AFNR Educators' Experiences in an MA Program

Abstract

In this study, we explored the lived experiences of secondary school agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) teachers enrolled in, or who recently completed a practitioner-oriented master's degree in AFNR Education at Michigan State University. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and interviews were informed by Appreciative Inquiry methodology. Ten master's students completed interviews and data were transcribed verbatim. Analysis followed an inductive, constant comparative approach yielding three themes: synthesis experience a critical component, the Master of Arts (MA) student/teacher identity, and MA students having a need for connectedness and external support. Findings are presented with substantiating participant quotes. Lastly, conclusions and implications are discussed, including the value of the capstone master's project as well as the need for opportunities to connect while completing a distance graduate program.

Keywords: capstone projects; master's degree; teacher identity; practitioner-oriented degree programs; relationships

Introduction

The quality of education relies on the abilities of educators; thus, efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers must be continuously implemented. One method commonly proposed for teacher improvement is completing a master's degree relating to teaching and learning (Knapp et al., 1990; Ward & Dixon, 2014). In this spirit, some school districts and states have encouraged, or even required, teachers to complete a master's degree (Horn & Jang, 2017). Supporters posit a master's degree bolsters teacher effectiveness while elevating social perceptions of the teaching profession (Horn & Jang, 2017; Knapp et al., 1990; Ward & Dixon, 2014). Opponents, however, note a lack of empirical evidence illuminating the positive impacts of a master's degree, teacher shortages, and the ever-increasing cost of graduate coursework as justifications for their stance (Knapp et al., 1990).

The data on teacher engagement in master's degrees suggests, required or not, a significant portion of educators have pursued this educational route. In 2011-2012, approximately half of teachers in the United States public school system held a master's degree (Horn & Jang, 2017). Investigating the data further, most teacher-held master's degrees (i.e., approximately 78%) are obtained by women (Zhou & Gao, 2021). While participation in master's degree programs among teachers remains high, the type of degree obtained has shifted. Evidence suggests a decline in teachers pursuing master's degrees focused on research; instead, teachers are pursuing master's degrees focused on the art of teaching (Ward & Dixon, 2014).

The predominance of research on teachers pursuing master's degrees appears to be peripheral to the lived experiences of teachers during their degree program (e.g., research on enrollment trends, requirement of master's degrees). As Ward and Dixon (2014, p. 165) noted, "little research centers on the personal nature of the journey of students." This gap in the literature fails to illuminate the most salient aspect of a master's degree, the teacher's experience. Therefore, the current qualitative investigation focuses on the lived experiences of agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) educators engaging in a practitioner-oriented master's degree in AFNR Education at Michigan State University (MSU).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) educators engaging in a practitioner-oriented master's degree in AFNR Education at

MSU, and included two objectives: (a) explore the challenges and successes of AFNR teachers pursuing a practitioner-oriented master's degree and (b) illuminate programmatic structures and norms which cultivate understanding and enhanced practice among teachers.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

To guide the development of this study, our literature review is broken into three themes of existing scholarship, (a) student experiences during master's degrees, (b) outcomes of master's degrees, and (c) philosophic practitioner education.

Student Experiences During Master's Degrees

The master's degree experience starts with a teacher's consideration to pursue the degree. Research in the social sciences of AFNR suggests potential graduate students consider a variety of factors (i.e., funding, professional advancement, learning goals, institutional culture, and program flexibility) when making the choice to pursue a postgraduate degree (Shellhouse et al., 2020). Broader research on master's degree enrollment adds teacher efficacy and outcome expectations to the list of factors influencing teacher enrollment (Ward & Dixon, 2014). Uniquely, the opportunity to conduct research appears as a motivational factor for potential doctoral students but was not a consistently important factor for master's degree students (Shellhouse et al., 2020). However, those identifying research as a motivating factor envisioned research to be a mechanism through which to create positive change within education (Ward & Dixon, 2014). Across motivation types, students pursuing master's degrees begin with a strong sense of efficacy and a determined commitment to complete their degree (Ward & Dixon, 2014).

After enrolling in the master's degree, students begin to engage in the program curriculum. Lindner and Baker (2003, p. 50) noted students in AFNR Education have an expectation that coursework is "up-to-date, in line with industry standards, socially responsive, and pragmatic," drawing upon diverse fields of knowledge to aid them in achieving personal and professional goals. Regarding specific programmatic experiences in AFNR Education, only a handful of studies inform our understanding. These studies suggest online graduate students prefer limited student-to-student interaction (Moore et al., 2016) and that an in-class alter-identity experience can bolster cultural knowledge and cultural empathy among graduate students within the discipline (Hains et al., 2013). Outside the context of AFNR Education, extant literature suggests mentorship and advising are key determinants to the quality of the master's degree experience, with enthusiasm, interest, wisdom, adaptability, and humor noted as desirable characteristics among mentors of graduate students (Ward & Dixon, 2014).

Importantly, however, not all students have the same graduate experience. Research foregrounds challenges female graduate students experience within and external to AFNR Education. Specific challenges faced by female students within the discipline include microaggressions, lack of female role models, traditions of a male-dominant profession, and colleagues questioning their competence (Cline et al., 2020). These challenges likely contribute to a national trend of female students requiring additional time to complete postgraduate degrees (National Science Foundation, 2018). These challenges are made more salient by enrollment data suggesting an increase in females pursuing graduate degrees, across all disciplines, over the last 30 years (Ward & Dixon, 2014). While an increase in females pursuing advanced degrees is positive, this trend has not translated to an abundance of tenured female faculty members within AFNR Education (Cline et al., 2020).

Outcomes of Master's Degrees

Research into the outcomes of teachers pursuing master's degrees can be concatenated into three categories, (a) teacher internal outcomes, (b) teacher external outcomes, and (c) student outcomes. Teacher

internal outcomes refer to the impact of a master's degree on a teacher's own knowledge and skills (Lindner & Baker, 2003). As noted previously, the body of research in this area is inconclusive; however, evidence suggests teachers can consistently expect increased self-confidence and self-esteem by completing a master's degree (Demb & Funk, 1999; Ward & Dixon, 2014). It is also noted the scope of teacher growth related to the master's degree may be determined, in part, by their awareness of the program expectations prior to engagement (Ward & Dixon, 2014).

The second category of outcomes, teacher external outcomes, focuses on benefits of engaging in a master's degree realized by teachers that extend beyond their development of knowledge and skills. These outcomes include advancement toward recertification, increased salary, and/or an annual stipend for completing a master's degree (Horn & Jang, 2017). In addition to these more structured benefits, master's degrees are sometimes viewed by school stakeholders (e.g., administrators, community members) as a representation of the teacher's commitment to the profession, making them more valued within their school and community.

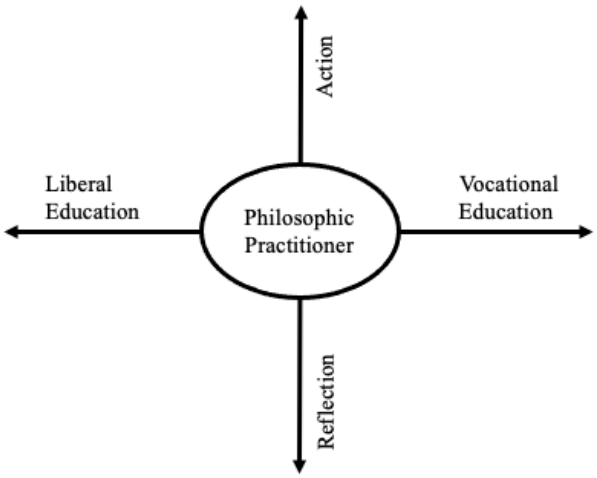
The final category is student outcomes associated with their teacher obtaining a master's degree. Like teacher outcomes, research is inconclusive regarding student outcomes with some studies suggesting modest student gains and other studies suggesting no impact (Horn & Jang, 2017; Knapp et al., 1990). A variety of factors may influence the lack of clarity; specifically, the level of the students, the subject being taught, and the relevance of coursework completed by the teacher during their master's degree (Horn & Jang, 2017). Therefore, qualitative research investigating the complexity of teacher and student outcomes, like the current approach, is needed to better understand the outcomes of teacher engagement in a master's degree.

Theoretical Framework: Philosophic Practitioner Education

As alluded to within this literature review, teacher experiences within a master's degree differ based on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender). Additionally, master's degrees within the same discipline, but across institutions, are not the same (Knapp et al., 1990). For example, teachers can pursue a range of degree titles (e.g., master's of arts, master's of science, master's of arts in teaching, etc.). Program curriculum also shifts between degree programs, with some foregrounding scientific inquiry, others emphasizing teaching arts, and still others relying on field work (Critchfield, 2015; Knapp et al., 1990). Inconsistencies between programs suggests a decrease in clarity on the meaning, value, and impact of a master's degree for teachers.

In tourism higher education, a solution has been proposed: frame the outcome of graduate degree programs as developing "philosophic practitioners" (Tribe, 2002). A philosophic practitioner is an individual who understands, and can create, new knowledge within the discipline while also being able to apply new knowledge to their practice (Critchfield, 2015; Tribe, 2002). For teachers pursuing a master's degree, this would entail being able to (a) understand existing educational research, (b) create new knowledge through educational research, and (c) apply new educational knowledge to their practice. Proponents of the philosophic practitioner approach to graduate education suggest the curriculum within a graduate degree should fall in the middle of two key continua (see Figure 1). First, curriculum should balance attention on both reflection and action. Additionally, curriculum should balance liberal and vocational emphases (Tribe, 2002). In this way, a philosophic practitioner better meets the demands of being a successful educator and is empowered to contribute to broader educational aims through the creation, consumption, and distribution of scholarship.

Figure 1
Model of the Philosophic Practitioner (adapted from Tribe, 2002)



Methods

Our study followed a basic qualitative design outlined by Merriam (2002), while incorporating elements of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Anderson et al., 2016; Coghlan et al., 2003) into our interview protocol. Basic qualitative approaches are common in education research and follow an inductive process to understand participant viewpoints (Merriam, 2002). In this study, we utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews facilitated by one member of the research team via Zoom in Summer of 2021. We received [University] Institutional Review Board approval prior to conducting the study.

Participants

All current and former AFNR Education MA students were invited to participate (13 AFNR Education MA students), with ten current or graduated students completing interviews (n = 10). All ten participants were active AFNR educators in Michigan within the first seven years of their teaching careers and were completing their programs remotely. For context, the MSU AFNR education MA degree is a practitioner-oriented degree that incorporates twelve credit hours from student teaching and requires a three-credit, capstone master's project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview data were collected by one member of the research team who did not have advising or supervision responsibilities with MA students. We followed a semi-structured format for interviews as Flick (2009) posits semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while still gaining understanding of participant viewpoints. While not following AI as a methodology, we drew from it to inform our interview questions (Michael, 2005; Shuayb et al., 2009). Appreciative Inquiry originated in organizational development (Coghlan et al., 2003) and focuses on an asset-based approach. Coghlan et al. (2003) posited a model for AI that includes four stages: discover, dream, design, and deliver.

We used AI to frame our interview questions in an asset-based way by focusing on positive moments and highest-points. Specifically, we draw from the discover and dream stages to inform our interview questions, and followed example questions from Cooperrider et al. (2003, p. 23) as cited in Coghlan et al. (2003). One such example question being "Describe a high-point experience in your MA program – a time when you were most alive and engaged."

Upon completion of interviews, all interview data were transcribed verbatim by a third-party transcription service, and participant confidentiality was honored by replacing participant names with pseudonyms. Using Microsoft Word, data were analyzed via an inductive coding process following the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Glaser posited four stages of the constant comparative method, including (a) comparing incidents to categories; (b) integrating categories and their properties; (c) delimiting the theory; and (d) writing the theory. The constant comparative method can be used as a coding process regardless of the presence of substantive theory construction (Merriam, 2002). As a research team, we operationalized this process by having a multi-stage analysis: first, the member of the team conducting interviews led the coding process; then, two other research team members reviewed and refined the codebook, reaching consensus for each item.

Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness and quality within the study. First, we engaged in reflexivity by examining our own biases and how they may influence the study (Merriam, 2002), increasing trustworthiness by increasing confirmability (Guba, 1981). Next, we triangulated data with multiple data sources (i.e., interviews and MA project documents) and multiple investigators to also enhance confirmability (Guba, 1981). Further, to establish credibility we engaged participants in member checking and completed multiple rounds of peer debrief throughout the research process (Guba, 1981). Finally, we provide thick descriptions to allow for judgements of transferability (Guba, 1981).

Subjectivity

A team of researchers engaged with this study, what follows is a discussion highlighting our viewpoints and thoughts as we entered into this process. First, while our program also offers master's of science and doctor of philosophy degrees, as a team we view practitioner-focused master's degrees as an important element of the educational system. All research team members were engaged in teacher education, with three completing terminal degrees. Additionally, we approached this study from an AI perspective, meaning that we sought to discover what our MA students valued about the MSU AFNR Education MA program and included interview questions written in the positive as opposed to the negative. Our intent was to gain an understanding of the value our MA degree program brings to practitioners in Michigan.

Findings

Three themes were identified by the research team: *synthesis experience a critical component*, *the MA student/teacher identity*, and *MA students have need for connectedness and external support*. Each theme, category, and code are provided (see Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of Themes, Categories, and Codes

Theme	Category	Code
Synthesis Experience a Critical Component	Value and Impact	Hands-on or Creative
		In-person Discussions
		Benefits of Program Credits
	Capstone Project as a High Point	Project
		Sharing out
		Mentorship
		Developing Credibility

The MA Student/Teacher Identity	Transferability of MA to Career as Teacher	Applying Learning as Teachers Student-focused Practitioner Goals Working With Students
	The MA and Practitioners	Continuing Education Reflecting on Practice Accountability
	Structuring the MA for Practitioners	Individualizing the Program Teachers and their Time Flexibility
MA Students Have Need for Connectedness and External Support	Desiring More Connectedness	Support Backloaded Discussion and the Project Project Prep Programmatic Guides Cohort Building
	Feeling of Committee Support	Advisor Communication Advisor Relationships

In the following sections, we present themes and their respective categories and codes with substantiating participant quotes. In an effort to honor a theme we identified in the study (i.e., teacher identities being that of a teacher and a student), we refer to participants in this study as a teacher-student.

Synthesis Experience a Critical Component

One of the first emerging themes was the idea that the MA project, or the synthesis experience, was an important component for teacher-students. There was a value the capstone experience brought, and teacher-students frequently mentioned the benefits and rigor associated with the experience – whether they were completing a product-oriented project or a research-oriented project. The *synthesis experience a critical component* theme is explored by looking at its two categories: value and impact and capstone project as a high point.

In the category value and impact, we explore elements of the MA program teacher-students found rewarding or fulfilling. Among them, teacher-students often identified hands-on or creative endeavors within the MA as valuable learning experiences. One teacher-student referenced a course where they developed a walking stick as a high point experience, "like doing something like this where I'm physically arranging something or physically doing something maybe that I'm unfamiliar with or, um, that I get to share out and use my creative side for it." Further highlighting hands-on instruction, another teacher-student referenced the appeal for hands-on learning for younger children, but also the value of it for everyone, "we do all of this with young children. Like, why are we just not doing this with everybody?" Succinctly articulating preferences for hands-on learning, another teacher-student said, "where I tend to feel the most impacted is when things are occurring in that [hands-on] aspect."

Another area teacher-students felt value and impact is during in-person discussions. "Sharing out," "discussions," and "motivated" appeared frequently within this code, which may have been influenced by COVID meeting formats. One teacher-student provided a representative idea, "we were really motivated, you know, brought things to share to class each week, um, when we were still in person." Similarly, another teacher-student highlighted the value of in-person interaction,

> I guess for me the first thing that sticks out was just when we actually could meet in-person….it was one of the first classes in the MA program, but, just to be able to bounce ideas off of the other, um, young ag teachers that were in the MA program. I definitely personally feel far more engaged to actually get to interact with other, with peers…

While teacher-students preferred in-person interactions, the first hints of their dual roles as teachers and students emerged and the difficulty of schedules as the same teacher-student suggested, "I get that that's harder to fit into people's schedules, but just with the way I learn, I do best to be able to actually talk with others." In what may be connected to teacher and student identities, another teacher-student offered up the challenges of learning strictly by reading,

> I feel like a lot of my classes have a lot of reading assignments, which is fine. Some of them are very impactful and very helpful but I feel like I don't get nearly as much out of reading a 12-page article or reading a 200-page book as I would out of a discussion that could have the same content.

Further substantiating the need for discussion, and potentially underscoring the challenges practitioners face with learning in alone-type settings, one teacher-student suggested it was the people element they missed, "I enjoy working with people. I enjoy working with groups. I enjoy having discussions…. Um, so working alone on my computer at home has been really challenging for me because I find other things to do."

Finally, in the value and impact category we have a code addressing the value of a structural element of the program: credits carried in from student teaching. This structural element was highlighted as impactful, with ideas like "the master's program set up, like, the student teaching classes count towards the master's. So, I guess, I mean, as far as impact, I would say those were most impactful for me..." Due to the span of time from student-teaching to completing the MA program, some offered thoughts of forgetting about the courses, but still saw value,

> I don't really consider the classes that I took while student-teaching to be part of my master's program. And I know that they are – but I feel like those were like required classes that I had to take in order to be certified to teach anyway and there are things that I would have taken anyway and classes that I would've taken regardless of whether I was in the master's program.

They went on to elaborate on the quality of the courses carried into the MA,

> But definitely thinking back to my student teaching experiences, yes, those were very hands-on learning. Those were very like Experiential Learning. Um, and I, and a lot of the things that I've learned from student teaching and the classes that went along with it – like taught me a lot and stuck in my mind a lot.

The second category within the *synthesis experience a critical component* theme was the capstone project as a high point, which explored the value teacher-students placed on their capstone projects – a process that was rigorous and engaged students deeply in the process of data collection and synthesis. Oftentimes these projects – whether research or product-oriented – focused on a concept relevant to the teacher-student, articulated well by this participant who conducted research on a new grading system and teacher adoption, "So I think to truly understand that [system] would be beneficial for me under, having some sort of scientific data to surround myself with would, would help me to wrap my mind around this whole concept." In a similar vein, another teacher-student suggested "the project I feel like overall has been a lot more engaging because it is kind of like my thing." While the relevancy of concept played an important role, teacher-students saw value in the end stages of their projects when synthesis was occurring, "I was most engaged, it was probably when I was closest to like presenting, and getting to the end and, again, just kind of at a point where I was synthesizing everything." A teacher-student who completed a product-oriented project offers a concurring thought,

> I felt like what I had put together was a good representation of what I had done over the last few years. And, I don't know, I just, it was like a high point, I guess or a moment of success. I was very proud of what I put together, so I described that moment as alive.

Within the capstone project as a high point category another emerging idea was the value the capstone experience brought for sharing out. One teacher-student put it succinctly regarding a high point experience with "my presentation to actually, um, to get to talk about it and show I completed this." Others had similar thoughts,

> I wanted to share the information, I was looking forward to sharing it. And I was really excited I had a lot of people attend who I hadn't necessarily, um, thought might attend and they asked really good questions. And so that was very rewarding.

Associated with this idea was teacher-students who completed research, and the potential for other educators to use their data in a meaningful way,

> …if an Ag teacher wanted to take the next step with that, um, looking at that data and taking it to their administration and saying, 'This isn't just something that I came up with, this is something that other teachers do or a lot of other teachers do or it's something that, you know, is probably going to be impactful for our program.'

Similarly, another teacher-student who completed a less-research intensive project focused on facilities suggested,

> …anyone else who's trying to convince their school board, superintendent, or community to get behind facilities can say, 'Hey, look, this, this is what happened [here]. They, their Ag teacher did all this research, look at all this data that they've collected.'

The last code within the capstone project as a high point category was focused on mentorship, exploring the valued mentorship associated with the capstone experience. What the mentorship looked like was different, but for some it resembled engaging in thinking about research ideas,

> And so I brought all of those ideas to our initial meeting and, and I just described them all. And then they kind of gave their feedback as to what they thought about them and gave me ideas as to how that would turn into something else. Like if we were to move forward with each of those ideas, and then, you know, they ultimately said, "It's up to you, it's your project. You need to decide." And I think that, that process helped me a lot.

Another teacher-student also completing a research-oriented project offered a similar thought, "I think that's been kind of the high point is having that one-on-one or two-on-one collaboration, really diving deeper into that subject." For teacher-students completing a product-oriented project, mentorship may have focused on topic selection and guidance, as offered here,

> So challenge-wise picking the topics for your lessons because biology is huge, right? It's the study of life. So, like, when I went to pick the topics, I was like, 'I'll do one of these.' And they're [committee] like, 'No. You need to narrow it down somehow.'

Finally, for others it was reassuring messages, "Pretty much just [my committee] continually telling me like that I got this and what I was doing was okay."

The MA Student/Teacher Identity

The second theme we identified centered on the identities of participants, specifically how their roles as both teacher and student presented challenges and opportunities. The opportunities of those divergent identities are mostly presented in the category transferability of MA to career as teacher, which explores how the MA program contributed to teacher success and their goals for their students.

The first idea we explore is developing credibility, where the MA helped establish credibility – especially the projects. Referring to their research project, one teacher-student explains how it helped them connect with other teachers doing similar things,

> It just helped me connect with staff 'cause we have, uh, at least three staff members that lead different study abroad programs, students. So, since that was the focus, I was able to like share all my materials with them, and get them engaged in what I was doing…

Another teacher-student connected their project to student understanding of grading, "now that I'm in the project, I'm working on it, um, I think I have a greater understanding, I think that makes it easier for me to explain [competency-based grading] to students why we're doing what we're doing." Finally, on a

somewhat divergent path one teacher-student described how their project helped them communicate with administration about facilities,

> As I was working on this project about facilities in place-based learning for agricultural education, I was actually taking this information that I was learning… and I was talking about my project with my superintendent. And, uh, here we are coming up for a bond renewal… and I would say that because I had done all this research and that I had all this background knowledge, I really made a good case of why we needed these facilities.

There were times when teacher-students referenced the MA program and learning influencing what they do within their own programs, represented by the code applying learning as teachers. The learning could originate within a course or other elements of the MA program, as one teacher-student elucidates how the project process impacted their thinking,

> It just made me wonder what credits other Ag courses count towards and if there was a potential to change, um, the credits that my courses count towards and if that would make a difference in how students sign up for my classes and the incentive for them to take my classes.

Going from the macro (i.e., programmatic view) to the micro, another teacher-student highlighted the "little things" they've picked up throughout the program, "Like laboratory instruction, or induction course, technically my student-teaching courses, um, literacy, all little things. There, there's like little things from all those classes that I use daily…" Finally, when talking about SAEs and their project, one teacher-student offers a thought emblematic of teacher thinking and their programs and MA learning,

> Ideally, after reflection, after we're all done looking through things, I will have a better idea of how SAEs being impactful to other students are perceived as impactful to other students by their teachers so I can make adjustments to my program to make it more effective for my own students, and more impactful for them.

An idea informing the theme *MA student/teacher identity* was student-focused practitioner goals. In this code, we explore how teacher-students kept a lens of that as practitioner while completing MA coursework and projects, using learnings to specifically develop their own students. This diverges from the previous idea as it represents teacher-students actively adjusting their MA experience to benefit their students, instead of merely using ideas they may learn as part of their MA to benefit their students. A representative instance was one teacher-student discussing their motivation behind their inclusivity minded project, "I was hoping for a more, I guess, inclusive classroom or calm classroom, a classroom where my students meshed better with one another." Similarly, another teacher-student offered "a big driving force behind my project as a whole is just, you know, trying to help students of all kinds be successful in our program." Lastly, intentionality was a recurring undercurrent, as one teacher-student highlighted while discussing their project and reviewing the data they collected, "I can reflect on how I'm doing my stuff…And then from there I can kind of better shape my SAE programming at my school to something that might fit the needs of my students better."

The final thought within the transferability of MA to career as teacher category focuses on teacher-students and how the MA impacted their work or connection with students. Specifically, what emerged was the MA learning helped teacher-students relate to their own students. For instance, one offered "I think myself being in school at the same time….being able to empathize with them [students] a little bit more about Zoom classes and stuff like that. Definitely keeps me humble and relatable hopefully to them." Another suggested a better understanding of supporting students, "I think it helped kind of reiterate like the student focus and it helped to reiterate the different ways that I could help to support students as a teacher." One teacher-student, while discussing their project, postulated a positive impact with how they interact with students by way of their own beliefs, "I think it definitely made me re-analyze how and when I say things to my students, and the assumptions I make about my students and the stereotypes that I have ingrained in my brain."

The second category in the *MA student/teacher identity* theme centers on the MA and practitioners, exploring how the MA interfaced with teachers as professionals. In our first code, we look at continuing education and the idea the MA furthered teacher knowledge and influenced their practice. For some, that focus was apparent when discussing their project, as one teacher-student suggested delving into the newest published research was more impactful than other professional development offerings,

> The time to actually dive into actual research and the actual updated practices, it's different [than] having someone who is trained in these things come in that kind of has this scripted up, like…bang, bang, bang. So, to actually take the time to actually read the research that's been out there and like the relevant in the new information, um, I felt like that was a really big benefit.

Others took a simpler approach, offering that the whole MA program benefits teacher practice, "I would say overall, the entire coursework that I've taken for my masters, um, has just, has been really, really, focused on improving my skills as an educator," and "I feel like they're [coursework and project] helping to really enrich and build on a teacher's skill level that will have an impact of the program level and the student level as well."

In the next code we explore how the MA caused teacher-students to reflect on their practice and look at the big picture, so to speak. One teacher-student sums this idea up well,

> I think it's been really, really valuable to just slow down and actually focus on these things throughout a semester. I know I already said this, but just as a teacher, we're going 400 miles per hour all the time, and so to just kind of stop and really dive deep into that stuff. I can feel it reflected in my practice, whether I'm interacting with a student or, um, working with a college student, trying to work through a lesson plan, I can kind of, I can kind of revisit the things that we are learning about in more of a real time.

Other, similar, statements were offered, including one focusing on an induction course as part of the MA, "just helpful to get me thinking about like my teaching philosophy…and where I wanted to go with classroom management." Lastly, one teacher-student focused in on a literacy course that caused them to be critical of their practice, "helping me to think critically about how I'm teaching and what I could [do] differently."

The final code within the MA and practitioner's category is accountability. Put simply, components of the MA program kept early career teacher-students accountable to what they know is good practice. Referencing the induction course, one highlight was "actually checking in like, okay, are you doing these things still in your practice that you learned the past two years? That was nice. Making sure that you're communicating with your mentors, that was really, really nice." Later, that same teacher-student shifted the narrative to forced reflection and accountability, "being forced to reflect through coursework is good because – especially as a first year teacher – there is no time to sit down and reflect. It's just keep going, going, going." Finally, in a quote that portends a finding we will discuss later focusing on advisor relationships, it was suggested the continuous relationship with faculty played a role, "That extra accountability for people that have been teaching me how to teach the last, you know, four or five years, are still here that I'm able to communicate with them if I run into any issues."

The third category, and maybe the most influential, of the *MA student/teacher identity* theme is structuring the MA for practitioners. In this category, we explore coursework and programmatic elements that are valuable for practitioners – and it becomes evident that MA students have an identity as teachers first and foremost. In the first code we examine a succinct idea revolving around teacher-students' ability to individualize their program, and how it meets their needs. This idea was mentioned by multiple teacher-students, and referenced both the project, "the project is based on what I wanted to do, and so that's been good" as well as coursework, "the way you can pick your courses is more flexible" and "flexible about what courses we take or what we do. I mean, they [committee], let me take an independent study because none of the other courses were really fitting."

The second code we identified that further lends itself to the structuring the MA for practitioners' category is teachers and their time, where we explore the challenges of teacher schedules and responsibilities. At times this idea was at odds with learning, as one teacher-student suggested more in-person meetings would be desirable for class sessions but recognized the convenience of having periodic remote class sessions, "from a scheduling standpoint, it's really convenient to only have one or two Zoom sessions per class, but from a learning standpoint, I feel like it would be more impactful to have more that are structured." Continuing down the path of balancing work and learning, another thought focused on surviving,

> balancing a full-time job and going to school, that was a milestone in itself. Like last semester when I was taking two classes I finished and I was like, wow, that was a lot. I don't think I wanna do that again.

A final thought involved figuring out scheduling, "I would say that that I've learned how to better manage my schedule, uh, 100% because there are times where it got crazy."

Akin to teachers and their time was a concise code, flexibility, describing the need for MA learning and courses to offer flexibility to the teacher-students taking them. One teacher-student suggested they most desired flexibility, "just understanding that dealing with, dealing with teachers or anyone in the field. I mean, everyone's job is crazy…so just the willingness to be flexible." A statement that expounds on the idea was offered, focusing on deadlines and coursework, "So coursework, most of the courses, some of them had like, specific deadlines for things but most everything was like, okay, everything is due at the end of the semester or the end of the class."

MA Students Have Need for Connectedness and External Support

The third and final theme we identified focuses on teacher-students and their need for connectedness and external support and is comprised of two categories: desiring more connectedness and feeling of committee support. The first of these categories explores a need for connectedness from students who are not often on campus or in the same physical location as their MA peers. In a light, concise code substantiated by two teacher-students, we explore a backloading of support, even if the support was strong from the teacher-student's committee. For example, it was highlighted that efficiency is nice but early meetings are sparse,

> I like efficiency and I like to get going with everything hitting the floor running. But on the other hand, uh, I also feel like, um, we didn't meet a lot, like we met a few times before I, before we had the program of study, we met a few times before the project proposal defense, we've met, I mean, we've met here and there, we've met more often now that I'm between the proposal defense and the project defense in that stage.

The need to meet more early in the program was a thought shared by another, "I kind of wish we would have scheduled meetings like, with our committee, like once a month." While lightly populated, this idea aligns with the rest of this theme, and thus is included.

A potential support mechanism identified by teacher-students was connecting with peers in, or who had recently completed the MA program to discuss the project and other MA elements. For some this was informal, "just to know, like, who else is anticipating to finish their project when you are, and being able to communicate with them," while for others it was more formally included in the program,

> Again, going back to me being a people person, um, I think it would be cool if we did like, a group brainstorming or sharing of people who are also working on projects, preparing to present them, that sort of thing.

Rounding out the idea, another teacher-student highlighted how peer review could be incorporated, "peer review….like if you have some people who are willing to, who've already completed the project to be a mentor to somebody who is currently completing their projects…I think a cohort piece probably would have been pretty helpful."

Strongly related to the need for discussion with peers, additional project prep emerged as an element teacher-students desired. A few teacher-students highlighted more examples and guidance on the project would ease stress, as one said "I think that to alleviate some of the stress in having so many options at the beginning…I think that it would have helped if they gave more examples of projects that people have already conducted in the MA program." While some focused on examples, others highlighted guides or check-ins as desirable, some sort of "guide or something to help students in choosing even just the topic of their project," and "maybe some more like specific check-in dates or, you know, quarterly meetings or, you know, I don't know what that looks like for different students."

Maybe the most relevant code for the connectedness category focused on cohort building, both with coursework and the project. While several teacher-students highlighted this desire, their focus was diverse. One focus was reflection and the value of communicating with peers, "just sharing what's happening, what challenges we're facing highs and lows as a group. Um, either in person or via Zoom, that was very, uh, good way to reflect." Others were just focused on connecting and broadening their perspective, "the first class, we actually did a lot of group work, um, which was really, really helpful because we had an opportunity to actually talk to other people with different focuses and different experiences." Providing a thorough appraisal and value of connectedness within the program, one teacher-student offered,

> this past fall, in the course I was in… I think it was the induction course… We, like once a month, got on Zoom and talked about what was going well, what wasn't going well in our classrooms. And, you know, even though, you know, maybe the project and the coursework piece was kind of removed. I think it was just good to connect with other educators, especially considering the school year that we had. Like, you know, none of us had ever been through what we were going through, and all of our situations were different. It's a great place to bounce ideas off and collaborate and vent and, you know, feel good about yourself.

In the second category, feeling of committee support, we explore teacher-student relationships with their advisors and committee. First, we look at advisor communication and the idea teacher-students felt their advisors were communicative and timely. One person connected the advisor relationship and communication to their professional role, "the professional communication between the committee and myself, working to understand that continuing that, um, has also definitely been a positive impact to me, uh, helping me understand my role as a teacher." Another teacher-student highlighted the ease of communication, "the ease of communication and access to my graduate committee and helping me through those steps. They explain things very thoroughly. And if I have questions, [my advisor], he'll always get back to me like less than 24 hours." Finally, for another teacher-student that communication resulted in confidence,

> I guess having a committee that was available for things, if I needed them and they're, they're really respondent….knowing that I had a good support system or that they supported what I wanted to do, gave me the confidence to do what I wanted to do.

The second and last code for the committee support category, while succinctly supported with ideas from three teacher-students, further punctuates the advisor/committee relationship, where preexisting relationships with faculty serving as committee members were a contributing factor to teacher confidence. One person sums it up succinctly, "[I] have a good relationship with both [Faculty] and [Faculty]. So that gave me a lot of confidence." Another teacher-student offered a similar thought, but focused on mentor caring, "I think the biggest confidence boost is knowing that I have two mentors in the program that care and want me to succeed and they make that very clear." To round out the code, it was also suggested the pivot to one-on-one mentorship was interesting, "I know the faculty, I've worked with the faculty, especially the two that are on my committee. So, um, being able to work with them, I guess, again, is, is more one-on-one mentors, instead of like class facilitators, that's been an interesting aspect of it, and that additional guidance has also been much appreciated."

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, we explored the lived experiences of AFNR educators engaging in a practitioner-oriented master's degree in AFNR Education at Michigan State University. Findings from this study support prior research and potentially highlight some elements not addressed in the literature. Consistent with prior research, teacher-students oftentimes focused on the first and third outcomes of master's degrees previously discussed in the literature review: teacher internal outcomes (Lindner & Baker, 2003) and student outcomes (Horn & Jang, 2017; Knapp et al., 1990). When discussing their experiences within the MA, teacher-students were concerned with their own growth – we see this coming through with quotes focused on their own growth as educators. Likewise, they were, arguably, just as concerned with their students and growth, with many describing how they maneuvered their MA experience to better their own students. If graduate students enrolled in research-focused MS and PhD programs are concerned with bettering the broader profession (i.e., macro), it is plausible teachers enrolled in practitioner-oriented programs are concerned with bettering their students/program (i.e., micro). This may be supported by the present findings that suggest teachers enter practitioner-oriented programs with the lens of a teacher. By entering with said teacher lens, teacher-students are concerned with identifying impact projects that can have a direct impact on their own students' growth.

Potentially contributing to the focus on one's own program and students, teachers in practitioner-oriented degree programs have less connection to campus and thus need interaction and support. Teacher life, especially early career educators, commands a significant portion of time, and when completing a degree program remotely it may be easy to feel disconnected from that institution. We identified within our data a strong element of appreciation for the support our MA students received during their degree programs – it was clear this is something they need and wanted to continue. While graduate students enrolled in on-campus programs surely need similar support, students engaging in practitioner-oriented programs are distant physically and potentially retaining the mindset of practitioner more than that of a student. When combining this idea with the plausibility many practitioner-oriented degree earners are early in their career, it becomes equally important to engage students in interactive elements of instruction whenever possible as they transition into their career, as structural barriers permit. One example of this may be the incorporation of in-person interactions as components of specific courses, such as courses offered during summer sessions or during evenings.

A third, and maybe somewhat surprising, conclusion focuses on the value of the capstone experience. Multiple teacher-students in our program entered rigorous research projects on their own volition, while the teacher-students completing a more traditional product-focused project frequently sought ways to increase the rigor of the experience. The impact these capstone experiences had was mentioned across participants and underscores the value of an experience tailored to the individual's needs that allows them to examine a component of AFNR education to improve their own programs. When considering this finding with that of a philosophic practitioner (Critchfield, 2015; Tribe, 2002), one can ascertain the teacher-students have connections to understanding knowledge in their profession and are able to create new knowledge, while also applying said knowledge to their practice. Through their capstone experiences teacher-students were reflective in identifying the existing knowledge base but also actionable in considering how that existing knowledge, or lack thereof, could impact their practice, thus meeting the view of a philosophical practitioner.

Among the leading implications for practice emanating from our findings are for faculty/facilitators of practitioner-oriented programs to further consider in-person experiences for students enrolled in these programs. While this presents challenges, students value interaction with their peers and need opportunities to discuss coursework and topics of the learning at hand. If the first implication is challenging the second may be counterintuitive, and that is for faculty to value and cultivate strong capstone/project experiences.

A key experience for our MA students was the rigor and applicability of a project that allowed them to examine some component of AFNR education. This experience was often cited a high point in their MA program. As a profession, we should strive to build challenging and applicable capstone experiences for our practitioner-oriented students the same as we would/do our research-oriented students. This may include, but not limited to, ensuring MA-pursuing teachers are pushing themselves to explore new knowledge and experiences as they consider impact project ideas with their committee.

Future Research

Continued research should focus on best practices for facilitating a practitioner-oriented degree program with students who retain the identity of teacher. Future research could employ quantitative approaches to gain a broader understanding of all AFNR education practitioner-oriented graduate students. Additionally, research could examine impact of in-person engagement events during practitioner-oriented programs. Finally, further research could include a pre-/post-survey to examine student knowledge gain during MA programs.

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