterated the Council’s convictions. In fact, three of the six national research priority areas identified by the AAAE are related either directly or peripherally to ensuring a sufficient quantity of high quality agricultural educators including priority areas three, four, and five (Doerfert, 2011). It is clear that the profession recognizes the

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fundamental struggle we face to fill our high school agricultural classrooms with qualified teachers.

Concern for the quantity of high quality agricultural educators in the profession stretches back much farther into our history than just 13 years. In fact, the ebb and flow of agricultural educator numbers has been tracked since the inception of secondary agricultural education and “teacher shortage” has been a consistent problem in secondary agricultural education for at least the last four decades (Kantrovich, 2010). There were 10,600 secondary agricultural education positions nationwide on September 1, 2009, with a net demand of 667 replacements, or 6.3% (Kantrovich, 2010). Even with 390 teachers receiving emergency or alternative certification, an estimated 21 secondary agricultural education departments across the United States were unable to operate in 2009 due to the lack of a qualified teacher (Kantrovich, 2010).

In order to address the shortfall of qualified teachers in agricultural education, newly qualified teachers must be recruited into classrooms and qualified teachers already in classrooms must be retained. Since there are not enough newly qualified agricultural teachers being produced nationally to fill the number of positions available (Kantrovich, 2010), it stands to reason that, as Ingersoll and Smith (2003) stated, the more significant piece of the teacher shortage puzzle is attrition. Retaining qualified teachers is of greater value than increasing the number of newly certified teachers entering the profession (Ingersoll, 2003). In order to keep qualified agriculture educators in our classrooms and reduce attrition, we must first fully understand their reasons for leaving the profession. While a number of studies have investigated variables in current teachers such as satisfaction with their job and intent to remain in the profession or problems faced by agriculture teachers (Cano & Miller, 1992; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Myers, Dyer & Washburn, 2005; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004) few have investigated agriculture teacher attrition utilizing the perspective of those who already made the decision to leave.

Chapman’s model of teacher retention and Grissmer and Kirby’s theory of teacher attrition were used to frame this study. Chapman (1984) proposed that a teacher’s decision to remain in the profession is the result of several factors including 1) personal characteristics, 2) educational preparation, 3) initial commitment, 4) quality of first employment, 5) integration in to teaching, 6) external influences, and 7) career satisfaction. Grissmer and Kirby (1987) proposed a complimentary theory of teacher attrition, suggesting that a teacher’s exit from the profession is influenced by the natural life and career cycle, where attrition occurs more frequently among novice teachers, decreases as experience increases, and then rises again as teachers near retirement age. In addition to this natural cycle, Grissmer and Kirby (1987) suggested that the following factors contribute to a teacher’s decision to leave the profession: 1) the amount of human capital one possesses in regard to teaching, 2) the amount and accuracy of information possessed when deciding to enter the profession, 3) previous work and teaching experience, 4) the likelihood of changes in family status after one becomes employed, 5) salary and working conditions, and 6) characteristics and compensation of alternative job opportunities.

Literature related to teacher retention and attrition, including literature specific to CTE teachers, and even more specifically to agriculture teachers, lends support to the factors presented in these models. Novice and experienced agriculture teachers have reported problems related to low salaries, too many responsibilities, lack of administrative support, balancing home and work life, and experiencing burnout (Boone & Boone, 2009; Cano & Miller, 1992; Chenevey, Ewing, & Whittington, 2008; Delnero & Montgomery, 2001; Foster, 2001; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011). Furthermore, while some literature differs slightly from the model of teacher retention and the theory of teacher attrition, specifically research regarding personal characteristics, studies investigating teacher commitment and intent to remain in the profession largely support them. It has been found that agricultural work experience, commitment to teaching agriculture, self-efficacy, and human capital investment in teaching agriculture all have a

positive relationship with career longevity (Edwards & Briers, 2001; Kelsey, 2006; Knobloch & Whittington, 2003). Previous research has also shown that positive working environments including being surrounded by supportive people and having positive past experiences in high school and post-secondary agricultural education are related to teachers' decisions to enter and remain in the profession (Rice et al., 2011; Thobega & Miller, 2003; Todd, 1983).

Finally, Chapman (1984) illustrated job satisfaction as the final influence on teachers' decision to remain in the profession. Research on agriculture teachers largely disputes this, indicating that both leavers and stayers were satisfied with their agriculture teaching position (Bennett et al., 2002; Walker et al., 2004). Additionally, teachers currently teaching agriculture do not indicate dissatisfaction (Bennett, et al., 2002).

The literature makes it clear that agriculture teachers encounter problems both similar to general education teachers and unique to their specific discipline. Despite facing problems as novice and experienced teachers, agriculture teachers indicate satisfaction with their career. Interestingly, even those former teachers who have exited the profession indicate being satisfied with their job while an agriculture teacher. It is this gap in knowledge that this research aimed to answer, by asking former agriculture teachers the question, "Why did you choose to leave your career teaching secondary agriculture?"

This research sought to determine reasons perceived by former secondary agriculture educators for leaving the profession. The following questions were developed to help guide the study:

1. Why did former secondary agriculture teachers pursue a career in teaching high school agriculture?
2. How do former secondary agriculture teachers characterize their teaching experience?
3. What do former secondary agriculture teachers perceive as their reasons for leaving the profession?

Methodology

This qualitative case study sought to reveal reasons causing agriculture teachers to leave the profession that are not otherwise uncovered utilizing alternative methods of investigation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). Former agriculture teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences and reasons for leaving the profession. They were encouraged to freely articulate those reasons, rather than selecting options from a static list, revealing important and previously unknown combinations and characteristics of situations which result in attrition of agriculture teachers.

Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling for maximum variation. Former secondary agriculture teachers comprised the sample. Selected participants must have taught at least one full academic year as an agriculture teacher in Texas. Participants must have left the profession voluntarily, and not as a result of termination or non-renewal or having been otherwise coerced or forced out of their position by being asked to resign, or as a reduction in force (RIF). Maximum variation was sought on the following characteristics: gender, age, means of agriculture teacher certification (traditional or alternative), number of years as an agriculture teacher, size of school and agriculture program, number of teachers in agriculture department(s) taught in, number of years since exiting the classroom, and current occupation.

Potential participants were identified through university faculty, current and former agriculture teachers and public websites including the Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas website and regional educational service center websites that publish current vacant agriculture teacher positions. I contacted ten former Texas agriculture teachers were contacted via phone or email and invited to participate in the study. Nine agreed to be interviewed.

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. I developed an interview guide. The questions were loosely guided by the theories of teacher retention and attrition (Chapman, 1984; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987) along with my own knowledge of the profession. Questions were composed to allow respondents to freely articulate their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding their entry into, duration in, and exit from the agricultural education profession. Questions were peer reviewed by experts familiar with qualitative case study research, interview techniques for data collection, and knowledge of the specific context of agricultural education.

Prior to data collection, the use of human subjects was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas Tech University. Nine participants were interviewed. Eight of the interviews were conducted over the phone, due to geographical and time constraints. One interview was conducted face-to-face. All interviews were conducted by me, and lasted from 30 minutes to 75 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and I transcribed them. Notes were taken on a copy of the moderator's guide during each interview. Additionally, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process to document my thoughts, feelings, reactions and reflections regarding the ongoing data collection and analysis.

Data collection and analysis were performed simultaneously (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data from the interviews was analyzed using the constant comparison method and open and axial or analytical coding. As interviews were conducted and transcribed, I read each and began to open code it (Merriam, 2009), making color-coded notes in the margins regarding thoughts, feelings, and reactions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and noting items of particular interest or relevance to the study questions. Each interview transcription was open-coded, creating a master list of codes. These codes were then grouped using axial coding, categorized systematically and informed by the study's purpose (Merriam, 2009). Interview transcriptions were re-read and the categories were refined, revised, and in some cases consolidated as analysis continued. Finally, categories or themes were named.

Measures of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were used to establish research rigor (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checks, and the use of a reflexive journal. Transferability is enabled here through the use of rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their context, along with purposive sampling for maximum variation of characteristics of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Finally, dependability and confirmability were established through the use of audits and supported by my reflexive journal (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Table 1

Summary of Interview Participants by Selected Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age Category	Years Taught	Year of Exit	Current Occupation
Lynn	Female	40s	18	2007	Ranch manager, FFA Liaison, Stay-at-home mom
Mike	Male	50s	7	2008	High School Principal
Ian	Male	20s	2.5	2010	Agricultural Sales
Emily	Female	20s	3	2011	Small Business Owner
Mitch	Male	50s	20	2011	Elementary/Junior High School Principal
Nolan	Male	30s	8	2011	Small Agribusiness Manager
Robin	Female	20s	3	2011	Stay-at-home mom
Ron	Male	50s	22	2005	Superintendent
Craig	Male	20s	3	2011	Middle School English/Special Education Teacher, High School Football/Basketball Coach

Findings

Nine participants were purposefully selected for this study. Three females and 6 males agreed to participate. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym in accordance with IRB protocol to protect confidentiality. Participants are described in reference to the demographic information collected in the course of the interviews. A summary table is provided. (Table 1).

Five themes developed through the analysis of the data, including: 1) Passions for the profession, 2) Alternative opportunities, 3) Expectations, 4) Burdens, retrospectively and 5) People.

Theme 1: Passions for the Profession

All nine participants spoke passionately about their experiences as agriculture teachers. Even when discussing struggles and negative occurrences, it was abundantly clear that all of the former teachers truly enjoyed and were passionate about teaching agriculture. Three sub-themes arose within passions for the profession as participants spoke energetically about their students, sharing their love for agriculture, and their enjoyment of competition.

Students. Each of the participants strongly indicated that students were their primary reason for teaching agriculture, emphasizing that they enjoyed helping students, spending time with their students, and seeing their students succeed. Many participants identified helping

students succeed and providing opportunities for students as overarching goals of their career. In turn, seeing students rewarded for their hard work and knowing they impacted students in a positive way were some of the things they enjoyed most about their career. Lynn said, “What did I enjoy about teaching Ag? There was, there’s a million, a million things that I enjoyed. I mean a million! First and foremost is always kids.” Mike said, “I enjoyed seeing those kids rewarded for their hard work.” “I wanted to help kids,” Nolan stated, adding, “I’m a kid person. I love kids. All kinds.”

However, Ian felt frustrated when he encountered students that seemed to not want to engage in the program or accept his help and when his efforts to help students went unrecognized. Nolan echoed that feeling saying, “students that wouldn’t listen” were a source of frustration for him.

Agriculture. Former teachers were passionate about agriculture, and sought to pass that enthusiasm and love on to others. Participants noted the uniqueness of their content area of agriculture, expressing frustration at misconceptions regarding agriculture, and a drive to change those misconceptions.

Nolan said he wanted his students to know “that there was stuff to do other than show animals.” Lynn said she felt good knowing that her students, regardless of the profession they ultimately pursued, had knowledge of the agriculture industry; “You wanted doctors and lawyers and dentists and nurses and teachers, and you wanted all kinds of people to have background knowledge in agriculture...to have an appreciation for it.” Mike said he began to notice a change in the students who were enrolling in his classes. Even though they lived in a rural area, students did not seem to have a strong connection to agriculture. He said, “It was funny, we were an ag-type town and it’s rural...but there weren’t really that many rural kind of kids ...They’re kind of like all town kids and aren’t really interested in agriculture.”

Some participants noted that changes in education legislation and student demographics threatened their content area, and expressed concern that they would eventually be asked to teach other subjects, such as math and science classes.

Competition. The third sub-theme within participants’ passion for the profession was competition. Most participants mentioned how their own involvement in agricultural education and FFA experiences as a youth influenced them to pursue agriculture education as a career. “I was very involved in Ag and the FFA and was a scholarship recipient,” Mitch revealed. Craig said that participating in FFA and showing pigs while in high school created his main interest in teaching agriculture. Emily said “I did a lot of public speaking contests, and I did all, I did a LDE and a CDE every year.”

In addition to their competitive experiences as youth, some participants identified competition as a driving force in their career. Ian said he was drawn to the career for the competition opportunities, saying “I got into it to show pigs and coach judging teams and some goals were to take several judging teams to state.” Mitch stated, “I wanted to be competitive. I mean it was all about competition for me... I just wanted to be exceptionally competitive because of scholarships.” Losing that competitive edge as an agriculture teacher and finding “that there was a whole new set of challenges and competitions” as an administrator is one thing Ron says influenced his decision to leave the classroom.

While the benefits of competition were made clear throughout the interviews, there was also a subtle feeling of possible overemphasis among teachers on winning student competitions. Craig said he felt like “we make it more about the competitions and how we as teachers are kind of performing as opposed to just keeping in mind that it’s the kids, that we’re doing all this for the kids.” Ian admitted that maybe the competition aspect played too large a role in his decision to become an agriculture teacher. However, despite their overall opinion all participants utilized and in most cases, emphasized student competitions during their career.

Theme 2: Alternative Opportunities

The second theme that arose was the exploration of, preparation for, and seizing alternative career opportunities. In some instances, motivation was internal, while others were externally encouraged to investigate and prepare for an eventual change in career path. Some participants began their career with the intent to stay until they retired.

For Craig, there was always an interest in coaching that was equal to that of teaching agriculture. "I had either wanted to teach Ag or coach when I started college," he said. Ian initially entered the agriculture education classroom intending to work his way up to administration after teaching for a few years. Mitch understood that financially, he would want to prepare himself to pursue an administration position for retirement reasons, so he enrolled in an alternative principal certification program as he approached his 20th year of teaching, the year at which Texas caps teachers' pay. Mike and Ron, however, required some persuasion and encouragement from those around them to see the potential benefits of pursuing a move to administration.

Nolan never considered he might do anything but teach high school agriculture from the time he was in sixth grade. In fact, the number one goal he did not accomplish in his career, he says, "is that I didn't retire from Ag teaching." Lynn believed the same about her longevity, saying, "...when I first started teaching I thought, oh man, I'll be doing this, my dad taught ag for 40 years. I pictured the same thing, the same kind of deal."

Theme 3: Expectations

A third theme that emerged was the idea of expectations. This theme is broken down into two sub-themes, including self expectations of the profession and expectations of others.

Self-expectations of the profession. Participants spoke about the high expectations they had when they entered teaching. Ron described the high expectations he had for being a good Ag teacher, saying, "They just go in there and they do it, they get the job done and they do it. And they don't fuss until they know, until they have exhausted every avenue of trying to get it done." Mitch advised that novice and pre-service teachers "need a good understanding of the total ag program." Ian echoed that warning, saying that people teaching should "make sure that they understand what they're getting into and that they're doing it for the right reasons."

Lynn's expectations came from the history of agriculture teachers in her family, including her father. She said "my idea of teaching Ag stemmed from his experiences that he shared with me. And so I tried to model as much as I could after him." This helped her develop a clear understanding of and expectations for her career and herself. Emily was not as fortunate. Following what she described as a "wonderful" student teaching experience, which provided her a solid foundation, her short-lived career was quite the opposite of the supportive atmosphere of her pre-service semester. She said she "definitely could have lasted much longer," had her novice teaching years lived up to the expectations set by her student teaching experience.

Expectations of others. In addition to their own expectations, some participants spoke about the expectations of others. Particularly, Emily felt as though she could not satisfy expectations placed upon her by others, and recalled being frustrated by "the expectations of parents to do all, travel to all, and be all that they need you to be" and that "no matter how hard, how many hours you work, sometimes people are just, it's still not good enough." Ron encouraged young teachers to make sure they know what their administration expects them to do. Lynn alluded to the pressure on younger agriculture teachers striving to meet the perceived expectations of fellow Ag teachers, saying "It's difficult because you want to be accepted and you want to do well and be successful."

Theme 4: Burdens, retrospectively

Given the purpose of the study and the population of former agriculture teachers, it was expected that participants would discuss the negative aspects of their career. These ideas developed into the theme labeled “burdens, retrospectively.” Throughout the sub-themes of multiple responsibilities, time, and money, the data developed a fourth undergirding theme of satisfaction. In general, former teachers spoke affectionately and with satisfaction about their careers, and seemed only to identify some aspects of it as burdensome in hind-sight.

Multiple responsibilities. Secondary agriculture teachers have a variety of responsibilities associated with their position, including duties extending beyond the classroom. Additionally, as teachers gain experience and years of service they are often asked to serve their profession in leadership roles. Lynn said in the small schools she taught in, she often wore multiple hats, and that she was a “yes girl,” often volunteering for extra duties at school. As Ron said, the good teachers “get stuff heaped and piled on them all the time.”

Mike explained, “There’s something going on year-round. There’s multiple, numerous events, FFA-wise, classroom-wise, fundraiser-wise, stock shows; there’s just so much going on.” Robin said she could not have managed an agriculture program alone, saying “I think you have to have a teaching partner, especially as thin as you’re spread in the spring time, definitely. I couldn’t have done it by myself, I’ll tell you that.” Mitch added that the number of class preps for an agriculture teacher is typically higher than other teachers. “Usually, typically 7 preps... So, that amount of having to have a, the leadership stuff, and your animal projects, and your judging stuff and more than a full course load.”

Time. Closely related to the sub-theme of multiple responsibilities, is the sub-theme of time. All participants reflected on the number of hours they dedicated to their job as an agriculture teacher. While all participants expressed satisfaction with their career and conveyed clear fondness for the time they spent with their students, most concluded that one thing they enjoyed about their present circumstances was the amount of time and flexibility they now had in their schedule.

“I’ve always told people kind of jokingly but it’s true, that at least being an administrator you get Sundays off,” laughed Mike. He continued, “Everybody knows that Ag teachers have a pretty rigorous schedule, especially in the spring.” Nolan stated that time was the number one reason he found to leave, saying, “To be good, you’ve got to work 16, 17, 18 hour days, 7 days a week.” Mitch said the amount of time spent “away from home, out of your bed,” contributed to his departure from the profession. “There’s just too many nights that you’re gone, gone, gone...” he recalled. Craig admitted that at the time, he enjoyed going on trips and traveling with students, but post-leave, “It was also nice at the same time not to have to be gone quite as much, especially now that I’m married.” Ian described a feeling of being on the clock 24 hours a day, especially tending to livestock issues, saying “We worked...all day and night.” In his new position, Ian enjoys more time off and more time at home.

Money. Money arose as a sub-theme in different respects. Some participants indicated they are earning more money doing the same amount of work, less work, or simply different work. Other participants conveyed that the loss of their salary did not overcome the benefits they gained by leaving the profession. Mitch was very direct. “I left for the money,” he said. Mike followed the same move to administration as Mitch, for the same reason, saying, “...it’s just kind of a natural move, possibly to look toward administration to kind of, because I had fewer years to build up a salary average.” Frustrated with what he perceived as a lack of financial reward for the time and effort he put into being an agriculture teacher, Ian made a move to agribusiness sales in order to achieve more reward. In sales, “your drive and your hard work is rewarded a whole lot more than...in teaching Ag,” he said.

Money was a contributing factor for Lynn, too, but for her, staying at home to raise her children was important enough that she found “other ways to make income,” including a from-home sales business. Robin also found her lost salary to be replaced by caring for her own children, rather than “working to pay for daycare.” Craig admitted he actually took a substantial pay cut in order to pursue a career change, simply because it was a personal interest and passion.

Satisfaction. Finally, in characterizing their experiences as secondary agriculture teachers, all participants expressed satisfaction with their former careers. Most participants agreed that there were circumstances under which they would have either continued to teach or would possibly return to teaching. Mike said he “wasn’t looking to leave” his teaching position. “I really enjoyed what I was doing,” Craig noted, “I had a great experience teaching Ag.” Lynn said, “I loved what I did.” Content with his career and chuckling at his self-proclaimed arrogance, Mitch said he accomplished every one of his goals. Ron agreed, saying he felt “pretty fulfilled” with his teaching and declared, “I think Ag teaching is the best job on campus. I still do to this day.”

Theme 5: People

A fifth and final theme emerging from the data involved people. Several participants talked about people being a frustrating aspect of their job, whether it was difficult teaching partners, students, parents, administrators or community members. Emily, in particular, encountered the most severe difficulties with people during her career, including “immoral and selfish” teaching partners, unsupportive administration, and antagonistic parents, students, and community members. Nolan encountered competitive parents who made his job difficult. Ron and Mitch found that administrators often lacked understanding and had to be educated about the agriculture education program. Craig and his teaching partner eventually worked through the issues they initially encountered, however he found that community leaders exerted an influence on administrative decisions concerning his position. Lynn likely stated it best when she said, “You’re always going to have difficulties when you work with people, whether it be administrators or other teachers or parents or just the kids themselves.”

Some participants spoke at length about their family. Lynn and Robin, who had children while teaching, indicated that being able to raise their own after they had “raised everyone else’s children” was important to them. Ron stated that once his daughter got to high school and became involved and competitive in his program, he wanted the opportunity to “be her dad” without feeling a conflict of interest with other students in his program.

Participants also spoke of people in a positive light, including Lynn who characterized her fellow agriculture teachers as “my best friends and my brothers...They are people that came to my father’s funeral, they came to my wedding, they’re my family.” Nolan keeps in contact with former students and their parents, even continuing to help some of them with their livestock projects. Likewise, Mitch has maintained his livestock breeding operation and continues to help students who purchase animals from him for show.

Discussion. This qualitative study sought to determine reasons perceived by former secondary agriculture educators for leaving the profession and was guided by questions including why former teachers pursued a career teaching high school agricultural education, how they characterized their experiences, and their perceived reasons for leaving the profession. Five themes emerged from the data, including passions for the profession, alternative opportunities, expectations, burdens, retrospectively and people.

Research question one sought to determine why former secondary agriculture teachers pursued a career in teaching high school agriculture. It is clear that participants were truly passionate about their careers. Sub-themes of students, agriculture, and competition were intricately woven and told the story boldly. Participants spoke extensively and enthusiastically

about their students and how much they enjoyed spending time with them. They shared their love for agriculture and their desire to pass that on to others. While their passion for agriculture was energizing and created drive for their career, it was also a source of frustration when they encountered people who did not share their enthusiasm about the subject matter. They recalled in great detail the student competitions and resulting awards. Similar to results reported by Todd (1983), all of the participants mentioned their involvement in agricultural education and the FFA as a youth. A few participants spoke about their experience in the agriculture industry prior to their becoming an agriculture teacher. Passion, combined with previous experience, may well contribute to teachers' initial commitment to the profession, which Chapman, Al-Barwani, Mawali, and Green (2012) indicated may be the single strongest predictor in the model of teacher retention.

According to Chapman's (1984) model of teacher retention, the initial factor contributing to a teacher's decision is personal characteristics. The results of this study would indicate that agriculture teachers do indeed possess some unique personal characteristics which guide them toward the decision to pursue a career teaching secondary agriculture education. This may imply that the initial recruitment of secondary agriculture teachers should partially consider personal characteristics, specifically prior experience in agriculture or agriculture education.

The second research question sought to determine how former secondary agriculture teachers characterize their teaching experiences. Three themes emerged to help shed light on this particular question. Participants spoke about their careers in terms of the expectations they and others had for the job and for themselves, the burdens they identified retrospectively, and the people whom inhabited that portion of their life.

Whether real or perceived, the high expectations placed on agriculture teachers are evident. Some participants had clear expectations while others had faulty expectations. Similarly, Grissmer and Kirby (1987) proposed that one factor related to teacher attrition is the amount and accuracy of information available to the teacher when he or she accepts the position. While former teachers spoke affectionately of the time they spent with their students, they were able to recognize, in hind-sight, the toll their work had on other aspects of their lives, and the contribution that made to their decision to leave the profession. This is similar to previous findings which indicated that agriculture teachers, in some cases specifically female agriculture teachers, struggle to find balance between their work and home lives (Foster, 2001; Kelsey, 2006; Murray et. al, 2011). Furthermore, Grissmer and Kirby (1987) identified changes in family status and working conditions as two crucial factors in teacher attrition, and the results here tend to support that. However, the overwhelming majority of participants characterize their agriculture teaching careers as satisfying and many of them described how much they enjoyed it, despite their choice to leave. This is consistent with prior research (Cano & Miller, 1992) but contrary to Chapman's model which suggests that satisfaction is a contributing factor to one's decision to remain in the profession. Participants also spoke about their experiences in terms of the people with whom they came into contact and built relationships as an agriculture teacher. Many of the participants described how those relationships have been sustained after their exit. The camaraderie was evident as many of the participants described a family-like bond with their fellow agriculture teachers and others in the agriculture education community. Teaching partners were found to have a potentially large impact on how participants characterized their experience, good and bad, which lends even more weight to the amount of time agriculture teachers spend at work and the difficult imbalance between work and home life that can occur.

Implications for research question two could be far reaching. Participants overwhelmingly characterized their teaching experience, regardless of duration, with an overall positive tone. It is interesting to note, however, that the characteristics they enjoyed most about their job, including spending time with students, also resulted in what they perceived as the most burdensome aspects of their job, particularly the time required to fulfill their own expectations of

success as well as the expectations of others. Addressing this dilemma may require a closer inspection of the current paradigm, or way of thinking about agriculture education. Additionally, it seemed as though the people with which they were surrounded could have a “make or break” impact on their career. This implies that a network of supportive people is critical to success and longevity. Teacher educators may play an important role in helping novice teachers find the best inaugural job and encouraging mentorship between young teachers and experienced teachers. Additionally, experienced teachers may have a positive impact on young teachers by mentoring and welcoming young teachers into the agricultural education family. Structured mentor programs could help young teachers better acclimate to the profession.

Attrition is a complex event, influenced often times by several inter-connecting factors. As anticipated, most participants identified a combination of reasons for leaving the profession, each one slightly different from the next. What emerged from the data most clearly were themes of alternative opportunities and people.

Some participants entered their career expecting to eventually seize an alternative career opportunity while others entered with expectations of longevity and no plans or preparation for alternative opportunities. However, each of them encountered an alternative career opportunity that they accepted. The majority of participants described their exit as being the result of a particular set of circumstances at “the right time.” These results support postulations by Chapman (1984) and Grissmer and Kirby (1987) that external influences and alternative career opportunities do contribute to a teacher’s decision to remain in or exit the profession. Additionally, the human capital factor included in the teacher attrition theory is supported, as there was clear evidence of participants weighing the net return of their decision whether it was staying or leaving. Furthermore, various categories of people were mentioned as being influential in participants’ exit, both in a positive light or a negative light.

It would be prudent to ask how the profession may help reduce the net gain “leavers” receive from accepting an alternative opportunity presented to them. It is often recognized that teachers do not receive adequate compensation for the work they do. This study lends support to that charge and builds the knowledge base that may be used to lobby for greater benefits. In addition, some attrition may be natural and unavoidable and potentially a positive occurrence, especially in those instances when the agriculture teacher leaves for an administrative position. While their exit still results in the need to fill a position, these leavers assume a critical supporting role for agriculture teachers. The impact of a former agriculture teacher becoming an administrator should be further investigated. Finally, teacher educators may need to start thinking differently in preparing pre-service teachers, asking ourselves whether we aim to prepare agriculture teachers to enter this career and remain until retirement, or do we perhaps need to prepare agriculture teachers to enter this career anticipating a shorter tenure and an eventual move or exit, pre-retirement. Many unanswered questions remain regarding realistic expectations of longevity for agriculture teachers.

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