

# The Role of Collaboration in Secondary Agriculture Teacher Career Satisfaction and Career Retention

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*The teaching profession is not without its share of challenges. Many teachers enter the professional ranks only to immediately search for the nearest exit. Teacher socialization has been shown to improve teachers' professional outlooks, slowing the exodus. In this phenomenological study, nine interviews were conducted with three experienced, mid-career, secondary agriculture teachers. Two questions guided the research: How do experienced secondary agriculture teachers (1) perceive and (2) experience the role of teacher collaboration in their career satisfaction and retention? Findings suggest professional collaboration had a positive impact on teachers' career satisfaction, lessening the impact of challenges related to dissatisfaction and leading to greater retention.*

**Keywords:** teacher collaboration; teacher retention; agricultural education; experienced teachers; career satisfaction

Teaching is described as an uncertain profession, a condition which “fuels a teacher’s dissatisfaction” (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 584). Shrinking budgets, rising expectations, growing learning demands, isolating cultures, and a less than flattering image perpetuated by the media are all well documented challenges for teachers (Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, & Billingsley, 1995; Greiman, Walker, & Birkenholz, 2005). Unaddressed, these issues chip away at a teacher’s career satisfaction and ultimately erode their willingness to remain in the classroom (Chenevey, Ewing & Whittington, 2008). This is particularly troubling considering the retention of quality teachers is important to learners and the learning environment. According to Joerger and Bremer (2001), a teacher’s experience follows the student’s level of reading achievement when determining that student’s potential for academic success.

Agricultural education, like the broader discipline, is suffering through its own teacher shortage trend (Kantrovich, 2010). Nationally, a deficit of qualified agriculture teachers exists and continues to occur each year. The unique structure of the secondary agricultural education program model presents agriculture teachers with additional responsibilities not required of

teachers in other content areas (Greiman et al., 2005; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004; Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2007). Failure to succeed in mastering the classroom, FFA, Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) and other program management duties can contribute to teacher frustration and isolation, as well as to increases in teacher shortages (Boone & Boone, 2007; Fritz & Miller, 2003; Greiman et al., 2005).

The social aspect of teaching is known to contribute to a teacher’s decision to persist (Hargreaves, 2001). Collaboration and collegiality help teachers develop throughout their careers (Hargreaves, 1994), motivate them to return each year (Boone & Boone, 2007), and mitigate professional isolation (Greiman et al., 2005; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001). Isolation proves especially detrimental to professional commitment when derived from barriers and conflict (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). By pulling teachers from their classroom islands and placing them in the school interface, they have the opportunity to forge relationships with their peers through sharing and problem solving. When interaction is based on their

needs, teachers view it as important and useful (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Teacher collaboration affords professional educators the chance to work together in the co-construction of both products and knowledge (Butler, Novak Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004). The strength of teacher collaboration as a tool for teacher learning rests on the fact it has the capacity to help teachers concentrate their collective efforts on a professional problem they face, rather than one identified for them by their administrators or leaders (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). With concerns surrounding the supply of qualified secondary agriculture teachers at the forefront of the profession's challenges (Doerfert, 2011), teacher collaboration may provide some hope to help teachers stay the course and maintain their career commitment.

### Theoretical Framework

Wenger's social theory of learning (2006) maintains learning is *social participation* (p. 4). Learning occurs by actively taking part in the community and forming identity within that context. Learning involves communicating about how meaning is drawn, how support is applied, how proficiency is demonstrated, and how an individual evolves relative to the community. Wenger's theory can be applied to teacher collaboration as it reflects the presence of learning in, and contributing to, the collective.

The social theory of learning supports the outcomes in a study of two professional development projects using teacher collaboration as the goal (Erickson, Brandes, Mitchell & Mitchell, 2005). Through collaboration, teachers generated both practical and formal knowledge. These products helped them professionalize their practice and enlighten their larger educational communities when they shared the information beyond the project groups. The collaborative culture generated in these environments showcased the high level of commitment each teacher extended to the peers with whom they worked. The collaborative relationships formed contributed to the teachers' overall career satisfaction.

Teacher collaboration is a tool involving the coordinated work of individuals toward a common goal, often based on a common "history and culture" (Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008, p. 2). The culture of teacher collaboration is "spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable" (Hargreaves, 1994, pp. 192–193). Teacher collaboration has been proposed as an effective cure for teacher isolation, poor student performance, and lagging professional development (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Teacher collaboration has the potential to increase professional commitment among teachers and positively impact their career satisfaction (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Weiss, 1999). Despite these benefits, teacher collaboration is not common practice in many schools (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002).

Kardos and Johnson (2007) surveyed first and second year teachers about the experiences they had working in their schools and with their colleagues. Many participants worked in isolationist cultures where they were expected to perform at the level of an expert teacher, without having received support from a professional development network. They also reported few teachers worked toward the common school mission and failed to share responsibility for all students. These findings expose the neglect many early career teachers endure and highlight the opportunity for reducing teacher frustration to promote retention beyond the early years of teaching.

Williams et al. (2001) examined school culture and established a continuum related to collaboration during teacher induction. The *individualistic culture* had many new teachers planning to terminate their employment and seek work in a new school, due to the physical and philosophical distance they felt from other professionals. The *structural culture* provided formal opportunities for collaborative development but based them on programmatic requirements and needs, rather than on those of the new teachers. The *spontaneous culture* involved collaborative opportunities generated by, and shared among, the faculty. Experiences

related to this final culture generated the greatest levels of career satisfaction.

Johnson and Birkeland (2003) noted new teacher movement was often based on the search for a collaborative, collegial school culture. A collaborative culture generated greater career satisfaction and retention of new teachers following their first years in the classroom. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) found the interaction beginning teachers had with other professionals provided emotional support, broadened their educational focus beyond survival, and taught them how to maintain high expectations. These elements contributed to their generally positive regard for the profession and were important to their decisions to remain in teaching the following year.

Collaboration also occurs throughout the teaching career. Roberts, Murphy and Edgar (2010) noted its recurring presence within a student teaching cohort as they worked with members of the group. Boone and Boone (2007) cited agricultural education's *professional brotherhood* as the standard by which teachers weighed their willingness to remain throughout their careers (p. 564). Chenevey et al. (2008) found older teachers were less likely to leave teaching and their desire to remain grew with each passing year, when collaboration was part of their professional experiences. Furthermore, as these teachers expanded their arsenal of resources, their feelings of anxiety and incompetence were diminished.

### Purpose

High rates of teacher turnover have beckoned researchers to examine the issue of teacher retention. The Agricultural Education profession has identified the supply of qualified agriculture teachers ready to perform their duties as a priority for research (Doerfert, 2011) as well as practice. Previous research in the agricultural education literature has reported teachers benefit from interaction with other educational professionals in a variety of contexts (Balschweid, Thompson & Cole, 2000; Boone & Boone, 2007; Greiman et al., 2005; Park, Moore, & Rivera, 2007; Roberts & Dyer, 2004; Roberts, Murphy & Edgar, 2010; Warnick, Thompson, & Gummer, 2004). However, there is little

research providing a thorough examination of teacher collaboration as a method impacting career satisfaction and retention. The purpose of the present study was to describe the phenomenon of teacher collaboration from the perspectives of three secondary agriculture teacher participants. The following questions were examined: How do experienced secondary agriculture teachers (1) perceive, and (2) experience the role of teacher collaboration in their career satisfaction and retention?

### Methods

Qualitative methodology and the phenomenological research approach were selected due to the individualized research focus. Phenomenology seeks to discover both what is happening in the lived experiences of participants and uncovers the meaning they have drawn from them. The goal is to identify the essence of the phenomenon and how it relates to others (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology casts off inherited meaning and places one's perceptions aside to receive experiences in a new way (Crotty, 2003) resulting in richer, more all-encompassing meaning.

The standards of rigor were addressed through accepted qualitative means (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). To establish credibility, the researchers completed thorough subjectivity statements, identifying bias related to teaching, collaboration, and career satisfaction. The rich description of participants and their professional contexts addressed transferability. An audit trail, detailing all decisions made throughout the study was maintained to assure dependability. Last, confirmability was achieved through member checks and peer review to ensure all decisions were data driven.

The Life Cycle of a Career Teacher model (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000) was used to identify the teacher participant pool. This six phase model of a teacher's career development includes: (1) novice – teachers at the pre-service level, (2) apprentice – induction teachers in the early stages of the career, (3) professional – inducted teachers with a student-centered focus, (4) expert – teacher leaders with commitment to student growth, reflection and professional

development, (5) distinguished – gifted teachers who maintain the respect of the profession and have made an impact on it at various levels, and (6) emeritus – teachers who have retired from a lifetime in the career. As there is no timetable marking advancement; a teacher achieves movement through the phases by displaying actions related to reflection, renewal and growth (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

Criterion-based sampling was used to select participants. An expert panel, comprised of agricultural education faculty from the University of Florida, identified potential participants based on the teachers' collaborative reputations and their placement on the Life Cycle of a Career Teacher model (Steffy et al., 2000). Participants represented a small sector of Florida's mid-career secondary agriculture teaching population. Mid-career teachers were defined as having taught approximately 15 years, and were in the *expert* and *distinguished* phases of their careers. All four participants were recognized as leaders among the state's teachers and possessed additional factors of interest including: one alternately certified teacher, two teachers who completed a secondary agriculture program, one teacher who entered teaching as a second career and both genders were included. They also surpassed the point when teachers typically exit and could provide insight about teacher collaboration up to their current phases in the career. Teachers from later phases were not included as they were significantly removed from the point of exit.

Qualitative studies seek depth and richness of data and the trade-off is often a smaller sample size (Ary et al., 2006). The expert panel selected one teacher to pilot-test the interview guide and identified three to participate in the full study. A semi-structured interview guide was reviewed by the expert panel, piloted and refined. The Seidman (2006) interview technique was used, resulting in a series of three interviews of each participant, with nine total interviews comprising the study. Each interview was conducted at the school of each participant and lasted approximately one hour. The researchers refrained from sharing their definition of *collaboration*, to ensure the participants' stories were authentic and did not carry re-

searcher bias. The time between interview rounds averaged two weeks.

Consistent with the Seidman technique, the goal of interview session one was to reveal a focused life history of participants relative to the phenomenon. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with collaboration during their pre-service teaching program. During the second round, the researchers began each interview by sharing a brief summary of the participant's previously stated experiences with collaboration. The intent of round two was to draw out details of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Participants were asked to tell about those teachers with whom they collaborate, how they began their collaborations and the specific areas in which they tend to collaborate. They were also asked to consider how collaboration impacted them professionally. The third interview session began with a summary of the second interview and then prompted overall reflection about the phenomenon. Participants were invited to consider, based on their own experiences, what promotes collaboration. They were also asked to describe how collaboration has impacted their perspectives of the profession and how these relationships with other teachers have helped them to remain committed.

Immediately following the interviews, transcripts were generated and cross-checked with field notes and recordings, then given to participants to check for accuracy. Data were analyzed using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers reviewed their subjectivity statements before open-coding each transcript. Themes were generated from the open-codes and textural statements involving the grand elements of the phenomenon were developed for each interview series. Researchers returned to the transcripts to describe how the experience happened for the participants through structural statements. Composite textural and structural statements were created across participants and a textural-structural statement synthesized collective meanings and essences of the phenomenon. Member checks were completed at each stage, to ensure participant agreement with researcher synthesis and decision-making.

Perceived limitations to the study were identified and measures were taken to minimize them. The risk of leaking researcher bias into the work is an ever-present limitation (Crotty, 2003). The researchers are former secondary teachers with their own perceptions of the secondary agriculture teacher career. To protect the purity of participant data, the research team used member checks, peer review, and completed thorough subjectivity statements to bracket personal bias (Moustakas, 1994). These measures helped the researchers make sure their decisions were made according to the data rather than their personal bias. The reader is encouraged to review the findings in relation to the participants rather than extrapolate them to a larger population.

### Findings

The following descriptions are extracted from interviews with three secondary agriculture teachers, referred to as *Kevin*, *Christy* and *Mark*. Each offers glimpses into their beliefs and lived experiences as secondary agriculture teachers working collaboratively with other teachers. Due to page limitations, representative samples from each individual textural and structural description are included.

#### Kevin's Individual Textural Description

At year 16 in his career, Kevin reflected on his relationship with his fraternity brother and labeled it as his first experience with teacher collaboration. The freedom and the breadth of subject matter available to students at the University of Florida regularly challenged their decisions to teach. "We talked a lot. We had a lot of discussions about the philosophy of agricultural education." Talking about these tough issues with another pre-professional helped Kevin maintain focus and commitment to his career path.

As a student teacher, Kevin's relationship with his cooperating teacher vacillated between mentoring and collaboration. Kevin's contributions ebbed and flowed based on his knowledge and confidence. Kevin remained the passive participant and observer with animal science content. Conversely, he possessed

expert plant science knowledge and felt comfortable taking the lead crafting lessons and facilitating activities. Kevin and his cooperating teacher shared a common interest in Career Development Events (CDE) and FFA, so they regularly pooled their expertise to further their own understandings and improve student performance. "We grew a lot during that time."

Upon receiving his first job, Kevin remained closed off from most teachers, a model set before him by his agriculture teacher father; resulting in long hours spent at work. He planned alone and believed the culture at the time necessitated this. "You didn't talk about team teaching or sharing. It was like an initiation where they wanted to see you struggle a little bit but not fail. No one gave me a hand out." Kevin also advised his FFA alone. He believed a teacher who requested to work together in preparation for a CDE would be met with cold refusal since competition was paramount. "They definitely wouldn't share CDE material. Oh no, no, no! It was almost a joke where if you hosted an event, you locked things up. You were in a competition. Why would they share?"

After a few years, Kevin accepted a new position in a department with his first, content-area teaching partner: an icon within the school, community, and state. Kevin assumed his teaching partner would insist having things his way since Kevin was an early career teacher, new to the program. The assumption was false as he assured Kevin they shared ownership in the program. Their collaboration was built on listening and brainstorming, and their similar philosophy and work ethic formed the basis of their program vision.

He'll listen to what I say and make comments and the same with me. I think we brainstorm well. He is open to new ideas, teaching methods, and technology. He urged me to work with other teachers in the nation. It really helped me and my students improve.

Kevin's involvement with the Florida agricultural education leadership program presented him with powerful opportunities for collaboration. The program participants traveled the state together, sharing experiences and creating a tool to help Florida agriculture

teachers be more efficient. These rich informal interactions made Kevin more comfortable with reaching out.

There was a lot of discussion but we finally created a CD with content agriculture teachers could use to explain and publicize their programs. To a new teacher we could say, 'Here, use this. Don't spin your wheels.' Everyone got to contribute.

During the leadership program, Kevin formed a strong connection with another participant. The two relied on this bond as they began the distance master's degree program. Kevin shared,

I got to collaborate with this really neat lady. We became excellent partners. We say we are the Yin and Yang of Ag Ed. She forces me out there and I pull her back just enough to make sure she's composed and everything is exactly the way we want it. On the KAI [Kirton Adaptive Innovative tool], she was at the very front of the line [Innovator] and I was in the very back of the line [Adaptor]. That is when we said, 'Okay, we're partners.'

The two worked together throughout the graduate program but their partnership did not end with commencement. She encouraged Kevin to participate in the Florida career and technical education professional association. He credits the keys to their success to the fact "no one was looking for credit." He continued saying, "It is a matter of being involved and helping where we can."

### **Kevin's Individual Structural Description**

Kevin's perceptions about teacher collaboration evolved over his career. During his pre-service and induction periods, mentorship was crucial. His needs were the focus of every professional interaction. He required regular guidance and feedback from an experienced teacher. The acquisition of the confidence, knowledge and skills necessary to become an effective teacher were his primary objectives. "I wasn't really concerned with trying to collaborate. I was just struggling." As mentoring persisted, his trust and confidence

grew. Collaborative interactions began to present themselves more regularly and he began to engage, albeit sparingly.

Kevin completed an accredited teacher education program yet was plagued by tunnel-vision determination, self-imposed intimidation, insecurity, and a limited definition of collaboration. He had an overwhelming need to prove himself to whomever he respected and to those occupying positions of authority. The long hours spent at school and his unwillingness to ask for input from others was evidence of his initial resistance. Feeling intimidated by older men, having limited resources, and adhering to the culture of independence kept him isolated. Kevin expressed a narrow view of teacher collaboration, seeing it mainly as a situation where teachers "share resources and engage in lesson planning."

When Kevin moved to a new school, he had been teaching a number of years. "By the time I got here, I was able to collaborate more because it wasn't as much about survival." Kevin was surprised by his teaching partner's openness. The man often initiated interaction between the two, as Kevin was not quite ready to assume the lead. Through teaching responsibilities, program management duties, and professional association participation, collaboration clearly was not limited to one context. Kevin learned much from his partner yet it was clear they were building a program together.

Kevin's collaborative notions were stretched to include new audiences and fresh opportunities for learning because of his relationship with another Florida agriculture leadership participant. Their bond was born of informal social time within a structured program and grew through continued interaction. An awareness of the talents and skills the other possessed, let the two leverage their strengths to pursue new challenges together. The positive results of this relationship, when added with the others, had a maturing effect on Kevin. He focused more on issues affecting the agricultural education community and less on those solely affecting him.

Kevin values teacher collaboration saying it has made his career "more enjoyable." Passing the "survival stage," he realized he wanted more from his career. Every collaborative experience

he shared was positive and involved little to no outside resistance. The resistance he encountered came from within, as he wrestled with relying on others. Kevin downplayed his role in initiating collaboration by crediting his experiences to “being with the right people, in the right places, at the right times.” His eventual willingness to engage helped him create a reputation as a collaborator and arrive at a place in his career where collaboration abounds.

### Christy’s Individual Textural Description

Christy did not grow up in agriculture but began wanting to become an agriculture teacher early in high school. She knew collaboration would be essential to meeting her goal, believing “you can’t go through life all by yourself.” As an undergraduate, she often collaborated on projects with others in her major, providing and receiving support. These supportive relationships continued through student teaching. She stated, “We were all with male teachers that had been in the business at least 25 years. We had the same kinds of issues.”

Christy was first hired to teach in a middle school. As the only agriculture teacher in the school, the mentors and teams with whom she was matched were unqualified to help with all aspects of her appointment. Christy was compelled to reach out to other agriculture teachers in the county but had difficulty fitting in as the only young, female teacher. She recounted, “There was nobody. They all had been teaching for quite a while. They were not overly friendly.” As a result, she remained a passive participant, too insecure to ask clarifying or follow-up questions. She struggled with her responsibilities in silence.

At the completion of her fifth year, she accepted a position with the high school. The same year, a female was hired to the opening she left at the middle school and another high school in the county hired a woman to fill their vacancy. Her closest collaborator was hired to yet another county position the following year. The wave of new, female teachers presented Christy with professionals to whom she could relate.

We had someone to sit with at events.  
The first year we were all together it was

basically work-related collaboration. We talked about ‘This is what works for me’ and ‘This is what we do.’ Then we got to be friends and had outside-of-work contact, which solidified the group. We then started talking about things that were work-related but you probably wouldn’t just talk about with your acquaintances. We talked about what we could do to make things different and better professionally, outside of our classrooms.

Christy’s relationship with this group of female agriculture teachers continued to progress, leading to many changes in her practice. To begin, she took the lead on seeking information related to state FFA opportunities, rather than waiting for it or using experience as her teacher. “We felt out of the loop so we did some things to benefit our kids. We felt the more we knew, the better it would be for them. We worked together.” She had always been a dues paying member of her professional association but had never been a participant. “Our little group decided we were going to get more involved and we did!” Christy became a member of the Florida FFA Board and another member of the group was elected to the Florida Association of Agricultural Educators Board, thus fulfilling their commitment.

Even as two of the four left teaching, those who remained continued to draft new ideas for collaboration.

Working to get on the boards led to curriculum projects and everything we do now. You get so much from exchanging stories but when you sit down and start to work on a project with someone, you can get a lot accomplished. There is a lot that can happen. I don’t think I would have done the whole master’s thing if I did not have my group.

Christy introduced the idea of completing a distance master’s program to her core group. The graduate program encouraged collaboration among students so Christy and her closest collaborator worked together whenever they could, studying and completing assignments as a team.

Anything we could work together on, we did. When you don’t have the teacher and you only have a screen with a PowerPoint

presentation to get the information, you need to be able to talk to someone. If I hadn't been able to talk it out it wouldn't have happened.

With the momentum created from the master's program, the group completed a grant application to improve the horticulture pathways in their local agriculture programs.

We're not big grant writers. We thought of some important things we wanted to try to do. We wrote them out as a group and gave it to the county grant writers to polish. We were awarded the money so something must have worked.

With funds available, they aligned their curriculum to the Florida horticultural industry association's professional certification test. Christy said, "I don't know a week that went by that we didn't talk by email or on the phone. I might have talked to them more than I talked to my teaching partner!"

### **Christy's Individual Structural Description**

Christy's collaborative associations profoundly impacted her professional development. A bright but withdrawn student, she knew working with others results in a richer end product. She formed valuable connections during her undergraduate career, pre-service experiences, and early teaching placements. Christy's self-awareness helped her realize she needed to force herself to interact, no matter how uncomfortable, if she was to grow.

Referring to her pre-service cohort as "friends," Christy's relationship with the other members was based on trust. They shared a number of demographic features including: professional preparation, gender and age. Even when they parted ways and commenced student teaching, each continued to reflect openly about their performance, plan lessons, and problem-solve challenges with their cooperating teachers. They felt comfortable with one another.

The mandated team structure infused at the middle school, presented Christy with a dichotomy. The experience allowed her to work closely with teachers from other content areas on school-related issues but the arbitrary assemblage of teachers presented a gap in her content area support. Her inability to access

subject-specific assistance on her campus left her feeling isolated. Additionally, Christy found the countywide agriculture teacher culture to be closed and intimidating. She felt out of place; a stranger in a foreign land. "I think some of it is sticking it out long enough to become one of the group. If you are around a little while, then you get accepted into the fold." Her determination bolstered her willingness to endure.

Christy admitted feeling restless many times during her 16 years of teaching but her associations with other teachers helped her find reasons to stay.

I got to a point where I felt I wasn't as happy as I could be if I had another job. I questioned if I wanted to stay in teaching. These people came along at the right time for us to work together and that has probably been the biggest thing keeping me here.

Her move to a program with two teachers brought the potential for daily collaboration on content and program-related matters. Her work with professional associations resulted in opportunities to continue her learning. She willingly and voluntarily took part, although each required additional time commitments with no compensation. These events presented the motivation needed to make her work stimulating and rewarding, encouraging her persistence.

### **Mark's Individual Textural Description**

*Mark* entered agricultural education following a ten-year career in banking. At age 33, he enrolled in a second bachelor's program and approached the experience much differently the second time, relying heavily on collaboration. One of his earliest encounters involved a particularly challenging horticulture class. Talking with his cohort, he discovered another member had taken the course and offered to share her study materials. The gesture sparked in him the importance of a collaborative culture. "We supported and worked with each other. 'How did you come up with this?' or 'Think we should do that?' It all developed from there."

Following student teaching, Mark was hired at the school of his current employment but his tenure had a rocky start. Paperwork challenges



related to unfilled work orders, a lack of teaching and learning resources, and a number of student management issues were just a few hurdles he faced. Mark was the fifth teacher the program had seen in just three years.

There is no way you can do it all. I realized I was trying to fix everything to try to teach and it was going to take a lot more than what I had. I had to win friends and influence people to get something to work. It was a chore but it paid off.

He began asking other agriculture teachers how they got results. "I don't know if it is just Florida or if it's just guys in particular but they keep their cards close to their chests. They really don't share anything." A visit with a teacher in a nearby county provided some direction, helping Mark deal with his FFA responsibilities. By working with teachers in County 1, Mark was able to train his students for the citrus CDE alongside students from other schools.

I took my team, and we set up a whole contest inside their auditorium. It is because of these encounters, my students recognize others when we go to competitions. They've got others to talk to when they're there, instead of just talking with their own team.

The successful outcome drove him to pursue "like-minded teachers" who were open to sharing their expertise. While at a sub-district land judging CDE, Mark shared some of the performance challenges and change goals he had with *Adam*. Adam offered to share his contest training resources and extended an invitation to have Mark's students practice with his own team and a few others. Mark asked Adam why he had offered to work with so many additional teams when they could beat his team on the day of competition. Mark recounted Adam's response by saying, "Well, that's easy. If we're not teaching kids, why are we doing what we're doing?" As they continued their discussion, Adam shared the tenets of this educational philosophy.

He said, 'Every kid is engaged and trying their best. There are no discipline problems. I have them hanging on every word. Every one of them is striving to do

their best. Never in your teaching career will you have a classroom like you've got right now. If you want to learn, I'll teach you because when we beat you I want to beat the best.' With that, I began to seek out and socialize with other teachers at different events who were like-minded.

Mark's experiences with teacher collaboration resulted in a satisfying career move and his development as a teacher professional. His students have won state and national awards, and his classroom practice has evolved through the use of innovative curriculum and methods. He has a number of students enter the agriculture industry and even major in agricultural education at the university upon graduation from high school. Due to the success, administrators have presented him with offers to teach in other schools and to move into administration.

People recognize my leadership in the agriculture department and suggest it could be better utilized in management. After 20 minutes in the front office, I come back to my classroom and I am so happy to be within my four walls and hugging my kids.

Rather than making the decision to persist in agricultural education on his own, Mark chose to seek the input of those in his inner circle.

When they opened up the new high school, I was heavily recruited to open that program. I liked the principal going there and the idea of brand new everything. I called Adam. When the county administration wanted me to oversee the new middle school they said, 'What do you think?' I called Adam. When he asked me about it I knew I had decided. I told him, 'Nah, I'm fine. About got this place the way I want it.'

### Mark's Individual Structural Description

Mark's perceptions of teacher collaboration were largely shaped by his core belief in interdependence. This belief was not appreciated in his first career so he found one where it would. Rather than pursue alternative certification like others entering agricultural education from industry, Mark completed a

formal teacher education program. The choice positioned Mark in a rich environment to network, learn, and grow with other pre-professionals. The experience integrated him into the profession prior to his first teaching job. "It kind of started and developed from there. I'd call and ask them. They'd send me some stuff. It snowballed."

His first experiences as a high school teacher let Mark know immediately how much he didn't know about meeting the associated roles and responsibilities. "They teach us this much," [gesturing an inch] "on that many subjects" [gesture holding his arms out wide]. The work order situation demonstrated his lack of knowledge about school protocol, something impossible for new teachers to anticipate until they infiltrate a particular school system. His limited content knowledge and the lack of instructional resources were surprises made very real when gazing at empty file cabinets and "trashed" textbooks. Frustrated by these barriers, Mark realized he needed help. Guided by his core beliefs, and his curiosity about how other schools achieved success, he approached teachers with whom he had formed connections during his pre-service program. They were happy to help by sharing resources, contacts, and tips for success. "You just ask questions and most people will help you because they are flattered you asked."

Energized by his initial success with teacher collaboration, Mark looked to other areas of his teaching responsibility; namely FFA and SAE. His willingness to sit down with other teachers at professional activities was a fruitful beginning to expanding his efforts. He chose to discuss professional topics rather than engage in small talk or withdraw from their company.

The teachers with whom I collaborate are teachers I gravitate toward. There are teachers that tell you what a great job they are doing. Then there are those that ask questions like 'How did you do it?' So the conversation starts in a big group but teachers break off into smaller groups of interest. That is where the like-mindedness develops.

This initiative generated connections with teachers versed in areas of expertise beyond his own. "You can't know it all." Mark's ability to

perform more effectively, in more areas, expanded as he expressed enough confidence to defer to others as experts. The interactions benefited Mark and extended to the other teachers and the students they served.

Mark humbled himself by moving beyond the profession's culture of skepticism and competition. He adopted more open educational philosophies and modeled his personal beliefs after them, rather than solely focusing on CDE placings. Many teachers, especially those early in their careers, have flocked to him to share their insight and seek his.

The younger ones are more approachable and willing to share. So many of them came through a program where they had an icon of a teacher that taught for 20 or 30 years, and had every answer or gave the kids the impression they did. They feel bad and don't have the confidence level they think they should.

Mark's professional maturity entering agricultural education was advanced, compared with his peers, but his experiences with teacher collaboration developed him further. Significant opportunities surfaced because of the professional development and program success he gained through interaction. When Mark considered those opportunities which might lead him out of the profession, he did so in true collaborator fashion; seeking input from others.

Individual textural and structural descriptions were examined for all three participants, to form composite textural descriptions and composite structural descriptions respectively. The composite descriptions were used to form the textural-structural statement. This serves as the universal essence of teacher collaboration in the context of career satisfaction and retention within this participant pool.

### **Textural-Structural Statement**

**Collaboration is a tool for teacher learning.** Collaboration is a consistent and persistent means of professional development, beginning in the pre-service phase and continuing throughout a career. Collegial interaction expands a teacher's awareness of, and access to, the knowledge, skills, and resources useful for developing professional competence and con-

fidence. It presents opportunities for reflection; including the identification of personal needs and strengths, and expanding professional philosophy. Collaboration grows with professional maturity and is often prompted through request and dialogue. Teachers must feel safe, believing their contributions are meaningful and the reward will be rich enough to outweigh the associated risks. Frequency of collaboration increases with favorable results.

**Collaboration increases teacher career satisfaction.** As a socialization tool, it removes the barrier of classroom walls and connects teachers in a variety of contexts, according to common professional interests. Collaboration forms a welcoming culture and helps teachers advance relationships beyond acquaintanceship to develop a deeper understanding and tolerance for one another and their work. Collaboration is applicable to each of the three circles of agriculture programs and to other program management responsibilities. Collaborative activity can increase the level to which teachers are engaged in their career responsibilities. Establishing connections provides support critical to helping them conquer personal professional challenges, refine pedagogical practice, and develop and maintain viable agriculture programs.

**Collaboration impacts professional investment.** Teachers view themselves and their contributions as important to a larger mission. They perceive their active involvement as necessary to the growth and health of the profession. A collaborative teacher culture supports immediate teacher growth and development, as well as counsel about decisions related to career longevity. Collaboration is professionally revitalizing, providing access to fresh opportunities and challenges. As teachers master immediate responsibilities, they look for new ways to grow and contribute, often resulting in greater benefit to the larger profession.

## Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

Agricultural education finds itself locked in the national teacher shortage trend (Kantrovich, 2010). To meet the needs for qualified agriculture teachers, the cycle of teacher turnover must be addressed. Teacher collaboration holds promise as a way to alleviate the challenges associated with turnover loss (Puchner & Taylor, 2006).

The teachers in this study mentioned their greatest concern during the first few years of their careers, was trying to learn everything. Collaborations at that time were often focused on working together to develop lessons, manage the FFA and SAEs, and increase their content knowledge (Greiman et al., 2005; Wenger 2006). With time, they completed their responsibilities with little effort and began to seek new challenges, often beyond the local program (Chenevey et al., 2008). Although prompted by different reasons, each felt they had something to offer to satisfy their own professional needs and those of other teachers (Boone & Boone, 2007). They assumed leadership positions with the state agriculture teacher's association and completed other service activities. These new frontiers crafted a sense of community, leading to the construction of shared knowledge and culture. The results included increased program visibility, enhanced career fulfillment, and a broader view of the agricultural education profession (Wenger, 2006).

Participants confessed they often entertained the idea of leaving teaching when they worked independently for long stretches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Despite their relationships with other teachers on campus, they desired regular interaction with others in agricultural education. They were confident they would have continued to entertain leaving if content area isolation continued. Taking the initiative to reach out to others ensured their collaborations were tailored to their individual needs and interests (Hargreaves, 1994; Penuel et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2001).

Similar to the experiences of the *leavers* described in the work of Johnson and Birkeland (2003), teachers in this study had rocky beginnings to their first teaching positions.

They admitted feelings of overwhelming frustration. However, their determination, commitment to career choice, and the presence of opportunities to work with other teachers outweighed setbacks and helped them through the difficult periods (Boone & Boone, 2007; Kardos & Johnson, 2007; Puchner & Taylor, 2006). In the present study, collaboration strengthened the teachers' resolve to grow and improve.

Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found professional frustration caused teachers to leave in the first few years. In the current study, teaching no longer held the challenge Christy craved. The sheer monotony was enough to cause her to wonder if she should leave the classroom, or persist but in a disengaged state. She opted to challenge herself by initiating and accepting opportunities to work with other teachers. She credits these activities and other teachers with keeping her in teaching and motivating her to move her career forward (Chenevey et al., 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Erickson et al., 2005).

Teacher collaboration was initially difficult for every teacher interviewed. At the pre-service level, each valued their peer interaction (Erickson et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2010). However, as early career teachers they viewed the agricultural education culture in Florida to be closed to the concept of collaboration. They described competition as paramount to program success and teacher independence as indicative of one's value. The demographics of age and/or gender were glaring reminders they did not fit in. As each teacher matured, found other willing participants, and discovered their niche, they worked to cultivate an emergent collaborative culture. Each continues to actively support the growth of this new culture among teachers in all career phases (Chenevey et al., 2008; Erickson et al., 2005; Steffy et al., 2000).

Two research questions were pursued in this study. The first inquired as to perceptions of teacher collaboration related to career satisfaction and retention. At its essence, the phenomenon of teacher collaboration involves connection with a purpose. Teacher collaborators...

1. Carry the desire to make education better for teachers and students alike.

2. Engage in deeper, more meaningful interaction. More than simply time to get to know one another, they make the conscious choice to address real issues, even if more work is created.
3. Seek and create opportunities to feel more capable and rewarded. Collaboration is often purposeful and requires significant personal investment and effort.
4. Are intrinsically motivated to engage with others who share the desire for interaction. While some may charge ahead, others may need gentle prodding to seek, to question, to challenge, to risk, to share, and to be diligent in such pursuits.

The second research question addressed how experiences with teacher collaboration relate to career satisfaction and retention. At some point in their careers, teachers desire more. Collaboration brings challenge, the opportunity needed to achieve a higher level of performance and impact. Teacher collaboration occurs through both spontaneous and structured avenues but the pre-service program is often the first encounter with the phenomenon. Teachers actively collaborating at the pre-service level seek informal interaction as they enter the career. This time encourages prospective collaborators to find one another and form friendships with the potential for lasting partnerships. As they mature, collaborations are most beneficial and successful when generated by the teachers themselves, rather than by mandate (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Penuel et al., 2007). Teachers' experiences with collaboration are key contributors to their career development, satisfaction, and commitment.

Teacher collaboration has the potential to positively impact a teacher's performance and professional commitment (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). For many teachers, the pre-service program is their first experience with the phenomenon. However, others like Christy and Kevin who completed a secondary agriculture program may have witnessed their own agriculture teachers collaborating with others. Some may have another exposure to teacher collaboration, as was the situation for Kevin, being children of agriculture teachers. With

such varied experiences, it is recommended teacher educators stimulate greater reflection among pre-service teachers related to core beliefs about teaching and learning. The implications of examining these beliefs early and often, before the cohort can support the formation of community, could mean the advancement for the potential of socially constructed knowledge about agricultural education, teaching, and learning (Wenger, 2006).

The researchers recommend state agricultural education staff and leaders of professional associations invite dialogue on the topic of teacher collaboration. Through existing statewide professional development, leaders should request presenters to integrate discussion connecting their presentation topics with opportunities for collaboration. The implications could result in further shaping of the professional culture, encouraging acceptance and celebration. Teachers should also be led through exercises illustrating how teacher collaboration can work for them and their colleagues. Reflective prompts, followed by down time to promote informal exchanges about their responses, may create a space for teachers to discover their own opportunities for meaningful collaboration. States might also consider using a special interest group (SIG) structure to encourage collaboration. SIG membership could be published in the state directory to help teachers identify others with similar interests. This simple step has the potential to support teachers in reaching out to others.

State leaders must consider providing professional development designed specifically for mid-career teachers. Schools and professional associations typically offer induction support for early career teachers and additional stand-alone workshops for all teachers to take part. Mid-career teachers are often lumped into the general teaching population and little regard is given to their unique needs. This current practice requires mid-career teachers to be intrinsically motivated to search out opportunities on their own, or risk being professionally unfulfilled. Kevin celebrated his opportunities for formal collaboration, which let him connect with his peers, create new

resources, and develop professionally (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Wenger, 2006). Christy expressed her formal collaborations helped her maintain her commitment and reignite her passion for the profession. Regular needs assessments of this teaching population could help states provide tailored professional development programming. The outcomes of supporting and challenging mid-career teachers could be widespread professional revitalization.

Each of the study's participants also characterized many of their collaborations as arising from informal time. Teachers need the chance to make their needs and desires known to one another. It is recommended state leaders provide a time and place for teachers to network. Building more time into formal event schedules for professional interaction, or simply offering snacks and a lounge space, can encourage the development of connections leading to spontaneous collaboration. The result of such planning could offer a more relaxed setting to help teachers engage with like-minded professionals, a strategy which worked well for Mark.

Teacher retention is an issue of national concern (Kantrovich, 2010). With teachers leaving so soon after their arrival, they fail to gain the skills necessary for success. According to Worthy (2005), teachers need to remain in teaching beyond their fifth years to "reach their full potential" (p. 381). The current study focused on the perceptions and experiences of current, mid-career teachers. A study examining the collaborative practice of those who have departed would expand understanding of the phenomenon. What role, if any, did teacher collaboration have in their careers? The implications of the findings for this kind of study would offer fresh insight on the issue.

Further research should include engaging in a targeted examination of teachers' earliest collaborative experiences. In the present study, each participant had positive pre-service experiences with teacher collaboration. This fueled their confidence to seek future opportunities. Learning more about the circumstances surrounding initial exposure may uncover criteria for creating the ideal collaborative environment. This information can assist teacher educators and facilitators of induction

programs with issuing collaborative opportunities early and often. The implications would result in sweeping and lasting change to agricultural education's culture of individualism

and competition. By welcoming new teachers with the tools each deems necessary, the profession can have a targeted impact for lasting career satisfaction and commitment.

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