

Lessons Learned: Challenges and Triumphs of First-Year Agriculture Teachers During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems, presenting unique challenges for early-career School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) teachers. Despite extensive research on beginning teacher challenges, limited attention has been given to how first-year SBAE teachers adapted during this global crisis. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of nine first-year SBAE teachers in Illinois during the 2020–2021 academic year. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate first-year agriculture teachers' anticipated versus actual experiences, instructional adaptations, encountered challenges, and perceived positive outcomes. Key findings revealed that adaptability and innovation were essential, as participants continuously revised instruction and FFA programming to meet shifting COVID-19 protocols. Teachers reported difficulty building relationships with students due to masks, hybrid models, and reduced interaction, resulting in lower motivation and engagement. The traditional three-circle model of SBAE was imbalanced, with a strong emphasis on classroom teaching and reduced focus on SAE and FFA. However, participants noted silver linings, including improved technological proficiency and time to focus on pedagogy without the pressure of extracurricular responsibilities. Findings from this study underscore the need for targeted support systems for early-career SBAE teachers, particularly during times of disruption. Professional development should include training in digital instructional tools, adaptive leadership, and strategies for maintaining student engagement in all components of the three-circle model. Future research should investigate the evolving role of technology, equitable access to SBAE experiences, and the long-term effects of beginning a teaching career during crisis conditions on teacher retention.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

When the global COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, it transformed the United States' educational landscape as schools nationwide were forced to move from in-person instruction to remote classrooms (Daniel, 2020). In this emergent situation, neither teachers nor students were prepared to

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transition their education online. School-based Agricultural Education (SBAE) was certainly not immune to the broader impacts of the pandemic. SBAE is a formal curriculum traditionally conceptualized around the three-circle model of agricultural education. This three-circle model includes classroom instruction, membership in the National FFA Organization, and Supervised Agricultural Experiences, offering students a holistic approach to experiential learning (Phipps et al., 2008).

Given the immediate change in the learning environment, teachers began using their instructional time to solve technology issues and learn new online platforms for reaching students (Daniel, 2020; Eck et al., 2021). This lack of preparedness caused panic, stress, and strain for teachers and students who were not equipped for this large-scale shift in learning (Eck et al., 2021). Teachers reported numerous challenges, and individual schools created unique issues for teachers and students. This included a lack of access to buildings and facilities, creating barriers to resources and making it more difficult to plan (Ermis et al., 2022; McKim & Sorenson, 2020).

Student motivation was also an obstacle as the challenges of remote instruction impacted every student, and many schools moved to inconsequential grading policies for the final nine weeks of the semester (McKim et al., 2021). Adaptation was a significant theme for teachers during the early days of the pandemic shutdown, as teachers adapted their learning management systems to various online platforms (Crawford et al., 2020), adjusted their instructional delivery methods for remote instruction (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020), and adapted hands-on lessons to teach using remote formats (Eck et al., 2021), hoping to still engage students in experiential learning.

As the COVID-19 pandemic became a long-term problem, not only were classroom attendance and teaching impacted, but intracurricular organizations and projects associated with SBAE also suffered. While many teachers struggled to adapt to remote learning, this transition further challenged early career teachers, who likely felt added stress and job dissatisfaction in their first year (McKim & Sorenson, 2020). While first-year teachers often have more enthusiasm and energy than other career stages, they reported needing more support in time management, work-life balance, and teacher leadership (Shoulders, 2021). Prevalent first-year challenges include managing the overall activities of the FFA chapter, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, properly managing their time, handling student discipline, and using proper classroom management strategies (Mundt & Connors, 1999).

Based on these challenges, beginning teachers often enter the profession unsure of their long-term commitment to SBAE (Warnick et al., 2010). Additional challenges first-year teachers face include organizing support groups like alumni chapters, management of student discipline, and organizing and planning FFA chapter events and activities (Myers et al., 2005). Previous studies have suggested that for new teachers to remain in the profession, additional support in finding work-life balance, creating community, and sharing resources is needed to provide authentic learning experiences for students (Shoulders et al., 2021; Solomonson et al., 2021; Warnick et al., 2010).

While research before the pandemic suggests SBAE teachers spent 50 to 60 hours a week engaged in work-related activities (Murray et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2017), SBAE teachers reported a 42% decline in weekday work hours and a 45% decline in weekend hours during the pandemic (McKim & Sorenson, 2020). Despite working fewer hours, SBAE teachers' lower job satisfaction suggested they see value in the elements of their job lost within pandemic restrictions (McKim & Sorenson, 2020). One teacher stated that the cancellations of FFA events like annual award banquets and State Conventions were "taking away the enjoyment of my job" (Ermis et al., 2022, p.77). Early-career agriculture teachers may have also been impacted more than mid- and late-stage teachers. According to Ermis et al. (2022), novice agriculture teachers may be more susceptible to the impacts of remote instruction. Historically, early-career agriculture teachers are more vulnerable to changes early in their careers (Ermis et al., 2022). Many adapted quickly and enthusiastically (Ermis et al., 2022), indicating positive motivation in their

professional duties (Clemons et al., 2021). Still, others felt the strain and stress of not knowing how to prepare and reach students from a distance.

This study was conceptualized around developing early career teachers as leaders during the global COVID-19 pandemic using Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) Leadership Development for Teachers (LDT) model. "This model acknowledges the collaborative nature of teacher leadership, both in the skill sets required and the process of becoming a leader" (Alho et al., 2024, p. 416). The LDT model's principles are especially relevant for beginning teachers facing unprecedented disruptions in education. The rapid shift to online and hybrid learning environments required teachers to adopt innovative practices, share expertise, and collaborate extensively to ensure student engagement and learning continuity (Daniel, 2020; Eck et al, 2021).

For early career SBAE teachers, this was a critical opportunity to engage in peer leadership by sharing strategies and technologies and contributing to collective problem-solving. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the importance of teacher leadership in advocating for student well-being and equity, particularly in addressing disparities exacerbated by remote learning. This model provided us a guiding lens for understanding how early career SBAE teachers navigated the complex demands of teaching during the pandemic, emphasizing their role as adaptive leaders within their schools.

Purpose and Research Objectives

Our qualitative study aimed to examine the lived experiences of first-year SBAE education teachers during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The specific research objectives of our study included:

1. Describe a first-year agriculture teacher's anticipated experience compared to their actual experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Describe how first-year agriculture teachers adapted classroom and laboratory instruction, FFA, and SAE during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Describe specific challenges first-year agriculture teachers encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Identify positive outcomes experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

A qualitative research design using a transcendental phenomenology approach was chosen for our study to explore the lived experiences of first-year SBAE teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology seeks to uncover a "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Specifically, transcendental phenomenology was selected over hermeneutic phenomenology due to its emphasis on setting aside the researchers' prior experiences in order to describe the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). This method aligned with our research purpose of identifying shared themes through the reduction of participant responses into significant statements and overarching themes.

Participants

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from each of our researchers' institutions that participated in the data collection process. All Illinois first-year, traditionally licensed SBAE teachers during the 2020-2021 academic year were eligible to participate in our study. With the assistance of the Illinois agricultural education state staff, we obtained a list of 21 potential participants. We used the state agriculture teachers' directory to obtain contact information. We contacted these individuals via email and invited them to participate. Following Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation

of sample sizes for phenomenological research, we selected nine individuals who met our criteria. Once they agreed to participate in our study, we had them complete a Qualtrics XM© questionnaire, which included an informed consent document and asked them several demographic questions. We also asked them about their availability for an interview. All interviews were scheduled individually and conducted using a consistent semi-structured protocol.

The participants selected included two males and seven females who were all first-year, traditionally certified, SBAE teachers in Illinois. In accordance with our IRB protocols, we removed all identifying information of participants and assigned them each a pseudonym. Information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	School COVID Modalities
Joey	Male	21	Hybrid Model (A/B Days) - Fully Remote Wednesdays
Morgan	Female	22	Fully In Person - Some remote students
Hannah	Female	22	Shortened Daily Schedules, A/B Days, Remote Students
Zoey	Female	23	Fully Online Beginning, Several periods of fully remote learning
Taylor	Female	22	Year began 6 weeks fully remote, AM In Person, PM Remote Classes
Molly	Female	22	Rural district, First Quarter Fully Remote, but No Internet, then 30-minute classes
Mackenzie	Female	25	A/B Days, Some shortened classes
Libby	Female	22	Virtual Every Other Day
John	Male	22	A Day/B Day Students + Remote Students

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom during the spring 2021 semester. The interview protocol was designed to elicit in-depth descriptions of our participants' experiences during their first year of teaching amid the pandemic. Primary interview questions, listed in Table 2, were guided by the study's purpose and included follow-up questions when appropriate to encourage elaboration and clarify responses.

Table 2*Questions Used During the Semi-Structured Interviews*

Interview Items
Tell me about your experiences as a first-year teacher, teaching during a pandemic?
What do you think your first-year teaching would have been like without the pandemic?
Tell me about your thoughts on online/remote teaching prior to the pandemic. What are your thoughts on online/remote teaching now?
How have you had to adapt classroom and laboratory instruction during the pandemic?
How have you had to adapt FFA (student organization activities) during the pandemic?
How have you had to adapt SAE (Supervised Agricultural Experience) programs during the pandemic?
What are some specific challenges you have encountered during your first-year teaching?
What, if any, positive aspects do you think may surface in the agricultural education profession because of the pandemic?

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into a coding matrix for analysis. Members of our research team engaged in open coding, a fundamental step in phenomenological data analysis where data is examined line by line to identify significant concepts or “codes” (Creswell, 2013). Each transcript was independently reviewed by members of the research team to generate initial codes. These codes reflected recurring ideas, experiences, or meanings expressed by participants. After initial coding, the research team met to compare and consolidate codes, identifying areas of overlap and refining the code set into a coherent framework. Through constant comparison and memoing, codes were grouped into emergent themes based on their relevance to the phenomenon and research objectives. Themes and subthemes were developed inductively and grounded in participant narratives.

Significant statements were extracted from the transcripts to illustrate the essence of each theme. Bracketing was used throughout the analysis process to reduce researcher bias, with each researcher consciously setting aside personal experiences as current or former SBAE teachers. The final themes represented commonalities across participant experiences and offered a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Reliability and Validity

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used to establish trustworthiness, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through the use of member checks and by drawing on the extensive experience of the research team in agricultural education. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a consistent interview protocol and analytic procedures, including verbatim transcription and collaborative coding. Transferability was supported by the detailed description of the participant selection process and context. Confirmability was ensured through the bracketing of researcher assumptions and systematic documentation of analytic decisions.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included the relatively homogeneous sample, with all participants in their first year of teaching during the same academic year and geographic location. As a result, most participants were of a similar age and had the same level of teaching experience. While necessary for consistency in experiencing the same phenomenon, this homogeneity may limit the generalizability of findings to other populations. Furthermore, it was difficult to isolate whether the reported challenges were unique to teaching during a global pandemic or reflective of the typical first-year teaching experience. Issues such as time management, student relationship building, and coordinating FFA events were commonly cited and may have emerged regardless of the pandemic context.

Findings

The findings of the study are organized into four common themes shared by multiple participants: Adaptability and Innovation, Relationships are the Foundation of Agricultural Education, Prioritization of the Classroom in the Three Circle Model, and Triumphs in Embracing Technology. Participants' reflections provide a detailed description of their lived experience as first-year teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 1: Adaptability and Innovation - Every Day is a New Day

One of the most prominent themes was the continuous need to adapt to unexpected and unprecedented challenges. First-year teachers had to modify nearly every aspect of their practice: ever-changing safety protocols, different student needs, and shifting modes of instruction. For many, resilience and adaptability became survival strategies. Some participants noted that first-year teachers may have had fewer challenges than veteran teachers who were also forced to adjust established routines. Two subthemes emerged: differentiated instruction and virtual FFA contests.

Differentiated Instruction

Much of the adaptation centered on classroom instruction. Teachers had to adjust group work and hands-on activities. Zoey shared, "The hands-on or partner work is the biggest piece that I have had to adapt." John echoed this, stating, "Group work isn't the same... that's been the biggest change in the shop." He added, "I'm only able to keep one class in the shop at a time," which required rotating access and sanitizing shared equipment. John said, "Once they're done... I take jackets, gloves, and I go disinfecting, washing, etc." Taylor modified assignments for remote students, asking them to photograph outlets in their home. Teachers also navigated constant scheduling changes and student absences. Joey said, "The schedule can change week to week, so it makes it hard to plan ahead." Zoey added, "As soon as we were back in, then we had to go back out... and then we had to go remote." Mackenzie noted the complications of conducting food labs, often relocating them outdoors. Teachers had to reimagine classroom tasks, laboratory activities, and student engagement under changing conditions.

Virtual FFA Contests

Teachers and students had mixed reactions to virtual FFA events. While online formats allowed continued participation, many students were reluctant to engage in additional screen time. Joey said, "They don't really want to spend any more time in front of the screen..." resulting in minimal contest participation. Molly noted, "The virtual part of FFA just hasn't worked out for us," with students quickly losing interest. She added, "Anything that was offered... they didn't want to attend." Mackenzie pointed out that the fun of contests came from the in-person experience, while Libby said, "The exciting part about FFA was traveling... so I think kids don't buy into that as much." Some events were successful, however. Hannah appreciated broader access: "I had a couple of girls... compete against FFA chapters from east to west coast." She hoped such opportunities would continue in the future.

Theme 2: Relationships are the Foundation of Agricultural Education

Despite discussions of planning and management, the most central theme was the importance of relationships. First-year teachers wanted to form meaningful connections with students, but COVID-19 protocols introduced both literal and figurative barriers. Subthemes included the effects of safety protocols on relationships and reduced student involvement and motivation.

COVID Protocols Impact Relationships

In fall 2020, mask mandates and hybrid schedules hindered face-to-face interaction. Molly said, “The lack of interaction with students was discouraging... the fun group activities... we’re not able to do.” Zoey reflected, “Without the pandemic, I would have had the opportunity to really get to know my kids faster...” Taylor added, “There are still kids I don’t know. I’ve never seen their faces...” Mackenzie was also frustrated: “We didn’t get those bus rides, we didn’t get National Convention... those things... normally build relationships.”

Student Involvement and Motivation

Many teachers noted a drop in student involvement and morale. Morgan said, “It was hard on my ego and confidence that kids just don’t care...” Libby and Mackenzie pointed to canceled events as a contributing factor. Libby shared, “There aren’t a lot of books students are keeping up or SAEs that qualify for competition.” Taylor said, “There aren’t that many kids that jump on in the afternoon... it’s been boring and frustrating.” Molly sympathized: “Students had zero motivation.” John added, “I’m not able to get students as involved as I’d like because I’m trying to learn everything myself.”

Theme 3: Prioritizing the Classroom in the Three-Circle Model

Time management challenges, reduced FFA opportunities, and classroom demands led first-year teachers to focus more on instruction than on the full three-circle model. Some saw this as a setback, while others welcomed the chance to hone their teaching skills. Subthemes included an investment in teaching and a reduced focus on SAE.

Investment in Teaching

Many teachers appreciated the extra time to invest in improving instruction in their first year. Mackenzie said, “Being able to focus on ‘teacher things’ like... and lesson planning this year and getting that under my belt so that next year, hopefully, we can do some of the more fun ag teacher activities.” While the lack of FFA activities and lowered engagement in SAE were certainly challenges, many teachers mentioned that they were actually able to spend more time finding their own pace and having more time to engage in the classroom without the added stress of attending FFA events. Morgan stated, “Honestly, it has gone way better than I ever could have imagined. Everyone was warning me, your first year is going to be so rough. You’re going to be staying at the school till 10:00 at night.” She was happy to report that those predictions didn’t come to fruition. Further, John reflected, “I think down the road, I’m going to be thankful for what I’ve done in the classroom this year and all the work I’ve put in preparing in the classroom.”

Reduced Focus on SAE

Pandemic restrictions limited SAE opportunities. John noted students were slower to adapt: “Students are kind of not wanting to adapt as quickly as we have to.” Libby said, “You really can’t put students out into the community...” Molly added, “In reality, it just didn’t happen because of the situation that everybody’s in.” John summed it up: “There is just too much this year to add an extra layer...” Morgan admitted, “It just kind of slipped my mind to do a few things... we haven’t really gotten to that this year.” Molly faced the added challenge of teaching AET remotely to a student who had never used it.

Theme 4: Triumphs in Embracing Technology

Though online learning posed initial challenges, many teachers grew more comfortable with technology and recognized its long-term value. When asked about the positive aspects of the pandemic and how they might influence agricultural education, each of the teachers reported a new benefit in using technology and online platforms. Subthemes included evolving opinions on technology and continued success in using digital tools.

Evolving Opinions on Technology

Initially hesitant, teachers gradually adapted to online instruction. During the onset of the pandemic, many noted frustration and the significant amount of time they had to devote to preparing for online instruction. Morgan noted, "It's not the same amount of learning..." Hannah shared, "Everything I was taught... was classroom material... I had no experience with remote learning." Molly added, "I thought it would be easy, but it turned out to be probably twice the work..." Over time, though, attitudes improved. Hannah said, "Since the beginning of the pandemic, I've gotten a lot better at online teaching and working on online platforms." Zoey observed, "We've been able to make it more interactive and engaging for students, so it's shown its value." Mackenzie reflected, "My opinion has definitely changed over the last 8 months." John noted benefits for his college-bound students: "I do think it [online learning] has provided some opportunities for higher-level kids to kind of get prepared for the college setup."

Continued Success in Using Digital Tools

Despite the challenges, teachers embraced the lasting benefits of technology. Several used Google Classroom for instruction and FFA contest preparation and discussed how they foresee using it throughout their teaching careers. Libby appreciated the flexibility of virtual events. Mackenzie noted that contests like public speaking might stay virtual long-term. Morgan highlighted the usefulness of online teacher communities: "Lots of people are more willing to share their ideas and help one another out." Overall, participants recognized how technology could enhance instruction, expand opportunities, and support student learning beyond the pandemic.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of our qualitative study offer critical insight into how first-year SBAE teachers navigated the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with earlier literature, these teachers were thrust into unfamiliar territory with minimal preparation, as in-person learning rapidly shifted to online instruction (Daniel, 2020; Eck et al., 2021). In response, they demonstrated remarkable adaptability and innovation by modifying instructional delivery, experimenting with virtual formats for FFA activities, and restructuring classroom management strategies. These actions reflect the broad instructional recalibrations described by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020).

While embracing innovation, teachers simultaneously faced significant challenges. Student apathy, decreased SAE engagement, and limited relationship-building due to masks, virtual platforms, and altered schedules all contributed to a demanding teaching environment, aligning with the stressors highlighted by McKim and Sorenson (2020). The foundational three-circle model of SBAE (Phipps et al., 2008) was disrupted, leading many teachers to prioritize classroom instruction while minimizing FFA and SAE involvement. This pattern echoes findings from McKim and Sorenson (2020), who documented a decline in extracurricular engagement and a related dip in teacher job satisfaction.

A noteworthy finding was that many early career teachers, despite increased stress and uncertainty, found value in the chance to focus more deeply on instructional planning and personal growth. Some

described the reduction in traditional extracurricular demands as a welcome reprieve that allowed better workload management and confidence development, a phenomenon also noted by Ermis et al. (2022).

These findings align with the Leadership Development for Teachers (LDT) Model (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009), which emphasizes collaboration, adaptive skill development, and shared leadership. The experiences of these first-year teachers suggest their emergence as adaptive leaders during a time of crisis. They embraced technology, shared ideas with peers, and guided their programs through new challenges (Alho et al., 2024). Their willingness to innovate and reflect indicates a foundational leadership capacity worthy of continued support and study.

As the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the educational experience for students and teachers alike, several areas for future research emerged. These lived experiences not only demonstrate resilience and adaptability but also highlight critical gaps in our understanding of teacher development, student engagement, and SBAE program structure during crisis conditions.

First, longitudinal research is needed to examine how launching a teaching career during a global crisis influences long-term retention and leadership development. Participants in this study exhibited both the vulnerability and promise described in existing literature (Mundt & Connors, 1999; Warnick et al., 2010; Shoulders, 2021). Many entered the profession with high expectations but encountered uncertainty, shifting responsibilities, and emotionally taxing circumstances. Following these individuals over time could reveal how early adversity affects resilience, leadership trajectories, and career persistence. This would also clarify how early-career teachers contribute to the profession as adaptive leaders, a concept central to Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) LDT framework.

Second, the role of technology in SBAE instruction warrants further investigation. Although participants initially resisted remote platforms, many later recognized the value of tools such as Google Classroom and virtual FFA contests. These findings support earlier research on instructional adaptation through digital methods (Crawford et al., 2020; Eck et al., 2021). Future research should explore whether these digital innovations persist, expand, or fade in post-pandemic classrooms, informing the design of professional development and teacher education in agricultural education.

Student disengagement, particularly in FFA and SAE, emerged as a consistent concern. The pandemic not only reduced motivation (McKim et al., 2021) but also altered students' perceptions of hallmark SBAE experiences. Virtual CDEs, for instance, lacked the energy and social interaction that traditionally drive participation (Ermis et al., 2022). Research should focus on re-engagement strategies, potentially through hybrid models that blend digital flexibility with in-person energy.

Another critical area involves equity and access during remote or hybrid instruction. As Daniel (2020) and others have pointed out, the digital divide and unequal access to resources pose serious challenges. These inequities were likely magnified in SBAE due to its reliance on physical spaces like shops, labs, and school farms. Future studies should examine how access gaps impacted participation and learning and what solutions emerged to address them.

In addition, the long-term impact on the three-circle model of SBAE deserves close attention. Many participants concentrated on classroom instruction at the expense of FFA and SAE, an evident departure from the integrated approach outlined by Phipps et al. (2008). Research should determine whether this shift was temporary or indicative of evolving teacher priorities and program structures. Understanding how and why certain components were emphasized can inform the future of comprehensive SBAE delivery.

This study also reinforces the importance of mentorship and institutional support, particularly during disruption. While past research has long emphasized the benefits of mentorship (Shoulders et al., 2021), the pandemic introduced new conditions and support needs. Further research should explore how novice teachers accessed community, resources, and administrative guidance, and what models proved most effective in helping them navigate their first year.

Finally, teacher well-being and work-life balance in the post-pandemic context must be addressed. Participants reported working fewer hours than what is typical in pre-pandemic SBAE (Murray et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2017), yet many described reduced job satisfaction. This paradox suggests that satisfaction in agricultural education may stem more from meaningful engagement than workload alone (McKim & Sorenson, 2020). A deeper understanding of how today's SBAE teachers define satisfaction and fulfillment could shape strategies to prevent burnout and improve retention, especially among early-career educators.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted nearly every facet of SBAE, it also exposed opportunities to rethink how we prepare, support, and retain teachers. Continued inquiry into these areas will help build a more resilient, equitable, and adaptive agricultural education system.

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