

The Success Trap: A Case Study of Early Career Agricultural Education Teachers' Conceptualizations of Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

Little progress has been made to understand the (in)abilities of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers to balance their work and life responsibilities. Nevertheless, advancing this conversation is critical, especially in light of ongoing teacher shortage trends. In response, this study's purpose was two-fold: (1) examine how early career teachers in Louisiana co-constructed their conceptualizations of work-life balance as SBAE teachers, and (2) illuminate the contextual factors that shaped how the early career teachers negotiated meaning regarding their reified views of work-life balance. When interpreting findings through the lens of landscapes of practice, five themes emerged: (1) The Success Trap, (2) The Work Eclipse, (3) Aspired Boundaries, (4) Grin and Bear It – Silence, and (5) Undercurrents of Change. The findings speak against the dominant narrative perpetuated by various actors and forces in the discipline that have championed the notion that work-life balance should be the ultimate goal. Instead, our findings problematize this notion by illuminating how early career teachers in Louisiana visualized success and work-life balance in diverse and complex ways. As a result, researchers offer implications and recommendations to help reimagine how early career teachers can better traverse issues of work and life in the SBAE landscape.

Keywords: agricultural education teachers; early career teachers; work-life balance

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Introduction and Literature Review

If I had to use one word to summarize the advice in this issue it would be “balance.” Balance your professional career and your personal life. Make sure that you plan time for your spouse, your immediate family, your extended family, your faith, and yourself. Along with the “balance” in your life, develop effective ways of dealing with the stress in your career and personal life. If you accomplish these two tasks, you will be on your way to a long, healthy and happy life. (Boone, 2011, p. 2)

In the excerpt above from the *Agricultural Education Magazine (The Magazine)*, Boone (2011) challenges secondary agricultural teachers to make purposeful strides in achieving work-life balance

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and claims that if such is achieved, it could lead to a more fulfilling career and life. Similar to Boone (2011), other authors in this issue of *The Magazine* emphasize the importance of work-life balance, as it “ensure[s] happiness at work and home” (Cano, 2011, p. 4) yet “is challenging but it can be done and done successfully” (Elmquist, 2011, p. 21). The message in this issue is straightforward; work-life balance is necessary, and it is up to individual agricultural educators to make it happen. Although this advice seems logical, achieving work-life balance appears to be more complex in practice, especially for agriculture teachers whose responsibilities extend far beyond classroom instruction (Talbert et al., 2014). With the expectations to engage students in a comprehensive agricultural education program that incorporates classroom and laboratory learning experiences, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) and student participation in the National FFA Organization (Talbert et al., 2014), achieving work-life balance as a secondary agricultural education teacher is not straightforward. To this point, extant research paints a murky picture regarding notions of work-life balance in school-based, agricultural education (SBAE) (Blackburn et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2011; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2016; Traini et al., 2019). As an illustration, conflicting evidence exists, neither supporting nor refuting claims that agriculture teachers struggle with balancing work and non-work obligations. In particular, Murray et al. (2011) examined challenges Georgia agriculture teachers encounter as they balance family and career expectations. They concluded SBAE teachers struggle to balance career and family. When surveyed about perceived barriers to fulfilling family responsibilities, participants reported the following barriers: (a) fatigued from work, (b) night meetings/activities, (c) long workdays, (d) weekends away, (e) excessive work demands, (f) inability to leave during the school day, and (g) taking work home (Murray et al., 2011).

These results differ from Sorensen’s and McKim’s (2014) findings that Oregon SBAE teachers reported moderate levels of work-family balance and that moderate and positive relationships existed among job satisfaction, work-life balance ability, and professional commitment. These findings were also echoed in their 2016 study that reported SBAE teachers experience moderate levels of work-family balance ability and job satisfaction (Sorensen et al., 2016). Similarly, Blackburn et al. (2017) found that Louisiana SBAE teachers were also primarily able to achieve work-life balance. These results somewhat conflicted with Solomonson and Retallick’s (2018) findings that mid-career SBAE teachers struggle to balance their personal and professional lives, which was largely due to changing family dynamics. Moreover, mid-career agriculture teachers noted marriage and children added to this struggle and, despite successes they were experiencing with their career, it affected their family life (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). One of the most recent studies in the field explored the ways in which agriculture teachers interact with reified forms of success in SBAE regarding work-life balance from a social learning perspective (Traini, et al., 2019). Traini et al.’s (2019) qualitative investigation with early-career agriculture teachers in Oregon found participants encountered tensions about their notions of success in agricultural education and work-life balance. For instance, SBAE teachers perceived they were able to achieve work-life balance (i.e., physical and mental well-being) *or* success in their career (i.e., winning awards, blue banners, or having high program numbers), but never both. And, as they strived for success and balance, they encountered stress, guilt, judgment, fear, and pressure (Traini et al., 2019). Therefore, results from this study suggested that work-life balance may be more difficult than a simple choice, as Boone (2011) suggested in *The Magazine*, but rather an impossible feat if SBAE teachers wish to succeed in their career.

Although no salient themes in the literature point to the (in)abilities of SBAE teachers to balance their work and non-work responsibilities, the conversation regarding work-life balance is critical for the profession, especially in light of teacher shortage trends (Smith, et al., 2019). Research has shown connections between the struggle to balance work and non-work obligations and the decision to leave the profession before retirement (Igo & Perry, 2019; Lemons et al., 2015; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018) as well as the decision not to enter the profession due to the inability to balance work and life while fulfilling the obligations of the job (Igo & Perry, 2019). To address the emergent concerns

about work-life balance and the teacher shortage problem, scholars have recommended myriad strategies. These often involve increasing the quality and quantity of professional development offered to SBAE teachers about how to better balance work and non-work responsibilities (Blackburn et al., 2017; Igo & Perry, 2019; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Sorensen & McKim, 2014) or to better manage their time (Murray et al., 2011). These recommendations align with the aforementioned sentiments espoused in *The Magazine* that framed balance as a personal choice or a factor that individuals can control. However, other scholars such as Hainline et al. (2015), Sorensen et al. (2017), and Traini et al. (2019) suggested that researchers and practitioners should look beyond the individual SBAE teacher and instead use a systems approach to advance the work-life balance conversation and gain a clearer understanding of how this variable influences SBAE teacher shortage trends. Such a change would necessitate a re-examination of the cultural norms regarding how SBAE measures success in teaching by reducing the expectations placed on teachers (Sorensen et al., 2016), charging state staff to make purposeful strides in alleviating challenges of work-life balance (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018), and digging deeper into the ways in which teachers experience and manage their work from a social learning perspective (Traini et al., 2019).

Although previous research (Blackburn, et al., 2017; Murray, et al., 2011; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen, et al., 2016; Traini, et al., 2019) has advanced the utility of work-life balance as a construct, so far, inconclusive evidence exists regarding the ways in which SBAE teachers can achieve this feat. Further, although existing research has illuminated how a lack of work-life balance may influence teacher attrition (Igo & Perry, 2019; Lemons et al., 2015; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018), little is known about SBAE teachers' conceptualizations of work-life balance and how such operates as a master narrative in SBAE - and as a result, may conceal critical dimensions of influence. Exploring this deficiency in knowledge, particularly from a social learning perspective, may allow agricultural education to paint a more granular picture of how SBAE teachers' conceptualizations of work-life balance manifest as a result of the discipline's unique context, expectations, and perspective. This insight might also advance the conversation concerning the ways in which varied representations of work-life balance may support or, perhaps, more importantly, stifle the career longevity of SBAE teachers.

Theoretical Framework

We employed concepts from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) *Landscapes of Practice* to examine how early career agriculture teachers in Louisiana co-constructed their conceptualizations of work-life balance and negotiated meaning in regard to their reified views on work-life balance. Built from previous work on situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and social learning perspectives (Wenger, 1998), *Landscapes of Practice* offers a broad social perspective on professional learning that situates learning in the context of our lived experiences as participants in a social world (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) postulated learning is a component of our human nature; a social endeavor in which people are active participants in the practices of various communities of practice, and that people construct their identities as they participate in these communities. It is through social participation within a community that learning occurs.

When considering the work of professionals, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) recognized individuals engage in and belong to multiple communities of practice or groups formed via mutual engagement in a landscape. As professionals engage in and participate in these communities, they negotiate meaning as well as shape and are shaped by the norms, expectations, and repertoires of practice negotiated by its members. Unlike other uses of the word, Wenger (1998) described negotiation as continuous interaction, a process that "is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique" (p. 54) and takes place through the dual process of *participation* and *reification*. Participation involves

an active process whereby “the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises” (Wenger, 1998, p. 55). Reification involves the projection of meaning onto the world; it describes our engagement in the world as useful and meaningful. As people participate in the practices of various communities, they give “form to our experiences by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Reification can take many forms, including symbols, patterns of behavior, logos, vernacular, abstractions, tools, or stories. The meaning that is negotiated within communities, and the boundaries between them, constitute a *landscape of practice*.

As a result, we conceptualized SBAE as a landscape of practice, comprised of multiple communities and boundaries. Similar to Traini et al. (2019) study, we acknowledged SBAE teachers participate in multiple communities in the landscape (e.g., an FFA community, an SAE community, a community associated with the professional association), yet purposefully did not define or identify these various communities as the landscape differs for each individual. Because meaning is negotiated across the landscape, we viewed agriculture teachers as individuals who traverse the SBAE landscape, negotiating meaning with others and, as a result, build a distinct professional identity. Teachers constantly negotiate meaning through participation and reification and come to understand what it means to be an SBAE teacher through their engagement in this landscape.

Given these tenets, we examined how the concept of work-life balance is taken up by SBAE teachers as they navigate the SBAE landscape. Using this theoretical lens, we assumed they constructed their understanding of work-life balance through active participation in the SBAE landscape and used such to inform their engagement. This may include the negotiation of meaning regarding what it means to be balanced, how one achieves or does not achieve balance, and the influences other individuals in the landscape may or may not have on their conceptualizations. Traini et al.’s (2019) study served as a starting point for this examination by asking Oregon agriculture teachers to consider their own conceptualizations of work-life balance given the profession’s reifications of success. Yet, their methods limited their ability to understand how their participants’ co-constructed their conceptualizations of work-life balance or how they negotiate meaning in regard to their reified views on work-life balance. Therefore, the current investigation examined how SBAE teachers conceptualized work-life balance using Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) theory to illuminate how SBAE teachers negotiated meaning. This, in turn, may widen our understanding of the connections between the concept of work-life balance and SBAE teacher shortage trends.

Purpose

Building on the work of Traini et al. (2019), this study’s purpose was two-fold: (1) examine how early career teachers in Louisiana co-constructed their conceptualizations of work-life balance as SBAE teachers, and (2) illuminate the contextual factors that shaped how the early career teachers negotiated meaning regarding their reified views on work-life balance. Because of the importance of work-life balance in addressing the discipline’s teacher retention issue, this investigation’s findings could help early career agricultural education teachers remain in the workforce (Igo & Perry, 2019; Lemons et al., 2015; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). As a consequence, this study supported the American Association for Agricultural Education’s (AAAE’s) Research Priority 3: *Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century* (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016).

Methodology

Case studies set boundaries for detailed investigation, allowing for in-depth analysis while examining situational and environmental factors in context (Meyer, 2001; Stake, 2005). Our inquiry

employed the particularistic and authentic nature of case studies as described by Stake (1995) to address the diverse conceptualizations of work-life balance held by early-career agricultural education teachers while underscoring the nuance and nature of the SBAE landscape. The first round of this study was bounded by time and place (Stake, 1995) and included 24 early career agriculture teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience who attended an early career teacher professional development session at Louisiana's agriculture teacher association's summer conference in 2019. Participants were all teachers in Louisiana and evenly represented male and female teachers. The second round of this study included follow-up interviews with four participants from round one, two males and two females. Data collection was conducted by two researchers, both teacher educators, one of which is closely linked to participants as a teacher educator in Louisiana. An additional researcher had no direct connection to participants and acted as an outside inquiry audit, examining the research process, and ensuring consistency throughout (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

During the first round of data collection, we followed the data collection protocol developed by Traini et al. (2019) by facilitating an interactive silent discussion (ISD), allowing participants to publicly respond to eight questions. This included questions such as "what are barriers to achieving balance?" "how would you define a successful agriculture teacher?" and "what is balance?", to name a few. Each question was written on a large poster board and spread out on an 8' x 30' conference room wall. Participants were asked to engage in the ISD for 15 minutes without talking and were asked to record their thoughts and opinions while also responding to statements of other participants. Thereafter, researchers facilitated 15 minutes of discussion following the ISD by which participants were asked to share their observations and reflect on the silent-discussion comments that resonated with them most. Participants were then provided a survey link that asked open-ended follow-up questions and provided an opportunity to add additional thoughts and take-aways anonymously. Round one of data collection included the following data: (a) 72 individually written responses on the wall, (b) transcription of the recorded discussion, (c) 30 written comments from the survey, (d) observational field notes recorded by researchers during the professional development session, and (e) subsequent memos from each researcher. We compiled and individually coded the data from round one for initial impressions using eclectic coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). During this process of meaning-making, we recognized additional data were needed for a more robust and saturated understanding of the factors at play (Ness, 2015). Therefore, a second round of data collection was initiated using a semi-structured interview protocol with questions that allowed for a deeper meaning to be provided by participants from round one. We contacted six teacher participants who indicated an interest in participating in future research and provided information warranting further exploration for a follow-up interview. Four of the six individuals agreed to engage in a follow-up interview. We asked participants questions such as "describe your experience during the ISD," "how would you characterize your work-life balance now?" and "can you think of an agriculture teacher you would consider successful and describe why you identify them as successful?" Interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To enhance the credibility of our findings, we compiled data from rounds one and two for analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Saldaña (2016) described the coding process as rigorous and cyclical analysis and interpretation beyond the labeling of data to the linking of ideas. He further described the value of teams of researchers brings to the collaborative process of coding through shared interpretation. We initially sifted through data individually by utilizing in vivo coding to allow meaning to be cultivated from the voices involved in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), but participated in several rounds of collaborative coding and negotiation during analysis (Schreier, 2012). According to Weston et al. (2001), collaborative coding often generates new and richer codes than coding alone when ideas are free to be questioned, considered, and debated. The consolidation of developed codes to generate categories was also a team process that increased the rigor of our inquiry by requiring intercoder agreement (Burla et al., 2008; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Krippendorff, 2009) prior to the systematic

development of themes. As former SBAE teachers *and* teacher educators, our experiences teaching in eight different states provided membership to several communities of practice and offered multiple angles to consider from different regions of the country. This multifaceted view of SBAE facilitated the triangulation of data with subsequent memos providing additional color and meaning to the perspective brought by individual researchers prior to the final development and arrangement of themes (Stake, 1995).

It was imperative to recognize our positionality as teacher educators and the influence our roles may have on teacher participants. We accomplished this by remaining reflexive throughout the research process. Reflexivity requires the researcher to recognize “an account of reality does not simply mirror reality but, rather, creates and constitutes as real in the first place whatever it describes” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Reflexivity provided space to acknowledge our potential biases and experiences as former SBAE teachers while shedding light on the various ways our own struggles with work-life balance may have entangled and shaped our perspective during this inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All three of us work in departments that prepare secondary agriculture teachers through traditional, credential-based programs. We teach various Agricultural Education courses, supervise student teachers, and interact with the profession regularly through in-service training, at state FFA activities, and at other events where agriculture teachers convene (e.g., fairs). In this study, we had varying degrees of familiarity with the research participants. One of us prepares teachers in Louisiana and had previous professional relationships with several of the participants. One of us works in an adjacent state and knows a few of the participants. One of us did not know any of the participants nor had any contact with the participants. We are all former high school agriculture teachers who can speak to the struggle to balance work responsibilities with non-work responsibilities, pastimes, and relationships.

Findings

Through our analysis, five themes emerged: (1) The Success Trap, (2) The Work Eclipse, (3) Aspired Boundaries, (4) Grin and Bear It – Silence, and (5) Undercurrents of Change. The themes, woven together by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) theory, demonstrate the shifting conceptualizations of work and personal success that were co-constructed by early-career agricultural education teachers in Louisiana. Such findings speak against the dominant narrative perpetuated by various actors and forces in the discipline that have championed the notion that *work-life balance* should be the ultimate goal. Instead, our findings problematize this notion by illuminating how early career teachers in Louisiana visualized and animated personal and career success in secondary agricultural education in diverse and complex ways. A discussion of each theme with salient evidence from the data follows. Illustrative quotes from the follow-up interview participants are offered using pseudonyms, while excerpts from the ISD are offered without quotes as these data points were anonymously reported.

Theme #1: The Success Trap

Consistent with Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) *Landscapes of Practice*, the early career teachers appeared to be greatly influenced by the norms and expectations reinforced by individuals they perceived held power in their social system. For example, a majority of participants in the ISD, as well as all of the individuals who participated in follow-up interviews, reported they felt “pressure to be successful” in their career by agricultural education leaders, administrators, and community members. As a result, the early career teachers reified success in their career (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) through having a “winning tradition” and helping their students obtain “awards” and gain other forms of “recognition.” Further, they also described success as impacting students by “engaging” them through “hands-on” and “impactful” learning experiences.

However, this success came at a cost for early career teachers. Once they perceived they were experiencing success in their career, they began feeling *trapped* because they felt they had to continue to “meet expectations” and “build on their success.” Individuals of influence – state leaders, administrators, and other key stakeholders – in the agricultural education discipline reinforced this notion expressed by the early career teachers. And as they experienced more success in their career, maintaining work-life balance became more “chaotic,” and they struggled to maintain “control.”

As an illustration, when responding to the question, “does balance factor into your notion of success?” the early career teachers’ responded by describing work-life balance as more of a “juggling” act rather than pure balance because they perceived a lack of focus could result in their success in both arenas of life to come crashing down. In response to such conceptualizations, one participant shared they had to have a clear separation between work and life by “let[ting] everyone know [his] priorities and stick[ing] to them.” This concept permeated many aspects of the early career teachers’ work and life, and at times, seemed to distort the ways in which they understood how more symmetry could be achieved. Therefore, the *success trap* concretized how they understood and operationalized their role as an SBAE teacher, and as a result, they struggled to shift this conceptualization. As a consequence, this notion seemed to serve as an impetus for the early career teachers to diminish aspects of their personal lives and struggle with how to break free of the *success trap*. In a follow-up interview, for instance, Mr. Shaw explained that his understanding of work-life balance was still “fuzzy.” Therefore, the *success trap* functioned as a master narrative in Louisiana agricultural education by which early career teachers perceived their agency to achieve work-life balance was muted (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Further, this notion appeared to form a critical foundation for how early career teachers understood how to navigate their landscape in secondary agricultural education. As such, it was critical to explore the dimensions of this master narrative to describe how such *supported* as well as *diminished* their conceptualizations of success and sculpted the early career teachers’ landscape in secondary agricultural education.

Theme #2: The Work Eclipse

The *success trap*, therefore, appeared to create a harsher landscape for early career teachers (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). And as a result, they began to experience a *Work Eclipse* as they recognized a dichotomy existed between their aspirations and reality regarding work-life balance. In particular, they perceived that at this point in their career, their work *eclipsed* their lives (i.e., they had no balance). For example, during an emotional exchange during the ISD, one participant posed the following question, “how can I leave work at work when I know students need me?” Meanwhile, another participant revealed that his work habits strained his relationship with his spouse, he shared: “my wife wants me home more.” Another male participant also echoed these sentiments by disclosing, “teaching at the same school as my wife meant work never turned off.” This theme, therefore, illuminated how early career teachers’ work overshadowed many other aspects of their lives – a conflicting reification of success (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). However, through the co-construction process, participants began to acknowledge that maintaining such an approach might be untenable and result in their work eclipsing their lives as evinced by concerns expressed by participants about their career causing issues and problems in their marriage and other aspects of their personal lives. As such, the negotiation of this meaning among participants revealed their understanding of work-life balance was underdeveloped and, perhaps, even fragmented. Despite this, the participants witnessed other approaches they aspired to incorporate into their lives.

Theme #3: Aspired Boundaries

After recognizing they had constructed fairly contradictory reified forms of success, the early career teachers began to articulate how they aspired to incorporate boundaries between their work and

career in more meaningful ways. As a consequence, the third theme illuminated the early career teachers' desires, motivations, and strivings as a result of observing more established secondary agricultural education teachers who served as their "role models" regarding the elusive notion of balance between work and life. For instance, Ms. Franks explained that her role model was a female teacher who she "... hope[ed] to be as good as one day..." Moreover, Ms. Franks explained that her role model was also successful at maintaining a family life, "I know she does a lot of family stuff. You always see her on social media. She does not stay at school for all hours of the day. They go and do stuff, like fun stuff on Saturdays." These role models appeared to serve as examples of individuals who were seemingly able to successfully create boundaries between their work and life - a skill not yet acquired by the early career teachers.

When reflecting on how he could better unify his work and life, Mr. Arnold shared the importance of shifting the way in which he conceptualized success to one that more closely represented work-life balance. In narrating this perspective change, he shared an illustrative analogy of how he would approach work in the future as one that relies heavily on delegation and setting up his work systems to be efficient:

It's like being the captain of the ship. Most of the time, you are in the boiler room. In the boiler room, the captain can say that we need to go right or left, but if he didn't set up the mechanism to go in the right direction or didn't tell the boiler room that, then the boiler room wouldn't be able to get done what they need done. I would say that you give guidance as a captain... if you're turning the steam that's, in my opinion, when you're delegating. When you're delegating, you're turning on a part of the ship. So [I think] you create [balance] within the boiler room.

On this point, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) explained individuals interact with expectations of their professional life in diverse ways. Through communities of practice, however, participants begin to negotiate meaning and construct more stable professional identities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Despite having a desire to achieve boundaries, however, the participants recognized that such was not their current reality.

Theme #4: Grin and Bear It - Silence

Although the early career teachers remained largely optimistic about work-life balance, the notion of *silence* emerged as a dominant theme as we analyzed field notes and analytic memos. During the ISD, for example, we noted that although participants engaged, they were hesitant and preferred to stay closely huddled together rather than freely sharing their struggles with work-life balance and success. As a consequence, during follow-up interviews, we began to investigate whether the early career teachers' silence may be rooted in broader contextual contours in which talking about their insecurities and weakness may not align with how they viewed and conceptualized a successful secondary agricultural education teacher.

When asked about their silence on work-life balance during a follow-up interview, Ms. Lane shared, "... I don't think ag teachers are vulnerable... basically, they put on a smile on their face and *grin and bear it*" (Emphasis added). Sometimes, I think being more honest about the good and bad aspects of the job would help [early career teachers] a lot more." Further, Mr. Carter explained, "we don't really talk about work-life balance. I don't know. We don't really talk about that... it's like there is no balance [to talk about]." Silence among the early career teachers, therefore, appeared to mute some of their more negative views on work-life balance during the ISD. As a consequence, a need emerged to better understand how this phenomenon might be upheld and reinforced as a master narrative in secondary agricultural education.

Theme #5: Undercurrents of Change

The final theme features our journey to understand why the early career teachers desired more work-life balance but were hesitant to articulate and implement changes that would allow them to achieve such. During individual follow-up interviews, therefore, we probed participants on whether the ISD had initiated any thought or furthered the discussion on changes they could implement in practice. As a result, participants reported they had engaged in further discussion about work-life balance; however, they perceived that such was negated by conflicting messages they have received from leaders, administrators, and their community.

For example, Mr. Franks shared, “our leaders tell us not to gripe. That when you’re a young teacher, you should work your ass off and not complain.” Interestingly, all of the early career teachers that engaged in a follow-up interview reported similar sentiments. Despite this, however, they did report that undercurrents of change were rippling throughout Louisiana because continuing on such a path might result in them leaving the profession. Mr. Carter shared, “I feel like if we’re not empowered, as in ag teachers, then we’ll never stay.” The final theme, therefore, offered an expanded view into early career teachers’ silence on work-life balance. Further, it demonstrated how early career teachers perceived that to achieve success and work-life balance, the system of agricultural education would have to change moving forward.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) examine how early career teachers in Louisiana co-constructed their conceptualizations of work-life balance as SBAE teachers, and (2) illuminate the contextual factors that shaped how the early career teachers negotiated meaning regarding their reified views on work-life balance. In this study, findings emerged through five themes: (1) The Success Trap, (2) The Work Eclipse, (3) Aspired Boundaries, (4) Grin and Bear It – Silence, and (5) Undercurrents of Change. Therefore, we conclude that early career teachers' conceptualizations of work-life balance were influenced by individuals of power in the SBAE landscape who they perceived placed pressure on them to be successful. As such, the early career teachers viewed success in their career as ensuring that their students won awards, banners, and other forms of recognition – a finding that aligns with those reported by Traini et al. (2019). This finding is logical given that Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) postulated landscapes of practice are political and power-laden; how one is positioned in the landscape and the claims of competence he/she makes influence the way they respond to and interact with various practices and people. In this study, we saw how reified forms of success influence the actions of early career agriculture teachers as they strive for success. Namely, how work eclipses non-work activities and the aspirations participants had to create boundaries between work and life. Given this, we argue the findings also provided new dimensions to the literature. For example, expectations voiced by individuals of influence in the SBAE landscape appeared to foment the success trap in which the early career teachers perceived they had to continue to build on their success. As a consequence, we conclude that the success trap served as a catalyst for the early career teachers to prioritize their work over their personal lives. Such a sentiment does not appear to have been explored in the agricultural education literature.

In the second theme, work eclipse, the early career teacher recognized a chasm existed between their aspirations and reality concerning work-life balance. As a result, we conclude the participants’ work responsibilities greatly diminished aspects of their personal lives, especially in regard to their relationships, marriages, and family responsibilities. Similar findings have been advanced in previous research (Boone & Boone, 2009; Clark et al., 2014; Moore & Camp, 1979; Myers et al., 2005; Roberts & Ramsey, 2017; Torres et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2004). Although work dominated the early career teachers’ lives, they aspired to establish more firm boundaries moving forward. This idea was realized

through a critical reflection on the strategies and techniques used by their role models, who were more established in their careers as secondary agricultural education teachers in Louisiana. We, therefore, conclude that mentors and role models can serve as powerful examples that can help early career teachers learn to traverse issues of work-life balance in the SBAE landscape. Although the importance of mentorship has been advanced as a critical strategy to help early career teachers mature (Talbert et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2009), the literature on the role of reflective strategies in fomenting this perspective shift is scant.

Unique to the literature on work-life balance, this investigation explored the implications of early career teachers' silence. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) postulated power dynamics within the landscape uplift certain voices and silence others. Given how our participants behaved in the ISD and expressed their struggles with messages from state leaders to silence their struggles, we conclude that this silence muted some of the negative views early career teachers held regarding their agency to overcome issues and problems associated with work-life balance (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Here, we see the detrimental effects power dynamics enacted within the SBAE landscape have on our participants, particularly as they built connections between their inability to voice their struggles and the possibility of leaving the profession. And, although undercurrents of change existed, we conclude that the early career teachers perceived that changes would have to transpire at the system level to stimulate tangible progress on work-life balance in the SBAE landscape. Because early career agriculture teachers are striving for belonging within the landscape and are consequently shaped by existing norms, repertoires of practice, and regimes of competence, it will take those in power (e.g., state leaders in agricultural education, experienced and respected agriculture teachers) to redefine notions of success and work-life balance in the landscape if early career agriculture teachers are to become agentic in voicing their struggles (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Implications, Recommendations, and Discussion

Understanding the various ways teachers navigate and manage membership in diverse communities of practice while also reifying their conceptualizations of work-life balance and success is vital to reimagining how early career teachers traverse the SBAE landscape. This case study illuminated some of the concealed contours in the SBAE landscape, such as the influence of power, positionality, and silence in the dynamic co-construction of early career teachers' professional identities. Perhaps these influences are sustained and perpetuated as tacit knowledge among multiple communities of practice in the SBAE landscape. As such, we recommend future research examine the specific traditions and ideological notions that contribute to our shared discourse and permeate the social fabric of our profession. Research exploring the historical and cultural development of communities of practice within the SBAE landscape would help unravel forces contributing to the experiences of agriculture teachers seeking a better balance between work and life. Future research should also explore the dynamics of silence within the SBAE landscape by seeking out and highlighting the perspectives of marginalized voices to reshape agricultural education's discourse that has muted such previously. A more detailed investigation of the various regional, ideological, cultural, and societal factors reinforcing cultures of silence would also provide valuable context to understand differences across the landscape. For instance, are certain regions of the country more likely to foster a culture of sharing? What factors contribute to the openness of dialogue shared by teachers conceptualizing work-life balance? And does the SBAE landscape accurately reflect shifts in the discourse of its membership?

Understanding the dynamics created by a system that recruits and grooms future teachers from the students in the landscape may further compound the effect of positionality once these individuals enter the profession as teachers. As a result, future research should examine whether the long-term nature of these relationships (teacher-student/mentee-mentor) is constructive or destructive to early career teachers as they attempt to cultivate more stable professional identities. Perhaps, by providing

healthy perspectives of work-life balance through statements and recommendations at the state and national level, SBAE leaders (e.g., NAAE, AAAE, NASAE) can reshape how early career teachers attempt to sculpt balanced professional identities (Shoulders & Myers, 2011). Further, more professional development opportunities are needed to equip SBAE leaders with tools to engage in positive conversations about work-life balance to create a more comfortable environment for early career teachers to seek guidance. In recent years, SBAE teachers have created spaces to share curriculum and resources online. Many times, these online environments, or communities, become channels for teachers to seek advice and share their struggles with work-life balance. Developing a unified social media campaign to highlight teachers who have a grasp on success and balance may foster more concrete impressions for preservice and early career teachers struggling to conceptualize their future in SBAE. Additional consideration of long-held traditions and symbols of SBAE should also be revisited to ensure unified statements supporting personal development and balance are unambiguous for teachers navigating the SBAE landscape (e.g., The Ag Teacher's Creed).

Mentors and role models can serve as influential examples for early career teachers, yet tangible strategies are needed to help mentor and mentee teachers cultivate organic as well as reciprocally beneficial relationships. As a consequence, SBAE leaders should ensure early career teachers are seeking out positive models of success *and* balance, mentors who can help them envision a successful future, both personally and professionally. For instance, perhaps early career teachers would be more comfortable with mentors who are closer in age and/or years of experience. It should also be noted that it is short-sighted to believe early career teachers are the only group struggling with work-life balance. For example, in this study, we found the notion of work-life balance, as co-constructed by early-career secondary agriculture teachers in Louisiana, extended far beyond a personal choice, as alluded by members of the profession in the December 2011 issue of *The Magazine*. Instead, we uncovered more dynamic and complex phenomena; that issues of work-life balance are shaped by power, silence, and conflicting tensions. Moving forward, therefore, we pose two questions: In what ways can we create spaces for agriculture teachers to have the agency needed to not only voice their struggles but also have candid conversations about their needs? And, how can individuals with power in the agricultural education profession help reconfigure the landscape to disrupt the master narrative perpetuated in SBAE regarding work-life balance and success?

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