

# More Than a Lesson: A Qualitative Analysis of Agricultural Educators' Impact on Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences

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## Abstract

*School-based agricultural education (SBAE) has impacted millions of students. In the modern secondary classroom, agricultural educators must navigate external factors, such as students experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These ACEs can have negative repercussions for the afflicted, including an increased risk of medical issues, drug use, and depression if the ACEs are not properly acknowledged. Guided by the Contemporary Trauma Theory, we sought to investigate the role that agricultural educators play in supporting students with ACEs. Using semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 16 agricultural educators from Oklahoma and Louisiana, we inductively used open and axial coding to identify three emergent themes with seven respective subthemes. First, we identified that agricultural educators emotionally support students with ACEs regularly due to the close teacher-student relationships and the socioeconomics of the school district. Agricultural educators also have a desire to support students experiencing ACEs. Secondly, students experiencing ACEs are often drawn to agricultural education because of the rapport with teachers, the experiential nature of the coursework, and the nurturing/inclusive environment in the classrooms. Finally, agricultural educators engage teacher- and school-driven strategies to support students experiencing ACEs. Due to the increased risk of secondary traumatic stress affiliated with emotionally supporting students with childhood trauma, we recommend increasing training for handling ACEs. Additionally, we also recommend cataloging strategies for educators to implement in their classrooms. These strategies can provide guidance to agricultural educators as they navigate emotionally supporting students with ACEs.*

## Review of Literature

School-based agricultural education (SBAE) has impacted millions of students for more than 100 years. This profound impact has influenced students to seek careers in the agricultural industry (National Council for Agricultural Education [NCAE], 2024), become informed consumers of agricultural products, and develop essential employability skills (Copeland et al., 2020; Parrella et al., 2023). While this impact is substantial, agricultural educators must navigate external factors that influence the lives of their students, such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines an ACE as a traumatic experience that occurs between the ages

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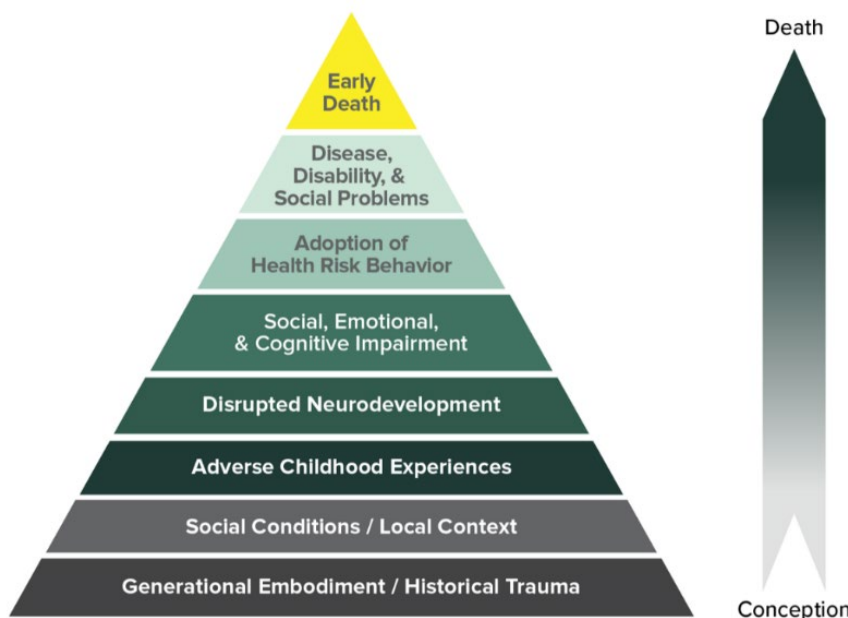
of 0 and 17 years old (CDC, 2022). These traumatic experiences can range from parental divorce/separation, parental neglect, substance abuse in the home, parental incarceration, or physical, verbal, or sexual abuse (CDC, 2022; CDC, 2023; Felitti et al., 1998; Murphey & Sacks, 2019). These experiences can undermine a child’s ability to feel safe, stunt their neurological development, and destabilize their relationship-building mechanisms (Felitti et al., 1998; Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

Childhood through adolescence is critical for proper neurological development as an individual grows into adulthood (Silverman & Hinshaw, 2008). The effect of ACEs can damage these biological processes and cause psychological maldevelopment (Gilbert et al., 2015; Goodman, 2017; Petruccelli et al., 2019). The CDC claims that 61% of adults in the U.S. have experienced at least one ACE, and 17% have four or more ACEs (CDC, 2022). This frequency is less common in certain demographics, with 58.8% of college-educated individuals having at least one ACE and 12.2% having at least four ACEs (Giano et al., 2020). In addition, women have a higher prevalence of ACEs, with 64.0% having at least one and 19.2% having four or more (Giano et al., 2020).

The long-term effects of ACEs can be detrimental to the lifespan of the afflicted individual (see Figure 1; Felitti et al., 1998; Gilbert et al., 2015; Goodman, 2017; Metzler et al., 2017; Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Petruccelli et al., 2019; Reavis et al., 2013). ACEs can lead to higher rates of obesity, diabetes, depression, and cardiovascular disease (Metzler et al., 2017; Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Petruccelli et al., 2019). The high prevalence of negative health outcomes associated with ACEs is coupled with an increase in risky behavior, such as smoking, violent crime, drug use, dropping out of high school, unemployment, and having 50 or more sexual partners in their lifetime (Felitti et al., 1998; Giano et al., 2020; Petruccelli et al., 2019). Furthermore, individuals with four or more ACEs are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, seven times more likely to abuse alcohol, and 10 times more likely to use illicit drugs (Reavis et al., 2013).

**Figure 1**

*Mechanisms Causing Long-Term Health Effects from ACEs*



Mechanism by which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan  
 Note. Model developed by the CDC (2020) and Felitti et al. (1998).

Education professionals using trauma-informed strategies to help students afflicted with ACEs can aid in mitigating their negative effects (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Cavanaugh, 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Pickens & Tschopp, 2017). In fact, Blodgett and Lanigan (2018) purported that “understanding and responding to a child’s ACE profile might be an important strategy for improving the academic trajectory of at-risk children” (p. 2). The most effective trauma-informed intervention is the Teacher-Student Relationship (TSRs; Forster et al., 2017; Keane & Evans, 2022; Stoppelbein et al., 2021). The strong bond that agricultural educators form with their students (Bird et al., 2013; Watson et al., 2015) places them in a unique position to leverage TSRs for the benefit of students facing ACEs (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022). While agricultural educators are uniquely positioned to emotionally support these students (Bird et al., 2013; Schmidt et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2015), most do not feel confident in their ability to provide reassurance and guidance for these circumstances (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024). In fact, 59.8% of agricultural educators had either no confidence or were only somewhat confident in emotionally supporting students who experienced sexual abuse (Question #3 in Felitti et al.’s [1998] ACEs questionnaire), and 47.5% of agricultural educators claimed to have no confidence or are only somewhat confident in emotionally supporting students with a parent facing domestic violence in the home (Question #7; Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024; Felitti et al., 1998). Agricultural educators felt the most confidence emotionally supporting students experiencing issues related to parental divorce and/or separation (Question #6; Felitti et al., 1998; Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024) and parent/guardian neglect (Question #5; Felitti et al., 1998; Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024).

While agricultural educators may not feel confident emotionally supporting students experiencing ACEs, their love for their students is one of the top factors retaining them in their teaching positions (Solomonson et al., 2021). Similarly, Solomonson et al. (2021) determined that a teacher’s attitude toward students and their perceived ability to engage students were two of the top retention factors. Agricultural educators have a deep admiration for their students, which can lead them to worry about their students’ home lives (Schmidt et al., 2022). As a result, Schmidt et al. (2022) determined that agricultural educators internalize a significant amount of secondary traumatic stress and emotional fatigue from their concerns regarding students experiencing ACEs. Secondary traumatic stress is “work-related, secondary exposure to people who have experienced extremely or traumatically stressful events” (Stamm, 2010, p. 13). Additionally, Schmidt et al. (2022) determined that secondary traumatic stress is a significant predictor of burnout, which is one of the leading causes of teacher attrition (Solomonson et al., 2018; Sorenson et al., 2017).

Agricultural educators report spending 58.7 hours per week in their positions teaching students in classroom settings, visiting students’ homes to observe supervised agricultural experience projects, and traveling with students to FFA events (Hainline et al., 2015). This additional time spent with students, and agricultural educators’ profound impact, strengthens the TSR, which allows them to administer emotional support to students experiencing ACEs (Bird et al., 2013; Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2015). In addition to this emotional support, educators have a legal and ethical obligation to report any suspected child abuse (Mathews & Kenny, 2008). This mandated reporting obligation saves thousands of students annually from abusive and neglectful situations (Mathews & Kenny, 2008), but many students will not be removed from their overwhelmingly negative circumstances (Anderson, 2014; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Crosby, 2015; Mathews & Kenny, 2008; Metzler et al., 2017; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Petrucci et al., 2019). While agricultural educators cannot replace professional counselors, the TSR built by educators can be a significant factor in mitigating the negative effects of ACEs (Forster et al., 2017; Keane & Evans, 2022; Stoppelbein et al., 2021), and the agricultural educator can be a vessel for this trauma-informed support (Bird et al., 2013; Schmidt et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2015). Investigating the impact of agricultural educators on students experiencing ACEs can assist in understanding this phenomenon.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to describe the impact that agricultural educators have on students experiencing ACEs. We used the following research objectives to guide the study:

1. Describe agricultural educators' interactions with students experiencing ACEs.
2. Describe if/how students with ACEs are drawn to agricultural education.
3. Assess strategies used by agricultural educators to support students experiencing ACEs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We used the Contemporary Trauma Theory (CTT; Goodman, 2017; Van Der Kolk, 2014; Williams, 2006) as the theoretical framework to guide this study. This theory describes the effects of trauma-informed support on the behavior of individuals experiencing ACEs (Goodman, 2017; Levendosky & Bутtenheim, 2010; Shapiro, 2010). The effects of ACEs can interfere with a "person's sense of control, which may lead to maladaptive internalization of the event. Such maladaptive internalization may result in disturbance to bio-psychosocial functioning, healthy development, and brain performance in regions that are related to emotions, behavior, and executive functioning" (Goodman, 2017, p. 187). The CTT foundation relies on the behavioral changes of the afflicted individual based on their resilience, coping mechanics, and current trauma symptoms (Goodman, 2017). These factors are powerful motivators to modify future behavior and mitigate the long-term negative effects of ACEs (Goodman, 2017).

Because agricultural educators are uniquely positioned to provide critical emotional support to students struggling with ACEs (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024) due to the strong TSRs formed through SBAE (Bird et al., 2013; Forster et al., 2017; Keane & Evans, 2022; Stoppelbein et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2015), the CTT framework provides context for educational support. As a result, the TSR can be a highly effective vessel for trauma-informed support and the CTT (Forster et al., 2017; Keane & Evans, 2022; Stoppelbein et al., 2021). The support from educators can serve as a role model for afflicted students, engage them in their academic endeavors, and provide hope for a better future. Investigating the impact of agricultural educators on students with ACEs can help inform the profession of this phenomenon.

### **Methodology**

We used a phenomenological case study design to address the study's research objectives (Groenewald, 2004). Guided by the phenomenological goal of condensing individual experiences to describe universal themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the context of the study allowed participants to share their personal interactions with childhood trauma and potential ACE experience(s). Because most ACE scenarios are highly sensitive and unique, we engaged a case study approach to yield an in-depth understanding of the complex issues through the lens of agricultural educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Population**

We purposively recruited participants from Oklahoma and Louisiana as both states ranked higher than the national average of adults with ACE experiences (CDC, 2022) and had open-access agricultural educator databases. Using these online databases, we forwarded a recruitment email requesting participation to research the effects of educators' experiences supporting students who may/may not experience trauma. Sixteen ( $f = 16$ ) agricultural educators accepted the semi-structured interview invitation, including 11 ( $f = 11$ ) from Oklahoma and five ( $f = 5$ ) from Louisiana (see Table 1). Fourteen (88%) participants were female, 13 (81%) were White/Caucasian, 12 (75%) taught in a rural school district, and 12 (75%) held a bachelor's degree as their highest degree earned. We assigned each participating educator a pseudonym identifier to provide anonymity (Allen & Wiles, 2015).

**Table 1***Demographics of Participants*

Identifier	State	Years of Teaching Experience	Ethnicity	# of SBAE Teachers in School	School Description	Highest Degree Earned
F1- Ella	Oklahoma	1	African American	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F2- Joy	Oklahoma	3	Native American	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F3- Kay	Oklahoma	1	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F4- Cora	Louisiana	8	White	1	Rural	Master's
F5- Mila	Louisiana	1	White	3	Urban	Bachelor's
F6- Lola	Louisiana	5	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F7- Luna	Oklahoma	11	White	3	Suburban	Master's
F8- Jean	Oklahoma	2	White	3	Suburban	Bachelor's
F9- Tess	Oklahoma	6	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F10- Ivy	Louisiana	7	White	1	Rural	Master's
F11- Mia	Oklahoma	1	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F12- Eve	Oklahoma	3	Native American	2	Suburban	Bachelor's
F13- Ava	Louisiana	10	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
F14- Jill	Oklahoma	1	White	1	Rural	Master's
M1- Tim	Oklahoma	6	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's
M2- Jon	Oklahoma	17	White	1	Rural	Bachelor's

Seven participants' (43.8%) schools qualified for free and reduced lunch, seven participants (43.8%) taught in Title One schools, and two participants (12.5%) taught in a school with more than 50% minority enrollment (see Table 2; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

**Table 2***Participants' School Demographics*

Identifier	Free & Reduced Lunch%	Title One School	Minority Enrollment%
F1- Ella	58%	Yes	25%
F2- Joy	72%	Yes	49%
F3- Kay	40%	Yes	64%
F4- Cora	0.3%	Yes	19%
F5- Mila	18%	No	34%
F6- Lola	58%	Yes	65%
F7- Luna	24%	No	45%
F8- Jean	24%	No	45%
F9- Tess	40%	No	38%
F10- Ivy	43%	Yes	26%
F11- Mia	74%	No	44%
F12- Eve	26%	No	49%
F13- Ava	67%	Yes	7%
F14- Jill	51%	No	48%
M1- Tim	73%	No	41%
M2- Jon	27%	No	27%

*Note.* Statistics reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2024).

In the demographic questionnaire, we asked participants to describe their personal ACE experiences based on Felitti et al.'s (1998) 10 ACE experiences (see Table 3).

**Table 3***Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Questionnaire*

Question #1	Did a parent or other adult in the household often: Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
Question #2	Did a parent or other adult in the household often: Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? Or, ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
Question #3	Did an adult or person at least five years older than you ever: Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? Or, attempt or have sexual intercourse with you?
Question #4	Did you often feel that: No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
Question #5	Did you often feel that: You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? Or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
Question #6	Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
Question #7	Were any of your parents or other adult caregivers: Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at them? Or sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
Question #8	Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
Question #9	Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?
Question #10	Did a household member go to prison?

*Note.* Adapted from Felitti et al. (1998).

Fourteen (87.5%) participants had experienced at least one ACE scenario, and six (37.5%) experienced four or more (see Table 4). Two (12.5%) participants did not report any personal ACE experiences.

**Table 4**

*Number of ACEs Experienced by the Participating Agricultural Educators (n = 16)*

# of ACE Experiences	# of Agricultural Educators	% of Agricultural Educators
0	2	
1	2	12.5%
2	3	18.8%
3	3	18.8%
4	5	31.3%
5	1	6.3%

*Note.* We provided a list of Felitti et al.'s (1998) 10 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the demographic survey, and participants selected which ACE(s) they personally experienced.

Using Felitti et al.'s (1998) 10 ACEs questions, we gauged the participants' overall experience with each scenario (see Table 5). Participants ( $f = 10$ ; 62.5%) most experienced Question #1, "Did a parent or other adult in the household often: Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?" Next, participants ( $f = 9$ ; 56.3%) most experienced Question #9, "Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?" No participants ( $f = 0$ ; 0%) had experience with Question #5, "Did you often feel that: You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?"

**Table 5**

*Personal ACE Experiences of Participating Agricultural Educators (n = 16)*

Question	Yes ( <i>f</i> )	%	No ( <i>f</i> )	%
Question #1	10	62.5	6	37.5
Question #2	4	25.0	12	75.0
Question #3	1	6.3	15	93.8
Question #4	3	18.8	13	81.3
Question #5	0	0.0	16	100.0
Question #6	6	37.5	10	62.5
Question #7	2	12.5	14	87.5
Question #8	9	56.3	7	43.8
Question #9	6	37.5	10	62.5
Question #10	1	6.3	15	93.8

*Note.* Participants answered yes or no regarding personal experience with Felitti et al.'s (1998) 10 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questions.

### **Data Collection**

Guided by a naturalistic approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), two members of the research team conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with participants from Oklahoma and Louisiana (see Table 6). Participants first completed a demographic survey and questionnaire regarding their personal ACE experiences (Felitti et al., 1998), and then completed the semi-structured interviews via Zoom.

**Table 6**

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

ACE Area	Semi-Structured Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal Abuse</li> <li>• Physical Abuse</li> <li>• Sexual Abuse</li> <li>• Parental Mental Illness</li> <li>• Parental Absence Due to Incarceration</li> <li>• Parental Neglect</li> <li>• Parental Drug/Alcohol Abuse</li> <li>• Lack of Emotional Support at Home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever taught student(s) who has/have experienced _____?</li> <li>• If so, did you notice if these students were drawn toward agricultural education? Why or why not?</li> <li>• Did the student(s) ever confide in you about their situation(s)?</li> <li>• What strategies have you found successful when supporting these students?</li> </ul>

*Note.* Because we used a semi-structured process, we asked follow-up questions when necessary.

**Data Analysis**

We used an inductive data analysis process to identify emergent themes once we met saturation (Bryman, 2016). Using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), we manually used open and axial coding to identify subthemes, followed by theoretical coding to identify central phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, we used exemplary statements from participants to support each theme (Bryman, 2016). We transcribed the interviews using Otter.ai (2023) and conducted member checking by forwarding the transcriptions to the participants to seek accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). To further enhance trustworthiness and confirmability, we triangulated the data by analyzing the transcriptions, field notes, and entries from a reflexive journal (Nowell et al., 2017). Certainly, a limitation of qualitative case studies is the generalizability of the findings. However, the 16 respondents provided rich descriptions that met saturation (Bryman, 2016) despite the unique nature of the study, which further supported the need for this case study investigation (Groenewald, 2004).

**Findings**

We sought to describe the impact that agricultural educators have on students experiencing ACEs using three research objectives.

**Research Objective 1: Describe Agricultural Educators’ Interactions with Students Experiencing ACEs**

Three subthemes supported the primary theme for research objective one that “agricultural educators emotionally support students with ACEs regularly.”

**Teacher-Student Relationships**

All participating agricultural educators ( $f = 16$ ) described their experiences of emotionally supporting students with ACEs. Most emotional support was initiated through the TSR. The participating agricultural educators built TSR through communicating with students about their lives (F3, F4, F13, M2). Kay (F3) said, “I try to talk to them individually every day and after school, and if they are struggling with

something, I talk to them about it. It is just trying to build a relationship with them.” Cora (F4) said, “I try to build relationships with them to know what's going on in their lives,” and Jon (M2) said, “I have had to fill in as a parent figure for a lot of students.” The TSR is particularly unique for agricultural educators because of the extra time spent with students (F2, F4, F13). Joy (F2) described it as, “I think it really boils down to the amount of time that [agricultural educators] spend with students in and out of the classroom,” and Lola (F6) said, “I have [students] from 6th to 12th grade ... for students that I teach over the course of time, especially for multiple years, I usually have really good relationships with them. I feel like that draws them towards [*sic*] agricultural education.” Similarly, Cora (F4), a former science teacher, also noted, “I have students that I have had three, four, or five times, and it just seems like you get to build a better and deeper relationship than teachers that only have them for a semester or a year.” Cora (F4) continued to explain, “It just seems like you get to pour more into them, which helps them to be more open to talk to agricultural teachers.” Finally, Ava (F13) said, “I especially think Ag teachers [have an impact] because usually we have them for more than one year. So, I think we end up being a role model.” This extended relationship with agricultural educators allowed students to build stronger relationships with their teachers.

Some of the less experienced educators noted that they have not had the time to develop TSRs as compared to their more experienced colleagues (F5, F8, F14). For example, Mila (F5) said, “This is only my second-year teaching. I have not encountered [TSR opportunities] in many students,” and Jill (F14) noted, “I’m new to the school. A lot of [students] don't know me, and they've been at this school since they were in kindergarten ... a lot of them have not gotten to that point of coming to me with their issues.” Additionally, Jean (F8), a second-year teacher, said, “I am young in my profession ... but I have a lot of energy, and I am kind of crazy in my classroom. I think that helps get students excited, but also helps pull them out of their shell.” Nevertheless, agricultural educators reported that the TSR is often the reason students confide in them about ACEs.

### ***Socioeconomics of the School***

Some participating agricultural educators reported that the socioeconomics of the school often played a role in how frequently they interacted with students facing ACEs (F6, F9, F11, M1). Several educators reflected on their previous employment locations to draw comparisons to their current schools. Tim (M1) said, “This is kind of a lower income school ... this school has a lot of poverty compared to other places I have [taught]. It's been a learning experience to navigate through some of the stuff with them.” Comparably, Lola (F6) said, “A lot of our students have rough home lives. We are in a low socioeconomic area. We are a Title One school.” Tess (F9), an educator who just changed school districts, observed, “I think it's the change in districts. I think it's geographic location. I think it's the poverty here.” Tess (F9) continued to elaborate by noting, “This is by far the smallest and most rural school I have ever taught in ... I have seen [poverty] in a few of my students in every school, but the prevalence here is so much more.” When discussing student homelessness, Mia (F11) said, “This is the most I've ever had. It's my third school, and I have six kids just this year [who are homeless].” Participating agricultural educators also reported that the demographics of the school impacted the frequency with which they interacted with students experiencing ACEs. See Table 2 for school demographics from the participating agricultural educators.

### ***Agricultural Educators' Desire to Support Students Experiencing ACEs***

Agricultural educators reported that they desired to help students struggling with ACEs (F1, F3, F11, F12). Supporting this concept, Mia (F11) stated, “No one tells you how emotionally heavy teaching is ... you just want to pick them up and take kids home with you, and you can't. No matter how bad you want to, it's just not something you can do.” Eve (F12) said, “I love my kids more than anything, and I tell them that every day.” While educators admire their students experiencing ACEs, they often feel incapable of properly supporting them, which leads to worrisome and stressful feelings (F1, F3). Ella (F1) described those feelings as, “I really felt uncomfortable at first ... I have just never been very good at comforting

people. I do care to listen. I always want to listen, but sometimes ... you just never know what the right thing is to say.” Moreover, Kay (F3) stated, “I think about my students all the time, but I am in a stage of life where I can do that because I don't have a family or a spouse ... I come home, and I worry about them.”

## **Research Objective 2: Describe If/How Students with ACEs are Drawn to Agricultural Education**

The primary theme that emerged for research objective two was that “students experiencing ACEs are drawn to agricultural education.” Three subthemes supported this finding.

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships***

Several agricultural educators reported that students with ACEs were drawn to SBAE (F5, F6, F7, M2). The primary driver for students with ACEs to be drawn to agricultural education was their relationship with the agricultural educator. Lola (F6) stated, “I have some [students] that want to take [SBAE] because, for some reason, they like me as a teacher.” Engaging the TSR can be an effective motivator to draw students with ACEs into the SBAE program. Tim (M1) said, “I tend to find [a better connection] with the kids saying, ‘Why are we here? This is just an elective. This is dumb. I don't need to know about agriculture.’ And it almost becomes easier ... to draw them in.” When discussing the impact of the TSR, Luna (F7) stated, “There's always those kids who are withdrawn at first. Typically, whenever they've had those kinds of [ACE] scenarios, they really gravitate toward the program and to us as teachers because they feel connected.” Mila (F5) also stated:

Yeah, they tell me all the time. They're like, ‘Miss, what are you teaching next year? Okay. I'm going take this course because you're teaching it.’ It's not just me. It's all the teachers in our program because we are a three-teacher program. And, we all have students in each of our classes that take it solely because they like us as teachers.

In short, students with ACE experiences feel comfortable with agricultural educators due to the time invested in the TSR. Luna (F7) stated, “[Students] know that we care, and they feel comfortable.”

### ***Experiential Nature of Agricultural Education***

Participants attributed the experiential and hands-on nature of agricultural education as an aspect that draws students with ACEs to SBAE (F1, F3, F8, F9, M1). Jean (F8) stated, “Many of those students [with ACEs] are typically drawn toward trade-based jobs ... we are all about hands-on learning in career tech. I definitely see a higher population that have had Adverse Childhood Experiences go on to that route.” When discussing the impact of SBAE's experiential nature, Ella (F1) stated, “They're constantly doing stuff. They're up moving. And, I think they really enjoy that because they struggle with being in a chair all day, and I feel like most classes are a lot of just sitting down and listening.” The technical skills taught in SBAE provide students struggling with ACEs the hope of a brighter future. Kay (F3) stated, “Learning these skills helps students who are struggling at home because it gives them something to do, and it could spark an interest in a career, which maybe they're not talking about. They're not having those conversations at home.” When discussing students struggling with ACEs gaining technical skills, Tess (F9) stated, “I have actually had some students admit that they come to Ag, even though they don't have an Ag background, because they feel like it can give them some livable skills.” In many instances, students felt that agricultural education was a ticket that could get them out of their negative home situations (F9). Tess (F9) elaborated:

[Students with ACEs] want to get a good job. They want to be able to weld. They want to be able to go straight to the oil field with some employable skills, so ‘I can get the [blank] out of here.’ I get that a lot. They want to be better. They need to make money. They need to do things better than their parents did. They want things for life.

### ***Nurturing and Inclusive Nature of Agricultural Education***

Multiple agricultural educators discussed SBAE being an inclusive program that allows students with ACEs to feel safe, comfortable, and welcome (F3, F5, M1, M2). For example, Kay (F3) stated, “I think that students who have experienced trauma in their life are drawn to and engaged in agricultural education because of its culture. It is the way it’s shaped to help students throughout high school.” Mila (F5) also noted, “I have several kids that come to school and use it as a safe place. A lot of teachers have created a strong relationship with them as far as being able to talk to them through any situation.” Certainly, in many scenarios, students who have ACE(s) experience(s) need a safe retreat away from their scenarios (F3, F5, M1, M2). Jon (M2) stated, “Students with a bad home life or a bad parent experience are definitely drawn to agricultural education ... at least in Oklahoma, because, you know, FFA gives you such a positive atmosphere.” Several agricultural educators reported students struggling with ACEs using SBAE as a reason to avoid issues at home (F1, F2, F9). Ella (F1) stated, “I think it could be because being involved in my classes are an easy way to spend less time at home because they are able to spend less time with whoever may be causing them harm.” Similarly, Joy (F2) noted, “Yes, I’ve noticed that the students really don’t want to be home.” In many instances, SBAE served as one of the only positive elements in students with ACEs lives (F1, F2, F9). For example, when discussing the impact SBAE makes in the lives of students struggling with ACEs, Tess (F9) stated:

I currently have a student who, him and his younger sister rotate who sleeps on the couch and who sleeps on the bed, so they do not have to sleep with the bed beetles because they bite. That kid is not a member of any of my competitive teams, but he stays after school for every practice because he knows I am going to feed him, and he does not have to go home until 5:30 [PM] instead of 3:00 [PM].

### **Research Objective 3: Assess Strategies used by Agricultural Educators to Support Students Experiencing ACEs**

Agricultural educators use a multitude of strategies to support students experiencing ACEs, which is supported by one subtheme.

#### ***Teacher- and School-Driven Strategies***

The participating agricultural educators reported numerous strategies to emotionally support students struggling with ACEs and engage them in SBAE (F2, F5, F6, F9, F10, M1). These strategies include both teacher- and school-driven approaches. Many of these ideas involve an agricultural educator spending their personal money (e.g., providing meals on trips, supplying needed hygiene items, etc.; F2, F9, M1, M2). Furthermore, these items provide educators with actionable items to specifically help students struggling with ACEs navigate their overwhelmingly negative situations (see Table 7).

**Table 7***Strategies Used by Agricultural Educators to Support Students with ACEs*

Strategies	Example Exemplary Statements
Providing Hygiene Items	"I keep hygiene items. I keep things like that, mainly for Ag trips, but I have had students who have noticed, and I encourage them to take things with them if they need them."- Joy (F2)
Being Active in the Community	"I am very active in the community. Whenever there's a home basketball game, home volleyball game, or a home sporting event, I'm typically there. And so, I think that helps draw them in."- Tim (M1)
Purchasing Meals on Trips	"It doesn't bother me to buy a meal. I am willing to do that because I know that if I'm willing to do that, they're going to be a lot more willing to go into a contest."- Tim (M1)
Keeping Food Items in Classroom	"I blame it on me being hypoglycemic, but I keep food in my classroom at all times. I feed my babies [students] often."- Tess (F9)
Providing Official Dress and Supplies in a Closet	"We have an official dress supply room that just has a bunch of official dress in it. I hang shoes and clothes in there that get donated to me."- Jon (M2)
Providing Teacher Affirmations	"I learned this from a teacher ... he told them, 'I love you,' and 'I am proud of you. I want to make sure that you're hearing this every day from an adult in your life.' Me and my teaching partner decided that was the kind of culture that we wanted to build, as well."- Mia (F11)
Utilizing Counselors	"The school is pretty blessed. Our counselor is fantastic."- Joy (F2)
Maintaining a School Clothes Closet	"We have what we call 'the closet,' and it's all donated, school-approved clothes, and students can go and shop out of it."- Mila (F5)
Offering Free Meals at School	"Our school offers free lunch, free breakfast, and there's an after-school program where they're able to take meals home with them."- Lola (F6)
Engaging a "Hope Squad"	"My school has a program called the 'Hope Squad' that has helped a lot. That's a team of students, and they get trained in talking with students who face these kinds of struggles."- Ivy (F10)

*Note.* These strategies are a summary of some of the details the agricultural educators shared when asked about strategies to support students who might face or who have faced ACEs.

### Discussions and Conclusions

Agricultural educators have a profound impact on students with ACEs, which also supports Norris and Norris-Parish's (2024) findings that agricultural educators are uniquely positioned to connect with students who have experienced or who are currently experiencing ACEs. The agricultural educator facilitates this impact by emotionally supporting students through enhanced TSRs, which allow students to feel comfortable and included in agricultural education. Conversely, while agricultural educators are uniquely positioned to form these TSRs, Norris and Norris-Parish (2024) also determined that many agricultural educators do not feel confident in their ability to emotionally support students through ACEs, despite the numerous strategies they employ to engage these students. Specifically, the range of confidence spanned from 47.6% of educators claiming to be very confident or extremely confident in their ability to support students facing parental divorce with only 16.4% of educators reporting they are very confident or extremely confident to support students facing sexual abuse (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024). This lack of confidence to support students with ACEs is coupled with the legality associated with the support (Hainline et al., 2019). Secondary agricultural educators are legally required to report any suspected abuse to the

appropriate authorities (Hainline et al., 2019; Mathews & Kenny, 2008). Additionally, some conversations regarding ACEs could be viewed as unprofessional or inappropriate, causing legal or administrative intervention. These potential legal repercussions could cause some educators to lack confidence when supporting students navigating these issues. Despite this lack of confidence, Norris and Norris-Parish (2024) also found that participating SBAE teachers reported interacting and supporting students with ACEs regularly. The participating educators reported that trust and rapport were common elements drawing students with ACEs to agricultural education. This trust is further developed through nurturing and inclusive TSRs, which is congruent with the findings of Forster et al. (2017) and Keane and Evans (2022). Utilizing the CTT (Goodman, 2017) could assist agricultural educators when leveraging trust and rapport to improve coping skills, foster personal development, and ultimately, mitigate the negative effects of ACEs.

Agricultural education appeals to students who desire more hands-on, technical-focused education, which also appeals to students with ACEs experiences. The experiential nature of agricultural education provides authentic experiences that engage students in interactive instruction (Baker et al., 2012). Several of the participating educators (F1, F3, F9) identified that their students facing ACEs were actively searching for a path to a better future and that agricultural education provided those students with the employability and technical skills to better themselves. Trauma-informed care has proven to be effective at moderating the risks associated with ACEs (Cavanaugh, 2016; Crosby, 2015; Goodman, 2017; Pickens & Tschopp, 2017). These students' intrinsic motivation for self-improvement, coupled with strong TSRs and agricultural education facilitating the development of critical skills, could help mitigate the negative long-term health risks associated with ACEs.

While agricultural educators are distinctively situated to support students with ACEs, it can take a toll on their mental health and cause secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue (Schmidt et al., 2022), which also emerged with agricultural educators' lack of confidence in handling these situations (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024). Schmidt et al. (2022) also found a positive association between secondary traumatic stress and the burnout of agricultural educators. This could lead to further complications by exacerbating the long-standing teacher attrition issue facing SBAE (Schmidt et al., 2022). Finally, like Blodgett and Lanigan's (2018) study, agricultural educators noted several personal strategies to assist students facing childhood trauma, such as providing personal funds to purchase student essentials, like hygiene items, meals on trips, supplies, and clothes. The extra money expended, coupled with relatively low teacher salaries (Hanushek, 2016), could create additional stress for SBAE teachers. Participants also noted that helping students see the bigger picture of service by getting involved in their community and providing peer and teacher affirmations helps redirect students' focus to serving rather than their circumstances. This redirection provides critical insight into helping students cope and ultimately heal from their potentially traumatic past.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

All participating agricultural educators noted numerous occasions where they personally supported students with ACEs. Due to the increased risk of secondary traumatic stress (Schmidt et al., 2022) associated with supporting students facing childhood trauma, we recommend increasing training for handling ACE scenarios. Particularly, if teachers do not feel confident handling these situations (Norris & Norris-Parish, 2024), associated worry can intensify. Professional development targeting this topic could assist with mitigating any legal and ethical concerns held by educators. In addition to professional development for in-service educators, training on how to handle ACEs situations in preservice teacher education could also better equip educators to assist this vulnerable population. Due to agricultural educators' strong TSRs, it is imperative for administration and professional organizations to support training opportunities to connect students experiencing ACEs with counselors, community programs, or other resources to help them navigate personal scenarios, and, in turn, mitigate undue stress on agricultural educators.

Similarly, if an educator may be coping with former trauma in his/her personal lives, we recommend implementing support resources to help those educators reach acceptance of his/her ACE experiences. While not every agricultural educator has personal experience with ACEs, Norris and Norris-Parish (2024) found that 50.8% of SBAE teachers have at least one ACE, and 10.2% have four or more ACEs. Proper resources provided to these educators could possibly increase their acceptance of their trauma and help mitigate any long-term health risks. Finally, cataloging additional specific strategies that agricultural educators have found helpful would provide actionable items for agricultural educators to implement into their classrooms.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study provided tangible strategies agricultural educators can use to support students with ACEs. Assessing the strategies of agricultural educators in other states would be beneficial in providing educators with actionable steps for support. These actionable steps could provide agricultural educators with more confidence to support students with ACEs. Furthermore, assessing agricultural education's influence on the employability and technical skill acquisition of students with ACEs and how that impacts their career trajectory could lead to further support of agricultural education's impact. Finally, we recommend investigating the repercussions of ACEs that agricultural educators observe in classroom behavior, which could assist in discovering solutions for potential discipline issues that may arise.

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