

# Success, Balance, but Never Both: Exploring Reified Forms of Success in School-Based Agricultural Education

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## Abstract

*This study utilized a case study design to explore how early career agriculture teachers in Oregon conceptualize success and work-life balance in school-based agricultural education. Wenger's (1998) theory of Communities of Practice, precisely the concept of reification, served as the framework for our study. Our population included 52 agriculture teachers who attended an early career teacher workshop and participated in a seminar on work-life balance. Overall, participants grappled with several tensions regarding notions of success, work-life balance, and the interactions between the two. Findings concluded "success" has been reified to equate the number of awards won, active FFA members, or money earned and, one can be a successful agriculture teacher, a balanced agriculture teacher, but never both. As agriculture teachers strive for success and balance, they encounter emotions of guilt, judgment, fear, and pressure. While participants acknowledged the tensions that exist between notions of success and notions of balance, any progress on achieving such balance is done in vain as no examples of balanced agriculture teachers exist, and messages about success and work-life balance are paradoxical and unsubstantiated. While this study focused on one state, it provides valuable insight into how agriculture teachers are defining and thinking about success.*

**Keywords:** agriculture teachers; reified forms of success; work-life balance

## Introduction/Literature Review

The responsibility of secondary agriculture teachers to build and maintain a comprehensive agricultural education program far exceeds classroom instruction (Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2014). Agriculture teachers are expected to offer an integrated educational experience by providing a standards-based curriculum that incorporates classroom and laboratory instruction, experiential career-based learning opportunities through Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) and personal leadership development through the National FFA (FFA) Organization (Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2014; The National Council, 2017).

In addition to designing and delivering an educational experience that aligns with the mission of agricultural education—"to prepare students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems"—and meet the seven program standards outlined by the National Council for Agricultural Education (the Council), agriculture

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teachers are expected to possess numerous characteristics and abilities to be considered effective (The National Council, 2017). According to the literature, these characteristics include the ability to: be effective classroom instructors, organizers, and managers (Larsen, 1992; Miller, Kahler, & Rheault, 1989), identify student needs and recognize them for their achievements (Luft & Thompson, 1995; Miller et al., 1989), be capable of handling the challenges associated with the workload (Miller et al., 1989) and be able to build human relations, manage conflict, and be highly motivated (Foster & Finley, 1995). Work by Roberts and Dyer (2004) identified 40 characteristics of effective agriculture teachers categorized into eight categories, including instruction, FFA, SAE, building community partnerships, marketing, professional growth/professionalism, program planning, and personal qualities. Work by Roberts, Dooley, Harlin, and Murphrey (2006) developed a model of successful agriculture teacher competencies that included 47 distinct characteristics in seven categories. Their model indicates agriculture teachers should make instructional visits to students regarding their SAE project, be willing and committed to working after hours, read professional literature, and be an excellent multi-tasker, among others (Roberts et al., 2006).

To assess the effectiveness of an agriculture teacher, one need not look far. Organizations such as the Council, the National FFA Organization, and the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) have awarded agriculture teachers for their abilities to meet and exceed the aforementioned expectations outlined by the profession. A review of the award applications and scoring rubrics make clear how “quality” is defined, measured, and assessed. For example, the National Program Quality Standards (NPQS) for Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resource Education provides a list of standards and their associative rubrics that define a high-quality agricultural education program. This 106-page document is designed for agriculture teachers and their local stakeholders first to evaluate the effectiveness of their work, then determine goals for further improvement (The National Council, 2017). To be eligible for the Honorary American FFA Degree, agriculture teachers must: (a) have 85% student membership and 100% student participation in SAEs, (b) win awards at the national level, and (c) create national impact with the partnerships and programs they have developed (National FFA Organization, 2017). The agriculture teachers who receive outstanding awards from NAAE must: (a) demonstrate his/her accomplishments in building school and community partnerships, (b) market the local program, (c) facilitate recruitment efforts, (d) maintain engagement with professional organizations, (e) have high student participation in FFA, and (f) engage students in experiential learning opportunities through SAE (NAAE, 2018). In sum, to be recognized as an outstanding, high-quality, or successful agriculture teacher, one must fulfill multiple obligations and duties that go well beyond classroom instruction.

In the past few decades, scholars within agricultural education have begun investigating challenges associated with these expectations, competencies, and notions of success, which we will later describe as reifications of success. In particular, research has found the additional expectations of agricultural teachers at all phases of their career not only require extended work hours (Torres, Lawver, & Lambert, 2009) exorbitant amounts of paperwork (Boone & Boone, 2007; McIntosh, Morrish, & Wakefield, 2018; Mundt & Connors, 1999), and the struggle to manage time given multiple expectations of the job (Mundt & Connors, 1999; Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Rocca & Washburn, 2006) but often result in increased occupational stress (Torres et al., 2009), emotional exhaustion (Chenevey, Ewing, & Whittington, 2008; Croom, 2003), and burnout (Torres et al., 2009). Literature also echoes the challenges agriculture teachers face balancing workplace demands with family life (often referred to as work-life balance), especially those in their first few years of teaching as well as mid-career agriculture teachers (Baxter, Stephens, & Thayer-Bacon, 2011; Boone & Boone, 2009; Rocca & Washburn, 2006; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2017). Inadequate work-life balance has even prevented agriculture teachers from entering the profession in the first place (Igo & Perry, 2019). Recent work by Sorensen, McKim, and Velez (2017) concluded that negative psychological strain exists as a result of agriculture teachers’ negotiating multiple roles within the

profession. Taken together, research on the effects of additional expectations required of agriculture teachers has been found to affect well-being negatively and has impeded their ability to manage the responsibilities of both their careers and responsibilities of non-career related obligations.

While research exploring the effects of the expectations of agriculture teachers has increased in recent years, this work has primarily taken the form of quantitative studies whose methods sought to generate lists and whose purpose was to inform professional development (Boone & Boone, 2009; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Roberts et al., 2006; Roberts & Dyer, 2004). While undoubtedly useful for informing those who prepare and support agriculture teachers, we still know little about how agriculture teachers assume their professional responsibilities as members of social and cultural communities. Knowing this, we argue for research to explore the effects of the expectations of agriculture teachers that go beyond the traditional quantitative methods in agricultural education.

Perspectives about the nature of knowledge and learning, from a social learning perspective, afford new theoretical constructs and methodological affordances to explore the ways agricultural teachers interact with the demands of their work and the people and communities in which they participate. Two specific assumptions in the social learning perspectives—mainly drawing from Wenger (1998)—have implications for understanding how agriculture teachers interact with the expectations of the profession. First, it is assumed the context in which practices take place is integral to that particular practice within a given community, and engagement in that practice is an integral part of the learning that occurs within it. Second, there is an emphasis on the integrated and interactive nature of the system an individual participates in as well as how the individual interacts with members in a given system. A social learning perspective then integrates the context, the learning that occurs within the given context, and the perspectives and identity of the individual as he/she engages in that context. Thus, an understanding of how agricultural teachers learn to engage in and interact with the practices of the profession can be developed by considering how they interact with the demanding expectations of the profession, particularly the reified forms of success associated with those expectations. Given this, we utilized Wenger's (1998) social learning theory, Communities of Practice, as the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Wenger's (1998) theory situates learning as a social endeavor in which we are active participants in the practices of various communities, and we construct our identities as we participate in these communities. Wenger conceptualized these communities—called communities of practice—as groups of people bound together by a common interest and expertise in a mutual endeavor (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are everywhere, and we all belong to them; in our work, with our friends, and through our hobbies. Bible studies at a friend's house, the band of cheerleaders who meet for lunch every day, the group of mothers who organize play dates for their children, or the assemblage of agricultural educators who attend a conference to share their research could all be considered communities of practice. Communities of practice are formal and informal, may or may not have set agendas, and are so ubiquitous that we often do not give much thought to their existence (Wenger, 1998). Nevertheless, we all participate in them to varying degrees. As we go about our lives and participate in these communities, we produce artifacts, symbols, conventions, ways of talking, routines, and practices that are unique to that community. We also learn how to engage in practices that are considered important. Our participation also shapes what we do, who we are, and how we interpret what we do (Wenger, 1998).

Through participation in communities of practice, we, as participants, recognize ourselves in each other. It is through reification; however, that we project ourselves onto the world (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) described reification as “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (p. 58). Reification helps us describe our engagement within the world, and the various communities we are a part of, as meaningful (Wenger, 1998). For example, we may reify our involvement in a club by creating and wearing a logo. We may reify our recent trip to Italy by hanging an Italian flag on our bedroom wall or reify our philosophy about school-based agricultural education by creating something like the three-component model. Reification includes a variety of processes that create points of focus around which meaning is negotiated (Wenger, 1998). This includes “making, designing, representing, naming, encoding, describing, perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding, and recasting.” (Wenger, 1998, p. 59). These aspects of practice become congealed into a fixed form and thus reified by the community. The process of reification can also be dangerous; reified forms can often take on a life of their own. Through ossification, reified forms can become so disconnected to the lived experiences of its participants that its meaningfulness can be expanded, or lost altogether (Wenger, 1998). Thus, the duality of participation and reification constitute a crucial element of Wenger's theory. It is through the interaction of participation and reification that the negotiation of meaning takes place, and ultimately, what makes people and communities the way they are.

To understand how agriculture teachers interact with expectations of the profession, we can embrace Wenger's (1998) ideas through the context of school-based agricultural education. As agriculture teachers actively engage in the practices of the profession and interact with other participants, they negotiate meaning and, consequently, construct their identities as they participate. As we consider the expectations of agriculture teachers, the types of activities in which they engage, and the people with whom they interact, we can assume they operate in multiple communities. While we do not attempt to explicitly define these communities and acknowledge that each individual and agriculture program is unique, examples of communities in which agriculture teachers participate could include an FFA community, an SAE community, a classroom community, a program/school community, or the professional organization community. Each of these communities, while overlapping, involves different participants, practices, and reifications of success associated with given practices. For example, members of an SAE community might include local veterinarians, farmers, livestock brokers, parents, and agriculture teachers. Practices that may be deemed important may include frequent visits to student animal projects or showing at the county fair. Reifications of success associated with this community might include winning FFA proficiency awards or the Honorary American FFA Degree, blue ribbons from winning at the fair, an article published in the local newspaper about the success of the chapter at a contest, or handshakes given to the agriculture teacher by parents or school administration on a job well done after the livestock auction. According to Wenger's definition of reification, this gives the agriculture teacher a sense of accomplishment, and in turn, contributes to his/her identity development.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

Given the unique theoretical lens afforded by Communities of Practice, and the gap in the literature exploring how agriculture teachers interact with their professional roles as members of social and cultural communities, the purpose of this study was to utilize Wenger's (1998) social learning theory to explore how agriculture teachers learn to engage in their job and as a result, interact with expectations—in particular, the reifications of success associated with those expectations—of the profession. This study addresses National Research Priority six, which calls for research to explore the resiliency of agricultural educators (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). The following objectives framed our study:

- 1) Explore how “success” has been reified in school-based agricultural education.

- 2) Explore how early career agricultural teachers in [State] interact with reified forms of "success," particularly in reference to work-life balance.

### Methods

This exploratory study utilized a case study approach to examine how early career agriculture teachers in Oregon interact with reified forms of success, specifically in regards to work-life balance. A case study approach allowed us to examine a bounded system using several forms of data to describe the case, provide themes, and triangulate our findings (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2003) concluded that exploratory case studies are appropriate for circumstances that may not have a clear outcome. Specifically, we employed a particularistic approach due to our focus on a specific case (Merriam, 2009). Merriam recommended particularistic approaches "... for practical problems—for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice" (p. 43). Stake (2005) posited that a case study is "a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 443). For this study our case was bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2013) and included 52 early career agriculture teachers, of which 80% were female, with fewer than five years of teaching experience who attended an early career agriculture teacher workshop at Oregon State University in 2018 focused on the interaction between success and work-life balance.

Data collection began during a researcher-facilitated interactive silent discussion (ISD) where participants publicly responded to eight questions posted on an 8' x 24' whiteboard. Example questions included "how would you describe balance?", "what are barriers to achieving balance?" "how would you define a successful agriculture teacher?" "how does our profession define a successful agriculture teacher?" and "does balance factor into our notion of success?" Participants recorded their thoughts, built off of others' responses, made connections between statements, and posed new questions using an individual whiteboard pen. This occurred for 15 minutes, and participants were asked to engage in the ISD without talking. This was followed by a 10-minute discussion in small groups of three to five individuals. During this portion of data collection, participants were prompted to discuss what they noticed about the responses on the board, share what resonated with them, and unpack any ideas which made them curious. This was followed by a 15-minute whole-group discussion to reflect and unpack the whiteboard responses and small-group conversations. Lastly, participants were asked to post additional insights anonymously on the online platform, Padlet regarding what insights they took away from the conversation, as well as what ideas they felt were missing from the conversation. Data collection included 151 individual responses recorded on the whiteboard, transcription of the video-recorded whole-group discussion, 72 written comments from the Padlet, and observational field notes each author recorded during the workshop.

To best understand the overall case under investigation, as well as enhance the credibility of our findings, we began data analysis by converging our multiple sources of data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This was followed by individual researchers utilizing a deductive coding process drawing on theoretical concepts from Wenger's (1998) framework. After getting a sense of the data through initial reading, coding, and memoing, the data were analyzed by "...[organizing] repeating ideas into larger groups that express a common theme" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 61).

As researchers, we adopted a pragmatic, constructivist paradigm for this work. We are all former high school agriculture teachers and current teacher educators in Oregon, who are familiar with the participants in this study. We recognized the affordances and constraints of our prior experiences as well as our connection to the participants as we completed this study. While we understand the context, we were aware of our own biases. To attend to this, we looked for confirming evidence within the data and utilized representative excerpts in the findings to substantiate our claims. We also noted disconfirming evidence in our data, which would refute our initial themes. To attend to this, we each revisited the data to find confirming evidence of our initial themes as well as disconfirming evidence

that would refute the themes. Through discussion, final themes were either kept, reworked, or removed based on the supporting evidence and counter-evidence found in the data.

Malterud (2001) introduced reflexivity as "an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process" (p. 484). As we engaged in data collection, discussed our findings, and crafted this manuscript, we were conscious of how our positionality influenced the work and made efforts to mitigate that influence through verbal discussions and individual and collaborative coding. Additionally, we utilized triangulation across types of data, as well as the analysis of multiple researchers to ensure research validity and credibility (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) postulated "being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people's lives" (p. 237). As this research is undergirded by pragmatic principles, it is essential that we address the generalizability and limitations of the study. First, case study research is not meant to be generalizable to a larger population (Yin, 2012). However, the bounded case presented in this paper provides a starting point for future research using a social learning lens to explore the interactions of agriculture teachers regarding success and work-life balance. Second, we also recognize that there are limitations to the study. These include the public aspect of sharing thoughts and experiences with the group during the workshop and the inability to ask follow-up or probing questions during the ISD. This limits the richness of our data, as many individual data points were sentence fragments or incomplete thoughts. Additionally, the public nature of the ISD also may have increased the chances of groupthink, which may have skewed the data from the whiteboard responses. Also, the frame of our participants, which was predominantly female early career agriculture teachers, limit the transferability of our findings. Lastly, while we counted and coded each data point from the ISD, we were unable to discern the level of participation, with some participants contributing more than others.

## Findings

The abundant and diverse data from the ISD, verbal discussions, Padlet poll responses, and observational field notes converged to formulate three broad themes about how agriculture teachers in this study are thinking about and interacting with reified forms of success. Below we present our findings using illustrative excerpts from our data, keeping the language grounded in the data. We then follow with a discussion that operationalizes Wenger's (1988) language (e.g., reifications) and framework using Communities of Practice.

### Theme 1: Success. Balance. But Never Both

As participants engaged in the ISD, small and whole-group discussions, and the concluding Padlet poll, it became clear conflicting notions of success exist. However, balance did not factor into the predominant conceptualization of success. When participants defined a successful agriculture teacher, they mainly spoke in terms of interacting with students in ways that were positive, fun, student-centered, and impactful. Participants identified personal relationships with their students as evidence of success, and several of them mentioned they would know they were successful when a former student would return to their classroom and remember them after they have graduated. Participants captured this by writing comments such as, "students coming back with stories of how you impacted their lives," "you're the one they remember and come back to after high school," and "leaving a legacy." Phrases like these were circled and starred on the whiteboard by a few other participants.

However, when participants shared how the agricultural education profession defines success, responses differed drastically. It quickly became clear that participants largely equated success with the

number of dollars earned/granted, awards won, or active FFA members. For example, one participant simply wrote, “the money you have, the money you raise.” Others recorded phrases like, “FFA > Classroom” or “the number of CDEs you compete in & how many banners, awards, etc. you bring home.” One participant accepted this reality, yet argued success should be measured using additional metrics. They stated:

Chasing the all mighty dollar. It's hard to support your paycheck without a successful program. We compete against each other as if banners are the basis of success. There is more to our programs than that. Find your own stats to support your worth. Graduation rates, job placement, internship, etc.

This theme was further corroborated as participants responded to the question, *does “balance” factor into our notion of “success”?* Phrases such as, “nope,” “it should be, but sometimes there’s more pressure on how many winning teams/banners you have,” and “no, success at work is often put before ‘balance’” emerged frequently. In an effort to be seen as good—which is determined by competitions where only one school is the winner—competitive feelings quickly erode any chance of creating work-life balance. One participant humorously made this explicit in her comment, “how can we go home at five if we also want to kick your ass in [the] soils CDE?”

Further, it became clear that one could be balanced *or* successful, but never both. For example, when questioned, *is “balance” achievable as an Ag. Teacher?* participants were quick to respond with phrases like, “not if you want to be good” and, “it doesn’t seem like there is a real solution unless the image of success is changed.” Others wrote about the personal struggle for both. One teacher commented on the impossibility to be both mentally healthy and successful due to the “...constant battle between being prepared and finding your sanity...it always feels like there can only be one and never both at the same time.” A different teacher blamed herself for her lack of balance because she wanted to be the best, “my biggest struggle is I want to be a top ag teacher in the state.” Perhaps the most comprehensive statement came from the participant who wrote:

We are told BALANCE, and it's this concept all the time and at every conference. But if we look at the 'best' Ag. Teachers and 'strongest' programs from around the state, this example is not shown. So how can we, as new teachers, try to create life balance when building programs when the goal is growth, success, and blue banners?

## Theme 2: Interacting Tensions between Success and Balance

As agriculture teachers strive to be both successful and work towards a more balanced lifestyle, they encounter several tensions, all of which were reported as destructive and have adverse effects on their well-being. This emerged in four predominant emotions: (a) guilt, (b) judgment, (c) fear, and (d) pressure.

**Guilt.** Feelings of guilt emerged as participants reflected on success as it relates to their work obligations and conceptualizations of work-life balance. Interestingly, work-life balance was conceptualized as the absence of guilt, describing balance as not feeling guilty about spending time on activities and people other than work, being able to be fully present in conversations with loved ones without feeling like they should be working, or simply feeling like they have permission to sleep, do laundry, clean their kitchen, or eat home-cooked meals. This surfaced as they wrote about, discussed, and posted comments about spending time with their spouses and families or devoting time to self-care. For example, when asked about what “balance” might feel like, participants wrote and posted phrases such as, “not feeling guilty about putting family, self, hobbies, etc. over work” and “having everything planned and ready so you don't feel guilty enjoying the downtime instead of spending time on work.” Other participants implied guilt with phrases like, “being fully present during each class/activity rather than thinking ‘what else should I be doing?’” Still, others talked about or implied guilt when discussing boundaries. One participant wrote, “saying 'no' and being/feeling OK with that.” Another commented,

"the hardest thing to do is to say 'no we can't do an officer meeting on Saturday.' You know, if you want to be the best...".

Feelings of guilt also surfaced when agriculture teachers reflected on what they are modeling to their students. Wracked with confusion and uncertainty, they questioned what they were teaching their students about balance, reflecting that their desire to be successful had deleterious effects on their students. One teacher wrote, "how do you teach kids to have balance in their life with their busy schedules when I cannot model that in my own life?" Others commented, "if I'm feeling this lack of balance, what are my students feeling, and how can I help them find balance when I can't balance my own life?" and "do our kids even have FFA/Life balance in our Ag Programs? How can we teach them and teach us at the same time?". In the Padlet, one agriculture teacher explicitly connected these concerns to notions of success stating,

I know that this is a struggle that I have fought my entire life, and this conversation has made me realize that I owe it to my students to teach them life balance so that they do not suffer like I have trying to be 'the best.'

**Judgment.** As these agriculture teachers grappled with notions of success and balance, they felt unsupported in their efforts and judged by their peers in the profession. As a result, teachers were not only afraid to ask questions for fear of being judged incompetent but rarely, if ever, shared how stressed and overworked they felt as they engaged in the profession. For example, two participants shared, "when I ask for help, I feel like I am being judged for being incompetent," and "in this profession, it's difficult to voice your opinion without being judged." Others felt judged by their peers, school, and community if their work was not meeting their expectations. This surfaced through comments like, "ag teachers judge you if you are not on top of everything all the time" and "if I try to have a balanced life, I feel like I am being judged by my community and school staff for not doing my job to the best of my abilities." Perhaps the most disheartening comments came from female participants who felt they would be judged for having children. To capture this, one participant wrote,

I am afraid if I have a child while my program is still vulnerable to structural changes and reorganization, and I want to take a whole year off that not only that my district will replace me with another Ag. Teacher, but my colleagues will look down on me.

**Fear and Pressure.** Participants shared feelings of fear and pressure from various individuals as they considered their desire to balance the demands of the job while striving for success. For many, this emerged as they considered pressures to give up personal time for the job. For example, one participant wrote, "I fear not being hired because another Ag. teacher is willing to give up more of their personal time than I am." For others, pressures to meet the expectations of the community were evident. One participant noted, "there are different pressures depending on where you are at," and opting out of longstanding traditions in the community is not an option.

For several women, fears of what would happen if they became mothers while teaching emerged. One participant wrote, "I have heard from other young female Ag. teachers that they felt pressured not to stay at home with their child for an extended period of time because they were afraid the school would replace them." Another posed the question, "can women Ag. teachers have children without fear of losing their careers?" In their efforts to balance work and non-work duties, notions of success and pressure also surfaced. When asked if balance factors into our notion of successful agriculture teachers, they commented, "it should be, but sometimes there's more pressure on how many winning teams/banners you have." Another participant explicated the tensions in trying to achieve balance while striving for success stating,

We are pressured in all different ways to be a certain way, act a certain way, be at a certain place. And for those who might be achieving balance of putting family first, relationships first, time for themselves, or whatever it is, they don't necessarily get placed as a 'good Ag teachers'



or as having a 'successful program.' Plus, what about the backlash from community, parents, students, when we say no to something? Where is there understanding of us not being able to do everything?

### Theme 3: Illusionary Support, No Way Forward

As participants wrestled with notions of success and work-life balance, they acknowledged that while the profession advertises a supportive and familial culture, little evidence for this is shown and, consequently, participants struggle to take steps toward balance. This frequently emerged in the form of rhetorical questions that challenge other participants to critically look at the current support structures within the profession, both from peers and leadership, and create an environment where “mutual respect” exists. For example, one participant wrote, “our profession looks like we support each other. But do we really?”. Another asked, “why are Ag. teachers not supportive of each other?” In the Padlet, many participants made a call to change the way they think about each other, advocating for less competition and more authentic support. One participant explicitly connected this call to action with ideas about success. She said, “none of us are gaining by being the ‘best’ young ag teacher. We all need to support each other so we can get there as a profession. It is not all about competition.” Another wrote, “if we don't stop and assess if we are actually helping each other with sharing our stories, are we just perpetuating the problem? Are we actually helping each other?”.

Yet, while it was evident there was a felt need to change, participants agreed few resources exist to help them on the journey toward work-life balance. Many commented on the mixed messages sent by state leadership or more senior agriculture teachers about work-life balance with statements like, “our exemplary programs we look up to do not practice balance, yet they tell us to.” Emotions of hopelessness were also apparent in the voices of the participants as they sought solutions to their struggles. One participant stated, “what I feel is missing would be the solutions. How is it possible to achieve a great, successful career without losing out on the opportunities with friends, family, etc.?” Others commented, “how do I learn what I need to know to be an effective teacher without putting in excessive hours?” and “who are the resources to talk to about this balance and responsibilities?”.

### Discussion

Early career agriculture teachers in our study are currently grappling with several tensions regarding notions of success, work-life balance, and the interactions between the two. Namely, to be identified as a successful agriculture teacher, one must win awards, blue banners, grant dollars, have growing program numbers, and high FFA participation. While this notion of success is agreed upon within the profession, participants mostly did not identify with it, making clear distinctions between how they define success versus how the profession defines success. Given the demanding expectations of the work, agriculture teachers were quite clear that work-life balance—conceptualized as basic physical and mental well-being—does not factor into notions of success. Put differently, one can be a successful agriculture teacher *or* a balanced agriculture teacher, but never both. As they go about their work and strive for success, participants are faced with intense emotions of guilt, judgment, fear, and pressure. Many are unable to enjoy time with friends and family without feelings of guilt surfacing. Others felt judgment and pressure from peers, administrators, or community members should they take actions toward achieving balance. Still, others live in fear about their futures, wondering if future endeavors such as motherhood are possible without being ostracized by their peers or let go from their jobs. However, while participants acknowledged tensions that exist between notions of success and notions of work-life balance, any progress on achieving such balance is done in vain as no examples of balanced agriculture teachers exist, and messages about success and work-life balance are paradoxical and unsubstantiated.

As we consider the expectations of agriculture teachers mentioned previously in this manuscript, in conjunction with the findings presented above, we can think about agriculture teachers as active participants within multiple communities of practice. Within each community exists individual participants, practices that are deemed important, and overlapping or conflicting reifications of success. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) conceptualization of communities of practice and what it means to be a participant in multiple communities, attempting to create identities within each. While this study did not seek to identify the individual communities in which agriculture teachers live and work, participants expressed difficulty in trying to attend to the expectations of various parties (administrators, community members, parents, peers, etc.) while simultaneously trying to achieve more balance. These findings are not surprising and align with previous work in agricultural education (Mundt & Connors, 1999; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Rocca & Washburn, 2008). However, given our lens, Wenger (1998) explained this navigating of expectations as challenging work, which may result in misunderstanding and confusion as people try to attend to the uniqueness of each community (e.g., different notions of success, repertoires, values, paradigms).

Further, this grappling with tensions requires reconciliation, which may or may not result in resolution. Wenger (1998) equated this work, this living in the tensions, as difficult identity work. While our study does not attend to identity, in particular, our findings do suggest agriculture teachers are struggling, and without resolve, to meet the demands of the profession. What is left to be known is what this reconciliation looks like. Perhaps if teachers are unable to reconcile these tensions among communities and identities, they are more inclined to leave the profession, or the move to leave the profession is their way of reconciling.

Concerning our first research objective, our findings suggest success has been reified as the number of awards won, active FFA members, and dollars earned. That is, to be considered a successful agriculture teacher, one must bring home state titles, receive considerable grant money, and have an FFA chapter with high membership. This reification was also evident in the previous work of Roberts and Dyer (2004) and Roberts, Dooley, Harlin, and Murphrey (2006). Wenger (1998) reminded us that reification is both formed and reinforced by members of the community as they engage in practices that are deemed important. This was evident by 1) the participants who mentioned how success, as defined by the profession, is reinforced by the "good" agriculture teachers who run "successful" programs across the state and 2) the judgment felt by peers who, by silencing their struggles, fail to disrupt the status quo, thus reinforcing aforementioned reifications. Additionally, Wenger postulated reifications could become so congealed that they can stray from their original meaning. This begs the question, have certain practices in SBAE become so reified that their original meaning is lost? Participants in our study spoke of FFA competitions in the profession as if they themselves were competing. Is winning Career Development Events and Leadership Development Events more meaningful for agriculture teachers? Or the students for whom they are intended?

Wenger (1998) also informed us reification is both a product *and* a process. Thus, it is not only the product of winning (e.g., the number of blue ribbons, the number of dollars awarded, etc.) that is reified; it is the process and practices that result in winning that are also reified (e.g., excessive work hours, weekends away from home, always being "on-call", etc.). It is this connection that sheds light on the findings of our second objective. As agriculture teachers strive to engage in the profession, with its demands, expectations, and reifications of success, they encounter tensions. These tensions, which include feelings of guilt, fear, pressure, and judgment, interfere with their well-being, other life roles, and attempts to practice self-care. Wenger told us members of a given community will participate in the practices deemed important by a given community until they are able to reflect a certain competency (Wenger, 1998). Applied to our context, we presume agriculture teachers will continue to strive toward these conceptualizations of success until they have achieved it, which may seem innocent. However, in

the case of this study and these participants, the effects of reaching such competencies result in negative emotions and reduced well-being.

In accordance with present results, previous studies have illuminated the connection between the expectations of the job of an agriculture teacher and work-life balance (Baxter, Stephens, & Thayer-Bacon, 2011; Boone & Boone, 2009; Rocca & Washburn, 2008; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2017; Torres, Lawver, & Lambert, 2009). The sub-theme of guilt is consistent with that of Foster (2001) and Solomonson et al. (2018), whose participants identified feelings of guilt to be associated with time spent away from home and family, along with concerns over never starting a family due to what it might mean for their career, and the inability to feel caught up with the demanding expectations of the job. Also consistent with the literature, this research found female participants undergo significant tensions as they consider motherhood (Baxter, Stephens, & Thayer-Bacon, 2011; Kelsey, 2006; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Tippens et al., 2013).

Perhaps the most similarities exist between this work and that of Lemons, Brashears, Meyers, and Price (2015), who examined factors contributing to agriculture teacher attrition. Their participants concluded that the expectations of the job were extremely demanding, and they felt others had unrealistically high expectations for them. Participants in their study also discussed the burdens of the job, including multiple responsibilities and the extended time required to fulfill those responsibilities. This parallels the participants in our study, as well as the challenges Wenger (1998), identified resulting from participating in multiple communities of practice. In their conclusions, Lemons et al. (2015) suggest the profession take a closer look at the paradigm of agricultural education and whether it is a career meant for longevity, an idea Sorensen, McKim, and Velez (2017) aligned themselves with from conclusions that the work culture of agricultural education is not very supportive of individuals who take on family roles (e.g., parent).

### Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

This exploratory case study provides a genesis for examining how agriculture teachers interact with the expectations of the profession as members of social and cultural communities. Understanding the work of agriculture teaching from a social learning perspective brings a unique understanding of the way they are interacting with, and consequently, navigating the tensions that emerge as they strive for success. Adopting these perspectives in research moving forward will allow scholars to better illuminate the systems and contexts in which agriculture teachers live and work rather than remain the focus solely on the individual agriculture teacher and what he/she needs to do to improve. We argue continued research from social learning perspectives will help further uncover systemic forces that influence the lives of agriculture teachers as they engage in the practices of the profession.

Further research should explore how other, more comprehensive samples of agricultural educators conceptualize reifications of success in both their origin and effect. Specific questions could include: In what communities of practice do agriculture teachers operate? Are the reifications of success found in this study echoed in other states? Are feelings of pressure, fear, judgment, and guilt unique to early career agriculture teachers? How *do* agriculture teachers reconcile the competing demands of the profession? Does Wenger's (1998) theory offer a useful way of examining other well-researched issues in agriculture education? Exploring these and other questions through both quantitative and qualitative approaches would provide further insight into the growing desire to understand teacher attrition, work-life balance, and the system of agricultural education.

Amidst continued research, this study offers utility for recommendations for practice. The methods with which we used to explore this topic were both useful for individual participants and well-received by the group as a whole. Notably, engaging in the ISD with participants provided an easy-to-

use tool to discuss a controversial topic while allowing individual voices to be heard. Participants were able to contribute to each question individually, something that would not have been feasible had we solely engaged in a whole-group verbal discussion. Also, the use of the large whiteboard for the ISD allowed for all written data points to be seen in one frame. We recommend teacher educators replicate this activity, purposefully creating spaces for this challenging conversation. This can be accomplished at state agriculture teacher in-service meetings, within preservice agricultural education classes, or through social media channels such as the Ag Ed Discussion Lab on Facebook. Doing this, we argue, will create more open lines of communication within the profession and challenge agriculture teachers to openly discuss tensions, norms, and other invisible forces that influence the way they live and work.

This research has taken up a social learning perspective to examine the ways in which early career agriculture teachers interact with reified forms of success when considering the notion of work-life balance. While disheartening, our findings make one consider the profession of secondary agricultural education, its expectations, and how agriculture teachers strive to navigate their lives and work. We challenge leaders in the profession to grapple with our findings and make purposeful strides to create space within their own contexts for similar conversations. While we advocate for continued research, this study compels us to think about the systems of school-based agricultural education and how those hinder the well-being of the professionals who are teaching the next generation of agricultural leaders.

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