

Accomplishments and Challenges Experienced by Beginning Agriculture Teachers in their First Three Years: A Collective Case Study

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Abstract

Studies show beginning agriculture teachers have different experiences than their seasoned colleagues, but how are their experiences different? This phenomenological collective case study tells the story of traditionally certified beginning agriculture teachers throughout their first three years of teaching. The study began with eight teachers in their first year and concluded with six teachers completing three years of teaching. Data collection included an on-site visit with an observation of teaching, tour, and an in-person interview followed by monthly phone interviews throughout the three academic years. Each year concluded with the teachers completing a reflection guide and participating in a focus group. The collective strengths and challenges the teachers faced were presented and organized by each year of experience. The findings highlighted areas the profession should support beginning agriculture teachers by including increased feedback and mentoring for teachers, resources on student management, work/life balance, seeking funding, and community relations.

Keywords: beginning teachers; agriculture teachers; mentoring; traditionally certified

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Introduction

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing agricultural education is the shortage of agriculture teachers (Camp et al., 2002; Foster et al., 2016; Kantrovich, 2010; Smith et al., 2017, 2018, 2019). The solution to the challenge lies in both recruitment and retention of teachers. This study focused on retention of teachers

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and sought to learn about the experiences of beginning teachers to understand how they may be better supported early in their careers.

In the broader field of education, two major studies exist that strive to tell the story of the beginning teacher. Ellen Moir's (1990) work suggested teachers' attitudes towards teaching can be represented in phases in a linear design by month throughout the school year. Fessler and Christianson's work (1992) focused on the *Teacher Career Cycle* which had eight stages, including the induction stage, specific to beginning teachers. This stage focused on "survival and discovery." Lynn (2002) further described this stage as the time when teachers were socialized into the profession and sought acceptance. However, do these findings apply to the unique culture and schedules novice agriculture teachers experience?

Research focused on beginning agriculture teachers showed they were generally happy in their jobs but overwhelmed with challenges related to classroom management, advising the FFA chapter, curriculum development and lesson planning, and managing paperwork (Myers et al., 2005). Additionally, for agriculture teachers, there can be a feeling of isolation when many are the only agriculture teacher in their school, district, or county (Greiman et al., 2005).

There exists a void in the research of in-depth longitudinal research and qualitative research that is not limited to the first-year teaching experience. The present study seeks to be worthy (Tracy, 2010) by working to fill this void in the literature base to understand the unique experiences of beginning agriculture teachers through an in-depth longitudinal qualitative study.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was drawn from a broader investigation to understand the experiences of beginning agriculture teachers during their first three years of teaching. This study was guided by the following question: what do agriculture teachers identify as their accomplishments and challenges during their first three years of teaching?

Conceptual Framework

In this qualitative study, constructionism guided the research. Constructionism states that "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (Crotty, 2015, p. 9). Within constructionism, the research is led by the perspective of interpretivism through phenomenology. Phenomenology was selected to learn about the lived experiences of the participants and guided the research as "a starting point and a basis" (Crotty, 2015, p.79). The longitudinal nature of the study followed the participants from the beginning of their teaching journey and offered monthly touchpoints over three years.

Pragmatism influenced the research by allowing multiple methods of data collection and consideration of the practical implications of the research (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative methods were selected based on Moir's (1999) meta-analysis which showed the needs of beginning teachers were complex based on their unique experiences. Constructionism guided the research that sought to understand the lived experiences of beginning teachers. Finally, Interpretivism through Phenomenology provided an anchor and checkpoint (Crotty, 2009) for the research as all participants were experiencing the same phenomenon.

Methods

The phenomenological case study design focused on the phenomenon of being a beginning agriculture teacher and allowed for "using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (Crotty, 2009 p. 14) which compliments the longitudinal study. Case study research influences what is studied by establishing a bounded system specifically defining the setting of the research based on time and place (Creswell, 2018). Utilizing collective case study design, the focus is on the phenomenon and utilizes multiple cases to describe the experience. Selecting multiple cases in a collective form provided

the ability to show different perspectives of the phenomenon experienced (Creswell, 2018). Within the case study design purposeful sampling, holistic, and embedded analysis were used. Theme identification was based on context gained by looking at specific cases followed by cross case analysis.

An instrumental case study design was used, and a bounded system was established (Creswell, 2018) by participants being agricultural education graduates from Kansas University in the mid 2010 decade who chose to teach agriculture in Kansas upon graduation. Due to the small sample size, all graduates meeting the criteria of the bounded system were invited to participate in the study through an e-mail invitation. Eight teachers responded positively to the invitation. A researcher visit to their school was scheduled. Participants completed consent forms approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The eight original teachers remained the focus throughout the study however, career and life descriptions changed from year to year as described in the following paragraphs. The collective summary of the participants is provided to protect their individual identities. In year one, there were eight participants, seven females and one male. All participants were white and aged 22-25 in their first year of teaching. Six teachers were in programs where they were the only agriculture teacher, two teachers were in multi-teacher programs. One participant returned to their hometown to teach. One participant did not have agricultural education experience as a high school student. One teacher was married and two of the teachers each had one child.

In year two of the study there were seven teachers, one was male. Five teachers were the only agriculture teacher in their school and two were in multi-teacher programs. Two participants changed positions between years one and two, one moved from a single teacher program to a multi-teacher program, and one moved from a multi-teacher program to a single teacher program. One participant left the study after year one due to time demands but remained teaching in their original school. Two teachers were married and two had a child.

In year three, there were six teachers, all females. One male participant left the study and the teaching profession after year two to engage in production agriculture. Of the six teachers, two taught in multi-teacher programs and the rest were the only agriculture teacher in the school. Two participants were married, and one had a child. One participant moved between years two and three to return to their home program. At the conclusion of the three-year study, seven of the eight original participants entered their fourth-year teaching agriculture.

The teachers taught in eleven different communities throughout the study. This includes the eight communities in which they started their teaching careers, and the three communities to which the teachers moved after their first-year teaching. The schools were in communities spread across the state of Kansas. Utilizing United States Department of Agriculture (2019) definitions, two communities were greater than 2,500 in population and considered "urban clusters" while the other nine communities met the definition of rural with populations less than 2,500 (para. 2). The community populations ranged from 414 to 3,983 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Using the Kansas High School Activities Association classifications, five schools were classified as 1A with high school enrollments of 14-108 students; four schools were 2A with high school enrollments of 109-171 students; and two schools were 4A with high school enrollments of 312-661 students. All communities and schools had predominately white populations.

Following the protocol for conducting interviews by Creswell (2018), creating research questions for the study was the first step of data collection. Since conducting a phenomenological study involves primarily in-depth interviews, questions were carefully crafted to learn about the phenomenon through the eyes of these individuals (Creswell, 2018). Questions were written to learn about their attitudes toward teaching, perceived accomplishments, and challenges. Based on information gained through the literature review, specific questions about curriculum and planning, work/life balance, school and community

culture were created (Boone & Boone, 2007; Myers et. al., 2005). In addition, the literature emphasized the role of mentors for successful teachers, therefore a question on mentors was added (Tummons et al., 2016). After the questions were reviewed by an agricultural education professor, IRB protocol and informed consent were written and submitted. IRB approval was secured, and a pilot interview was conducted with a second-year teacher who was not engaged with the study, and adjustments to the protocol were made. Guided by the case study design, multiple data forms were gathered alongside the interviews (Creswell, 2018) including site tours, photographs, informal introductions with administrators, observations of teaching, and focus groups. Rapport (Creswell, 2018) was already established between the researcher and the study participants based four years of interactions as pre-service teachers before the data collection process began.

The researcher conducted a ½ day school site visit to each of the teachers between the 6th and 8th week of their first school year teaching. Each month during the school year following the initial meeting, the researcher conducted an approximately 30-minute semi-structured (Merriam, 2009) phone interview with each of the teachers. At the end of each year, a 60-minute semi-structured (Merriam, 2009) focus group was hosted using Zoom after participants had individually completed a researcher-developed reflection guide. Teachers who moved schools during the study received another site visit at their new location using the initial visit protocol.

Ethical considerations were made to the anonymity of the participants by utilizing pseudonyms. Details about the participant profiles were presented in a composite profile (Creswell, 2018). Rigor and trustworthiness were ensured by selecting participants who were part of the established bounded system (Tracy, 2010). Interviews were solely analyzed by the researcher. Field notes were taken during and following the interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). A research log documented the thoughts of the researcher throughout coding and analysis. The data were provided to a peer/colleague for review at each step of the coding and analysis process. Triangulation (Tracy, 2010) was established through multiple data sources including interviews, field notes, focus groups, reflection guides, teacher observations and photographs. Annual focus groups provided triangulation of the monthly interviews for reflection and peer consensus.

Data collection yielded 129 individual transcripts and three focus group transcripts. Each transcript was transcribed by a third party. The researcher coded in NVivo 12 using the constant comparative method for data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Guided by grounded theory data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), the three-phase coding process employed included open, axial, and selective coding by the researcher, no automatic coding resources were utilized inside the NVivo 12 program. Reflective journaling was utilized throughout the process to ensure reflexivity during and after interviews, at the conclusion of each coded transcript, and by summarizing codes by academic quarter for organizational purposes. An audit trail (Creswell, 2018) was created in the NVivo 12 program to document the thinking process used to make organizational decisions. Validity and reliability were ensured through comparison with focus group transcripts and by having a colleague review coded and analyzed data. Furthermore, a researcher subjectivity statement was created to position the researcher for data analysis. The researcher positioned herself as a former high school agriculture teacher and as a university agricultural education faculty member who taught each of the participating teachers a majority of their pre-service agricultural education courses during their undergraduate program.

From coding and analysis, the teachers' experiences emerged into major themes. Each theme was divided further into sub-themes for deeper analysis. The themes and sub-themes were analyzed by quarter and year resulting in the findings of this article. The collective case study (Stake, 1995) approach helped describe the phenomenon in multiple settings but cannot be generalized beyond the study population as it presents the story and experiences of this group of individuals. The experiences of these teachers may contribute to theory and future research.

Results

The research objective was to learn what beginning agriculture teachers perceive as their strengths and challenges in their first three years. Following the flow of the school year, data were divided into four academic quarters per year yielding 12 independently analyzed quarters of data. Four major themes emerged: program management, community, personal, and school.

Year 1 Summary:

In all theme areas, teachers were found to be thirsty for feedback - compliments from community members, students, faculty, and peers went a long way in driving them to continue to put in the time and effort to be the teacher they wanted to become. They were so thirsty for feedback they would “read into” interactions to find feedback such as students moving into their classes or choosing to attend an FFA event they had not been involved with as personal compliments. Teachers measured their teaching quality on Career Development Event (CDE) success. In response to “what is going well” a common response was listing the most recent FFA events, for example Crystal responded with “We got sixth in poultry as an A-team with all my returners. And so, we didn’t do worse than last year with [the previous teacher].”

Theme 1: Program Management

The teachers’ experiences were focused on the agricultural education program and the school. Even conversations about themselves and the community were still predominately presented within the lens of the school and agricultural education program. Furthermore, their view of the school was directly related to their experiences through the agriculture program.

Curriculum and planning took time in the evenings and weekends impacting work/life balance. They searched for resources and designed lessons with a “just in time” focus rather than a holistic view of the curriculum experiences for students. FFA events, greenhouse sales, and shop projects drove the curriculum rather than complementing it. Helen said, “In the next month, we have most of our contests, so it’s kind of hard to plan around the contest...usually I find it not easy, but beneficial to kind of teach to the CDE days.” Similarly, Wendy said “I am struggling with teaching CASE (Curriculum for AgriScience Education) and getting the students ready for contests.” Finding productive work for students to complete with substitute teachers and finding substitute teachers who held students accountable was an additional challenge. Sophia described one situation, “last week, I had a substitute that just didn’t really care, he sat in my office the whole time and either watched movies or took a nap. He didn’t make the students do what they were supposed to do.” The teachers identified their voids in content or delivery but often felt they could only get ahead when there was a break from school. Claudia described her plan to “have some really cool lessons. Because I am going to spend time during break on lessons and coming up with some really cool activities.” There was relief when they could use prior work, Hank said “I used my prior experience from last spring to do the same thing I did student teaching and made it better.”

Developing student relationships was where the teachers were most comfortable. Initially there was overcoming the “I am not like the last teacher” situations, Crystal described it this way, “The kids are not used to actually doing things and receiving a grade good or bad because of their work ethic...I’m not as laid back, I am stricter and more structured.” Similarly, Helen said, “I have to remind them like, ‘well, I’m not [former teacher].” They strategically planned ways to get to know the students and incorporate student-specific information into the classroom. The teachers were gone frequently for FFA events and noticed it was during these activities when the student relationships were developed. Those relationships continued to grow in the classroom. For example, Claudia said “We’ve done a lot of FFA events lately. I’ve been able to talk to kids one-on-one... they do respect me; they see me as their teacher and someone they can come to when they need help.” When students added the course at semester or pre-enrollment numbers were up

for the following year, the teachers were excited and motivated, but cautious, they did not want this interest to be based on their courses perceived as being “too easy.”

Engagement with the FFA program provided the teachers an avenue for student relationships, allowed them to compare their work and the work of their students to others, and served as a key motivator for everyone engaged with the program. However, FFA took up significant time managing fundraisers, preparing for and attending events, and working with the student leadership team. Wendy reflected on an experience at a CDE, “I had two students place in the top 10 for food science, so that was really exciting. And then seeing their faces after that... that’s one of the reasons that we do what we do, I’ve figured out.”

Teachers felt they spent as much as or more time managing student behavior than teaching, Hank said “it seems like I am finding that I put more priority on teaching these kids how to behave than the difference between an Angus and Hereford cow -the actual content.” Some challenges were based on personal and one-to-one technology provided by the school, students were not bringing the technology provided by the school ready to use or were distracted by personal devices. Sophia explained “try to get kids to stay off of cell phones and to pay attention in class because they think social media and Snapchat and all that is a little more important.” Later in the year, the biggest challenge transitioned into student motivation, Crystal said “it’s been tough, kids have really been slacking in getting assignments turned in.” This challenge heightened when the weather improved, and the end of the year approached.

Time management was a consistent challenge throughout the first year. Clare said, “what I am most worried about is staying on top of everything whether that is grading or lesson planning.” Wendy stated, “I had no idea how much time planning FFA anything would take...I had no idea until the first couple of weeks how much time you have to put in, but it’s worth it.” The expectations of the classroom and FFA surpassed Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs), therefore there were plans to get SAEs started at the beginning of the year, but those plans were overshadowed by the end of the year. Hank said, “the classroom is rolling, FFA activities are ramping up and thinking about SAEs, we have been through quite a bit of coursework and it’s balancing a lot of things at one time.” Time management challenges were especially strong in the fourth quarter, Clare said “it’s hectic because it has been CDE’s, the plant sale...it just feels like there’s a million things to get done before state convention is here and it’s a matter of us getting it all completed.”

Theme 2: Community

Crystal explained her community involvement, “the community just doesn’t really know who I am yet, I don’t know if that is because I am gone on weekends or what ... I may be lacking on visibility in the community.” Later in the year some of the teachers found ways to get connected to the community. Claudia said, “I just joined the Lion’s Club, I’m the youngest lion by a few years. But it’s been fun meeting new people.” While a few teachers felt they “inherited” long standing traditions of serving the community, others worked to set new boundaries with community members “we have set a few boundaries...I appreciate community members trust us to take care of [repairing] these items for them, at the same time...it’s completely a learning environment and there have been a few people who have been surprised.”

Theme 3: School

Feedback provided by administrators varied significantly in quantity and quality, but every participant wanted more. Some administrators conducted formal observations and feedback sessions, but not all. The administrators’ expectations of the teachers also varied. Some required weekly lesson plans and final exams in advance, others did not. Support from the administration was a major component of the teacher’s morale and job satisfaction. Clare described her experience “I know regardless of any decision I have had to make or any questions I have had, my principal and vice principal have stood by me.” In contrast, Paige said, “we don’t have complete support yet of our faculty members and administration.”

Concerns with administration often focused on lack of communication, Paige said “we don’t ever have faculty meetings which is not good for our school because we need them.”

Another component of overall job satisfaction was connections to the faculty. Some schools were welcoming and made a point to have social gatherings and included the new teachers. Other faculty groups either did not have social gatherings or the beginning teachers were not included. Sophia said “just the friendships, playing in volleyball leagues and that kind of stuff together. It helps knowing that the faculty is behind your back, and they are there to help and support you.” Claudia and Hank took working with the faculty to a higher level by designing cross-curricular work with the science department. Those working in multi-teacher programs spent time trying to balance the responsibilities between teachers, Helen said, “it is to the point [co-teacher] is not pulling their weight...and I am trying to pull the weight, and that is tough.”

The teachers spent significant time learning the processes in the school or if they did not, they later felt reprimanded because they didn’t know. Crystal described it like this “I’m getting told things very last minute and so then they get mad at me because I didn’t know, because somebody should have told me.” The teachers did not have the tools and equipment they felt they needed and sought external funding for the program for hydroponics systems, shop equipment and greenhouses. Claudia said “Our shop needs a lot of work. We have equipment that doesn’t run properly or doesn’t run at all, just really rundown stuff. So, I’ve been working with my welding boys to make a list of everything we need.” Claudia said, “I recently got approved for a grant, for hydroponics through our community foundation, yeah it’s like \$1,000.”

The teachers took on additional responsibilities in the school on top of agricultural education/FFA responsibilities to gain connections, for example, Claudia said “so the kids, they know who I am now even the ones I don’t have in class. I’m in charge of concession stands, so I see kids all the time now.” The additional roles included starting and coaching the trap shooting team, running concessions stands, assistant track coach, assistant boys basketball coach, and as an assistant with after school tutoring. The teachers sought connections to overcome feelings of separation by being physically located away from the main school building or having a different lunchtime than other teachers. Crystal said, “I don’t eat with high school teachers, I have a middle school lunch, so I sit in on the FACS teacher’s 5th hour...I’m not very close with any of the teachers because I am so far away out here.”

Mentoring was initially focused on reaching out to the teachers who served as their host during student teaching. Once the formal mentoring process in the schools got established there were regular meetings, and they utilized the school-based mentor for more procedural and school process questions. One teacher was in a school that used an online mentoring program, this was not a positive experience for Paige, she said “I mean, technically, we have our online mentor. But she doesn’t really do much.” Peer mentoring emerged within the participant group, both sides of peer pairs talked about reaching out to each other for support and ideas, Paige said “Me and Wendy always – are always trading stuff, it’s like a daily event.” As the teachers attended more district level FFA events, they talked more about using experienced agriculture teachers in their district and less about their cooperating teachers, Crystal said “we had our CDE Wednesday and so I was talking to some teachers in the district about some problems I was having. So, I’m using all of their life knowledge and asking them for help. That was really nice.” A lot of informal mentoring happened at the January Agricultural Education Symposium, and they left the professional development event “inspired with some new ideas,” said Crystal.

Theme 4: Personal

Throughout the year, finding a comfortable balance between their work and personal life was a challenge. The teachers started each semester with a feeling of excitement and were refreshed after a break, at the mid-point of each semester they became overwhelmed. In a search for more balance, the teachers set expectations for themselves such as taking at least one day a week off from schoolwork, not taking work home or setting a hard deadline on when to go home, Clare said “most times I try to leave here no later than

7 pm.” As they were working in a very demanding job, they were still working to balance the life of an early career adult, there were changes in family dynamics (engagements, children, etc.), renting and purchasing homes, and making plans for graduate school happening while they were starting in the profession. At the end of the year this was especially difficult, Claudia said laughingly, “I don’t have a lot of balance right now. Between teaching, the officers, track, and all of that.”

By the end of the year, they were all ready for a break. The teachers had identified the changes they wanted to make next year and how they would go about making them and many had plans for specific professional development over the summer. Wendy reflected on her teaching “I need to say this is where we’re going to go, this is what we’re going to learn, and this is how we are going to get there...being firm with it and staying with it.” Hank said, “we have some potential next year to offer some different courses, we are adding two more courses.” Some teachers were making decisions to become further committed to the community and the profession, others were looking for opportunities outside the classroom. The teachers enjoyed their jobs but were challenged by how to get everything done to be the teacher they wanted to be.

Year 2 Summary

Year two started with an increased feeling of preparedness and knowing what to expect. Hank described this as “I feel more prepared, but at the same time I know that there will be challenges, there will be unseen challenges.” Some of those “unseen challenges” quickly arose such as not having enough classroom chairs and desks for increased enrollment, dealing with storm damage to the greenhouse and shop windows, adapting to technology changes and learning a new system for those teachers who transitioned schools between year one and two. They quickly began to feel behind and overwhelmed again in late October through mid-December. The teachers were better able to predict what they needed to get done, but still struggled to find the time to accomplish it. They were more proactive in parent communication in the first semester when compared to their first year such as hosting a beginning of the year parent night, sending information to parents about joining FFA and they more readily reached out to parents when students were underperforming academically. Hank said “I’m starting something I’ve heard other teachers doing, and previously to this year I just couldn’t believe I had time to do it. This year I’m making the time...I sent an e-mail for every class to all the parents.”

Theme 1: Program Management

Time management continued to be a challenge. There was a feeling of being less behind than last year, but still unable to get ahead. Paige said, “I feel like I stay on pace for like a day but getting ahead never happens.” Facilities and equipment contributed to the time management crunch. The teachers were dealing with a frozen greenhouse, mealy bugs, equipment repair, lack of supplies, or managing multiple classrooms. Growth in classes added to the challenge. Paige said, “hopefully we can figure it out before tomorrow because I don’t have seats for 28 kids.”

Student relationships were continuing to develop for those in the same school and the teachers who transitioned were starting over. Those returning noticed the classes started at a different point when everyone already knew each other. Claudia talked about how comfortable her students were with her, “I’ve got a couple of kids that talk to me about stuff that’s going on in their lives because they are so comfortable opening up to me...I am glad they have someone they can come to.” Student motivation was the most significant student management challenge. Teachers felt better about management of the FFA program but were surprised by challenges they had to overcome in the first semester from removing a chapter officer from the team, managing events they had never done before and navigating errors in t-shirt sponsorships. Just when they felt like they knew how to manage things, something unexpected would pop up. They wanted to ask for help from others and give more ownership to the FFA officer team by delegating tasks, but there was concern with turning over projects to the student leaders they did not know exactly how to do

themselves. Furthermore, while some teachers felt like the spring was the most demanding, Wendy described her fall like this, “this is the busiest time for Ag programs, national convention, fruit, and meat sales...your roster, your POA and everything as a new teacher it’s still like you don’t trust anyone, you want to make sure you get it done.” They acknowledged things were easier than last year, but still challenging.

With the increased comfort in the classroom and FFA, a few began to shift some attention to SAE. The teachers who attended the SAE for All conference discussed fewer hurdles and more solutions to SAE integration. Claudia attended the training and said “starting with my freshmen class...they are going to have to come up with something and keep records over it. I didn’t do any SAE last year really and I want to try to hit those a little harder this year.” In contrast, Crystal said “I’m still struggling with the whole SAE component...I really just need to sit down and go through AET and just take the time to do it with them and they’re going to complain.”

Curriculum and planning still took a significant amount of time. Their feeling of preparedness related to this topic was directly related to the amount of time they had dedicated to working on it over the summer. Hank said, “planning still isn’t like my strong suit, I feel like coming in this summer I didn’t spend as much time planning as I should...I have unit plans, but I just don’t feel prepared.” Those who had taken time to re-vamp curriculum over the summer felt better about where they were, others were making similar mistakes they experienced the first year and knew they could do better but could not find the time to make it happen. There was again the challenge of finding productive work for students to do with substitutes and getting high quality substitutes. Crystal said, “I counted out how many days I’ve been gone this year between FFA and personal and I’ve been gone 30...my kids never see me, I never see them, and we haven’t got through much content in the past month.” Overall, year two was easier than year one, but still harder than they anticipated.

Theme 2: Community

The teachers described an increase in community engagement. Many teachers increased their engagement through a summer job or volunteering. Those who resided outside of the district had more challenges with community engagement. Claudia stated “A lot more people know me in the community now. I mean I go to all the ball games and stuff; I buy as much local things as I can for myself and for the school.”

Theme 3: Personal

Work/Life balance was impacted by not only the demands of the Ag Ed program but the additional responsibilities they accepted. The teachers took on additional responsibilities within the school including coaching, prom sponsorship, assistant activities director, and concession stands. It was unclear if they were pressured into these responsibilities or sought them out. Surprisingly, the motivation to take on these responsibilities was not financial, rather they were seeking a way to connect with students and faculty outside of the agriculture program and give them something else to focus on. Claudia said, “I had to find balance, I’m coaching volleyball and am still in-charge of concession stands, and you name it. I’m the one that gets thrown into it because I’m the one not married and who doesn’t have kids.”

Theme 4: School

The use of formal mentors in the school from year one varied among the teachers. Some continued to use the same person on a regular, but less frequent basis compared to the previous year. Others found a different resource person in the school than they had originally been assigned. If the mentor they were formally assigned left the school, they were not re-assigned and sought out support on their own. Also, teachers who moved schools between year one and two were not assigned a new mentor and sought out

support from other teachers and parents. Although in-school mentors were used less often, there was still a need for support from a mentor in the school. All the teachers utilized agriculture mentors as well, many identified at least two other people, often one being a peer and the other a mentor within their FFA district. The peer interactions were still present, but less frequent, Wendy said “I don’t feel like I talk to someone daily like I always shoot someone in our [graduating] class [cohort] a text probably weekly still.” Some of the best support was received informally as they gathered during FFA events or Ag Ed Symposium. Hank said, “I look forward to career development event days because that’s when I have a lot of conversations, [Ag teacher] has continued to be helpful in times of need...so that’s nice having him so close.” The teachers sought out mentoring, but less frequently and on more specific topics than they did their first year. Teachers in multi-teacher programs needed mentoring support that was different than teachers in single teacher programs including how to balance the distribution of responsibilities and managing teacher transitions.

The teachers were seeking agricultural education professional development and showed remorse if they missed Summer Conference or Agricultural Education Symposium. Helen said, “I do feel like I missed out not going to summer conference, so I think I’m going to next year, I’ll kick everything aside because I didn’t get to go last year.” They enhanced this with additional professional development on topics unique to each person such as inquiry-based instruction, additional CASE certifications or agricultural mechanics construction. Claudia said, “I went to the inquiry-based learning training this summer, that’s helped a lot too when I’ve been coming up with lessons.” As they finished their second year there was a wide range of professional development plans before year three. Some teachers engaged in multiple professional development opportunities while others elected to not engage in any.

Year 3 Summary

They were more comfortable sharing the responsibility of the program. Clare said “I let go of control over a bunch of stuff this year, I’m a perfectionist and I like to be in control of everything. This year, I just let my officers do all the planning for all our events.” Some teachers had been so focused on professional development, they felt the need to step back, Claudia said “this summer is kind of weird for me because I am actually not doing any professional development (PD) like the last three it has just been full of PD and I’ve been gone all the time but this summer I am not doing anything so I can finish my thesis.” They were also analyzing their additional responsibilities and Clare said, “we are looking for someone else to take over the concession stands.” They became more comfortable saying “no” to protect the time they dedicated to the agriculture program and their personal lives.

Theme 1: Program Management

When compared to earlier years, teachers were more focused on motivating students than developing relationships. Student relationships continued to be important to the teachers, but they were easier now that they knew most of their students prior to starting classes. They believed getting to know new students and specifically students with whom they had not previously connected was critical. For those who were more challenged by building student relationships they were aware of how important relationships were and worked to create a plan for success in that area. Clare said “relationship building is my professional development goal this year. And so, my goal is to do one activity each nine weeks in each one of my classes.” To increase student motivation the teachers provided more input to the student on what they will learn via alternative assignments allowing the students more freedom of choice on the topic they study or the way they presented the information. The teachers were quicker to identify groups or individual students to monitor more closely to avoid issues getting out of control. Wendy said, “I definitely noticed I have more confidence in myself...you don’t give them a chance to do anything.” They were also clearer with their expectations, Clare said “I get a little bit black and white with how I see things...like if the kids just don’t read the directions or the instructions that are pretty well laid out...it’s not my fault their grade isn’t the greatest.” There were times during tragedy that teachers truly learned their important role in

mentoring students, when students came to them for advice in the most difficult times. Clare had a student who died, she worked to support her students and reflected on her own actions, "Because of the student who called me I knew it was an emergency, he said, 'you know [student] has passed away.' Then Monday was just shock for me, after the memorial service, I guess it's just like, did I do enough as a teacher?"

During the fourth quarter there was an increase in significant student management challenges they had not experienced in prior years. The teachers talked about it being harder to motivate students and be productive when other teachers in the building shut down. They wished administrators had expectations for all teachers to push to the end of the year productively.

At the beginning of their third year the teachers mentioned goals set for FFA such as increasing membership or attending National FFA Convention for the first time. There were concerns about the student leadership team like working to increase follow through and avoid "drama." Helen said, "I have concerns for my officer team. They have a lot of really good ideas, and they work together really well but I think communicating what all of them are doing needs to be better." Once again, the demands of the FFA program between National FFA Convention and fruit sales delivery caused strain on time management and was overwhelming. Helen said, "I think managing the ag program has been tough because I feel like I don't have enough time, I don't have enough time with the kids. I tried to schedule a ritual practice all week."

Curriculum and planning were time consuming, but significantly easier than previous years. The teachers were reviewing curriculum they had made in the past and making changes to enhance it. Claudia said, "I take a few minutes and go through the lesson, make sure it's what I want it to be...it's been way less stressful than the last two years because I have some basis of what to go off of." There were examples of integration of new tools such as interactive notebooks, more labs and hands-on activities and increased student engagement. Paige said, "I do interactive notebooks with them, I've been putting a lot of time into making my sample and trying to get that a little bit more organized now that I kind of know about them better than last year." There was a stronger focus on student learning as explained by Crystal, "I'm getting the feel of the kids and if we need to take an extra day to do something then that's ok...I want the kids to really understand the content." However, the teachers were moving through curriculum at a faster pace than in the years past and were making choices on what to add at the end of the semester with the additional time. When seeking curriculum resources, they had a clearer idea of what they were looking for, some needed content in specific areas while others acknowledged they needed creative delivery ideas to complement the content they had.

Theme 2: Community

The teachers were focusing on sharing information about the program to the community more than in the past utilizing newspaper articles, newsletters, and social media. The increased awareness of the program was followed by positive feedback through supportive comments, an increase in volunteers reaching out to the program, and a more engaged community at events. Helen said, "I really want to do more community driven events because it seems like [school] has had its hand out and they haven't given to the community as much as they could." They talked less about needing to get involved in the community compared to the first two years. For Wendy, engagement with the community was a morale boost, "I go into the community and hear, 'oh, you're doing such a good job.' It doesn't seem like I'm doing a great job, but everyone else says so, so I am trying to keep doing my best."

Theme 3: Personal

Work-life balance was still a challenge, but they had developed coping mechanisms to make it better. Some teachers held themselves to a strict "no work at home" rule and/or set strict times by which they would be home, others had embraced a work/life integration model that incorporated their family into the agriculture program in appropriate ways. They mentioned how spouses may step up in the busy times

of the year knowing that a break was often coming when they could balance the home duties back out. Although still a challenge, the teachers had found ways to find more balance than in previous years and had the ability to plan for especially busy times. Claudia said “yesterday was food sales stuff, definitely all work and no life. But compared to –my first-year teaching or even last year, I’m able to leave work at work and then have more of a life outside of school.” Teachers who felt better at work-life balance discussed how they strategically utilized every minute of their planning period to ensure they were able to be home at a reasonable time. Furthermore, the demands outside of the classroom were increasing, several teachers had begun graduate school and used time in the evenings and weekends to study. Many were still engaged with additional responsibilities in the school, but there were comments about letting those go soon. Helen said “next year not to do cheerleading because I want to give more of my time to teaching and FFA in the ag program. And that would just give me a little bit more time too, with work-life balance.” Those in multi-teacher programs relied on the other teachers to help run the program and when they were not available, it increased their work responsibilities.

Theme 4: School

Teachers who balanced time off in the summer and time engaged with professional development and planning started the year refreshed with new plans and ideas. Those who traveled with students to multiple events and engaged in multiple professional development activities, lacked a break over the summer and started the school year already feeling behind. It was possible to “overdo” summer professional development, some felt the need to slow down the summer after their third year because they experienced burn-out over the last few. However, those who took a more moderate pace on professional development did not feel the same. Some shifted their professional development focus to graduate coursework as they sought a graduate degree. Claudia said, “Yeah, I am taking this summer off. I have got my thesis and then moving and that kind of stuff. I just figured I needed a little break from PD and stuff for now.”

Mentoring was no longer a formal process. The teachers could assess what they needed to know more about and sought out mentors with expertise in that area. Wendy said “Trying to get a couple of things for our small gas engines, talking to older guys in the district, [teacher] and [teacher] seeing what they do. And I’ve talked to [peer] a couple of times to get things.” Utilizing peer mentors was common for this group of teachers, but they were communicating less with their peers now. Conversations that did happen were simple exchanges of ideas related to a specific topic. Claudia said [I reach out to] “my class and then the class below me, I am always like ‘hey, have you taught this? How have you taught it?’” They did not feel like novice teachers but did not feel they have the experience to move into a formal mentoring role yet. However, this group of teachers was being called upon to serve in mentoring roles to undergraduate agricultural education students, within their schools, and profession. As new faculty members were hired in the school, they were reaching out to provide support, Crystal said, “she asked me a lot over the summer about how I planned my day, because she went from block scheduling to eight periods.” In contrast Helen said, “I am not a mentor yet. I would like to maybe mentor somebody if I could, but I don’t know if I’m that knowledgeable.”

Relationships with administration were either strongly positive or negative. Crystal said, “every time I try to do something, I hit a brick wall and it doesn't work out.” In contrast, Paige said, “It gives me confidence my principal pulls me in for [advice].”

Overall, the third year was easier but there were places where they were still surprised, new challenges they had not experienced would “pop up,” and the learning curve was still present. The teachers appreciated having a better idea of what to expect related to curriculum, FFA activities, and had developed individual strategies to balance their work and life responsibilities. They were happy with their jobs but easily identify where they wanted to grow.

Summary

The research question sought to identify areas of accomplishments and challenges faced by beginning agriculture teachers in their first three years of teaching. While findings addressed individual teacher's experiences, the conclusion attempts to provide their collective experiences. Data tables 1-3 represent the areas identified by the participants of this collective case study by year.

In year one, the teachers were seeking any type of feedback they could find. Generally, they were confident in their ability to develop relationships, first with students, then faculty and finally the community. Daily decisions were based on the immediate impact on the agricultural education program. Most of their challenges were focused on finding time to get everything done, and the time was focused on the classroom as Torres et al. (2008) found. Learning processes and procedures, lesson planning, and preparing for events all took more time because they were all new experiences, similar to the finding by Myers et al. (2005). A summary of their accomplishments and challenges in year one is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Accomplishments and Challenges Faced by Beginning Agriculture Teachers in Year One

Accomplishments	Challenges
Growing student numbers	Feedback and measuring success
Student leadership team	School processes & logistics
Student learning	Curriculum and planning
Student relationships, faculty relationships and community relationships (in that order)	Student management – special education student technology, and motivation
Student-centered classroom	Time management
Long term planning	Change
Community support	SAE's
Diversifying opportunities to students	Work/life balance

The overarching theme for year two was an increased feeling of preparedness. They still had things to learn related to process and content, but it was easier than the first year because they had a better idea of what to expect. Student relationships continued to be a strength, advising the FFA chapter was easier, and they did a better job communicating with the community and in return, received positive feedback. Work/life balance was better, but there were times in the year it was still overwhelming, which aligns with research by Sorensen and McKim (2014). When the teachers faced challenges, it was easier to identify mentors who could provide advice. The growing student relationships caused a challenge with significantly larger classes. Funding was a challenge to have the facilities and equipment they needed for their growing programs and to add additional opportunities for students. Planning was easier for those who had documented their lessons, but there were still content areas they wanted to grow in. Student motivation became a growing challenge.

Table 2

Accomplishments and Challenges Faced by Beginning Agriculture Teachers in Year Two

Accomplishments	Challenges
FFA is smoother	Significant class size changes
Informal mentoring	Facilities and equipment
Student relationships	Curriculum planning
Student learning	Lack of student motivation
Community relationships	Funding

Table 3*Accomplishments and Challenges Faced by Beginning Agriculture Teachers in Year Two, continued...*

Work/life integration or more balance	Planning – better but still hard
Additional roles	Experience with specific events
Faculty relationships	Overwhelmed

In year three, the teachers had a shared responsibility of the program and were more likely to delegate tasks to students or adult volunteers. However, there were times they were surprised with situations that were new to them. Students in the classroom were provided more input and freedom of choice related to what and how they learned. They were more confident in their teaching abilities, there were more established classroom routines, and they exercised an increased classroom awareness. There was more community and parent support due to increased communication. There were challenges, and one was time as also identified by Lambert et al. (2011). Managing the FFA chapter took significantly more time than they felt it should, similar to findings by Myers et al (2005). In the classroom, they moved through content faster and were seeking additional information to teach. SAEs were beginning to be established but were still not where they wanted them to be. Student motivation was an ongoing challenge.

Table 4*Accomplishments and Challenges Faced by Beginning Agriculture Teachers in Year Three*

Accomplishments	Challenges
Providing students input and choice	Time management – especially FFA
Improvement of previous lessons	Finding additional content to add to courses
Established classroom routines	Student lack of motivation
Increased classroom awareness	Content from mentors on specific topics
Curriculum planning and selecting resources	SAE
Delegation of FFA responsibilities to students	Student management (behavior)
Positive relationships	Social media
Community support	

Implications & Recommendations

Each of the teachers experienced success leading their agricultural education program. Over the three-year time frame, only one teacher chose to leave the profession. During the annual focus groups, the teachers identified the value of the monthly phone calls related to the research as a benefit to help guide reflection, Paige said “it made me step back and reflect ... ‘okay, what was good, what was bad, were those things really that big of a deal or did they seem like a big deal at that time.’” As previous literature shows, and aligns with the findings of this research, classroom management, advising the FFA chapter, curriculum development, lesson planning and school paperwork (Myers et al., 2005) are notable challenges faced by beginning agriculture teachers. One way to help alleviate some of these challenges is through mentoring programs that work to support the unique needs of beginning agriculture teachers. Mentoring programs both within the school and the agricultural education profession can help beginning teachers through any feelings of isolation they may experience (Greiman et al. 2005). It is important to note, the data tables are not intended to be an all-encompassing list of topics for a teacher mentoring program, rather topics that were sought by this specific group of teachers. Induction programs need to be responsive to the needs of the teachers they serve.

Findings consistently and clearly identified teachers are seeking (and not receiving) feedback on a regular basis and on all aspects of being an agriculture teacher. Multiple entities should come together to provide the multi-tiered support to novice teachers. They need “go-to” resources in their school and through

the FFA district/area and state agricultural education organization such as details about policies and procedures that can be accessed when they are looking for them. For example, a school could provide details on requesting a substitute and an FFA association could provide a video on how to submit the roster at the state level. These are tasks teachers may complete outside of “office hours” and require access to the information as needed. The teachers flourished when allowed to work with and problem solve with their peers, establishing a network of peers increases the sense of belonging in the profession fuels informal mentoring as Inzer and Crawford (2005) suggested, by allowing them to select peer mentors.

In year one, attention should be focused on helping teachers identify their challenges early and develop coping mechanisms prior to the middle of the fall semester when they become more overwhelmed. Special attention should be paid to the teachers when preparing them to enter the mid-Spring semester stretch of increased job demands. In year two, the teachers need help doing self-analysis of their performance and their program and get connected with the specific resources they need. In year three teachers should be leading the program and be supported in new initiatives and provided mentoring and resources specific to the areas of growth they are seeking as teachers and relate to the long-term goals for the agriculture program.

The scope of this study was narrow, focusing on traditionally certified, white teachers in rural, predominately white communities. Future research opportunities exist in similar studies with a more diverse population of teachers and/or schools This study did not address the non-traditionally certified teachers’ experiences which may differ significantly. The mentoring experiences should be examined further to explore the role of mentors for beginning teachers, including formal and informal mentors they use.

How does the beginning teacher experience compare to teachers in other stages of Fessler and Christianson’s (1992) *Teacher Career Cycle*? We now better understand what beginning teachers need to know or might be challenged by, but more investigation is needed to clarify best practices to deliver support, content, and resources. Finally, what is the post-COVID impact on early career teachers?

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