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Over The Edge: Factors Nudging Mid-Career, School- Based Agriculture Teachers Out of the Profession

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Keywords

teacher retention, teacher attrition, mid-career, job satisfaction, teacher shortage

Disciplines

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Comments

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Over The Edge: Factors Nudging Mid-Career, School-Based Agriculture Teachers Out of the Profession

Jay K. Solomonson¹ & Michael S. Retallick²

Abstract

The field of agricultural education has experienced a consistent labor shortage the past several decades. Consequently, many school districts struggle to fill their open positions, while others are forced to shut down their agricultural programs completely due to inadequate staffing. Teacher attrition has been identified as a predominant factor behind the teacher shortage. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify factors influencing mid-career school-based agriculture teachers' decision to stay in or leave the secondary agriculture teaching profession. Researchers developed and administered questionnaires, as well as conducted interviews, to gather data from current, mid-career agriculture teachers to answer the research questions. The researcher's discovered mid-career agriculture teachers are satisfied with their careers and significant differences do not exist in overall job satisfaction between those contemplating leaving and those who were not. However, differences existed between groups in areas related to recognition and school policy and administration. Additional findings suggest mid-career agriculture teachers value student and program successes, autonomy and variety, and stakeholder support. Moreover, the researcher's discovered mid-career agriculture teachers experience similar frustrations as teachers in other professional life stages; however, they seem to struggle more with balancing their personal and professional lives due to changing family dynamics.

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Introduction

The current United States educational system is on the cusp of a major teacher shortage. According to the projected demand for teachers, an annual shortfall of 112,000 educators is expected for the foreseeable future with an estimated 300,000 new teachers being required annually through 2020 to keep up with the current demand (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Researchers have suggested it is not solely the decline of those entering education causing the teacher shortage, but that high teacher attrition is the “driving factor” behind the shortage (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 38). Researchers report an 8% annual attrition rate with two-thirds of leavers doing so before becoming retirement-eligible (Sutcher et al., 2016). Sutcher et al. (2016) suggested, “Reducing attrition would actually make a greater difference in balancing supply and demand than any other intervention” (p. 37).

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The field of agricultural education has not been immune to this problem. History has shown agricultural education has endured a shortage of highly qualified teachers for at least the past four decades (Camp, Broyles, & Skelton, 2002; Kantrovich, 2010; Smith, Lawver, & Foster, 2017). In 2017, the researcher's conducting the National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand Executive Summary reported 1476 openings in 2016, but only 772 college graduates certified in agricultural education to enter the profession (Smith et al., 2017). Disturbingly, more than a quarter of those graduates did not accept a teaching position after completing their degree (Smith et al., 2017). This, coupled with the fact that 520 agriculture teachers left the profession before being retirement-eligible, indicates a major problem for the agricultural education profession (Smith et al., 2017).

Agricultural education researchers have attempted to identify issues and isolate factors leading to the teacher attrition problem within the agricultural education profession. Several of the factors include: *stress* (Lambert, Henry, & Tummons, 2011; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Torres, Lawver, & Lambert, 2009), *burnout* (Chenevey, Ewing, & Whittington, 2008; Croom, 2003; Kitchel et al., 2012), the *inability to balance work with family life* (Blackburn, Bunch, & Haynes, 2017; Boone & Boone, 2009; Hainline, Ulmer, Ritz, Burris, & Gibson, 2015; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Myers et al., 2005; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2016a; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2016b), *possessing a low degree of self-efficacy* (Blackburn & Robinson, 2008; Hasselquist, Herndon, & Kitchel, 2017; Knobloch & Whittington, 2003; McKim & Velez, 2015; Wolf, 2011), *inadequate compensation* (Boone & Boone, 2009; Lemons, Brashears, Burris, Meyers, & Price, 2015), *lack of administrative support* (Boone & Boone, 2007; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kelsey, 2006; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004), *lack of student motivation and poor behavior* (Boone & Boone, 2009; Tippens, Ricketts, Morgan, Navarro, & Flanders, 2013), *heavy workload* (Hainline et al., 2015; Lambert et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2016a), *poor working conditions* (Boone & Boone, 2007; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Lemons et al., 2015; Tippens et al., 2013), and *lack of time-management skills* (Boone & Boone, 2007; Boone & Boone, 2009; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Myers et al., 2005), among others.

Researchers have also attempted to isolate factors related to agriculture teachers' intentions to remain in the profession. The top cited reasons include: *possessing a high initial commitment to the profession* (Crutchfield, Ritz, & Burris, 2013), *receiving generous levels of support from home and work* (Clark, Kelsey, & Brown, 2014; Rice, LaVergne, & Gartin, 2011), *working in a positive school environment* (Thobega & Miller, 2003), *having highly motivated students* (Rice et al., 2011), *receiving adequate compensation* (Warnick, Thompson, & Tarpley, 2010), and *having a high level of autonomy* (Clark et al., 2014).

Interestingly, researchers reported agriculture teachers are generally satisfied with their careers (Blackburn et al., 2017; Blackburn & Robinson, 2008; Cano & Miller, 1992; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Chenevey et al., 2008; Gilman, Peake, & Parr, 2012; Kitchel et al., 2012; Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2016a; Walker et al., 2004), and yet, many still leave the teaching profession. This creates an opportunity to establish overall job satisfaction as a leading contributor to high teacher attrition rates or if specific attrition variables have a greater impact on an agriculture teacher's decision to leave the profession.

Many researchers have focused on attrition factors of novice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; DeAngelis & Presely, 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), with few focusing on teachers in other stages of their professional career. While the highest teacher attrition rates occur within the first five years (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014), the profession should also be concerned with the growing number of experienced teachers, specifically mid-career teachers, leaving the profession. Jones-Carey (2016) suggested the, "Dramatic increase in those leaving the

profession with eight to twelve years of experience should be sounding a siren” (p.65). Researchers and practitioners agree that in addition to investigating novice teachers, the profession should begin examining specific job satisfaction factors related to mid-career teacher attrition (Doan & Peters, 2009; Graham, Hudson, & Willis, 2014; Hartsel, 2016; Tye & O’Brien, 2002).

A review of previous agricultural education research did not uncover any literature explicitly examining attrition factors involving mid-career teachers within agricultural education. We attempted to bridge this gap and examine if overall job satisfaction is a significant contributor to the decision to leave the profession and identify potential attrition and retention factors associated with the mid-career agriculture teacher career stage.

Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study was derived from Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman’s motivator-hygiene theory (1959), Grissmer and Kirby’s (1987) human capital theory, and Huberman’s professional life cycle model (1989). Herzberg et al. (1959) postulates in the motivator-hygiene theory that all careers have factors, which lead to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, often occurring concurrently within the workplace. The researchers proposed working conditions could purposively be altered to increase job satisfaction if employers could identify potential areas of dissatisfaction with their employees (Herzberg et al., 1959). Through their research, five satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors were identified which were deemed significant contributors to overall job satisfaction.

The “motivator” or satisfaction factors identified were levels of achievement, advancement, recognition, responsibility, and the work itself. The recognized “hygiene” or dissatisfaction factors were those related to interpersonal relationships, level of supervision, policy and administration, salary, and working conditions (Herzberg et al., 1959). According to the theory, hygiene factors do not create satisfaction, but the lack of them in the workplace causes job dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Herzberg et al. (1959) suggested motivating factors are a strong indication of satisfaction and they have a lasting effect, unlike the hygiene factors, which only produce short-term changes in job satisfaction.

To establish levels of job satisfaction for teachers, the Brayfield- Rothe job satisfaction index (JSI) (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951), as modified by Warner (1973), was developed. Several variations of this instrument have been utilized within the agricultural education profession to determine levels of job satisfaction of teachers (Blackburn et al., 2017; Blackburn & Robinson, 2008; Cano & Miller, 1992; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Chenevey et al., 2008; Gilman et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2004), and as previously mentioned, agricultural educators are generally satisfied with their careers.

Researchers have already revealed satisfaction levels of specific motivation and hygiene factors agricultural educators encounter, which can indicate potential retention/attrition factors within the profession. Castillo and Cano (1999) discovered females showed lower levels of satisfaction with advancement, working conditions, supervision, and factors dealing with school policy and administration compared to their male counterparts. They also examined disparities between novice and experienced teachers but found no significant differences. Gilman et al. (2012) conducted a similar study investigating gender differences in levels of job satisfaction. While they found no significant differences between genders and indicated both were satisfied with their career, they discovered both groups find the work, itself, as the most satisfying facet of the job, and dealing with school policy and administrators as the least satisfying component. Interestingly, Walker et al. (2004) reported when referring to the job responsibilities of the agricultural educator,

those who chose to leave the profession were no more satisfied than those who stayed in secondary agricultural education. This poses the question if overall job satisfaction is even an indication of teacher attrition.

When examining teachers within their various career stages, Grissmer and Kirby (1987) denoted mid-career teachers typically exhibit the lowest attrition rates among the various categories of teachers due to having insufficient human capital. Grissmer and Kirby (1987) hypothesized that individuals will enter or change careers to maximize monetary (salary, benefits, etc.) and nonmonetary benefits (working conditions, support, favorable hours, etc.), while taking into account the costs of additional training or loss of benefits if they would leave their current profession (Grimer & Kirby, 1987). Consequently, Grissmer and Kirby (1987) reported teacher attrition rates were higher in both early career and late career teachers due to either insufficient human capital (for novice teachers) or nearing retirement age (for experienced teachers) and lowest with mid-career teachers who are sufficiently vested within the profession.

To help characterize mid-career educators, an adaptation of Huberman's (1989) model of the professional life cycle of teachers was included in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Professional Agriculture Teacher Life Cycle Stages

Years of Teaching	Stage	Sub-stage	Characteristics
1-5	Novice	Early Novice	Surviving in the profession
		Middle Novice	Focusing on the task of teaching
		Late Novice	Concern is impacting students
6-15	Mid-Career	Stabilization	Some professional confidence; Settling into a comfortable and predictable teaching pattern
		Experimentation	Experimenting with innovative approaches and activities in the classroom
		Taking Stock	Reflecting on the decision to become a teacher; Contemplating the worth of past work and anticipating plans for the future
16+	Late-Career	Serenity	Comfortable with the classroom and their role in education
		Disengagement	Life beyond the classroom

Note. Adapted from Huberman, 1989; National Association of Agricultural Educators, 2017a; White, 2008.

Huberman's (1989) model consists of three distinct stages including (1) novice, (2) mid-career, and (3) late-career teachers. He theorized that within the novice stage, three sub-stages

emerge including (a) the early novice stage, focusing on survival; (b) the middle novice stage, concentrating on the task of teaching, and (c) the late novice stage, where impacting students is the primary concern. Characteristics of the mid-career teacher stage include career stabilization, experimentation, and teachers taking stock in their work. Finally, the late-career teacher stage deals with either teacher serenity or the onset of teacher disengagement due to approaching retirement. Huberman (1989) indicated it is not always a linear progression through the stages, but more of a process of development teachers migrate in and out of as a result of new experiences. In 2016, The National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) adopted Huberman's model and revealed an adaptation entitled the "Ag Teacher's Life Cycle" to showcase their focus areas and programming opportunities (National Association of Agricultural Educators, 2017a).

The need for this study is emphasized in the American Association for Agricultural Education's (AAAE) National Research Agenda and addresses Research Priority 3, "Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century" (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). Specifically, it addresses the research question, "What methods, models, and practices are effective in recruiting agricultural leadership, education, and communication practitioners and supporting their success at all stages of their careers?" (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016, p. 31).

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of the study was to identify factors influencing current mid-career agriculture teachers' decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify personal and professional characteristics of mid-career agriculture teachers participating in the XLR8 program.
2. Determine levels of job satisfaction and if overall job satisfaction levels are significantly different for mid-career agriculture teachers contemplating leaving the profession and those who are not.
3. Identify professional and personal variables that may contribute to mid-career agriculture teachers' decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession.

Methodology

In this mixed-methods study, we sought to determine levels of job satisfaction and identify potential retention/attrition factors amongst mid-career agriculture teachers. The target population for the study was the 2016 National Association of Agricultural Educators XLR8 participants ($N = 20$). This group was purposively selected as they met our targeted demographic requirements, possessing between 6 and 15 years of teaching experience. XLR8 is a professional development program designed for agricultural educators with between 7 and 15 years of teaching experience with a primary goal of increasing teacher longevity and job satisfaction (National Association of Agricultural Educators, 2017b). Agriculture teachers had to meet the admission criteria, apply to this program, and be selected by the National Association of Agricultural Educators for participation. Due to this selection process and the overall small population size, caution must be taken when generalizing the subsequent results beyond this group.

After receiving IRB approval, an online survey was administered through Qualtrics to the XLR8 participants prior to the 2016 national conference. The instrument was used for the quantitative component of the study and to address research objectives one and two. We developed several demographic questions and utilized the Brayfield-Rothe job satisfaction index (JSI)

(Brayfield & Rothe, 1951), as modified by Warner (1973), to determine levels of overall job satisfaction, as well as examine specific motivation and hygiene factors related to the participants job. The instrument utilizes variables within Herzberg et al. (1959) motivator-hygiene theory. A panel of experts, consisting of five university agricultural education faculty and graduate students, evaluated the instrument for content and face validity. Minor adjustments to the questions were made prior to administering the instrument. Due to the extensive use of the JSI within the agricultural education literature, reliability for the instrument was established through earlier research.

Of the possible 20 participants, 18 completed the survey instrument for a response rate of 90.0% ($n = 18$). Quantitative data were analyzed using Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) v18 for Microsoft Windows. The personal and professional data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies and percentages). The data were used to categorize potential leavers (those who expressed interest in a job outside of teaching) and the stayers (those who did not). Independent-level t-tests were calculated to determine significant differences in job satisfaction and its factors using *a priori* ($p < .05$) of the established groups. Due to the small sample size, Shapiro-Wilk (S-W) tests were also performed to determine normality of the data. Results of the S-W test showed the data related to overall job satisfaction, $W(18) = .936$, $p = .25$, and job satisfaction with specific facets of the job, $W(18) = .954$, $p = .50$, were not significantly different than normal.

For the qualitative component of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews, operating under a social constructivism epistemological framework, to address the final research question of this study. Polkinghorne (1989) suggested researchers interview between 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Of the 20 participants in the 2016 XLR8 cohort, 13 consented and were interviewed during the conference. Elements of the social constructivism framework were embedded in the data collection techniques. Moustakas (1994) indicated the social constructivist worldview is present in phenomenological studies where participants describe their experiences. Hence, a phenomenological approach was utilized to understand the phenomenon of mid-career agriculture teachers leaving the profession.

In the phenomenological approach, the researcher describes, “The common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Two main authorities on phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990), operate using several defining features, which are included in almost all phenomenological studies including an emphasis on the phenomenon, interviewing a heterogeneous group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon, incorporating the use of bracketing, data analysis that moves from narrow units to broader units, and ending with a discussion on the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) indicated data collection in phenomenological studies consists of in-depth interviews with the participants who experienced the phenomenon. The researchers conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with these individuals. Questions were prepared ahead of time, which were developed with the theoretical framework in mind. A panel of five experts reviewed the questions for validity before interviewing. No changes were made. All interviews were recorded onsite, then transcribed word-for-word. An open-coding technique was used to identify concepts, significant statements, and create themes and connections to the phenomenon of interest. These statements were used to write textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon, and then synthesized into the essence for this component of the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated qualitative researchers develop trustworthiness through the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability attained through their methods.

Credibility can be related to the level of confidence in the researcher and their experiences. We have had extensive experience within school-based agricultural education, totaling more than 20 years in the secondary classroom and over 41 years in education. To ascertain transferability, the research participants were purposively selected for the study based on their experiences with the phenomenon. To help achieve a high level of dependability procedures, benchmarks were kept in place and followed. These included using peer-reviewed, credible resources; transcribing data word-for-word following the interviews; having participants check for the accuracy of the transcripts; and utilization of a mentor to make sure proper procedures and policies were followed. Confirmability was established by bracketing the biases of the researcher. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research which requires the investigator to put aside their beliefs about the research topic (Creswell, 2013).

Findings

The purpose of objective one was to determine the personal and professional characteristics of the mid-career agriculture teachers participating in this study. Those participating self-identified as 55.6% female (n = 10) and 44.4% male (n = 8). Of the participants, 72.2% (n = 13) completed a traditional teacher certification program, while 27.8% (n = 5) were alternatively certified. More than half (55.6%, n= 10) of the participants explored other career options outside of agricultural education within the past year. These participants looked at job postings, applied for another job, and/or were offered a job outside of teaching. For methodological purposes, these individuals were classified as a “leaver.” The remaining population (44.4%, n = 8) indicated they had not explored a career outside of agricultural education within the past year. These individuals will be classified as a “stayer.” Additional personal and professional characteristics can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Selected Personal and Professional Characteristics of Mid-Career Agriculture Teachers Participating in the 2016 XLR8 Conference (n=18)

Variable	<i>f</i>	%
Age		
<=30	1	5.56%
31-34	5	27.78%
35-39	9	50.00%
40 +	3	16.67%
Gender		
Female	10	55.56%
Male	8	44.44%
Type of Certification		
Traditional Certification	13	72.22%
Alternative Certification	5	27.78%

Table 2 (continued)

Selected Personal and Professional Characteristics of Mid-Career Agriculture Teachers Participating in the 2016 XLR8 Conference (n=18)

Variable	f	%
Highest Level of Education Completed		
Master's Degree	12	66.67%
Bachelor's Degree	6	33.33%
Marital Situation		
Married (with children at home)	15	83.33%
Married (no children, no children living at home)	3	16.67%
Single	0	0.00%
Divorced or Widowed	0	0.00%
Have Explored a Career Outside of Ag Education this past year		
Yes* (Looked at Job Postings ¹ , Applied for Another Job ² , Been Offered Another Job ³)	10	55.6%
No**, have not explored a job outside of Ag Ed this past year	8	44.4%

Note. ¹Have looked at job postings outside of teaching agriculture ($n = 10$); ²Have applied for a job outside of agriculture ($n = 4$); ³Have been offered a job outside of teaching agriculture ($n = 2$); *Classified as a potential leaver of the profession, **Classified as an individual who plans to stay teaching high school agricultural education.

Objective two was used to describe job satisfaction levels of mid-career agriculture teachers and determine if overall job satisfaction levels were significantly different between those contemplating leaving the profession and those not. Results indicated the participants were generally satisfied with their careers ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .31$) and no significant differences existed between our leavers and stayers (see Table 3).

Table 3

Overall Job Satisfaction of Mid-Career Agriculture Teachers (n = 18)

		Total ($n = 18$)		Leavers ($n = 10$)		Stayers ($n = 8$)		t-test	p
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Overall	Job Satisfaction	3.72	.31	3.60	.30	3.88	.26	-2.05	.06

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Undecided, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly Agree.

The results illustrate a statistically significant difference between the leavers and stayers in two specific job satisfaction factor categories. Independent-level t-tests indicate those contemplating leaving the profession were significantly different in the level of recognition they receive ($t(16) = -2.26$, $p = .04$) with a large effect size of 1.14 (Cohen's d) and satisfaction with

their school policies and administration ($t(16) = -2.97, p = .01$) with a large effect size of 1.49 (Cohen's d). Refer to Table 4 for additional results involving the other motivation-hygiene factors.

Table 4

Levels of Job Satisfaction with Specific Facets of the Job Between Agriculture Teachers Contemplating Leaving and Those Who Are Not (n = 18)

Specific Job Satisfaction Factors	Leavers (n = 10)		Stayers (n = 8)		t-test	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Motivation Factors						
Level of Achievement	4.90	.74	5.25	.71	-1.02	.32
Level of Advancement	4.40	.84	4.75	.89	-.86	.41
Level of Recognition	3.90	.99	5.00	1.07	-2.26	.04*
Level of Responsibility	5.10	.57	5.13	.84	-.08	.94
The Work Itself	5.10	.57	5.25	.71	-.50	.62
Hygiene Factors						
Interpersonal Relationships	4.60	1.17	4.75	1.23	-.26	.80
Level of Supervision	4.50	1.35	4.63	.74	-.23	.82
Salary	3.20	1.62	3.25	1.49	-.07	.95
School Policy and Admin.	2.70	1.57	4.63	1.06	-2.97	.01*
Working Conditions	4.10	1.79	5.25	.71	-1.70	.11

Note. 1 = Very Dissatisfied, 2= Somewhat Dissatisfied, 3= Slightly Dissatisfied, 4= Slightly Satisfied, 5= Somewhat Satisfied, and 6= Very Satisfied; *Significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

The purpose of objective three was to identify professional and personal variables, which may contribute to a mid-career agriculture teachers' decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions geared toward assessing potential retention and attrition factors. After analyzing the data through an open-coding procedure, several concepts were identified, which then emerged as three distinct themes. The concepts identified include (a) passionate about students, (b) autonomy and variety, (c) pride in the program and its successes (d) support, (e) changing family dynamics, (f) working all the time, and (g) compensation. The following themes emerged from these concepts: (1) Mid-career agriculture teachers value many aspects of their job, particularly student and program successes, autonomy and variety, and stakeholder support, (2) Mid-career agriculture teachers often experience additional successes at school, but at the expense of their personal lives, (3) While compensation was deemed important, many mid-career agriculture teachers value their time over money.

Theme 1: Mid-career agriculture teachers value many aspects of their job, particularly student and program successes, autonomy and variety, and stakeholder support.

The first theme identifies mid-career agriculture teachers' intentions to remain in the teaching profession. Most participants indicated their greatest enjoyment comes from working with

students and being a part of their successes. One teacher told us, “I do the job for the kids and to make a difference. To be there for the support they need... if I wasn’t there, it just wouldn’t be there.” Another teacher expressed, “I love that every day there is an opportunity to truly make a difference in the lives of a student.” One individual referred to this as “teacher crack.” He articulated,

Whether it’s showing a young man how to weld...or after competing in a FFA competition ...they come back and say, ‘thank you, [name].’ It means a lot to me. It’s also when they come back after graduation three years down the road, or when they ask you to be in their wedding. When they become leaders in your town... they still come back and tell you ‘thank you, we appreciate you.’ That’s what you get up for... I think when you have comments like that, it’s like crack.

One teacher explained he had recently considered leaving the profession but was worried about how it would affect his students. He indicated, “I will say that I have considered leaving the classroom... that’s always been something I struggle with because I love teaching kids.” These teachers genuinely want all students to be successful, regardless if they leave the profession. One other teacher reflected,

I believe in the work. I believe in what it does for kids. It’s every time that one of those guys or girls comes back and says, ‘that’s the best thing that ever happened to me.’ That’s why you do it. I don’t do it for the kids that are naturally talented.... I don’t get out of bed for them. I get out of bed for the kid that doesn’t have a shot, otherwise.

Due to several of the mid-career teachers having spent a majority of their career in the same school district, they tend to become extremely devoted to their programs and its successes. Several teachers indicated at this stage of their career, they had invested too much of themselves into their programs to leave. One teacher indicated, “It’s home, it’s my community... I feel firmly attached to it.” Another teacher said, “I am passionate about the program I’ve built and the work that I’ve done.” Another individual disclosed,

I think in my community, and where I’m at, this is what I was meant to do. This is where I need to be. I’m not going to do this anywhere else. Honestly, if I leave [school], I probably won’t teach Ag, and I don’t want to do that, so I’m not going anywhere.

Several teachers were also cognizant their children might someday be in their programs and struggled with the idea of not being there. One of them revealed:

Why would I leave when my own children haven’t had the opportunity... not saying that someone else couldn’t do it better and different, but I’ve worked so hard to get all this stuff...Why don’t I want to stay and let my own children experience what I have to offer? And you know, that’s what keeps me coming back.

Another teacher had a similar sentiment expressing:

We gave up a lot with our kids when they were birth to five... If I leave, then the first 15 years of me investing in the program... if it was worthy enough for other people’s kids, it’s probably worthy enough for my children. I’m not ready to pass

that off. We put our time in and sacrificed for this community. I want my kids to be a part of that... it is a lifetime of investment in my community, which also includes my children.

Several teachers expressed that they enjoy the variety and high level of autonomy they are given within their school district. One teacher indicated, "I have a lot of freedom. I can take a bus during class, and we go to the farm... I think they allow me to do this because of the number of hours I put in." Other teachers discussed how they enjoy the variety afforded by agricultural education. One teacher said, "I love my job. I wouldn't want to be anything else. I love what I get to do every day, and I love that it's different every day. I love that my kids, although at times can be annoying, they spice up my life, and they change what's going on." Another teacher told us, "It's different every day. It's not monotonous because you're dealing with people, everyone's different."

All interviewees discussed how they valued the support they received from various stakeholders at work, several mentioning their administration and community. While some teachers expressed extreme dislike for their current administration, several articulated an appreciation for their administrators and praised the support they bestow upon them and their programs. One teacher told us, "I've been blessed my whole career, especially the last five years with having a fantastic administration. We've got a district administrator, and she just gets it." Another teacher gave similar comments indicating, "I'm pretty lucky. I have a really supportive administration and community. However, I do believe they could be the absolute downfall of your program." Several teachers agreed, suggesting unsupportive administration can strongly impact a teachers' decision to leave the profession. One teacher said, "Administration... they don't understand what we do." Another indicated, "Things have gotten worse because of administration. We went through an administrative change about three years ago, and while I have a ton of community support... I don't see the program going anywhere." Interestingly, when discussing this issue, one teacher noted:

We didn't get into education because of administrators, so don't let them be the reason why we don't like our jobs. We value our jobs for several things, so just remember that. I have to tell myself that a few times a year.

Every one of the mid-career teachers admitted they struggled with some aspect of their job, but were still there because of their students, the dedication and sacrifices they made for their programs, the freedom and variety the job affords, and the support they receive from their school and community. When one teacher was asked why they stay in the profession, they said, "There is more that I like than I don't like. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

Theme 2: Mid-career agriculture teachers often experience additional successes at school, but at the expense of their personal lives.

Theme two begins to reveal reasons mid-career agriculture teachers may contemplate their career choice. Many began by discussing the achievements of their programs, citing an increased efficacy in the classroom and the successes of their FFA chapters. One teacher noted, "Every year I feel like I get stronger in the classroom, including my content understanding. I am always trying new things... We qualified a [CDE] team for nationals this year, which I thought would never happen." Another teacher told us, "We have had a lot of success this past year. We have the banners that justify that." However, as they disclosed their successes, many mentioned the sacrifices it took and emphasized their struggle with balancing their personal and professional lives. One individual expressed:

Last year was marked by great successes, but also, we worked really hard to get those great successes... We put a lot of notches on the wall so to speak, but it came at a price, lots of different prices throughout the year. I had to cash in some capital, so to speak, with family and other teachers and administrators... All the late nights, dragging in late... You can have a lot of success, but at what cost to the very students bringing you that success? What costs to your family? What cost to the school system that you profess to be in?

Several other agriculture teachers discussed a similar displeasure with the substantial out-of-classroom expectations and how it took time away from family. One teacher disclosed the amount of time she spent working this past year and professed, "My son turned one, and I realized that went way too fast. I've always heard that, but it's different when you're a parent, and you see how fast it goes, and I was like... something's got to change." Another teacher said,

I have a set plan of what I'm doing, and I know how the system runs, and I know what I'm expected to do... For me, the new challenge is balancing my children in with what I'm doing, because they're becoming of the age that my oldest is starting to do sports and wants to do this activity and that activity... and I'm like, "wait a minute, how do I manage everybody else's stuff, including mine?"

These factors seem to weigh heavily on the minds of mid-career teachers. An additional teacher mentioned, "When I get home, I always go in and see my kids.... if I didn't get to put them to bed or read them a story... that stuff weighs on me." One female teacher seemed overwhelmed with her work-life struggles by indicating, "Eighty percent of the childcare falls on me... all the transporting, cooking, day-to-day... It gives me less time to meet my work commitments, and that's been very stressful." One individual noted, "I think if I could find a job where I could make a comparable income with a regular schedule, and know I could be home for my kids at 5:00 every night... I would be sorely tempted right now." One teacher confessed:

I think that if I didn't have a strong family support... I don't think I'd still be where I am. There is a job that I know is going to open, that is going to take me out of the classroom. It's just a matter of time, and when it does and if it fits in with my personal life, I'm gone because there's a limit to how much you can put in without getting back what you need.

Theme 3: While compensation was deemed important, many mid-career agriculture teachers value their time over money.

Theme three helps ascertain the perceived level of significance related to the top attrition factors identified throughout the study. While several attrition factors surfaced, two major variables kept emerging, the time commitment beyond the school day and low compensation. Additionally, in each interview that divulged these two factors, the researchers inquired about which they deemed more important.

When discussing the time commitment issue, one teacher disclosed, "I struggle with time away from family, time away from my classes, and time just for myself." Another teacher mentioned, "I spend zero-time planning for instruction which should be the number one thing we do... I spend all my time getting money, doing administrative paperwork, and FFA stuff. I don't get to work with kids... I'm an administrator." Others teachers also discussed their dislike for the administrative aspects of the job, and the excessive time it takes to complete. One particular teacher told us, "There's an administrative aspect of the job that a monkey could do with some training.

Stop making me do all these online forms... this is just more paperwork. It is less time for me to prepare in my classroom.”

Several teachers acknowledged the profession places too many expectations upon our teachers and the lack of personal and family time is detrimental to the profession. One teacher suggested, “I think to keep people there long enough to realize the value of what their impact is, you have to compensate them, or you’re going to lose them to industry.” Several others agreed, suggesting the need to pay teachers a fair salary and adequately compensate them for their time beyond their regular contract. One teacher noted, “When trying to work that many hours, then compare it to how much you’re getting paid... you’re working for less than minimum wage. I would venture to say 35-60 cents an hour... it’s tough.” When asked which factor they deemed more important- time or compensation, an overwhelming majority of these mid-career teachers indicated they wanted their time back. One noted, “More money is not the answer... I need more time... you can’t throw money at the problem. Sometimes you have to throw time at the problem.” Another teacher disclosed:

I can’t add anything to my plate that takes away from my family, my kids, my wife, or my family farm. I will not. You could offer me more money. I will not take it; it’s not worth it. There’s no more hours in the day... absolutely, not worth it. You can’t compensate me enough.

Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify factors influencing current mid-career agriculture teachers’ decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. Previous agricultural education researchers have identified retention/attrition factors, but none have focused on factors within the mid-career professional life stage. This study examined overall job satisfaction and specific retention/attrition factors reported by mid-career teachers participating in the 2016 National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) XLR8 professional development program.

Descriptive statistics and independent-level t-tests were utilized to determine levels of job satisfaction and if overall job satisfaction levels are significantly different between mid-career agriculture teachers contemplating leaving the profession and those not. It can be concluded the mid-career agriculture teachers who participated in 2016 XLR8 program were more satisfied than dissatisfied with their job. This is consistent with the literature reporting agriculture teachers as being satisfied with their careers (Blackburn et al., 2017; Blackburn & Robinson, 2008; Cano & Miller, 1992; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Chenevey et al., 2008; Gilman, Peake, & Parr, 2012; Kitchel et al., 2012; Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2016a; Walker et al., 2004). Furthermore, there were no significant differences in overall job satisfaction between those contemplating leaving the classroom and those who were not. This finding supports the literature suggesting those who leave the agricultural education profession are no more satisfied than those who remain in the profession (Walker et al., 2004).

The data revealed differences between potential leavers and stayers in the areas of job satisfaction related to the level of recognition they receive and issues with school policy and administration. Those teachers exploring careers outside of agricultural education showed significantly lower mean scores in these two areas. This may suggest teachers consider leaving the profession because they feel underappreciated and/or do not feel supported by their administration. If these teachers are not receiving adequate appreciation at the local level, additional recognition programs of mid-career teachers at the regional and state level should be considered. As this is a

variable not proven to be a significant factor within the agricultural education literature, further research investigating perceptions of mid-career agriculture teachers and the level of recognition they receive is recommended. When examining the area of school policy and administration, it is plausible lower levels of perceived support mid-career agriculture teachers receive from their administrators, could contribute to lower levels of job satisfaction. This is consistent with previous findings implying dissatisfaction with school administration as a significant problem agricultural educators encounter in the profession (Boone & Boone, 2007; Castillo & Cano, 1999; Kelsey, 2006; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004). As several participants inferred their administrators did not understand agricultural education, a recommendation would be to develop a regional or state program for administrators to showcase opportunities and impact of agricultural education and FFA.

When evaluating the qualitative component of the study, several interesting conclusions can be drawn from the findings. It is interesting to note the retention factors identified influential for mid-career agriculture teachers are similar to those for all agriculture teachers. Working with motivated students, autonomy, variety, and support was frequently identified as reasons the participants enjoyed their jobs. This is consistent with the previous literature identifying factors related to agricultural educators' intentions to remain in the profession (Clark et al., 2014, Rice et al., 2014). A unique variable for this population included a passion for their programs and commitment to ensure it remains successful. This was likely to occur due to the significant investment of non-monetary capital to their agriculture programs and FFA chapters. Grissmer and Kirby's (1987) human capital theory supports this finding.

When examining reported attrition factors, it was apparent teachers within the mid-career professional life stage were struggling to balance their personal and professional lives due to changing family dynamics. This is consistent with literature indicating agricultural educators struggle with obtaining a work-life balance (Blackburn et al., 2017; Boone & Boone, 2009; Hainline et al., 2015; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Murray et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2005; Sorensen et al., 2016a; Sorensen et al., 2016b). Many indicated being recently married, or were having children, and found they were struggling to balance that dynamic with their professional life. Many also discussed that while they were undergoing these difficulties at home, they were experiencing additional successes within their agricultural programs. However, they were beginning to become aware of the costs surrounding those successes. To help address this issue it is recommended purposeful professional development, similar to the National Association of Agricultural Educators XLR8 program, should be developed at the state level to involve additional teachers struggling with these issues.

One key finding in this study is that many mid-career agriculture teachers value their time above compensation. While they acknowledge the importance of being adequately compensated for their time and effort, they indicated they value their time more at this stage of their career. The literature acknowledges compensation as a leading attrition factor (Boone & Boone, 2009; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Lemons et al., 2015; Sutcher et al., 2016; Warnick et al., 2010), but little research has specifically examined this factor for those within the mid-career professional life stage. Teachers in this study revealed they were making enough money at this point in their career, that compensation was no longer a leading factor. While they admitted they still were not compensated enough for the hours they put in, they would rather have some time back than more hours and additional compensation.

This study has strong implications for the profession and state and national leaders must recognize the additional expectations (paperwork, deadlines, additional days, etc.) they place upon teachers, are extremely influential in stress levels, especially on teachers struggling to balance their

personal and professional lives. One recommendation for state leaders, CTE directors, and administrators would be to evaluate the expectations they place upon teachers. Consolidation of activities and events, which would eliminate additional days away from home, should also be considered. Further research investigating retention rates in states, which consolidate events and activities, should be conducted. It is recommended the quantitative component of this study be replicated nationally, with a larger sample size, to gain a better understanding of agricultural educator job satisfaction and attrition factors for mid-career agriculture teachers.

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