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Choosing a Life of Impact: A Grounded Theory Approach to Describe the Career Choice of Becoming a High School Agriculture Teacher

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Choosing a Life of Impact: A Grounded Theory Approach to Describe the Career Choice of Becoming a High School Agriculture Teacher

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The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative research was to identify the influences on students' decisions to pursue a career as a high school agriculture teacher and develop a proposed theoretical model to conceptualize this career decision. Two samples of students – one sample of high school students and one sample of college students – were the participants in this study. Each participant included in the two samples was either considering teaching as a career or was currently enrolled in a university teacher licensure program. Data were collected from individual interviews, focus groups, and writing samples. The findings from this study suggested that when participants were motivated by role models with whom they could socially identify, became familiar with the profession through relevant experiences, and were affirmed of their career capabilities through people in their social environment to whom they were emotionally connected, they pursued a career path to become a high school agriculture teacher.

Keywords: career development, career choice, teacher career choice, teaching, agricultural education, grounded theory

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Teacher attrition (i.e., teachers leaving the profession) has steadily increased over the past two decades (Ingersoll et al., 2014). As a result, Perda (2013) estimates that more than 42% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years. In many disciplines of education throughout the United States, the increased rate of attrition has led to a shortage of qualified, competent teachers to fill vacancies (Thomson et al., 2012). To add to this growing concern, The

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Chronicle of Higher Education (2017) reported that only 4.2% of college freshmen in 2015 majored in education, which is the smallest percentage of students in the United States who planned to pursue a career as a teacher since the organization began collecting data in 1971.

Specific to the discipline of agricultural education, Foster et al. (2015) identified 30 states experiencing a shortage of high school agriculture teachers. As reported in the National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand Study (Foster et al., 2015), nearly 4% of the 11,000 educator positions were vacant due to a disproportionate balance of teachers who retired, teachers who left the profession to pursue other careers (i.e., attrition), and the expansion of new programs. Despite increased efforts in the discipline of agricultural education to recruit high school students to the profession, a critical need remains to find qualified, traditionally licensed teachers to fill vacant positions.

The steady decline of college freshmen who are choosing to major in education over the last 15 years, combined with the obvious need for teachers across all disciplines (Aragon, 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2014), led researchers to examine the variables that contribute to students' decision to pursue a career as a teacher. Literature from the field of psychology may provide clues to those in the field of education regarding how and why young people decide to pursue teaching careers. Extensive research in career choice from organizational, educational, and behavioral psychology identifies the need for *familiarity* with the profession (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Lawver & Torres, 2012; Lent et al., 1994, 2002; Thieman et al., 2016; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005); personal mechanisms of *motivation* (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006; Dik et al., 2008; Fischman et al., 2001; Harms & Knobloch, 2005; Palmer, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thomson et al., 2012; Watt & Richardson, 2008); and shared *social identity* with someone in a specific career (Bandura et al., 2001; Krumboltz et al., 1976; Lent & Brown, 2008; Lent et al., 1994, 2002; Marx et al., 2014; Rocca & Washburn, 2005; Thieman et al., 2016; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Considering the high attrition rates for teachers, as well as the shortage of students planning to major in agricultural education (Foster et al., 2015), it is important to determine ways to recruit students to the profession (Korte & Simonsen, 2018; Solomonson et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016). To combat the critical shortage concerns, closer examination of the variables that impact high school and university students' decision to pursue a career as a high school agriculture teacher is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations, beliefs, and typologies which characterize a prospective teacher. This enhanced knowledge has the potential to increase the number of agricultural education teacher candidates who choose to pursue this career path and subsequently reduce the critical need for educators.

With this purpose in mind, the researchers in this study selected to use a grounded theory approach to examine the specific factors or combination of factors that influence students' decisions to pursue careers as high school agriculture teachers (Morse & Richards, 2002; Robinson et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is an inductive, systematic

methodological approach by which researchers use very few assumptions and preconceived ideas to develop research questions around a central phenomenon. After data collection and analysis, researchers use themes that emerge from the stories and lived experiences of participants to conceptualize a visual model (Brown, 2010; Creswell, 2013).

This research was grounded in data collected from students who were either (a) a junior or senior in high school who aspired to become an agriculture teacher or (b) a university student in the process of completing a university's teacher licensure program. Students of different ages may provide different perspectives on the ways they think about teacher career choice decisions (Bandura, 1997; Bandura et al., 2001). Thus, an iterative process of data collection and analysis was used to develop a proposed theoretical model based on the viewpoints of two different age groups of students – high school students and university students. The central research questions which guided the design, data collection, and analysis for this study were:

1) What previous experiences and/or people impact students' decision to pursue careers as high school agriculture teachers?
2) What psychological and environmental influences motivate students to pursue careers as high school agriculture teachers?

Methods

Using a grounded theory approach, researchers interpreted the data generated from interviews and writing samples from high school and university students to develop a theoretical model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data collection was accomplished using a constant comparative method, which allowed researchers to develop concepts from interview data and writing samples by simultaneously coding and analyzing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As recommended by Strauss (1987), researchers first used open coding to determine initial categories with similar properties and dimensions. Axial coding, putting data together in new ways after categories are initially identified in the open coding phase, was then used by the researchers to assemble higher-order categories and causal conditions within a similar context or with similar intervening variables. Finally, researchers used selective coding to develop a theoretical model to describe the integration of the influences which contributed to students' decisions to pursue a career as a teacher.

Sample

The population for this study was two groups of future educators from Missouri and Illinois. Researchers used theoretical sampling to explore the evolving theory of career choice with the purposeful sample of secondary (i.e., high school) and post-secondary (i.e., university or preservice) students ($N = 41$). In theoretical sampling, researchers select additional cases to be studied to gather new insights or expand and refine concepts already gained (Taylor & Bogdan,

1998). Both the secondary and post-secondary cases utilized in this study were made up of students who intended to become high school agriculture teachers.

As recommended by Creswell (2007), researchers first selected and studied a homogeneous group of secondary students (n = 13) to generate a preliminary theoretical model. As shown in Table 1, the homogenous group was comprised of 13 female Caucasian students who chose to participate in a three-day teaching academy for students who were interested in becoming a high school agriculture teacher. These students had recently completed their junior or senior year of education in a secondary school, were from either rural or suburban geographic locations, and were actively or very actively involved in agricultural-based youth organizations (e.g., FFA and 4-H). The teaching academy, held during the summer of 2016, was organized and hosted by faculty and staff at a large land-grant university in the Midwest.

Table 1. Demographics for Homogenous Group of Female Secondary-Level Participants (n = 13)

Demographic Characteristic	Number
High School Academic Level	
Junior	3
Senior	10
Geographic Location	
Rural	9
Suburban	4
Involvement in Youth Organizations	
Very Active	4
Active	9

In compliance with Institutional Review Board regulations from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Missouri, a parent or guardian read and signed a consent form for each high school student prior to data collection.

After developing a preliminary theoretical model based on the results of data from the high school student sample, researchers then utilized a heterogeneous sample (n = 28) of university students to confirm or disconfirm the model. Discriminant sampling was used with the goal of moving toward saturation. Data were gathered from individuals different from those initially interviewed to see if the model would hold for additional participants (Creswell, 2013). This group of university student participants was selected for the study because, like the first group, they were preparing to become high school agriculture teachers. However, they were further along in their decision making about and preparation toward their careers. Researchers also hoped this older group of participants would be able to reflect on their own experiences at an even deeper level than the high school participants in the first sample. As shown in Table 2, the heterogeneous sample of university students (i.e., preservice teachers) included 14 male and 14

female students pursuing graduate (n = 4) and undergraduate (n = 24) degrees who completed 25 or more hours of their first clinical field experience requirement in an agricultural education teacher preparation program at a large land-grant university in the Midwest. Two students were African American; the remaining students identified themselves as Caucasian. Although the majority of students were previously enrolled in a secondary agriculture course, five students had no prior experience in the discipline of agricultural education. Students were from varied geographic locations (e.g., urban, suburban, rural, and rural/farm) and varied in their degree of involvement in agricultural-based youth organizations (e.g., FFA and 4-H).

Table 2. Demographics for Heterogeneous Group of Post-Secondary Level Participants (n = 28)

Demographic Characteristic	Number
Gender	
Female	14
Male	14
Academic Level	
Undergraduate	24
Graduate Student	4
Geographic Location	
Rural/Farm	9
Rural	11
Suburban	6
Urban	2
Involvement in Youth Organizations	
Very Active	7
Moderately Active	16
No Experience	5

In compliance with IRB regulations, university students read and signed consent forms prior to data collection.

Each participant included in the two samples was either considering teaching high school agriculture or had already chosen to pursue a career as a secondary agricultural education teacher, as evident by their enrollment in a university teacher licensure program. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized beyond the students who were participants in this study, but potentially may be valuable for university teacher educators and secondary school teachers and administrators across all disciplines of education.

Data Collection

High School Student Data Collection. The high school students (n = 13) who attended the teaching academy participated in a sixty-minute focus group interview. Prior to data collection, focus group questions were developed and evaluated by a panel of experts from two land-grant institutions to determine both face and content validity. An adapted version of the SHOWeD model of questioning (Wallerstein, 1994; Wang, 1999) was used to facilitate discussion among the participants and the researcher.

The researchers facilitated and audio recorded the semi-structured focus group interview on the final day of the teaching academy. The focus group interview style was casual and flexible, which allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and probe for deeper understanding. In addition to the focus group interview, the participants provided written reflections about their experience at the teaching academy and their interpretation of the teaching profession.

Relative to their experience during the teaching academy, students were asked to (a) discuss the overall impacts of the experience, (b) describe their perceptions of the most impactful activities, (c) explain why the experience or activity was meaningful, and (d) envision how their participation in the academy might influence their futures. When asked about meaningful experiences and activities, students did not just address events that had occurred at the academy. They also talked extensively about how previous experiences and influential people had motivated them to consider teaching as a career possibility. Data collected from this focus group interview was transcribed and analyzed by the researchers.

College Student Sample Data Collection. Following the analysis of the data collected from the high school students and the development of a preliminary theoretical model, each university student in the sample (n = 28) participated in a 30 to 45-minute, semi-structured individual interview that was conducted in a private office or classroom at the university. Although grounded theory research requires a systematic approach, it must also evolve in order to identify the central phenomenon and causal conditions (Creswell, 2013). Because of the high school students' rich discussion of experiences and people influencing their career decision during the focus group interview, researchers elected to focus university student interview questions on variables that impacted their decision to choose teaching as a career path. Students were asked to (a) reflect on the reasons they chose to pursue a career as a teacher, (b) describe the characteristics of their favorite or most inspirational teacher, (c) explain the qualities of a "good" teacher, and (d) examine their perceived confidence to be a "good" teacher in the future. The interview questions were developed and evaluated by a panel of experts consisting of agricultural education professors and graduate students from two land-grant institutions to ensure face and content validity.

The university student interviews were completed over a three-year period (during the Spring semesters of 2015, 2016, and 2017), after the students had completed 25 or more clinical

experience hours with a teacher and school. These interviews were conversational in style, and the researcher probed for more information when necessary. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed by an outside transcription service.

Data Analysis

As recommended by Strauss (1987), researchers first used open coding to determine initial categories with similar properties and dimensions for each group of students. After collecting the high school student focus group interview and written sample data and, again, after collecting the college student data, researchers developed an initial open coding scheme that used sentence-by-sentence analysis of the interview transcripts and writing samples. The goal was to develop categories that reflected the processes involved in the participants' considerations of or actual decisions to becoming high school agriculture teachers.

Axial coding was then used by the researchers to assemble higher-order categories and causal conditions within a similar context or with similar intervening variables. During this phase, the researcher determined how the categories identified during open coding were related to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, researchers used selective coding to determine the core themes of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interrelationships among the core categories were solidified to develop a proposed theoretical model describing how students made decisions to pursue a career as a high school agriculture teacher.

Researchers participated in memo writing throughout this entire project. These memos varied from detailed analysis of a specific concept to simple notes regarding possible linkages among concepts (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In addition to being used as an analytic tool, written memos provide an audit trail that can be used by others to determine whether the methods, analysis, and write-up are a reasonable interpretation of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness is an important consideration in determining the worth of a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Aspects of trustworthiness include establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility (i.e., confidence that findings are 'true') was established in this study through triangulation of data sources and multiple investigators. Rich, thick description established transferability (i.e., evidence the findings could also be applied to other contexts). An external audit of the data analysis performed by a senior faculty member at the University of Missouri who was not involved in the research promoted dependability (i.e., findings were consistent and could be repeated). Finally, an audit trail that included raw data, reflexive notes, and process notes was kept by the researchers. This trail, as well as the fact that this study occurred at two different institutions at different points in time, helped establish confirmability of this study. In other words, they ensured that the findings were shaped by the study participants, not researcher bias or motivation.

Members of the research team in this study have expertise in the areas of agriculture education, psychology, and community development. To establish rigor in the qualitative research methodology, peer review (Creswell, 2007) was utilized to provide triangulation of the analyses and results of this study. As part of this peer review process, all members of the research team scrutinized decisions made by the lead researcher during the research process. The benefit of this procedure was to lead to more robust data conceptualization that the lead researcher may not have considered on her own (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Researchers analyzed and interpreted data from the focus group interview and writing samples from a homogeneous group (i.e., female high school students from either rural or suburban areas who attended a teaching academy) to develop a preliminary theoretical model for agriculture teacher career choice. After developing the preliminary theoretical model based on the high school student participant sample data, researchers tested the trustworthiness and credibility of the model with the heterogeneous sample of college students (i.e., male and female undergraduate and graduate degree students enrolled in a university teacher licensure program from varied geographic locations). The three themes that emerged from the homogeneous group (high school students) that were tested for trustworthiness and credibility with the heterogeneous group (university students) were (a) intrapersonal affirmation from teaching behaviors, (b) direct and indirect social influences, and (c) emotional connection to teachers and impactful service. The analysis of the results indicated the participants' responses were representative of one of these three themes. The names of the participants identified with the quotes in the following sections are not the real names of the participants. Each quote was shared by a participant who was either a high school student (HS) or a university student (U).

Theme One: Intrapersonal Affirmation from Teaching Behaviors

Both high school and college participants provided detailed accounts of teaching behaviors that elicited a positive psychological response: playing school as a child, tutoring peers or siblings, and teaching or coaching outside the school environment were all mentioned. Participants connected these efficacy-building behaviors with a sense of accomplishment and increased familiarity with teaching or coaching tasks.

Participants fondly recounted behaviors from childhood when they "played teacher." Sally (U) recalled:

> The moment I decided I wanted to be a teacher was probably when I was in kindergarten. I just remember that was always my favorite game to play. I would set up all my baby dolls and stuffed animals, and that's what I loved to play.

Like Sally, Sandra (U) had fond memories of "playing school." However, her "students" were more animated than stuffed animals:

> [I played teacher] with my little cousins, and I had a little chalkboard in my room. I loved, loved, teaching. When I was in elementary school, I wanted to be a teacher . . . me, my sister, and cousins played school all the time. But I always thought I wanted to be an elementary school teacher because I liked to work with little kids.

One participant even recalled that her father was involved in "playing school" with her. Amber (U) explained, "When I was younger, my dad and I used to like . . . like write curriculum and like plan for this school that we were going to start."

It is interesting to note that each of these childhood memories of "playing school" was mentioned by a female participant. Considering the majority of elementary teachers are female, it can be surmised that female children were more likely than male children to socially identify with this familiar profession.

Aside from childhood memories, several participants noted tutoring or coaching behaviors from elementary and middle school, which they believed positively influenced their career decision. Stacey (U) commented:

> I wanted to be a teacher probably in that late elementary school, early middle-school period. I didn't know really what I wanted to teach, but I knew that I liked being in school. I liked . . . helping other kids learn things and I was always getting asked to help so-and-so help figure this concept out . . . I had little sisters – so I'd help them with their homework, and I was like 'this is something that I'm decent at, and I kind of enjoy doing.'

Jenna (U) shared a similar story:

> When I was in high school, I did a lot of tutoring, especially in math, and I realized that since I struggled in math, being able to relate the concepts better to those students that were struggling, I was like, this is not that bad. To be a teacher you really don't have to know everything. You just have to be able to teach them how to do something. So, I decided then I wanted to teach and became a teacher.

Some participants specifically noted unique experiences during high school where they were able to replicate teaching-behaviors. As a result, they increased self-efficacy in their ability to teach. As an example, one participant, Nate (U), recalled the day his high school agriculture teacher asked him-to instruct a group of students on a specific topic. Although he was caught completely off-guard by the request, he received intrapersonal affirmation from the experience of teaching the group of peers:

> I was like, you know, that's kind of a good feeling that I can . . . I can take something that was already put in layman's terms and put it into more layman's terms for someone. These kids were all [students with special needs]. They had no understanding of how to manipulate words into something that's worth understanding. So, I could take something scientific and put it in their terms, like maybe talking about . . . football or something along those lines . . . making that connection and knowing that I was able to do that made me feel really good. It was like I can connect with those students [in a way] that a lot of teachers can't. It started out as that, and then I actually started tutoring after school when I was in high school for kids that were seniors or juniors or sophomores or freshmen.

Irene (HS) strongly believed her firsthand experience working alongside her agriculture teacher in the classroom for three years influenced her decision to become a teacher. Now, as a senior in high school, she fondly recalled her experiences from the past three years as she shared, "I've worked with an ag teacher (as a classroom helper) since I was a freshman. So, I'm just kind of working toward my goal of being a teacher too."

Jayden (U) experienced her defining moment to become a teacher after she completed a university-sponsored teacher recruitment program designed specifically for high school students. She explained:

> After I did [the university-sponsored teacher recruitment program] and after I made my own lesson plan, I presented it to a bunch of second graders. That's the moment when I knew that I wanted to be a teacher because I really enjoyed that experience and being able to do that really hit it right there [pointing to her heart]. Like, alright, let's do this thing.

Participants also described teaching behaviors they applied outside the traditional classroom environment in areas of great familiarity (e.g., sports teams and youth programs) that stimulated intrapersonal affirmations to become a teacher. As an example, one university student said his initial interest in pursuing a career as a high school agriculture teacher was motivated by the realization of his tendency to always help younger kids with their livestock projects during the local agricultural fair. After several years of helping youth at the fair, he finally acknowledged the positive intrapersonal responses that he received when helping others learn more about their livestock projects or training them to use proper animal handling techniques. Similarly, a few students fondly described behaviors of coaching children or siblings in a variety of sports teams. Not only did they believe they were able to successfully teach a specific skill, but they also derived a sense of satisfaction from helping others succeed.

Whether acquired from childhood experiences of "playing teacher," tutoring others, or helping younger siblings or friends learn a new skill, participants associated their desire to teach with an intrapersonal affirmation they received from teaching or helping others learn. Perhaps the best representation of this finding was provided by Amber, a university student. Prior to returning to

graduate school to pursue teacher licensure, Amber worked in a career outside of education. After several months of volunteer tutoring in an afterschool program, Amber said there was a defining moment when she realized she was more motivated to tutor the kids in the afterschool program than she was to go to work at her full-time place of employment in a different career. She attributed this realization, in part, to the positive interactions she had with the kids. These interactions, combined with her childhood memories of "playing school," helped Amber recognize her underlying desire to become a teacher: "I could tell the difference between the feelings I got between doing one thing versus the other. I realized I just need to do it [become a teacher]. I won't be fulfilled unless I do so." The intrapersonal affirmation she received through a variety of teaching behaviors led to her eventual decision to become a teacher.

Theme Two: Direct and Indirect Social Influence

Perhaps the most recurring theme which continued to surface was participants' acknowledgment of the inspirations to pursue a teaching career they received from people in their environment. The overwhelming majority of participants recalled moments when others in their social environment told them, "I could see you being a teacher," "you'd be a great teacher," or "you should be a teacher." More often than not, these statements came from individuals the students could easily identify with and who they respected as a parent, teacher, mentor, or friend. Brad (U) attributed his career choice decision, in part, to the influence from his father:

> Growing up, I had a lot of people telling me I should be a teacher, my dad, especially. He always told me I should be a teacher . . . [that] I'd be a good teacher. It was always kind of in the back of my head that, especially my dad, that [he] thought that is what I'd be good at.

Another participant appeared to have a sudden realization in mid-conversation of the overwhelming impact a teacher had on his career choice decision. After a long pause, Paul (U) stated with emotion:

> He was really influential in me becoming a teacher. He was always pushing me to become a teacher because he . . . I think . . . I think he saw it in me before I even accepted it or realized it. It's not that I didn't accept it, but it was just that I didn't realize that's what I wanted to do.

Shannon (HS) undeniably perceived the influence of her agriculture teachers as the driving force for her career decision. In a very straightforward tone, she shared, "Without our ag teachers, we wouldn't even be here [at the Teach Ag Academy]. We wouldn't want to become ag teachers. I know my teacher inspired me to want to become one."

In some instances, it was a combination of people in participants' social networks that reinforced their career choice decisions. Howard (U) noted the social influence he received from family

and subsequent reinforcement of his career choice from his agriculture teacher: "I had thought about becoming a teacher . . . had kind of thrown it around . . . and my grandpa always told me, 'You know, you ought to go into ag ed.'" His agriculture teacher substantiated the social influence from his grandfather when he registered Howard to attend the state-sponsored teacher recruitment conference.

One participant explained that her desire to teach was also supported by a network of social influences. Recalling the moments when she shared her decision to become a teacher with her parents, Sally (U) recalled:

> I remember distinctly [that] I was in 8th grade. I was riding in the car with my parents, and we were talking about college and what I wanted to do. My brother was in his first year of college, but my brother and cousins had all been in FFA and taken ag classes. I heard about the great experiences my brother and my cousins had in FFA. I remember saying to my parents, "I want to be an ag teacher, just like [the agriculture teacher]." And my parents were caught completely off guard because they always thought I wanted to be an elementary teacher.

When asked if her parents supported her decision, Sally (U) said:

> [My parents] always told me I can pretty much do whatever I wanted, but . . . I mean, they supported my decision, and they always told me they thought I would make a good teacher. They know how I have worked with younger kids and helped instruct things, and they've always told me I'd be a good teacher and always supported me.

In the next breath, she also acknowledged the power of social influence from her agriculture teacher, whom she considered a father-like figure in her life: "[My agriculture teacher] believed in me. He said, 'You're gonna do great' and 'You're gonna learn.' No matter what it was, he believed in me."

Multiple participants specifically acknowledged the social influence of teachers whom they respected and admired. Unexpectedly, more than half of the students did not reference their high school agriculture teacher as the educator who generated their initial interest to pursue this career path of agricultural education. Rather, the teachers they described as influential were affiliated with various educational disciplines (e.g., librarians, social studies teachers, and coaches) and across multiple academic levels (i.e., elementary or high school). As Allison (U) explained:

> I realized I wanted to be a teacher, but I wasn't sure I wanted to be an ag teacher. I looked at a lot of different paths in education. I thought maybe I'd like science or biology . . . my teacher in biology was really good. I even had a spurt my sophomore year where I thought about Spanish, but that quickly went downhill when the good teacher left.

Samantha (U) shared a similar story:

> When I was little, I wanted to be a librarian because I love to read. I think I wanted to teach, but I didn't know what I wanted to teach. I remember a day in high school, and my ag teacher said, "I think you'd be a good ag teacher." [When] people encourage me to do things, and if I follow through with them, it ends up being a good thing. Like other people put things in my path. I think it was the encouragement of my ag teacher.

Many participants described the social influence of teachers whom they believed "loved to teach." They shared stories of teachers whom they respected for their obvious passions for teaching, their abilities to manage the classroom environment, and their engaging instruction. Participants specifically mentioned teachers who challenged them to learn in new ways. Amber (U) emphasized the positive influence a teacher had on her career choice decision:

> Just the way she instructed the class was extremely engaging for me. It was just a lecture hall full of like 500 students, but she still managed to make it extremely engaging, and I was just really interested. I think later on I went back to her and . . . we just talked about my goals and some of my plans. And that was the second time I saw her and the last time I saw her . . . but she definitely helped me shape my path.

Theme Three: Emotional Connection to Teachers and Impactful Service

In addition to teaching behaviors and social influences, the third theme that emerged from the analysis was participants' emotional connections to teachers and impactful service. When asked why they wanted to teach, some participants initially struggled to identify a specific person, experience, or event that inspired them to teach. However, as their stories unfolded, they eventually provided responses that referenced the emotional connection they shared with a teacher in their life who cared about their well-being and stimulated their desire to serve and impact others.

Many participants shared stories of teachers in their life who they believed cared for them as individuals, were concerned about their well-being, and trusted them to successfully complete tasks. Within these narratives, it became evident that the specific activities or events that teachers trusted students to complete were not consequential in their decisions to teach. Rather, it was participants' beliefs that the teachers in these scenarios trusted them and believed in their abilities.

Samantha (U) reflected on her interpretation of perceived trust in the relationship that she had with her agriculture teacher. She explained:

> On multiple occasions, [my teacher] asked me to watch over the greenhouse if she was gone for a weekend or gone for a week in the summer. We met up, and she gave me

> keys, and then it was my job once-a-day every day to water whatever was in there. So, I think . . . I mean . . . she trusted me a lot, and so that gave me . . . that was encouraging too . . . where, you know, she thought I was good enough to handle her greenhouse. That was probably a big part of it [my decision to teach].

The positive emotional connections that emerged during the focus group interview with high school participants and the individual interviews with college participants went much deeper than conditions of trust, care, and concern for the students' well-beings. Eight participants affectionately described specific teachers in their lives whom they believed served as parental figures. Markus (U) emphatically explained, "I see how [my teachers] are sometimes parent figures to students. I want to grow into someone who is there for other people."

Students were positively impacted by the close parental-like emotional connections they had with individual teachers. Parker (U) explained:

> He's the one that I would say really influenced me to be a teacher. [My teacher] got to know everybody on a personal level and we joked around that he was like . . . like we were his adopted kids kind of thing.

Grace (HS) shared Parker's sentiments about seeing her ag teacher as a parent figure:

> My ag teacher's like a second mom to me . . . completely. When I was little, I wanted nothing to do with teaching. But I saw how she inspired other kids, and it made me want to do the same thing.

Kendra (HS) explained why she thinks students feel this way about their agriculture teachers:

> In January through April, you spend more time with your ag teacher than with your actual family. So, in a lot of ways, they do become your family, just because they are the ones paying for your meals when you forget your money. Kendra giggled as she added, They're the ones telling you, "Hey, you need to fix your hair. You don't look good." They're the ones that fix your car because Dad's out of town and you need help. So sometimes they just fill that parent role for you in a lot of ways whenever your parents aren't able to.

Emma (HS) added:

> I know my ag teachers are the biggest role models in my life, other than my immediate family, and I see how they are parent-figures to their students. I have learned from talking to different ag teachers, how important that bond is between student and teacher.

Participants also realized their own potential to make positive differences in the lives of their future students. When recalling conversations he had with high school students during his

clinical observations, Brad (U) stated, "You can really affect [high school students] and help them grow." Even minimal exchanges with high school students 'stuck' with university students and convinced them to remain on their career path to become a teacher. The opportunity to potentially impact someone else is what Nelson (U) described as a primary driver for his career choice decision:

> Going into my freshman year, I didn't want to be in ag. I thought it was pointless and dumb. Nelson laughed, I was told it was an easy A as a freshman, that was all I wanted to hear. Easy A . . . free food sometimes. I was like, sweet, I'll try it. So, I went to class, and my teacher came up to me and said, "There's something you could do, I think great, in this organization." And that's kind of the gist of the conversation. He just slipped me a piece of paper about a junior officer interview. And so, I got a junior office, and the rest is history. I went on to do all kinds of things in the organization, and then I knew I wanted to be an ag teacher. That's just kind of the reason I want to be an ag teacher. To have that kind of impact on somebody else.

Jane (U) shared her thoughts as to why someone should choose to become a teacher. Her explanation was representative of many of the participants' intrinsic motivation to teach:

> Through recent life experiences, you don't go into the [teaching] profession to glorify yourself or do anything for you really. It's about building up the future and igniting passion and desire for agriculture you have yourself. It's not a glamourous job; it's a purposeful and rewarding job.

Although some participants mentioned that they had been discouraged from becoming a teacher, they defended their decision to pursue a career as a high school agriculture teacher because they were aware of their love for the discipline of agricultural education in combination with their personal desire to teach. As Hayley (HS) explained, "Whenever I tell people I want to be a teacher, they look at me like, "Oh, I'd think you'd want to do more than that." But it's my passion, so it's my life."

Like Hayley, Meg (HS) had received negative feedback about her career decision. However, her intrinsic desire to teach outweighed these comments. She explained:

> I always get people saying, "Why do you want to be an ag teacher? You don't make good money whenever you're a teacher." And I say, "It's not about the money, it's about doing what you love. There's no point in having a job that makes you a lot of money if you don't want to go to work every day."

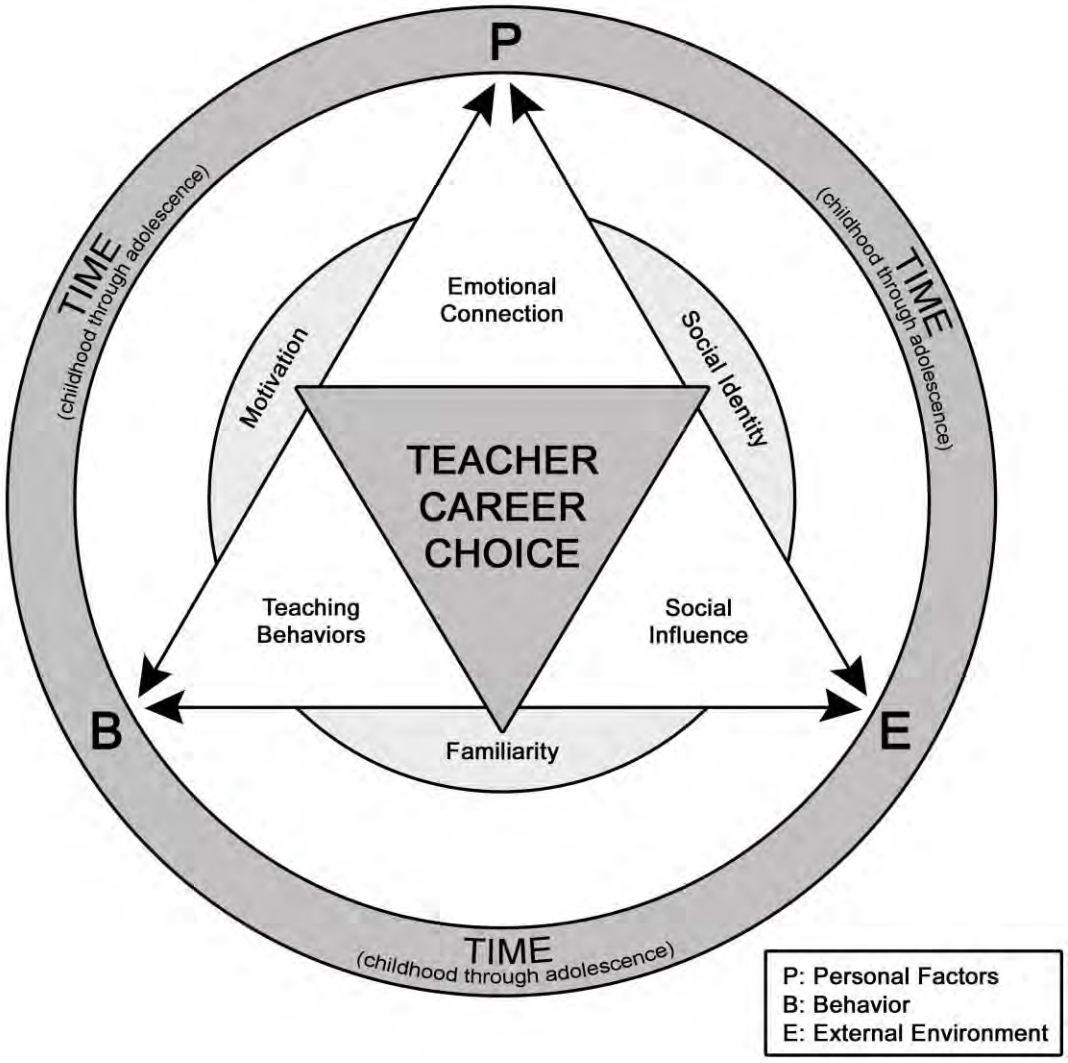
Discussion

Of the three themes that emerged during data analysis – intrapersonal affirmation from teaching behaviors, direct and indirect social influence, and emotional connection to teacher(s) and impactful service – it was clear that intrapersonal affirmation was evident in each participant's shared experience and interwoven throughout each theme. Many study participants affectionately described teachers in their environment whom they were familiar with and whom they could relate to by shared social identity characteristics. Several participants vividly described their motivation to teach in terms of a sincere desire to 'give back' to those who made a difference in their lives and an eagerness to help others learn. When stepping back to view a broader perspective of the findings, the pivotal experiences and people participants spoke of were not associated with a specific stage of their physiological development. Rather, the people and events that participants credited as contributing factors in their career choice decision were affiliated with the span of time between childhood and adolescence.

Participants' implicit needs for familiarity with the profession, shared social identity characteristics, and motivations to teach that evolved over time did not operate independently or sequentially to determine their career choice. However, these phenomena held close association with bidirectional movements between personal factors, behaviors, and their external environment (Bandura, 1997; Fischman et al., 2001; Harms & Knobloch, 2005; Krumboltz et al., 1976; Leff et al., 2015; Lent et al., 2002; Maslow, 1954; Palmer, 1998). With these findings in mind, Bandura's (1977) reciprocal determinism from social learning theory was used as the fundamental core of the multifaceted, integrative model proposed by the authors of this study. Reciprocal determinism is defined as the relationship wherein human agency functions through bidirectional movements between personal factors (P) (e.g., affective, biological, and cognitive); behaviors (B); and the external environment (E) (Bandura and National Institute of Mental Health, 1986).

A key finding from this research is that no single identifying phenomenon led to participants' career decisions to become high school agriculture teachers. Rather, participants' decisions hinged upon the intrapersonal affirmation they received over time from the combination of (a) intrapersonal affirmation from teaching behaviors, (b) direct and indirect social influences, and (c) emotional connections to teacher(s) and a life of impactful service. While the triadic relationship of reciprocal determinism served as the underpinning of the proposed integrative theoretical model, the three emergent themes, in combination with career choice influences identified in the literature (e.g., motivation, familiarity, and social identity), were also integrated into the model (See Figure 1). Each theme closely aligned with a specific component of reciprocal determinism (i.e., *social influence* and *external environment*). Each theme in the model also held a cross-directional association with two specific career choice influences (e.g., participants received social influence from individuals in their external environment with whom they held a social identity and familiarity).

Figure 1. Proposed Integrative Theoretical Model for Teacher Career Choice



The uniqueness of this proposed model lies not only in the integration of career choice variables with Bandura's (1997) theory of reciprocal determinism, but also the essential inclusion of time, which encircles personal factors, behaviors, and the external environment. As high school and university students shared their career-shaping stories, they retold fond memories from childhood of playing school with stuffed animals, experiences in elementary school when the teacher asked them to tutor peers in class, and the affirmation they perceived when someone in their environment told them they "should be a teacher" or that they "would be a good teacher." Although the exact moment in time when they acquired their initial commitment to pursue a career path as a teacher varied, interwoven in each story within the triadic relationship of reciprocal determinism was the connection of time. The culmination of teaching behaviors, social influences, and emotional connections that occurred between childhood and adolescence established a deeply rooted commitment to pursue this career path.

Andrea's story provides an example of the complex interactions that influence career decisions and can be used to help illustrate the model. Andrea, a senior in high school, explained that she had great admiration and respect for her agriculture teacher from the very first day of school (Emotional Connection, Personal Factors). This opened her eyes to the fact that being an agriculture teacher was a career option for her (Social Identity, Familiarity, Social Influence, External Environment). However, it was her participation in the teaching academy (which was recommended by her teacher) that served as a turning point (Social Influence, External Environment). In the teaching academy, she met with other high school students (Social Identity, Social Influence) who were teaching agriculture lessons in grade school classrooms (Teaching Behaviors, Behavior). Andrea took this idea back to her own agriculture teacher, and together they made arrangements for her to teach a lesson in an elementary classroom each week (Motivation, Familiarity, Teaching Behaviors, Behavior). It was the combination of being in the grade school classroom and teaching lessons by herself that ultimately finalized her decision to become an agriculture teacher. Andrea received further affirmation of her career choice when she received statewide recognition for the work she did in elementary school classrooms at the State FFA Convention (Motivation, Social Identity, Emotional Connection). Detailed stories such as this one support the integrative theoretical model. When students are motivated by role models with whom they can socially identify, become familiar with the profession through relevant practical experiences, and are affirmed of their career capabilities through people in their social environment whom they are emotionally connected to, they are inclined to pursue a career path to become a teacher.

Recommendations for Practice

Specific to the discipline of agricultural education, the results of this study suggest that opportunities exist to recruit candidates to the profession outside the walls of the agriculture classroom. In some situations, students' love for the subject of agriculture was derived from their agriculture teacher. However, the majority of students in this study described teachers from a variety of educational disciplines who made them feel cared for and trusted by providing them with opportunities to tutor peers or prepare materials for class. Contrary to findings from Thieman et al. (2016), even the students who were the most actively involved in the agricultural-based youth organizations (e.g., FFA and 4-H) and achieved significant success did not identify their participation in competitions or leadership conferences as influences on their decision to teach. Rather, they credited positively stimulating connections to people in their external environments, teaching behaviors, or emotional connections to teachers and lives of impactful service.

Furthermore, the study results indicate that it is critical that educators in both formal (e.g., classroom) and nonformal (e.g., Extension and nonprofit organizations) education fields take advantage of the very limited time spent with students during this critical period of their life. If educators at all levels make intentional efforts to connect and maintain relationships with current,

potential, future, and former students who possess the desire to become a teacher or who exhibit the characteristics of a quality educator (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), it could help address the teacher shortage that is so prevalent in the United States. It can be easy for educators to get overwhelmed with the day-to-day tasks of teaching, but they must not forget that they are the face of education for the students they are teaching each day. In particular, educators who spend time with students outside of class in extracurricular organizations or sports should be mindful of their direct and indirect influences toward students' career choice decisions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researchers in this study recommend continued investigation on this topic and testing of this study's proposed Integrative Theoretical Model for Teacher Career Choice to address one of the most obvious limitations of the study, a small sample size ($N = 41$). Additional studies can be conducted with subjects at the high school and/or college level to determine if other students' responses that address the research questions of this study provide data that support the proposed model.

Furthermore, additional qualitative discussions should be conducted with younger adolescents (i.e., middle school students) to develop an enhanced understanding of their perceptions of teaching careers. This information has the potential to impact future direction for teacher education planning, curriculum design, and teacher recruitment processes (Watt & Richardson, 2008).

This study also highlights the need to explore the impact negative social influence from teachers, parents, and mentors has on a student's decision whether or not to pursue a career as a teacher. When sharing their career plans, participants in this study were often told by parents and mentors, "You are smart. Why would you want to be a teacher? You can do more with your life than that." Amber explained, "I think I always knew [I wanted to be a teacher], but I just kind of denied it because there was more prestige in doing other things." Although the majority of participants in this study received positive affirmation of their career choice, the power of negative influences, particularly from parents or mentors, must be acknowledged.

It is a challenge to recruit the best and the brightest to teach when students are receiving negative feedback, especially from parents or the teachers whom they view as role models. This negative perception may be derived, in part, by parents' beliefs in their own personal and occupational efficacy, which has the potential to impact their children's educational development and career aspirations (Bandura, 1997). It became evident during rich conversations that the majority of students looked to their parents and inspirational teachers as heroes. When these same individuals expressed disapproval of the students' aspirations to become teachers, the students' enthusiasm to continue on this career path tended to diminish. More research is needed to explore the impact of negative social influence on students who initially express interest in teaching, but who then choose to pursue an alternative career path outside of education.

Conclusions

It does not appear that decision making about a teaching career is a linear process. The proposed integrative theoretical model produced from this research incorporates the complex combination of career choice influences from literature (e.g., social identity, familiarity, and motivation) within the triad of personal factors, behaviors, and the external environment. The essential connection for the themes that emerged from this research was the connection of time between childhood and adolescence. Participants' career decisions were positively impacted by the combination of (a) teaching behaviors, (b) social influence, and (c) emotional connections with people or experiences between the time of childhood and adolescence.

The findings from this research clearly reaffirm Teddy Roosevelt's old adage, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Teachers are in the relationship-building business. Participants did not decide to become teachers because their teachers were good at employing the techniques of teaching. The participants were attracted to careers in teaching high school agriculture because of their experiences with teachers who cared about them and inspired them. The perspective that students brought to the surface revealed that they notice when teachers care. They emulate the behaviors of teachers who care. They aspire to be like teachers who care. Whether students come into a classroom with a passion for the discipline or discover that passion in class, they are motivated and assured of their decisions to teach by teachers who care about them and inspire them.

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