

The Teacher's Noble Sacrifice: An Exploration of Agriculture Teacher Margin

Tiffany Marzolino¹
Aaron J. McKim²
Catlin M. Goodwin³
R. Bud McKendree⁴

Abstract

Due to the persistence of the school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teacher shortage, research on this issue must continue. Exploring a variety of aspects of how this shortage manifests may be advantageous for devising paths for teachers to be retained in the career. While considerable literature exists on SBAE teacher retention and related topics, there is an absence of holistic, systemic perspectives which may help researchers recognize key drivers of this issue. This qualitative study utilized the theory of margin and sought an understanding of how teachers are experiencing their workloads. The overall theme of this study was The Teacher's Noble Sacrifice, encompassing a holistic picture of teacher load, sources of teacher power, how lacking margin may affect a teacher's power or load, where and how support networks can be utilized, and how these SBAE teachers identify as agricultural educators. The themes emerging from this research are explored for their impact on the teacher shortage with recommendations for research and practice suggested.

Introduction

For years, there has been a shortage of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers (Smith et al., 2023). This shortage has been identified as a major challenge impacting the profession (Disberger et al., 2023; Smith & Smalley, 2018; Solomonson et al., 2019; The National FFA Organization, 2022). The teacher shortage has been approached by researchers qualitatively and quantitatively, from a variety of angles, yet it persists. This problem meets the criteria for a wicked problem as it is complex and may have a variety of solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Furthermore, the persistence of the shortage indicates the problem may be systemic (Meadows, 2008). The SBAE teacher shortage is a problem greater than sum of its parts; thus, it is important to explore different system components that contribute to the shortage.

One driver of the teacher shortage may be the inability of educators to achieve work-life balance (WLB). Illinois teachers reported moderate WLB (Solomonson et al., 2022), as did teachers in the nationwide survey Sorensen et al. (2016) conducted. Factors including working many hours and being married were both related to lower WLB ability (Sorensen & McKim, 2014). Additionally, an unsatisfying work-life balance feels implicit in other reasons teachers leave the classroom. Solomonson et al. (2018) found "family or personal reasons" and "out-of-classroom expectations" (p. 330) as two reasons teachers leave.

¹ Tiffany A. Marzolino is a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University, 480 Wilson Rd., East Lansing, MI 48824, marzo@msu.edu. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0478-4626>

² Aaron J. McKim is an Associate Professor in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University, 480 Wilson Rd., East Lansing, MI 48824, amckim@msu.edu. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0600-3611>

³ Catlin M. Goodwin is a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University, 480 Wilson Rd., East Lansing, MI 48824, cmg@msu.edu. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0312-8504>

⁴ R. Bud McKendree is an Owner/Manager of Florida Green Keepers, 1401 NW 53rd Ave, Gainesville, FL, 32609, buddy@floridagreenkeepers.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0351-777X>

Research has linked WLB and job satisfaction (Sorensen et al., 2016); job satisfaction and career commitment are also linked to teacher retention and attrition, as teachers with greater job satisfaction are less likely to quit (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Nationwide, SBAE teachers are generally satisfied with their job (McKibben et al., 2022). In fact, research found no significant differences between the satisfaction of mid-career teachers with intent to leave versus those intending to stay (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). Furthermore, Walker et al. (2004) found no significant difference in job satisfaction between first year teachers who left, moved, or stayed in their positions. While these studies capture interesting snapshots of job satisfaction, the pandemic saw some shifts, with McKim and Sorensen (2020) identifying a 23.13% decrease in job satisfaction amidst the pandemic. It is unclear how satisfied teachers are with their jobs presently, especially as the landscape of education and workload of teachers continue to shift (McKim & Sorensen, 2020; Shoulders et al., 2021).

The composition of a teacher's workload varies based on their context. The workload of teachers includes "preparation for instruction, classroom/laboratory teaching, laboratory preparation and/or maintenance, grading/scoring students' work, administrative duties-program management, professional activities, SAE observations and recording, [local, area, district, and/or state] FFA activities, CDE preparation, and adult education" (Torres et al., 2008, p. 79). While these components may remain similar throughout career stages, various studies have identified unique challenges at specific career stages, especially amongst teachers early in their career. Early career teachers face expectations unaligned to their experience level (Disberger et al., 2023; Moser & McKim, 2020), spend more time on work at home than peers (Lambert et al., 2011), and are more likely to experience negative emotions (Disberger et al., 2023).

While early career SBAE teachers experience unique challenges, those challenges associated with the affective domain are not unique to early career teachers. SBAE literature captures some of the affective-domain challenges experienced across career stages. For example, there is extensive research related to teacher burnout and stress. Burnout is caused by prolonged periods of stress (Maslach, 1976) and has been assessed amidst SBAE teachers, with studies indicating moderate levels of stress and emotional exhaustion (Kitchel et al., 2012; Shoulders et al., 2021; Smith & Smalley, 2018). While stress and burnout may be the more prevalent aspects of the affective domain, others have been explored. For example, many studies explore the emotional impacts of lofty expectations surrounding the job (Lambert et al., 2011; Solomonson et al., 2019; Traini et al., 2019). Teachers reported a discrepancy between what was happening in their programs and expectations placed on themselves (Solomonson et al., 2019), noting feelings of inadequacy due to a strong commitment to excellence (Solomonson et al., 2019). Further, Traini et al. (2019) found early career teachers felt they could have work-life balance or success, but not both, supporting previous research by Lambert et al. (2011).

The examples provided of additional emotional load could lead to frustration with the self or the career, but there are some points of power stemming from the affective domain. Teachers reported sources of enjoyment from their career including, "[w]orking with motivated students, autonomy, variety, and support" (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018, p. 14). Moser and McKim (2020) found collaboration and relationships with other teachers were beneficial to teacher retention, suggesting relationships are a source of power. However, findings from Haddad et al. (2023) suggest building connections may not be enough. Rather, "[an] SBAE teacher's vision of the purpose of agricultural education must align with their community influencers' if it is to be positioned as supported" (Haddad et al., 2023, p. 217). Their findings suggest a lack of vision alignment may add complexity to teacher power derived from support networks. Additionally, positive parent engagement supports teacher retention (Berry et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2013), though new and early career teachers may have issues learning to deal with parents, especially those who are uninterested or hostile (Buchanan et al., 2013). Ideally, sources of teacher power are plentiful enough to sustain teachers.

The research on teacher workload led Solomonson et al. (2019) to call for a more sustainable model for SBAE. We argue making the career sustainable will require systemic change. As a step toward this goal, we believe a holistic perspective on teacher workload, job satisfaction, and life is necessary. As such, a qualitative study was conducted in Michigan to offer additional insights into teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of their workloads.

Purpose and Objectives

How teachers manage their workload varies (Sorensen & McKim, 2014); therefore, it is important for research to capture the depth of teacher experiences. Given the need for depth, a qualitative methodology was employed to address our research questions: (a) how do teachers experience their workload and (b) how does a teacher's workload impact their life?

Theoretical Framework

We operationalized the theory of margin as our framework for this investigation. The theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) originated in adult education. This theory states an individual has power in their life to accomplish their tasks, derived from physical, social, mental, and economic ability as well as skills (Hiemstra, 1993; McClusky, 1963). An individual also has their own load, comprised of responsibilities at work, home, and life (McClusky, 1963). The difference between power and load is called margin (McClusky, 1963). Margin has been explored in a variety of adult education spaces, including emergency medical education (Kalynych, 2010) and postsecondary education (Biney, 2021). Current research suggests teacher margin plays a role in teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Marzolino & McKim, 2024b) and the efficacy of professional development (McKim & McKim, 2023). However, teacher margin was not found to impact other teacher characteristics, such as creativity (Marzolino & McKim, 2024a).

Having margin (i.e., wherein power exceeds load) ensures "good mental hygiene" as well as an improved ability to learn and handle "life's emergencies" (McClusky, 1963, p. 17). As such, margin is critical to teacher retention, especially for early career teachers still trying to learn the job (Disberger et al., 2023; Moir, 1990). We posit the theory of margin may also inform how teachers experience their day-to-day work lives, as margin will shift as power and load fluctuate.

Methods

To explore the margin of SBAE teachers in Michigan, we employed a basic qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews. As the researcher is the instrument in qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010), we recognize our subjectivity and positionality as integral to the research. The overall mission for this research was to help teachers find ways to navigate their jobs so they may be retained in the field. Each of the authors were former SBAE teachers and have a great passion for helping agricultural educators. The research team believes the system of agricultural education creates explicit and implicit pressures which contribute to reduced teacher margin and teacher attrition. This phenomenon is something they each experienced as former middle school and high school agriculture teachers.

Participants

An email invitation was sent to 12 teachers in Michigan inviting them to participate in this study. Seeking saturation (Morse, 2018), these 12 teachers were invited due to their diversity in certain characteristics, including being parents/guardianship, marital/relationship status, years of teaching experience, and school type. These characteristics were prioritized as they were identified by Stevenson (1982) as salient to margin. Characteristics important to power, load, and margin but not widely represented

across SBAE educators in Michigan, such as race (BIPOC) and sexuality, were not considered. Eight of the 12 teachers participated in an interview. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, outlined in Table 1. Information that may be used to identify participants has been withheld from the table.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Gender	School Type
Abigail	3	Female	Comprehensive High School
Alex	14	Male	Career and Technical Center
Emily	10	Female	Comprehensive High School
George	3	Male	Career and Technical Center
Haley	22	Female	Career and Technical Center
Leah	5	Female	Career and Technical Center
Penny	20	Female	Comprehensive High School
Robin	23	Female	Comprehensive High School
Shane	4	Male	Comprehensive High School

Note. Names assigned based on gender identity.

Data Generation and Analysis

Data were generated in November and December of 2022. Each participant met with the lead researcher via Zoom for one semi-structured interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Transcription Star. The interview protocol consisted of 16 questions; the first 10 were asked without participant knowledge of the terminology offered by the theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) and the last six were asked regarding the teachers' thinking using theory-specific words and concepts (i.e., definitions provided to participants), soliciting teacher comments based on this shared understanding.

The theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) was used to guide the study, from instrument design, described above, to data analysis. The theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) lent language to the researchers as they conducted open and axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to create concept codes which represent "a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119).

Codes were sorted into categories, which were then organized into themes. The lead researcher conducted an initial grouping of codes. Afterward, the research team began a peer review process as a means of data verification (Morse, 2018); we met, discussed, negotiated, and reorganized data within these codes, allowing for the emergence of new codes from the dataset when appropriate. Next, the lead researcher categorized the codes and, upon completion, the research team again convened to discuss, negotiate, and reorganize codes, categories, and themes. Vocabulary from the theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) was used to assist in classifying some of the phenomena described by teachers, offering itself to naming codes and categories. Validity issues were addressed by taking a systematic approach to the research, with a focus

on ontological and educative authenticity (Lincoln et al., 2018). Furthermore, there has been much intent to incorporate multivocality and thick description into this manuscript (Tracy, 2010).

Findings and Discussion

The overall theme of the data was *The Teacher’s Noble Sacrifice*, comprised of seven categories (see Table 2). For clarity, categories and the codes are explored within their own sub-headings.

Table 2

A Breakdown of Theme, Categories, and Codes

Theme	Categories	Codes	
The Teacher’s Noble Sacrifice	A Holistic Picture of Load	Additional Sources of Load	
		Administration Adding Load	
		Home Load	
		Load Impacts Emotions	
		Responsibilities of a CTE Teacher	
		Responsibilities of a Teacher	
	Agriculture Teacher Identity	Agriculture Teacher Identity	
		Ag. Teachers Integrating into their Communities	
		It Is Ultimately My Responsibility	
		Investing in Success	
		Noble Sacrifice Mindset	
		Power in Appreciation	
	Boundaries	The Teacher’s Noble Sacrifice	The Best Teacher I Can Be
			Ability to do What Needs to be Done
Conflict Between Work and Home			
Confronting the Realities of Teaching Agriculture			
Kids Need to Want It			
Needing to Say No			
Questioning Career Choice			
Margin and Work Interplay			Impacts of Reduced Margin
			Margin and Innovation
			Professional Development
Sources of Teacher Power	Developed Wisdom from Experience		
	Joys of Working with Students		
	Other Ag Teachers Get Me		
Support Networks	Sources of Power		
	Leaning on Co-Teacher		
	Support from Alumni & Community Members		
	Support from Family		
Workload Structure	Support from School Community		
	Ebb and Flow		
	Time Management		
		Work Management Strategies	

Note. Categories and codes are presented in alphabetical order.

A Holistic Picture of Load

The category A Holistic Picture of Load expresses the complexities of an SBAE teachers' load. From what responsibilities they have at work to the hidden labor that goes into the job, there are a vast array of duties teachers complete. At the base level, teachers are responsible for *Responsibilities of a Teacher*, *Responsibilities of a Career and Technical Education (CTE) Teacher*, and their *Home Load*. *Responsibilities of a Teacher* outlines duties the research team felt all teachers may experience. Study participants shared components of their workload, collectively identifying field trips, grading, lesson planning, preparing for classes, accommodations (IEPs, 504s), behavioral support reports, communicating with special education teacher(s), contacting parents for sports ineligibility, cleaning and organizing their room, collaborating with a co-teacher, meetings, events, curriculum crafting, logistical paperwork, and independent studies for students. Not all teachers interviewed shared the same duties.

When talking about *Responsibilities of a CTE Teacher*, Emily shared, "the classroom stuff's easy, it's the taking care of the CTE program that's the hardest part." Teachers described some of CTE-specific responsibilities, collectively identifying CTE paperwork, accounting work for reimbursement, coaching and organizing coaches for FFA teams, FFA events and trips, officer meetings, leadership and skills contest preparation, managing the agricultural facilities, recruiting students to their program, SAE visits, and facilitating fundraising for the program. Finally, within the non-job aspect of teacher load, *Home Load*, teachers reported the following duties: helping with family business, dishes, laundry, cooking, spending time with family, parental duties, raising children, and supporting their spouse. Importantly, differences in home load differed between parents and teachers without children.

Load is further complicated by three other codes, all increasing the burden placed upon teachers. The code *Additional Sources of Load* consists of aspects of teachers' jobs adding to their workload, from parents to paperwork. Emily shared, "[parents] really don't understand what [teachers] do on a day-to-day basis." Further, Abigail expressed her angst with additional sources of load, stating, "paperwork freaking sucks, that's not why people become teachers." These aspects of load often carry with them an intangible burden. Other aspects of load represented in this code include ineffective professional development (Abigail), a lack of predictability (Alex), and mentoring new teachers in the building (Haley). Outside of these duties, there is an emotional component to teacher load. *Emotional Load* includes teachers' descriptions of how their load made them feel and how their feelings impacted their load. George shared, "there are days where I feel closer to breaking, even when I leave early." He further explained, "if I have problems with students all day where we're struggling... I've got to work through that with them and it's just emotionally and physically taxing." Emily shared, "if [additional duties are] stuff I know I can do, I'm not as stressed and I'm not as short with people at school." Furthermore, *Administration Adding Load* explores an abundance of ways administrators shape a teacher's workload, from poor communication complicating the job to a perceived lack of trust negatively impacting relationships. Shane recounted an instance where administrators changed the schedule, resulting in the cancellation of a program with elementary students. Robin and her new co-teacher had to negotiate to ensure the FFA pay they were receiving wasn't halved when that co-teacher was hired. Teachers also expressed "time deadlines surprise me sometimes because they'll tell me one thing and then the next time, I get a different time deadline" (Emily) and "it seems like frequently there are things that pop up and it's just like there's another thing that we have to do" (George). This unpredictability adds to load.

Agriculture Teacher Identity

The Agriculture Teacher Identity category comprises ways in which identity is informing or informed by being an agricultural educator. Each teacher exists both as a teacher and a person; there is the person they are as a professional, and the person they are in their most natural and authentic state. The following codes suggest being an agricultural educator is not simply an identity characteristic, but an identity in and of itself. *Agriculture Teacher Identity* emerged from teachers sharing how they go above and beyond for their students because that's who they are. Teachers act as "fail safes" for students (Shane),

try hard to do it all by themselves (Robin, Shane), make decisions to preserve student “self-esteem” (Penny), and make themselves known in the community to benefit their program (Abigail, Shane). While these characteristics and actions may exist outside of the written job description, teachers are still considering them, because they perceive them as components of agriculture teacher identity. *Agriculture Teachers Integrating into Their Communities* showcased the variety of ways teachers are involved at the community level, from helping with the local Farm Bureau (Leah, Shane) and serving as 4-H leaders (Haley, Robin) to being involved in their churches (Alex, Robin). *The Best Teacher I Can Be* captures the desire for teachers to do whatever it takes to provide quality educational experiences for their students. A reoccurring topic evident in this code was self-improvement. Emily shared she attends professional development to learn new things. Haley shared that she does “extra studying” and “courses” “just to keep [her]self current in the [agricultural] industry.”

Noble Sacrifice Mindset captures evidence teachers are willing to sacrifice themselves (i.e., their time, energy, and/or wellbeing) to ensure students and communities receive strong programming. The sentiment that extra time needs to be spent to get the job done was shared by Emily and Haley. Shane expressed tension between boundaries and being successful with contest teams, who are supported by local industry members. Finally, Robin shared she had cancer earlier in her teaching career, saying “I don’t know why I didn’t take more time off. I probably should have, but like, it was the beginning of the school year, it was during the pandemic... I want to be able to meet them, you know?” This powerful quote and story embody the noble sacrifice mindset and what we perceive to be her love and care for her students.

Investing in Success showcases how teachers justify devoting themselves to their students and the profession. Penny captures this sentiment well and shares two sides of the same coin in her interview, beginning with, “if [margin’s] lower and you’re not seeing [success], it’d be really hard to keep pushing and doing some of those things [working toward your] goals,” adding later, “I guess it would be really hard to do the amount of work and the time and everything that I put in [my job] to just be mediocre.” *It is Ultimately My Responsibility* explores how aspects of the job may be suitable for delegation, but the teacher needs to make sure it gets done appropriately. Shane shared, “you create a [program of activities] with the students, but ultimately you’re still responsible for getting all that done.” Robin utilizes community support for preparing students for contests, but also likes to have things done her way. To achieve balance, Robin prepares lists and emphasizes clear communication with community partners. However, while others are helping, she still feels responsible for the outcomes. While the mindset of individual responsibility is present and may sometimes work for teachers, *Power in Appreciation* demonstrates that teachers are willing to give more of themselves when they are being appreciated (Abigail, Shane, Emily) and that they question their career decision when feeling unappreciated (Emily, Shane).

Boundaries

The need for, or desire to, set boundaries manifested in a multitude of ways. *Ability to do What Needs to be Done* featured teachers exploring their capacity. Shane demonstrates by questioning, “so is [workload] achievable? Yes. Is it realistic? Maybe not so much.” Abigail also reported “achieving my goals steadily for two years and three months now,” though she added this trend is “probably not” sustainable. This is representative of a boundary struggle teachers are facing. Appropriately, *Needing to Say No* also arose, with Haley sharing that, as an early career teacher at her former school, “I overloaded my plate to the detriment of my family sometimes for sure, because I didn’t want to tell anybody no.” Other teachers have “learned that ag advising is the only thing [school extracurricular] I can do” (Emily) and learned “that I can’t do everything myself” (Robin). Alex approaches opportunities with intentionality, “saying yes to the things I want to be a part of and no to things I don’t want to be a part of.” Shane reports feeling pressured to “build [community] relationships as the ag teacher,” but has turned down a position on the local Farm Bureau board, a boundary he’s been able to set. *Confronting the Realities of Teaching Agriculture* melds with this, though this code featured mid- to late-career teachers reflecting on how their boundary setting around capacity has shifted as they’ve been in the career. Emily shared, “I didn’t realize how much time

FFA, being the advisor, took,” later adding “after 10 years it kind of gets a little easier.” Penny found a way to communicate with students her need for boundaries: “but there's only so much of me... there's just only so much that one person can do.” Furthermore, the code *Kids Need to Want It* featured teachers maintaining boundaries around the length to which they would work for students. Haley shared that she’s “refused to fill out forms for kids” and faced parental backlash, wondering, “why do I need to waste my time for something your kid does not value or want?” Robin shared that she wants students to “meet me halfway,” stating she “won’t pull them over the finish line, like I’ll push them but I won’t pull them.” George added that new activities in his program are not generated by himself or his co-teacher, that “if we’re adding anything new, I make sure its student driven... I make sure that [students] are leading the cause... we’ll try [students’ new ideas] as long as we’re comfortable with our workload.”

When boundaries are not set or are ineffective, *Conflict Between Work and Home* may arise. Leah shared, “my work takes up so much time that the only stuff I get to do at home is the stuff I don’t actually want to do, like laundry, dishes, and making dinner.” Penny shared, “I am divorced and do not have a family or kids, which would be a big challenge, I feel, with how much that I put into the program.” Alex complemented this by sharing that, during the FFA contest season, “for those eight weeks, my wife just knows that I’m not going to be present at home.” Home is often what is being sacrificed to make work achievable. Furthermore, lacking boundaries between work and home may lead to *Questioning Career Choice*. Emily and Shane shared this happens for them in times of low margin, with Emily sharing, “[w]hen that [margin] gets really low is when I start questioning whether or not I want to be a teacher and whether or not I want to do something else in the industry.” Shane finds comfort in his ‘why’ statement, though that’s sometimes not enough: “... [b]ut you look at your why statement and it brings you back to why am I doing this?”

Margin and Work Interplay

Impacts of Reduced Margin were plentiful. Haley identified a lack of margin as something that “burns you out faster,” sharing that “you get to a point where you can’t, your body physically is like, I’m done,” attributing this to sickness. Shane shared that, during periods of low margin, “your career satisfaction starts to dwindle and I think that’s what leads to teacher burnout.” Also attributed to lack of margin were decreased job satisfaction (George, Robin) and reduced happiness, both at work and at home (Abigail, Leah). Alex shared how being in a period of low margin feels, “I would say the lack of margin would be if you don’t feel like you’re ever going to surface to the top, if you don’t feel like you’re going to win or achieve or be successful.” When in a period of low margin, teachers found that *Professional Development* (PD) efficacy can be affected. Haley shared that, without processing time or time to try new things, insights from PD aren’t retained. Alex shared that PD feels more approachable when “you’ve got things under control and it’s not overwhelming.” Abigail noted a difference between “actually helpful” PD and “[PD] that is pushed on you because either your [district] or your school has some sort of agenda that they are trying to accomplish,” noting that her “margin increases tenfold when it is helpful PD.” Margin may play a role in teachers determining if they wish to attend a PD session.

Teachers also suggested *Margin and Innovation* are linked. George shared, “I would say when that [load] is smaller or when [power] does get closer to that equal point is when I do feel more comfortable to try something new.” Leah shared she can “brainstorm new ideas” and think about how to “do [classroom activities] differently” when she has margin. Robin attributed increased innovation when margin was greater, “because you have the time to think of those things, you’re not just in survival mode.” Overall, margin impacts a variety of home and life domains for teachers, evoking a variety of responses and emotions.

Sources of Teacher Power

Teachers derive power from a multitude of areas. *Sources of Power* details a variety of these power sources, such as “predictability” (Alex), autonomy (Robin), and a positive outlook (George). Robin’s idea

of autonomy is attributed to a boundary she was able to set and uphold: "I detest chickens. Like, I never wanted to do [contest name], so we never did it." George shared that "a good day working with a student... makes me feel better about my job, my load hasn't decreased, my power hasn't increased, but it's improved my outlook." George's improved outlook also aligns well to the code *Joys of Working with Students*. Leah said she "love[s] working with the kids," that "getting up in the class each day and teaching" is "definitely" something that she wants to do. Abigail stated that "every teacher need[s] to see their students succeed," and Emily emphasized this by sharing "seeing [students] achieve things at state level and regionals reminds me why I do what I do." Emily also mentioned positive feelings about "light bulb" moments with students. Robin shared that she is working in a poor district within a poor county, "but the tradeoff for the kind of people I work with and the kind of kids I work with is worth it to me because our kids are amazing." Teachers are finding power via their students and through community with other SBAE teachers, evidenced in the *Other Agriculture Teachers Get Me* code. George reported "[other ag teachers] understand the struggles that I have, they understand maybe some of the successes..."; Emily also found power in others who can identify with her struggles. Robin shared that, "[ag teacher conference] reiterates why you enjoy your job and it gets you around other people who enjoy their job and it sort of gives you the boost that you need to go back and go at it again." Finally, more experienced teachers were heard in the *Developed Wisdom from Experience* code, where teachers reported finding power via a familiarity with the calendar and ability to estimate how much time is necessary to prepare for various tasks and events (Emily), being willing to accept help from others (Penny), and having an established program with familiar routines (Robin).

Support Networks

There are a variety of support networks teachers use to help bolster their power or alleviate their load. *Support from Alumni and Community Members* features the various ways teachers are being supported by this population, including cleaning their classroom, coaching teams, running events when family emergencies happen, running facilities (like land labs), moral and personal support, and financial support. *Support from School Community* refers to in-district support, such as mentor teachers, fellow teachers, administrators, and students. Penny calls her school a "utopia" and shared, "I couldn't imagine teaching in another school district; I've never once ever asked to do something and my administration told me no." Also within the school community, but existing as a distinct code is *Leaning on Co-Teacher*, which came from teachers with experience in multi-teacher programs. Robin shared her "[co-teacher and herself] tried to split up the duties so that we didn't both have to do the same thing," which theoretically adds balance to both their loads. Penny shared she was excited her new co-teacher was "passionate about plants," as Penny felt her greenhouse facility was being underutilized. George shared that his co-teacher is a source of support, but "I'd say the struggle with leaning on my co-teacher for support is, most often when I'm feeling pressure, she is as well," implying there are times the load is still so large that both can exist in margin deficit. Finally, *Support from Family* ranged from spouses or significant others to other family members. Leah felt she has been able to achieve "a lot of that work-life balance" because her husband "came to our chapter events, he volunteered at different things, he actually even came into class and helped coach kids for CDEs and things like that." Leah appreciated that her husband "at least somewhat tries to understand [her] job and be a part of it." Family members who are supportive can be a source of power, though those who are unsupportive may negatively impact a teacher's power and/or load.

Workload Structure

The codes within Workload Structure center teachers' observations of how they cope with their loads. *Work Management Strategies* include an emphasis on prioritizing needs (Alex, George, Leah, Penny). "Everything that needs to get done gets done," shared Penny. Alex complemented her comment by sharing, "it's okay to put [tasks] away and get to [them] the next day." *Time Management* relates to prioritizing needs. In this aspect, Leah shared she feels her goals may be achievable but her timeline is not. Alex also emphasized the ability to set goals with reasonable timelines, a skill he's trying to share with his students. George questioned, "[s]o do [my co-teacher and I] get everything done that we want to? No. It's very difficult to try and get everything done," reiterating that timelines need to be realistic. Additionally,

Emily brought up an emotional load added to her existing load when time management isn't cutting it, "When I get to that point where I have so much on my plate and I don't feel like I have enough time in the day, then it gets..." she goes on to express how she feels like she is drowning.

Teachers also noted an *Ebb and Flow* to the calendar year. George listed the months when he's been the most stressed, generally choosing the months in which Michigan teachers have a variety of contests or applications due, then reflecting, "so I picked about five of the 10 months we're in school, so that's cool for me to visualize now." Haley was able to pinpoint the month of February as "torture for ag teachers - we used to joke that we saw each other more during the month of February than we saw our families." Alex emphasized the "seasons" of the job, explaining that there may be seasons that are "a little more work-heavy" and seasons where "you're going to have more freedom." Leah shared that she copes with these heavy work periods by "knowing that this doesn't last forever, knowing that I just got to get over this hump," and Alex and Robin both mention a "light at the end of the tunnel." Alex took a moment to reflect on the teacher retention issue, sharing, "in five years, how many teachers actually survive...it's very little...because I feel like that [load] is so daunting at the beginning [of teaching] and so large that [new teachers] don't see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teacher margin is critical for professional growth and retention (Marzolino & McKim, 2024b; McClusky, 1963; McKim & McKim, 2023); thus, understanding the professional experiences of agriculture teachers in relation to their margin is critical within a sustainable system of agricultural education. In this study, we explored the workload and margin of agriculture teachers in Michigan. Our analysis had two limitations. First, this study reports the experiences of eight SBAE teachers in a single state; we recognize the limited scope and recommend future work exploring the lived experiences of SBAE teachers in different areas. Second, teacher load and power change daily as well as gradually throughout a career, influenced by acquiring experience and unpredictable life circumstances. Therefore, the data collected in this study are a snapshot that will continually change. Thus, we recommend continued scholarship exploring how SBAE teachers experience margin across career stages and other non-work transitions. As teacher retention remains a consistent issue, developing our understanding of teacher margin, including the current study, will inform strategies for future change.

To synthesize the findings from this study, three emergent conclusions are shared, starting with the Noble Sacrifice Paradox.

The Noble Sacrifice Paradox

The overall theme from this study is *The Teacher's Noble Sacrifice*. This theme describes a mindset participating teachers held containing two dimensions. First, teachers wanted to continually expand their ability to provide plentiful opportunities for students, a noble endeavor. Second, teachers were willing to sacrifice parts of themselves (e.g., time, energy, relationships, health) to achieve that noble endeavor. The paradox of noble sacrifice, however, is the sacrifices required to achieve the ever-expanding noble outputs within agricultural education often erode the ability (i.e., power) of teachers, forcing them to question their future in the profession.

The Experience Conundrum

The "solution" to the noble sacrifice paradox is increasing teacher power while limiting the expansion of outputs expected from the teacher and the program. Expanding power and intentionally managing expectations appear achievable through experience, phrased by participants as the "light at the end of the tunnel." The experience conundrum, however, is teachers find it hard to cling to a non-guaranteed, brighter future when in prolonged periods of margin deficit. The time delay (Marzolino & McKim, 2024b) required when relying solely on experience to build teacher power and margin is untenable

for early career teacher retention. To address this conundrum, we unpack four strategies for increasing teacher power, informed by the experiences of participants in our study.

First, early career teacher power should be built by increasing work efficiency and normalizing firm boundaries. Second, teacher power appears to increase through workload predictability; therefore, mapping the seasonality of work expectations for early career teachers could be an effective way of increasing margin. Third, encouraging teachers to adjust the definition of success away from things that are hard to achieve and reserved for a few teachers/programs (e.g., winning a state contest) to things achievable by all teachers/programs (e.g., building meaningful connections with students, facilitating innovative instruction) may also bolster power. Fourth, teacher power is rooted in community, including students and other SBAE teachers. Thus, empowering these communities to provide support which is authentic and aligned to the vision of teachers is critical to enhancing teacher power.

The Identity Challenge

Teachers in this study appeared to struggle aligning their identity, boundaries, and the expectations of the profession. Teacher identity appeared intertwined with the lofty expectations of productivity and success embedded within the profession. At the same time, teachers articulated the necessity of maintaining boundaries. The identity challenge emerged as the boundaries teachers wanted to establish precluded realizing their achievement-based identity as agricultural educators. This was evident as teachers discussed busy seasons within the profession. These busy seasons yielded power- and identity-affirming student/program success; however, these seasons also created the trials of margin deficit which led teachers to question their future in the profession.

To address the identity challenge, we must critically analyze the interconnections of teacher identity and success to begin untangling being an agriculture teacher from being unable to maintain desired boundaries. To be sure, the interconnectedness of agriculture teacher identity and sacrifice-requiring achievement is strong; thus, the pathway to separating these two will require every actor within the system of agricultural education critically evaluate their role in contributing to the problem. To guide this work, a collective vision for a sustainable agricultural education system in which agriculture teacher *expectations* are reasonable, *boundaries* are permissible, and *identities* are obtainable is recommended.

References

- Berry, B., Bastian, K. C., Darling-Hammond, L., & Kini, T. (2021). The importance of teaching and learning conditions: Influences on teacher retention and school performance in North Carolina.
- Biney, I. K. (2021). McClusky's Theory of Margin and its implications on adult learners in higher education institutions. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 28(1), 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971421989337>
- Buchanan, J., Prescott, A., Schuck, S., Aubusson, P., Burke, P., & Louviere, J. (2013). Teacher retention and attrition: Views of early career teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(3). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n3.9>
- Disberger, B., Washburn, S., Hock, G., & Ulmer, J. (2023). A qualitative analysis of agriculture teacher's attitudinal changes toward the teaching profession in the first three years of teaching. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 64(1), 61–81. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v64i1.30>
- Haddad, B., Velez, J., Stewart, J., & Botkin, H. (2023). That's not in my position description. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 64(3), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v64i3.156>

- Hiemstra, R. (1993). Three underdeveloped models for adult learning. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *An Update on Adult Learning Theory* (Vol. 57, pp. 37–46). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Kalynych, C. J. (2010). *The application of Margin in life theory in regard to attrition and remediation among emergency medicine residents*. University of Northern Florida.
- Kitchel, T. J., Smith, A., Henry, A., Robinson, S., Lawver, R., Park, T., & Schell, A. (2012). Teacher job satisfaction and burnout viewed through social comparisons. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 53(1), 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2012.01031>
- Lambert, M. D., Henry, A. L., & Tummons, J. D. (2011). How do early career agriculture teachers talk about their time? *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 52(3), 50–63. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2011.03050>
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed., pp. 137–142). SAGE.
- Madigan, D. J., & Kim, L. E. (2021). Towards an understanding of teacher attrition: A meta-analysis of burnout, job satisfaction, and teachers' intentions to quit. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 105, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103425>
- Marzolino, T. A., & McKim, A. J. (2024a). Investigating teacher margin and creativity in Michigan. Proceedings of the American Association for Agricultural Education Research Conference, Manhattan, KS, 587-600.
- Marzolino, T. A., & McKim, A. J. (2024b). Retaining school-based agricultural educators: A system dynamics approach. Proceedings of the American Association for Agricultural Education Research Conference, Manhattan, KS, 46-61.
- Maslach, C. (1976). Burned-out. *Human Behavior*, 5(9), 16–22.
- McClusky, H. Y. (1963). The course of the adult life span. In W. C. Hallenback (Ed.), *Psychology of Adults* (pp. 10–20). Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.
- McKibben, J., Clemons, C., & Nurradin, M. (2022). Hybrid vigor: A quantitative analysis of job satisfaction of United States school based secondary agricultural education classrooms. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 63(2), 238–250. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2022.02238>
- McKim, A. J., & McKim, L. K. (2023). Enhancing professional development by increasing agricultural educator margin. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 64(3), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v64i3.48>
- McKim, A. J., & Sorensen, T. J. (2020). Agricultural educators and the pandemic: An evaluation of work and life variables. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 61(4), 214–228. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2020.04214>
- Meadows, D. H. (2008). *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation: Fourth edition*. Jossey-Bass.

- <https://ezproxy.msu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1022562&site=eds-live>
- Moir, E. (1990). *Phases of first-year teaching*. California New Teacher Project.
<https://www.aliefisd.net/cms/lib/TX01917308/Centricity/Domain/140/Phases%20of%20First%20Year%20Teachers%20Text.pdf>
- Morse, J. (2018). Reframing rigor in qualitative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry* (5th ed., pp. 796–818). SAGE Publications.
- Moser, E. M., & McKim, A. J. (2020). Teacher retention: A relational perspective. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 61(2), 263-275. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2020.02263>
- Rittel, H. W. J., Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Shoulders, C. W., Estep, C. M., & Johnson, D. M. (2021). Teachers' stress, coping strategies, and job satisfaction in COVID-induced teaching environments. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 62(4), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2021.04067>
- Smith, A. R., Foster, D. D., & Lawver, R. G. (2023). National agricultural education supply and demand study, 2022 executive summary. Retrieved from:
http://aaaeonline.org/Resources/Documents/NSD_2022Summary.pdf
- Smith, A. R., & Smalley, S. (2018). Job stress, burnout, and professional development needs of mid-career agricultural education teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(2), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.02305>
- Solomonson, J. K., Korte, D. S., Thieman, E. B., Retallick, M. S., & Keating, K. H. (2018). Factors contributing to Illinois school-based agriculture teachers' final decision to leave the classroom. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(2), 321–342. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.02321>
- Solomonson, J. K., & Retallick, M. S. (2018). Over the edge: Factors nudging mid-career, school-based agriculture teachers out of the profession. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(4), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.04001>
- Solomonson, J. K., Still, S., Maxwell, L., & Barrowclough, M. (2022). Exploring relationships between career retention factors and personal and professional characteristics of Illinois agriculture teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 63(2), 119–130. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2022.02119>
- Solomonson, J. K., Thieman, E. B., Korte, D. S., & Retallick, M. S. (2019). Why do they leave and where do they go? A qualitative study of Illinois school-based agriculture teachers who left the profession. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 60(4), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2019.04115>
- Sorensen, T. J., & McKim, A. J. (2014). Perceived work-life balance ability, job satisfaction, and professional commitment among agriculture teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(4), 116–132. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.04116>

- Sorensen, T. J., McKim, A. J., & Velez, J. (2016). A national study of work-family balance and job satisfaction among agriculture teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 57*(4), 146–159. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2016.04146>
- Stevenson, J. S. (1982). Construction of a scale to measure load, power, and margin in life. *Nursing Research, 31*(4), 222–225. https://journals.lww.com/nursingresearchonline/Fulltext/1982/07000/Construction_of_a_Scale_to_Measure_Load,_Power,.9.aspx
- The National FFA Organization. (2022). *FFA statistics*. <https://www.ffa.org/statistics/>
- Torres, R. M., Ulmer, J. D., & Aschenbrener, M. S. (2008). Workload distribution among agriculture teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 49*(2), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2008.02075>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Traini, H., Claflin, K., Stewart, J., & Velez, J. (2019). Success, balance, but never both: Exploring reified forms of success in school-based agricultural education. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 60*(4), 240–254. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2019.04240>
- Walker, W. D., Garton, B. L., & Kitchel, T. J. (2004). Job satisfaction and retention of secondary agriculture teachers. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 45*(2), 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2004.02028>