

Teaching Through the COVID Chaos: A Phenomenological Examination of School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers' Motivation

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Abstract

School-Based Agricultural Education teachers faced a unique challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic as they continually tackled state and local health mandate decisions while teaching technical skills in a variety of settings, advising FFA chapters, and supervising work-based learning experiences. These challenges could influence teacher motivation in a variety of ways. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the essence of SBAE teacher motivation during the shared trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenological study consisted of eight solo interviews and two focus group interviews (n = 14) that focused primarily on teachers' motivation within their teaching role. Participant responses resulted in four themes: 1) stronger teachers emerging from the chaos, 2) triumphs and challenges of working with students in the three-circle model, 3) always the scapegoat, rarely allowed to graze, and 4) forced reconciliation of work-life priorities. These themes consisted of both motivational and demotivational factors in the teachers' year following the onset of the pandemic, and provide insight for state staff, teacher educators, and professional development providers as they support teachers as the pandemic continues.

Introduction

Preparation for the 2020-2021 school year was met with uncertainty, as school districts stood waiting for Governor Mike DeWine to announce guidelines for the opening of K-12 schools in Ohio. On July 2, 2020, Governor DeWine provided a set of guidelines that each school district must follow when developing its local school reopening plan (Ohio Legislative Service Commission, 2015). Relying heavily on Ohio's history of local control over how each school operates, local school districts were charged to design their reopening plan to fit the needs of their students, employees, and school district while still adhering to the directives outlined by the state (Ohio Department of Education, 2020). As such, there were vast variances in the school districts' approaches due to educational delivery models, internet connectivity and technology accessibility, changes to school district funding, increased district costs, and building capacity (Ohio Department of Education, 2020). State department of education guidelines were again modified for the 2021-2022 school year, however vast variances due to local school board and administrative decisions continued.

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School-Based Agriculture Education (SBAE) programs faced a unique challenge during COVID-19 as educators were faced with teaching technical skills outside of the classroom/laboratory and virtually engaging students in Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO) (Gordon & Xing, 2020; McKim & Sorensen, 2020). These pedagogical and programmatic challenges impacted SBAE teachers in a variety of ways. Additionally, SBAE teachers experienced a decrease in well-being due to the exhaustion of virtual teaching but experienced professional growth as they explored new methods and resources for virtual teaching (Easterly et al., 2021). Florida SBAE teachers exhibited reduced efficacy when teaching virtually as compared to teaching in-person (Barry & Easterly, 2021) and South Carolina teachers felt less efficacious to supervise work-based projects known as Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs), manage the FFA chapter, and teach Career Development Event teams as the pandemic continued (Eck, 2021). Finally, SBAE teachers displayed positive motivation towards their roles as teachers and desired to make positive changes related to the FFA and SAEs but were less efficacious in their ability to make the programmatic changes they desired (Clemons et al., 2021). In addition, previous research with SBAE teachers has found that many teachers fail to maintain a balance of work and life, as exemplified by participants agreeing that effective teachers are willing to put in extra hours (Eck et al., 2019). Early career teachers have also found themselves in a “success trap” that eclipses their personal lives (Traini et al., 2020), with other teachers declaring that being an excellent teacher is *incompatible* with having a satisfying personal life (Solomonson et al., 2018). Recently, due to COVID-19, SBAE teachers experienced a decline in overall work hours with a shift in emotional attention away from their work role to their family/life domain and a decrease in job satisfaction (McKim & Sorensen, 2020).

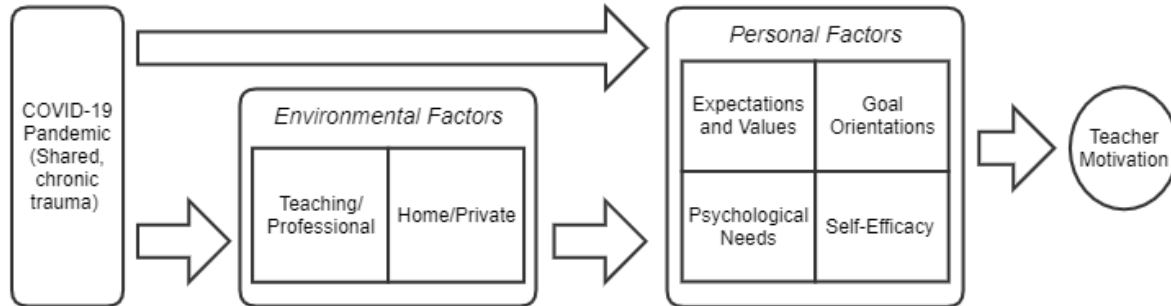
While much focus within the literature has explored virtual teaching and teacher efficacy, there has been little research on total SBAE programs and teacher motivation. Additionally, there is a lack of literature examining COVID-19 and SBAE teachers. Because much of the current research has focused on the time and place of the pandemic, this study provides a view of how COVID-19 has impacted teacher motivation and details some changes in teacher motivation and practices that may persist after teachers return to “normal” teaching. The results of this study could help us understand teacher motivation during COVID-19 and other times when students and teachers experience the same trauma.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a conceptual framework (see Figure 1), which captures concepts from different motivation theories to indicate how COVID-19 could have potentially influenced teacher motivation via its influence on environmental and personal factors. This framework guided our methodology to understand teacher motivation within the COVID-19 context and allows for the inclusion of shared chronic trauma, as defined by Masiero et al. (2020), within the analysis.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of COVID-19's potential indirect influences on teacher motivation, indicating relationships between motivational concepts.



When examining teachers' motivational factors, it's important to note that teaching is one of the social service careers that have been indicated to have high rates of secondary traumatic stress (STS) – where you take on stress because of interacting with those who have experienced trauma (Hydon et al., 2015). It has been indicated in the literature that teachers incur high rates of STS and burnout (Hydon et al., 2015; Watts & Robertson, 2011). In addition to this, the COVID-19 pandemic could be examined through the lens of shared trauma – where those who work directly with others experience the same trauma as their students or patients (Tosone et al., 2003; Tosone et al., 2012). The effects of shared trauma have not been fully examined, but clinicians have indicated difficulty in separating their experiences from those of their clients, professional boundaries being stretched, and avoidance of processing the event for themselves when exposed to acute trauma (Day et al., 2015). Trauma in and of itself has been shown to predict an increase in drinking and depressive symptoms among undergraduate students (Borsari et al., 2018). While some recent studies have examined COVID-19 within the professional environment, no studies could be found examining teacher motivation or other mental health effects within this shared trauma as they relate to motivation in professionals.

Further, motivation as a phenomenon has been modeled in many ways within educational research. A motivational research review by Pintrich (2003) describes five generalizations that can be made across motivation theories despite their varying definitions of and relationships between constructs. These five generalizations state that one can be motivated through self-belief in personal competence, control beliefs, goals, and high interest and/or value levels. Further motivation can be influenced by environmental and personal factors. While teachers' environmental motivation factors have not been largely studied, there is evidence that educators are motivated by their work environment, pay, and colleagues (Mani, 2002). Additionally, having access to quality educational equipment and supportive administration has been shown to positively impact their motivation (Carson & Chase, 2009). Moreover, factors such as student achievement, positive relationships with others, and working in a collegial, supportive environment (Dinham & Scott, 2000). Finally, student response to instruction and working in an environment which accepts their culture (Paver & Oga-Baldwin, 2008). Some ways that personal motivational factors can be found in the literature include the four-phase model of interest development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), a four-quadrant framework of achievement goal

orientations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), and the three psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness that can foster intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Purpose and Research Questions

This qualitative study aimed to explore the essence of SBAE teacher motivation during the shared, chronic trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. This inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What is the essence of SBAE teachers' motivation through COVID-19?
- 2) What are the COVID-19 related lived experiences which influenced SBAE teachers' motivational factors?
- 3) What are the COVID-19 related lived experiences which influenced SBAE teachers' work and home environments?
- 4) What are the COVID-19 related environmental changes which influenced SBAE teachers' motivational factors?

Methods

We utilized a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the lived experiences of SBAE teacher motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We used a constructivist lens to allow for the emergence of the teacher motivation through the participants' understanding, as we believe knowledge is constructed through individual and group experiences (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, as researchers, we must acknowledge that we are all former SBAE teachers. At the time of this research, two of us were agricultural education faculty members, and one was a graduate student – all at the same large Midwestern land grant university. Throughout this research, we purposively identified our biases where applicable and worked to bracket them within the research (Creswell, 2013).

A Qualtrics questionnaire was distributed to all Ohio SBAE teachers to collect data related to pandemic modes of teaching, general feelings about pandemic teaching, and demographic information. From this data, participants were purposively sampled to maximize variation based on consistency of teaching modes (asynchronous vs. synchronous; online vs. face to face), school type as defined by participants (rural, suburban, urban), number of SBAE teachers in the program, and family structure (marital status, dependents in the household). Eight teachers participated in individual interviews, and six participated in focus groups, providing a total of 14 SBAE teachers who participated in the study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of study participants (n = 14)

Pseudonym	Phase	Gender	Age	Years Taught	School type
Andrew		Male	34	7	Career Center
Brad	Interview	Male	43	20	Rural
Caitlyn	Round #1	Female	51	28	Rural
Diana		Female	51	3	Urban
Wendy*	Focus	Female	42	18	Rural
Xandra	Group #1	Female	27	5	Rural

Yvette		Female	26	2	Rural
Zarah		Female	37	12	Suburban
Eric		Male	28	6	Rural
Frances	Interview	Female	42	19	Suburban
Gerald*	Round #2	Male	30	8	Rural
Hannah		Female	50	22	Rural
Vince	Focus	Male	43	21	Rural
Ulrich	Group #2	Male	26	2	Rural

Note: * = teach at the same school

Data were collected using phased interviews, focus groups, and field notes. Interviews and focus groups were conducted over Zoom or in-person – averaging one hour each – and were audio and video recorded, transcribed verbatim, and served as the primary data source. To begin phase one, we conducted four one-on-one interviews using semi-structured questions to allow individuals to discuss the essence of their motivation during the pandemic. Sample interview questions included: “How has your motivation changed from the start of the pandemic, through the past year, to now?” and “During the pandemic, were you focused on mastering tasks related to your classes or program or were you just aiming to get them done?”. Interview and focus group guides were altered based on emerging codes after the interviews. We then conducted one focus group in June 2021 with 4 participants, using semi-structured questions to allow for both individual and group discussions about their motivation during the pandemic. The focus group allowed us to identify shared or contradictory statements across participants. Following the first focus group, the interview questions were again adjusted to align with emerging codes. Phase two began with the second round of four one-on-one interviews, followed by another focus group with two participants in October of 2021 (four participants were planned, but due to unforeseen circumstances, two participants did not join the Zoom call). In all interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on the time between March 2020 and May 2021. Data saturation was estimated to have occurred during the seventh interview. During all interviews and focus groups, field notes were documented by the researchers and served as ancillary data sources. Field notes included descriptive information like time, date of the interviews, setting, and location of the interviews. Field notes also included any unique behaviors, such as the participants' reactions to questions or other changes in body language. Observations of focus group interactions were documented as there were two researchers participating in the focus groups. Researchers also engaged in reflections post-interview to discuss what we observed and experienced during the interview.

Data were analyzed using horizontalization, identifying meaning units, and clustering themes to determine the essence of teacher motivation during COVID-19 (Moustakas, 1994). One researcher reviewed the phase one interview and focus group transcripts for horizontalized statements and open-coded the primary and ancillary data sources. Next, they identified emergent meaning units from the open codes for the primary data sources. Lastly, they triangulated the ancillary data sources and combined like meaning units to allow for the emergence of themes and subthemes. We then peer-reviewed the themes and subthemes. We analyzed phase two data together and compared phase 2 meaning units to the emerging themes from phase 1 to finalize the emerging themes presented in the findings.

We utilized a variety of validation strategies to uphold trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was upheld through prolonged engagement in the field, data triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking. Member checking was completed by repeating responses to the participants to ensure their responses were captured accurately. We also member checked themes we found in our individual interviews to explore the credibility of our findings from the individual interviews. We upheld transferability through the use of thick, rich descriptions for the findings. Dependability was upheld through data triangulation and maintaining a dependability audit. We utilized a confirmability audit to uphold the confirmability of the findings and recommendations.

Findings

Results from the two rounds of interviews and focus groups indicate the presence of four themes and seven subthemes through the participants' lived experiences relating to their motivation to provide a total SBAE program through the pandemic. It is important to note that all participants shared similar instructional contexts, including the use of asynchronous instruction in the spring of 2020 and an overall feeling of "not knowing" how the 2020-2021 school year would go. This was described by participants as switching frequently between the environments of online vs. face to face and the timing of synchronous vs. asynchronous learning.

Theme 1: Stronger Teachers Emerging from Chaos

This theme drew from the participant's reflections regarding how their teaching and preparation were positively impacted by the time they spent planning and reflecting on teaching during the pandemic. Our first theme consists of three sub-themes: 1.1) positive motivation from instruction, 1.2) prepared pedagogues, and 1.3) the double-edged sword of technology. The first of these, positive motivation from instruction, was found in all 14 participants. Every story told by the participants captured an increase in their motivation through what they were able to learn from and accomplish with their instruction. To begin, Diana was motivated by the fact that her students deserved the education that they were showing up for regardless of the larger circumstances at play. Diana stated:

It's hard to stay motivated for the five kids showing up ... But, I will say that I never once dropped the ball. I never once thought, "Well, I'm not going to put much into this because I've only got two kids showing up." I would put as much into it as if 30 kids were showing up because those two kids deserved all of me. They deserve the education that they were showing up for.

Additionally, Andrew said that he was "more cognizant" of how he was ensuring his content was accessible to his students across the board. Diana similarly found that she was more motivated because her lessons were more individualized, and her students were better able to handle the content. This reflection of being a stronger teacher was compounded within the focus group, with Zarah emphasizing that she learned a lot about adapting while still trying to make learning fun. Her indicator of success was her enrollment numbers for the next school year, "they're huge. We had to turn students away." All fourteen participants also indicated at some point during their interviews that this was a motivator for teaching. Particularly, Yvette described that she "felt more comfortable" in her classroom, allowing her to feel much more relaxed than she had during her first year of teaching when the pandemic began.

The second subtheme, prepared pedagogues, was found in two forms: direct comments about having extra time within the school day and indirect comments relating to the teachers being able to accomplish other tasks because of an increase in free time. For example, while Caitlyn felt that it was “really nice to have more time, but when you’re a[n] ag teacher, and you’re used to be[ing] so busy, it’s also weird.” Brad felt that he “did a better job.” He “had that extra time in the school day to work through some of those things [lesson planning] and help my colleague out” when referring to assisting his co-teacher in the extracurricular management of their program. Multiple participants nodded to lower stress and higher motivation as they reflected on their preparedness. Focus group members Yvette and Xandra stated that they felt “like I had a lot more time” and “I used my free time differently...to finish my masters [degree],” respectively. Wendy followed up this exchange, saying that the transition back to a full in-person school week at the end of the year was “really rough...I was worn out, but up until then, yeah, I had more time.” This may indicate that there were major stress and motivation differences between pandemic schedules and what we would consider a “traditional” school day. Eric appreciated the new flexibility that virtual school days offered him. “I had more time at home, trading off with [my] night-shift wife during the shutdown.” Eric went on to state that this was his “best year ever for [statewide end of year exams]” because he was able to focus on content to a greater extent in the 20-21 school year than in previous years.

The final subtheme was that of the double-edged sword of technology. This was a consistent force throughout the pandemic and was evenly split between what the teachers considered good and bad experiences. Teachers overwhelmingly felt that technology was a worthwhile investment in time and school district money. Diana was excited for her students to experience one-on-one technology. Although the technology dissemination for students (Chromebooks and broadband receivers, if needed) was managed well, Diana did not feel the same way about the professional development (PD) provided by her school district. The school district introduced online tools such as new software in this PD. Unfortunately, some of these tools required being purchased, which the administration then refused to do. Teachers felt that even though the technological tools allowed them to educate via distance during the pandemic, it felt incomplete. Notably, Caitlyn stated that “technology can’t ever beat the meeting in person and the connections that you’re building,” which she felt impacted her motivation. While Eric learned to utilize Google Classroom and plans to continue using it, he also noted that he did not love the lack of direct interaction with students. This idea was echoed in the second focus group by Ulrich when he said that he “probably use[s] more technology now” and went on to qualify that “being a young teacher, I probably was using a little bit more technology than the average teacher who had been there for 20 years like Mr. [Vince].” Vince, who took humorous offense to Ulrich’s comment, said, “I probably learned how to use them better, but the tech guy would refer folks to me to use Google Classroom because I was already using it” to illustrate his technological abilities in the classroom. At some point in all interviews, participants expressed an increased ability to work with technology despite the negative experiences.

Theme 2: Triumphs and Challenges of Working with Students in the Three-Circle Model

Our second theme works directly to describe how teachers perceived working within the Three-Circle Model and aligns directly with our three subthemes: 2.1) Persisting with pupils in the classroom, 2.2) Uncertainty when trying to lead, and 2.3) Splitting the check for success with no receipts.

Across all participants, teachers indicated that in a “normal” year, the three pieces of a total SBAE program would overlap much more than the pandemic allowed. Our first subtheme of persisting with pupils was the most present. Teachers felt conflicted here because, on the one hand, hybrid teachers could “pick those key hands-on activities...to get the topic addressed” which led to an overall feeling of accomplishment that they were able to teach their content properly. There was also a feeling of frustration as their class enrollment depends on student interest in their elective classes. There was a struggle to “make things fun and exciting” to recruit students into their programs. Even when teachers were able to create hands-on experiences, it was demotivating to constantly monitor the intense pandemic guidelines as exemplified when focus group member Zarah was frustrated when she was “constantly saying ‘stay six feet apart’ and ‘move your chairs back’” during lab activities where kids wanted to be together. Although Yvette felt she was on the opposite end of the spectrum from Zarah because she found solidarity with the science teachers in her building. They, as a group, met with the superintendent and were eventually allowed to “do our group work and all that stuff, as long as [students] had their masks on.” Wendy went on to explain that she was worried for her students now because she noticed that they struggled in her class. She felt that these students would need much more than just education from the school system, particularly needing more therapy and mental health support. She detailed where she had seen her teaching partner Gerald “spend his whole class period of them just talking...need[ing] to get things out.” While course content was important, she felt that working to provide students with everything they needed was also worthwhile. Because Wendy specifically mentioned Gerald in her answers, he was explicitly sought as a participant in the second round of interviews. Gerald’s experiences largely mirrored Wendy’s descriptions, calling these class periods that Wendy described above as “real talk days.” These real talk days were important to Gerald’s students since they did not have many adults they could turn to, with one student even appreciating these days because “we know you don’t judge us.” Something similar had happened in Eric’s classroom during the first COVID shutdown in 2020 where he adjusted his content: “I don’t think it was very creative stuff...even if they weren’t learning standards, they were getting real-life knowledge.” Participants, while identifying places where they struggled, emphasized the importance of their connections with their students and persisting, even if that meant not following the usual educational standards.

The second subtheme, uncertainty when trying to lead, reflects both teachers’ feelings toward advising their FFA chapters, as well as their FFA officers leading the chapter. For one example, Diana was unable to facilitate any FFA activities. Because this was supposed to be her first year implementing FFA, she was never able to get it off the ground with “all the kids” signing up for FFA, but then “really nothing” because the pandemic took away all opportunities for events to get students interested – which she cited as a demotivator for even “doing” FFA in the first place. For Andrew, even though his FFA chapter continued to operate, he felt that FFA had “been hell...the toughest part of the year” feeling that he picked up extra responsibilities that were typically done by students to “make sure things didn’t fall to the ground to pieces this year than I’ve ever had to do.” Teachers were also very frustrated that there were no consistent rules on extracurricular activities. Particularly, “sports” was discussed in most of the interviews as a point of comparison. Some teachers claimed that their FFA chapter was treated as a sports team, with administration stating that “if athletics can do this, this, and this, I don’t see why FFA can’t either” in Brad’s case. Some teachers, however, indicated the opposite, with the administration limiting

their travel opportunities because they were not a sport. Xandra's chapter was limited this way but blamed the state department of education because neither they nor the Ohio FFA Association had put out guidelines for safe travel and activities like the Ohio High School Athletics Association provided for their stakeholders. Eric agreed with the other participants, stating that "my kids were working their tails off trying to make it as normal a year as possible, but then we're told six months out that [State Convention] is going to be virtual." These frustrations, however, were not as strong when teachers were able to host events in person. Participants often felt that these events had an "overwhelming number of students" when compared to pre-COVID in-person events, which served as a major motivator, especially because of the lackluster involvement from the current school year. Teachers were all motivated to make the most of their situations, even though viewpoints varied between individuals. For example, Eric was conservative on what events they attempted to host, stating "if we get the stamp of approval from the local side, we're gonna run ahead and do it" proverbially valuing permission over forgiveness. However, this was not shared by all teachers and is best illustrated by Vince stating that for local events he "looked at the rules...and figure[d] out...how to make it happen at the end of the day," taking advantage of gray areas left by their administration, while also indicating that he hadn't needed to ask for forgiveness...yet. Regardless of the approach, many teachers' thoughts were summarized by Xandra's final statement in the first focus group: "It was the FFA stuff...being able to do those in-person activities that I wasn't able to do in person last year. That's what made me motivated."

The final subtheme - splitting the check for success with no receipts in SAEs - is named such because in this theme there was no consensus between participants about SAE supervision. About half of the teachers felt that it was an above-average year for their students and the other half felt it was below average. Yvette, being a second-year teacher, found that it was exceedingly difficult to get SAEs off the ground. Xandra agreed, saying that her students' "SAE involvement this year was very limited." Not only was she not able to complete visits to evaluate student SAEs, but her teaching partner could not teach introductory SAEs like usual where all first year SBAE students would complete job shadows. These teachers shared that this was demotivating, wondering why they should even try to get SAEs started when they couldn't supervise them. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some teachers found that they couldn't keep up with their students' progress and this motivated them. Wendy found that her students "worked a lot, a lot, a lot...they were working more than their parents." Similarly, Caitlyn's students continued with their SAE projects, even going on to say that she had what "was probably one of the most awesome SAE visits" because she was able to visit a student who worked behind the scenes at a local Zoo. She went on to share that "virtually, I personally didn't really have those connections" with other students. Andrew and Brad both had students continuing to work for local companies, with Brad indicating that the pandemic was good for those students with horticultural jobs because "people are home now, and they want their yards mowed and their landscaping done." The idea of 'no receipts' within this subtheme comes into the picture with the fact that all teachers who indicated it was a better-than-average year also felt that they couldn't get their students to keep their records updated! As put succinctly by Yvette: "I did have kids that did a lot of working, but tracking it, keeping a record? Yeah, none." Eric also stated a similar sentiment, stating that "all bets are off if kids are turning in records...being virtual made it tougher I guess." Similarly, Gerald's students "still did fair projects last year, even though we knew there was no fair show *per se*."

Theme Three: Always the Scapegoat, Rarely Allowed to Graze

The third theme was that of the feeling that as SBAE teachers, they were always the scapegoat, but rarely allowed to graze – meaning that while they were limited in how they could operate as teachers within their buildings, they were often the ones who were *blamed* when things went wrong. One example of limited operating, Diana felt as if she did not even know some of her coworkers because of the virtual environment she had taught in for half of her teaching career – noting that there were cliques among the other teachers at the school. Meanwhile, Wendy, Xandra, and Zarah all had some points of contention with other teachers within their building that did not exist out of the pandemic. Xandra spoke about how the “ag kids...didn’t follow the rules of COVID,” such as being caught in the building not wearing a mask. In the eyes of her coworkers, she was “solely responsible for disciplining them” using her as a scapegoat and pressuring her to monitor and discipline her students even outside of her classroom. Zarah and Xandra shared similar experiences where teachers felt that it was inappropriate for them to pull students out of academic classes for live-streamed FFA events – feeling so strongly that some would come into the gymnasium where the students were watching the event and yell at Xandra in front of her students. Fearing that something similar would happen to her, Yvette only allowed students to watch these events during their time with her, circumventing any anger that other teachers may have had. Finally, many interactions with the community were identified as being demotivating to the participants. These interactions included frustrations that were expressed *at* – not *to* – them. Yvette detailed being frustrated at comments on social media after posting pictures of her students facilitating a fourth-grade ag day; parents of remote learners would comment things like, “man, it really sucks that these remote learners weren’t invited to come to participate.” All four of the focus group members felt that they saw examples of similar situations, with Wendy referring to it as an ethical dilemma. The community at large was somewhat of a mixed bag of support for teachers. For Caitlyn, she often felt very supported, with her community supporting a fundraiser that had a possibility of not happening: “they sold tickets and said ‘we’ll have it in person if we can.’” Others felt less supported, particularly when they would see or hear comments like “I can’t believe I still have to deal with my kids like these dirty rotten teachers” in Andrew’s case.

Theme Four: Forced Reconciliation of Work-Life Priorities

The fourth and final theme arose from the second round of interviews. Most codes in this theme were initially placed in the above themes, but further comparative analysis eventually brought to light the idea of our participants being forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and their individual life circumstances to examine how they operated between their roles in and out of their capacity as SBAE teachers. While this theme does not have any specific subthemes, participants expressed both positive and negative emotions with this forced perspective. On the lighter side of this theme, Ulrich indicated that during the past few years “COVID...helped create a little bit healthier of a [work-life] balance”. Before COVID “with me being at work from seven to seven... I wouldn’t have had time for a relationship, nothing would have worked out.” Because of this newfound balance, he “made new friends” in addition to beginning a long-term relationship. Vince agreed with a balance at the beginning of the pandemic, detailing that he “turned the computers off at 3 [PM] and spend the evening with the family.” However, as he began to teach in person again, “that shut off at 3:00 just doesn’t work again because from 7:30 until 3:00 every day there are students here, and then you’ve got other things.” Gerald shared a similar experience of his time commitment slowly creeping back: “like last year...you weren’t as busy, but now I’ve already

noticed... I've got stuff on the weekends again." This, however, was seen in a positive light, with Gerald going on to say that "I think it's a good change because I feel like I'm doing my job again." Caitlyn, in our first round of interviews, reflected a lot on the benefits to her personal life since she found herself with more time. "I did some individual projects...bake and take things to the neighbors. We usually have a pretty nice garden, but it was the best garden of my life last year." Through these activities, Caitlyn was forced to reflect on those "cup filling" activities that allowed her to simply enjoy life – something difficult to do, especially at the height of the first COVID lockdown.

Discussions

From the results of this study, we concluded that teachers' lived experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of both motivating and demotivating factors as it pertained to 1) teaching ability, 2) working with students within the three-circle model, 3) interacting with other adults in the school building and community, and 4) reconciling their work-life priorities.

Relating to teaching ability, participants found across the board that they were not only more reflective of their teaching practices but that this reflection allowed them to pinpoint specific details and interactions that they would then use as evidence of stronger and more motivated teaching. When probing the differences between now and the past, teachers felt that this was a by-product of having more time to plan and prepare for the school day. Another by-product of this increased preparation time also led to having more time to spend with family or on recreational activities. While this was seen as positive, instructional technology was seen as both positive and negative in the eyes of the teachers. On one hand, we see that technology allows teachers to improve their teaching when flung into the virtual classroom. However, on the other hand, we see that technology was seen as a demotivator in the sense that the connections they had with students were not nearly as strong, and students seemed to be less engaged over the technology.

When working with students in the three-circle model, teachers found that the only overall "bad" portion was that of advising the FFA chapter. Ranging from indifferent feelings to "hell", FFA events did not operate as usual over the year, with a few teachers not advising or working with their chapters at all. However, the experiences with students in the classroom and within work-based learning were both considered by teachers to be a mixed bag. Positives arose from each, such as more impactful lab activities and students expanding their work-based projects beyond what would be expected in a regular school year. Negatives also arose, with much frustration surrounding the ideas of being unable to complete lab activities because of social distancing, students refusing to maintain project records, and even some teachers being lost on how to get students to even set up new work-based learning projects.

Teachers were also vocal about the negative experiences they had with their administration, other teachers, and even the parents of their students. Experiences within this theme included many negative experiences like being called names on social media posts, being accused of excluding distance learning students, and being yelled at by other teachers within their buildings. While there were some positive experiences, like the support that one teacher felt from their community fundraiser, these were rare.

Finally, it emerged that SBAE teachers were forced to reconcile their work-life priorities during the pandemic. Due to canceled events and remote learning, teachers were able to find motivating personal factors and were able to build personal relationships that did not exist under the normal requirements of being an SBAE teacher. While some found motivation in focusing on personal factors, others found motivation as they became “busy again” with their schedule filled with traditional classroom instruction, FFA events, and SAE visits. As schedules continue to return to normal, the SBAE profession will need to reconcile that many SBAE teachers need to be constantly busy to feel like they are fulfilling their job requirements.

While teachers underwent many negative demotivating experiences during COVID-19, there were positives from their experiences as well, which aligns with Clemons et al.’s findings of Alabama SBAE teachers neither agreeing nor disagreeing that they were positively motivated (2021). In considering our pandemic’s influence on environmental motivation factors, we see that the lines were blurred between professional and private lives (Gregersen et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Kuebel & Haskett, 2023). This could have been worrisome if FFA continued operating as if in a ‘regular’ year, but since teachers were not supervising these experiences, their free time was increased, as seen in their teaching preparation and recreational activities. Preparation and reflection were key aspects in teachers’ professional motivation factors with the additional preparation and recreational time, which again aligns with Alabama SBAE teachers agreeing that they spent more time in critical reflection across all three circles in the SBAE program (Clemons et al., 2021).

In evaluating COVID-19’s influence on personal motivational factors, we see that many motivational terms have been mentioned by the teachers. For example, a few teachers noted that they maintained their autonomy, a psychological need, through the content they taught even though they were restricted by health guidelines during the pandemic. This aligns with Easterly et al.’s findings, where SBAE teachers were frustrated by the adjustments they had to make to the three-circle model while still retaining all three elements (2021). In evaluating participants’ goals and self-efficacy, we see alignments with previous studies as well, where teachers agreed that they were planning to implement positive changes to their instruction upon returning to the classroom (Clemons et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Finally, existing literature also supports that teacher motivation was a mixed bag, containing both positive and negative influences on teacher motivation amid the pandemic (Clemons et al., 2021; Easterly et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

Recommendations

The emerging themes demonstrated how the pandemic forced the SBAE teachers to take new pedagogical approaches. PD sessions should be developed focusing on the dissemination of these practices to other in-service teachers. Additionally, teacher educators should seek out SBAE teachers whose teaching thrived during the pandemic to supervise field experience students and engage with pre-service teachers in methods courses. Further, this study demonstrated some of the good and adverse effects that technology can have in the classroom, particularly for distance learning. PD facilitators should consider examining the tools and programs most utilized by teachers amid COVID and developing programming to help deepen teachers’ understanding of these tools. Teacher educators should also examine if there are any ways to increase the technological skills of teacher candidates within their programs. Finally, SBAE professionals should consider how they could continue to help teachers address work-life balance. This could be

addressed through reflective PD sessions where teachers identify the home-based environmental factors that were more abundant and motivating, as well as the SBAE program activities that decreased but did not reduce student success during the pandemic. This information could then be used to develop a plan to increase motivating life experiences while decreasing unnecessary work requirements. Additionally, state staff and the teacher professional association could work together to select virtual events that teachers and students maintain as still valuable. This could increase work-life balance by minimizing travel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had undeniable effects on SBAE teacher experiences and motivation. Further research should be completed to determine if these effects are universal or if they vary based on teacher or school demographics – particularly since the urban and suburban teachers in this study had slightly different experiences than their rural counterparts. Further research should seek to further describe the hurdles that SBAE teachers need to overcome amidst the pandemic and the potentially lasting effects these might have on both teachers and the teaching profession. Lastly, no literature could be found detailing SBAE *students'* experiences or motivation amid COVID-19. This would be a valuable source to determine if teacher perceptions of students are accurate or if students have much different experiences than they let their teachers know about.

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