

The Thornless Rose: A Phenomenological Look at Decisions Career Teachers Make to Remain in the Profession

Mindi S. Clark¹, Kathleen D. Kelsey², and Nicholas R. Brown³

Abstract

Attrition among the agricultural education profession is concerning as approximately 50% of agriculture teachers leave within the first six years of teaching. Therefore, the purpose of the phenomenological study, conducted from an emic perspective, was to explore and describe secondary agriculture teachers' experiences related to remaining in the profession past the point of retirement eligibility. Four themes emerged from the study: (a) Career teachers experienced a transformative shift in mid-career, leading to career sustainability; (b) Career teachers experienced an abundance of support from students, parents, administrators, and community; (c) Career teachers maintained a balance between work and personal life; and (d) Career teachers reduced their workload later in their careers to coincide with aging. The essence deduced from the data revealed that teachers balanced work, family, and community life, reduced known stressors, and found satisfaction that led to long-term engagement in the profession. The emergent metaphor of this phenomenon was the Thornless Rose and served as the structural framework for reporting the findings. The results of this study can serve as a transferrable means to help teachers remain in the profession.

Keywords: attrition; career teachers; job satisfaction; phenomenology; retention

After attending the National FFA convention and sharing his experience with a career teacher, cowboy poet Baxter Black wrote:

I looked at him more attentively. "How long have you been teaching?" I asked. "Thirty-eight years," he said. There was a touch of weariness in his voice. We looked out over the sea of blue coats that surged through the huge convention. His wife took our picture. "That's a long time to be married to an agricultural teacher." I told her, knowing the commitment a spouse makes to accommodate the late suppers, kid's projects, county fairs, field trips, night calls, weekend practices, long hours and exhaustion that are an accepted requisite of the job description. She smiled and touched his elbow. "It was worth it," she said and they walked away (Black, 2006 as cited in Black, 2007).

Burnout and Attrition

For many, spending a career teaching agriculture has been *worth it*, but many others have abandoned the profession prior to reaching retirement eligibility. Many teachers leave because

¹ Mindi S. Clark is an Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agriculture at Northwestern Oklahoma State University, 709 Oklahoma Boulevard, Alva, OK 73717, Email: msclark@nwsu.edu.

² Kathleen D. Kelsey is a Professor of Agricultural Education and the Head of the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia, 142A Four Towers, Athens, GA 30602, Email: kdk@uga.edu.

³ Nicholas R. Brown is a Middle School Assistant Principal at Jenks Public Schools, 205 East B Street, Jenks, OK 74037, Email: nick.brown@jenksps.org.

they experience burnout, anxiety surrounding family and life balance, and poor time management skills (Boone & Boone, 2009; Chenevey, Ewing, & Whittington, 2008; Clark, Brown, & Ramsey, 2012; Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Torres, Lambert, & Tummons, 2009). Early career teachers in general immerse themselves in their career. Hughes (2001) reported that many teachers become exhausted by work-related duties until some form of intervention occurs. Furthermore, when looking at the role of a secondary agriculture teacher from a holistic approach, Cano and Miller (1992) found that teachers were undecided (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied) when considering all facets of the job.

Attrition is a concern among teachers and educational stakeholders at large (Jalongo & Heider, 2006) as over 90% of the teachers who were hired in the United States were replacement teachers for those who left for reasons other than retirement (Ingersoll, 2002). Further, 40% of secondary teachers currently teaching in the United States (grades 9-12) do not expect to be teaching in K-12 schools by 2016 (Feistritzer, 2011). Many studies have focused on teacher burnout as researchers seek to understand attrition theoretically for the purpose of cultivating retention strategies. In spite of these efforts, over 50% of teachers leave within the first six years of their career (Heath-Camp & Camp, 1990; Marso & Pigge, 1997). While the majority of research has focused on why teachers leave (Boone & Boone, 2009; Chenevey et al., 2008; Clark et al., 2012; Moore and Camp, 1979; Murray et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2009), understanding why teachers remain in the profession is equally valuable for understanding attrition.

There is limited research in agricultural education that examines teachers who remain in the profession long-term with a focus of retention (Boone and Boone, 2007; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004), especially those who remain after retirement eligibility. The need for retaining high quality teachers is also underscored in the National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education under Research Priority Area 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs (Doerfert, 2011). Therefore, this study examined the experiences of career teachers (those who remained in the profession for 30+ years) to identify the essence of their experiences and advance the literature pertaining to teacher retention from a phenomenological perspective that informs practice.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has been defined as feelings one has towards his or her job (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), and can be both positive and negative; unfortunately, negative feelings often lead to teacher attrition. Conversely, those who experience positive feelings remain in their careers. Research has found that most agriculture teachers are generally satisfied with their jobs (Kitchel et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2004) for several reasons including self-fulfillment from educating youth, experiences outside the classroom, sound health, and community visibility (Bruening & Hoover, 1991). In addition, Boone and Boone (2007) found that student-centered teachers were also motivated to remain in the profession. Student-centeredness can be defined as the desire to educate and help students in the context of agricultural education, and assisting students gain achievements in FFA. Teacher motivation was also reinforced by financial rewards, professional fellowship, job location and security, and administrative support. Accordingly, Jewell, Beavers III, Malpiedi, and Flowers (1990) found that agriculture teachers were generally satisfied with intrinsic job satisfiers versus extrinsic job satisfiers. Extrinsic job satisfiers included duties not related to instruction, such as financial support.

Walker et al. (2004) discovered that job satisfaction increased among agriculture teachers who remained in the profession, positing that maturity and becoming accustomed to job responsibilities were related to increased satisfaction. The authors also reported that agriculture teachers who stayed in the profession may have reached a plateau or homeostasis in their career, leading to energy saving behavior and complacency; while not satisfying, neither were their jobs dissatisfying.

In summary, attrition is a considerable problem within the secondary agricultural education profession due to a host of factors such as burnout, anxiety surrounding family and life balance, and poor time management skills. Researchers have identified reasons teachers leave, but there is also a need to focus on why teachers remain in the profession. Those who remain teaching, in general, are satisfied with their current job. It was purported that teachers have become accustomed to job responsibilities and may have reduced their workload, resulting in less stress and higher job satisfaction (Walker et al., 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Teachers who participated in the research reported here were classified as career teachers because they remained on the job well past the point of retirement eligibility (+30 years) in Oklahoma. The participants' careers endured for the majority of their lifespan; therefore, Super's (1957) life span/life space theory was used as the lens for framing the phenomenological study. Super recognized changes individuals experience as they mature and identified the variable of *career maturity* as a major theme of his theory. *Career maturity* is manifested by physical maturity (age) and career development through stages within the lifespan.

Super's (1957) five stages of development are growth (ages 4-14), exploration (15-24), establishment (25-44), maintenance (45-65), and disengagement (65+). Growth is the time when people discover their ability to develop necessary skills for self-achievement and increase control over their life. Exploration is defined by crystallization of interests by specifying and implementing an occupational choice. Establishment happens when individuals seek a secure place in their career track. The Establishment stage is often characterized by career achievements. Maintenance is primarily characterized by constancy, continuity, a reduction in stress, safety, and stability. This is the stage in middle adulthood when individuals may ask, *what have I done with my life?* or *what else can I offer?* Finally, disengagement is typically marked by reduction or decline, where individuals may imagine and plan for retirement. Super (1980) later reported that not everyone transitions through these five stages at fixed ages or in the same manner and that the process is more fluid than linear. Super's theory is an ideal fit for this study because it focuses on teachers who have navigated through their careers 30+ years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the essence of secondary agricultural education teachers' experiences as late career professionals using Super's life span/life space theoretical lens. The authors specifically sought to surface a deeper understanding of what participants experienced in terms of (a) remaining in the agricultural education profession beyond retirement eligibility, and (b) what situations influenced their life as a career teacher.

Methodology

Research Design

Phenomenology was the appropriate approach for this inquiry as the design seeks to capture the "meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In this study, the phenomenon addressed was the essence of secondary agricultural education teachers who have continued to teach beyond their eligibility to retire (30+ years of service).

Of the two types of phenomenological approaches to inquiry (hermeneutical and transcendental), transcendental phenomenology was employed (Creswell, 2007). Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to suspend past knowledge and experience in an effort to

understand the phenomenon at a deeper level through a process called *epoché* (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Transcendental implies that the research assume a stance “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” while immersed in the study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). *Bracketing* completes the process of suspending one’s past knowledge and experience (Creswell, 2007). While not a perfect process, bracketing reduces researcher bias by bracketing out ideas and familiarities related to the phenomenon to describe better the meaning of the participants’ lived experiences. It was necessary for me, as the primary researcher and first author, to bracket my experiences as an agriculture teacher. In an effort to achieve *epoché*, the study was delivered from an *emic* perspective, or the telling of the story from the participant’s perspective.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity encourages researchers to recognize their strengths and shortcomings and is one of the most celebrated practices in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Reflexivity is used to help *bracket*, and requires researchers to be honest and authentic with self, research participants, and audience. Therefore, the following narrative informs readers about my background in secondary agricultural education and elucidates my epistemological stance.

I grew up in rural Oklahoma and took advantage of the opportunities offered by the local agricultural education program. My agriculture teacher was a career teacher, having taught 28 years. I achieved the state FFA degree and was a state FFA officer under my agriculture teacher’s mentorship and these experiences served as a springboard for my successful career as a secondary, and now tertiary, agricultural educator. I earned a baccalaureate degree in agricultural education from Oklahoma State University and taught high school agriculture for four years in a rural setting. I earned a Ph.D. in agricultural education at Oklahoma State University and currently teach at a regional university. My experience as a secondary agriculture teacher, along with my experience of learning from a career teacher, informs the reader of my strengths and shortcomings in conducting this study. It is for these reasons I sought to bracket out my experiences.

My epistemological stance aligns with social constructivism where, “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work...relying as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). This viewpoint allowed me to make sense of a phenomenon and to deduce findings utilizing my strengths as a member of the cultural group.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Polkinghorne (1989) recommended researchers interview from five to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Oklahoma State University, a snowball sample of five men was selected to participate in the study. Only men participated because there were no female agriculture teachers in Oklahoma who were eligible for retirement at the time of the study. Four participants were White; one teacher reported being bicultural (Cherokee and White). All participants taught more than 30 years and averaged 36.6 years of service with a mean age of 61.8 years.

The snowball sample allowed me to interview participants who were similar in age and years of career service. The first participant, Mr. Allen (pseudonyms were used to achieve anonymity) was selected because he met the criteria of 30+ years in the field, was eligible to retire, and had experienced success during his tenure as an agriculture teacher. He taught 34 years, however, not continuously. He resigned from teaching secondary agricultural education twice during his career: once to work in the oil field as a young man and once to work for the state Agricultural Education Division.

I asked Mr. Allen to recommend a peer who had similar experiences in the profession; he recommended the next participant, Mr. Walker. Mr. Walker taught secondary agricultural

education at the same school for 38 years, never leaving the profession. The third participant, Mr. Miller, taught out of state for two years and spent an additional 30 years in Oklahoma. Unique to the participants, Mr. Miller exited the classroom for 14 years after teaching for seven years. He did so when his children were young so he could spend more time with his family. He returned to the profession and has taught in his current position for 25 years. The fourth participant, Mr. Buck, a career teacher of 45 years, taught out of state for one year before returning home for the remainder of his career. Mr. Buck subsequently moved once within his home state to another school due to dissatisfaction with the administration. Mr. Buck taught for 37 years at his current location. Finally, Mr. Morris was selected upon referral from Mr. Buck. He taught in a suburban school for two years and then moved to a rural school where he spent the past 32 years. All of the participants reported experiencing fruitful careers by revealing success in the classroom, supervised agricultural experiences (SAE), and FFA.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

In phenomenology, “the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews” (Creswell, 2007, p. 131). After approval from the IRB, I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each participant at their preferred location. I met Mr. Walker at his home while the rest of the participants were interviewed on the job. To focus the study, I followed Moustakas’ (1994) suggestion that the data collection concentrate on what participants have experienced in terms of remaining in the agricultural education profession beyond retirement eligibility and what situations influenced their life as a career teacher.

During the interviews, additional probing questions were asked to guide participants in a semi-structured approach for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and proceeded until *data saturation* (Creswell, 2007) was reached. In addition, the technique of *triangulation* (Tracy, 2010) was used as I took photographs, scribed field notes, and observed the teachers as well as documents that would help illuminate the phenomenon at hand. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim using a digital recording application on an iPad® so they could be analyzed further.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2007) reported that phenomenological data analysis is completed through the method of reduction; therefore, analysis was conducted using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method modified by Moustakas (1994). Transcriptions were downloaded and coded for the purpose of *horizontalization*, or looking at each statement, or horizon, of the transcription equally and then identifying significant statements (Moustakas, 1994). Delimited horizons were then clustered under emic codes. Once the horizons were coded, “...nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents were clustered into themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p.180). Themes were then used to develop textural descriptions, describing *what* was experienced and structural descriptions describing *how* it was experienced. The textural and structural descriptions of what and how were then synthesized into the *essence* of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Essence is the distilled experience, converted to narrative and shared with interested audiences for the purposes of advancing our understanding of teacher retention in the context of agricultural education.

Building Quality into the Study

A central concept of high quality, qualitative research is *trustworthiness* (Tracy, 2010). In an effort to provide viable, trustworthy research to the agricultural education profession, I approached the study with a transparent lens. Trustworthiness is achieved through multiple

methods, including rigor and those already discussed within *reflexivity*. Rigor not only provides an abundance of description and explanation, in doing so, it also provides face validity.

Another quality building technique used in the study was a multivocal approach called *member reflection* (Tracy, 2010). I sought input from participants through *member checking* as well as *peer debriefed* with a group of eight individuals in a qualitative research club at Oklahoma State University along with the two co-researchers for this study in collecting and analyzing data.

Ethics

I was cognizant of the ethics required of qualitative research. I employed procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics (Tracy, 2010) to ensure that I, as a human instrument, would be a responsible and cautious researcher. Procedural ethics were achieved by avoiding deception, receiving informed consent, and ensuring privacy and confidentiality among participants. Situational ethics asks the researcher “to constantly reflect on our methods and the data worth exposing” to ensure that the means justify the ends (Tracy, 2010 p. 847). The data presented in this study were carefully analyzed and statements presented were ethically considered before exposing. The concept of *reciprocity* is key to the establishment of relational ethics. Reciprocity was achieved because both parties benefited from the study; the participants agreed to tell their story and I agreed to report the findings accurately to the profession for the mutual benefit of understanding better the essence of teacher retention. Finally, exiting ethics were employed to leave the data collection phase with accuracy and avoid unintended consequences. To reduce wrongful interpretation of the data, I presented direct quotes within their context and provided rich, thick descriptions within the data. These ethical considerations were taken seriously to protect participants and provide an accurate portrayal of the essence of their experiences.

Findings: Emerging the Essence

From five verbatim transcripts, 183 significant statements, or horizons, were extracted for the first step in data analysis (Moustakas 1994). The data were then clustered into codes and further refined into four themes. Among the themes, textural and structural descriptions were developed to deduce the essence of the phenomenon.

Theme 1: Thorns Among the Roses - Career Teachers Experienced Certain Thorn Pricks, Causing a Transformative Shift in Their Career, Leading to Career Sustainability

Consistent with transformational learning (Mezirow, 2006), emergent from the findings, each teacher experienced a major event(s) that provoked change in his career. According to transformational learning theory, an individual may encounter an event or life transition that causes him to change his current mindset about a situation. As such, participants experienced a *thorn prick*, or an event that caused them to reflect and reevaluate their current situation. It became evident teachers had transitioned from proving themselves, which corresponds with Super’s (1954) stage of establishment, to maintenance after they experienced transformational learning, stimulated by thorn pricks.

Two teachers, Mr. Allen and Mr. Miller, exited secondary agricultural education early in their careers, and Mr. Allen exited more than once. Upon their return, the teachers had a new attitude about their approach to teaching. Mr. Allen said, “When I left, I could refresh myself” [A1: 55]. Burnout occurred among these two teachers as they exhausted themselves to establish their careers, aligning with Hughes (2001) findings on teacher burnout. Mr. Miller, who exited secondary agricultural education said, “When I left teaching, it was because I just ran myself, and we are talking about in off hours, to death trying to win at every contest that came along and this and that. Then I came back to teaching, and I decided I wasn’t going to do that. I was going to do

the contests and the showing that I enjoyed and if that wasn't good enough, I would do something else. And that's actually all I've done since I came back" [Mi: 84-88]. The career shift allowed these teachers to reevaluate their roles (Mezirow, 2006) while embarking on other ventures and return to the profession with a new mindset focused on life balance.

Without the support of significant others, it is hard to maintain job satisfaction (Cooper & Nelson, 1981). In an effort to remove his dissatisfaction, Mr. Buck experienced a career shift as he left his position for another agriculture teaching position after seven years of teaching in Oklahoma, saying, "I probably would still be there but the superintendent and I were not getting along real well" [Bu: 36-37]. Administration can be a contributing factor for teacher dissatisfaction (Boone & Boone, 2007).

Mr. Morris left his role in a suburban setting as an agriculture teacher for a rural setting. When planning his career, he anticipated teaching five years. After an early move to a new town, he invested 32 years in his current rural school district. Physically, Mr. Morris experienced another career shift, or *life crisis* (Mazirow, 2006), due to his health. He experienced heart surgery at age 49, which had significant implications on his job performance, causing him to slow down and reduce his workload immediately.

Divorce served as another thorn prick. Too often, in the early career stages, teachers tend to vigorously attack their job to achieve success (Talbert, Camp, & Heath-Camp, 1994). Mr. Walker admitted his early mistakes by saying, "When I was younger, I was gone all the time – weekends and after school, I would come in late at night, and I was gone all the time. One divorce later, missing out on my kids growing up, and participating in one thing or another in school, I figured out that some of those hours weren't used wisely. Now, I think I use my hours wisely for my benefit" [Wa: 127-134].

The career shifts that occurred for each of these teachers were the catalysts to move from establishment to maintenance in Super's (1954) theory. Job satisfaction increased once the teachers were able to successfully transition into maintenance mode. Four of the five teachers changed schools at least once in their career, but the teacher who remained at the same school experienced a divorce. Perhaps, once a teacher moves, he may be able to focus better on well-being and life balance compared to early career striving; however, we recognize there are many factors that influence divorce. Eventually, the teachers successfully transitioned from the establishment to maintenance stages (Super, 1954) in their careers.

The thorn pricks experienced by the teachers motivated major shifts in their careers and served as the impetus to seeking a thornless rose as an agricultural educator. The thorn pricks experienced by participants were administrators, unmotivated students, poor life balance, and too much time spent on the job, which is consistent with the literature (Boone & Boone, 2009; Moore & Camp, 1979; Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005; Torres et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2004). These men were able to navigate around their stressors, resolve them, and, consequently, survived and thrived in the profession. The participants still experience challenges within their career; however, their challenges are generational rather than situational. The most talked about challenge was that students have changed over the years; hence, the teachers expressed difficulty in practicing effective motivational strategies for youth who have various social interests, home situations, and availability to more extracurricular activities within the school. Additional challenges faced by participants included competing with sports programs, lost student potential, changes in educational policies, physical challenges, and competing against livestock professionals (jocks). Although they still faced challenges in their careers, participants were able to manage stressors by blunting the thorns over the years.

Theme 2: Fertilizing the Rose: Career Teachers Experienced an Abundance of Support from Students, Parents, Administrators and Community Members

When discussing the variables that sustained their careers, each of the teachers boasted proudly about those who made their lives easier through their support including students, parents, administrators, and community members. Evidence of support was documented for the purpose of triangulating the data. I quickly observed support in Mr. Buck's agricultural education building as I walked by two large granite figures scripted with thankful messages from students who credited their agriculture teacher for making a difference in their lives. As I observed further, I noticed the newness of the facility. I later learned the administration had funded the new agricultural building as a reward for Mr. Buck's successes in working with students. When asked about what had sustained him as a teacher he said, "The great kids and the administration" [Bu: 69-70]. All of the participants spoke at length about "having great kids." Mr. Miller said, "Unless you happen to be that one that just really has something that you're going to get rich doing, I don't know that there's anything financially a whole lot better than teaching kids" [Mi: 152-154]. As a result of their successful interactions with students, they did not spend much time disciplining students or in conflict with parents. "I've never had many parent problems" [Mi:163], Mr. Miller stated.

Participants also identified the community as a supportive link to the agricultural education program. Community support ranged from encouragement and physical help in accomplishing tasks, to financial support. Two teachers reported raising over \$30,000 at their local, community-supported fundraisers. All of the study participants indicated financial support was solid and spoke about having the resources to participate in more opportunities and provide better learning environments for their students in the classroom. Aside from community-supported fundraisers, many community members were a part of the local booster club that raised money to support student-centered expenses, such as funding travel expenses for FFA events.

In addition to financial support from the public, members of the community were willing to help with other needs including providing labor at local events and fundraisers and/or contributing to a need by donating time and providing resources. "The community has always stepped up and helped with everything I have needed. They've done a fantastic job at stepping up and doing the heavy work and a lot of things to help with my shortcomings. They don't ask me, they know there are things that I can't do and they get it taken care of. I appreciate that. I also have people in the community that volunteer to come up and do all different types of things at the school for me. The main thing is if you just ask, you'll have people who will help you" [Mr. Walker, 169-186].

All five career teachers had very supportive experiences that were conducive to job satisfaction. Mr. Allen said it best, "I've been really fortunate from the standpoint of having some really, really good kids, some really, really good parents, really, really good school systems and administrators and school boards. As a neighbor and a program specialist, I saw teachers who had those kinds of problems and I've been really fortunate in the 34 years that I've taught. I've never had administrator problems; I've never had school board problems. That stress has never been there for me" [Al: 28-33]. All five teachers expressed similar sentiments in terms of a supportive professional climate. As a result, the teachers experienced fewer thorns and more fertilizer from supportive stakeholders, resulting in a high level of job satisfaction.

Theme 3: Enough Blooms for All: Career Teachers Experienced a Positive Life Balance Between Work and Family

Career and family balance is a concern for job satisfaction in agricultural education (Murray et al., 2011). Despite the methods in which teachers spent time with their families, it was evident family was extremely important to these teachers later in their career. Due to the supportive role of most spouses, family time was spent together at job-related events, such as FFA activities. "They just went with me," Mr. Buck said [Bu: 169]. Understandably, life balance did not occur during the teacher's establishment stage as Mr. Allen said, "It was stupid doing that because you took time away from your family that you shouldn't have been taking" [Al: 259-260]. As teachers

moved into the maintenance and disengagement stages, the teachers in this study revealed that they spend more time with their family than in the early years of their career.

Although Mr. Walker experienced a divorce, he learned from his prior experience and currently seeks good life balance with his second wife, children, and grandchildren. He said, “You probably have to cut back a few things and decide to make more intelligent decisions so you can balance work and family life” [Wa: 156-157]. Being visible at other activities for his own children was important for Mr. Morris. He said, “I watched a lot of softball and cheerleading, pageants, and other stuff too” [Mo: 229-230]. Life balance helped these teachers to be more satisfied in their jobs, and it was evident that early in their career, this was not always the case. Findings are congruent with Baxter, Stephens, and Thayer-Bacon’s (2011) findings in female teachers, reporting that the amount of time teachers spent on their job may not have been worth the sacrifice of family time.

The most unique family dynamic belonged to Mr. Miller who had exited the profession for more than ten years. When discussing his family he said, “Well families do suffer. I saw that was going to happen if I didn’t do something different” [Mi: 97-99]. As a result, he left teaching agricultural education while his children were young. He returned to teaching agricultural education after his daughter graduated high school.

The participants stressed the importance of taking vacation days and breaks and spending more time with family. In their opinion, this time should be used for the purpose of remaining balanced between career and family, and should not be taken lightly. In contrast from his early career practices, Mr. Miller said, “I think having your summers, is to some degree, I mean we do a lot of things in the summer, but having that summer slowdown and having a Christmas break is important. From a family standpoint, I think having those breaks that you can do things with your family is awfully good” [Mi: 156-159]. Teachers found a positive balance, which gave them the ability to spend time with family and career related activities: having enough blooms for everyone.

Theme 4: The Rose Loses its Thorns: Career Teachers Experienced a Reduction in Workload Later in Their Careers

All of the teachers in this study experienced a reduction of workload, which is consistent with Super’s (1954) theory and Walker’s et al. (2004) findings. This does not mean these teachers abandoned necessary job duties; rather, their time was spent differently than during the establishment phase of their career. Teachers learned to delegate tasks to capable individuals, such as students, parents, and community members. “I’ve learned instead of taking it all on my shoulders, I’ve delegated it out,” said Mr. Allen [Al: 248-249]. When teachers delegated, it allowed more time to complete other tasks, resulting in less hours spent working. Lambert, Henry, and Tummons (2011) reported that many teachers who become excellent time managers compound their workload by adding new tasks; however, the teachers in this study did not do so.

The teachers in this study also chose not to battle with students over participating in FFA events and SAE activities. Decisions to participate shifted from early career teachers expecting full participation of their students in FFA events and SAE activities to late career teachers allowing students the option not to participate in those activities. Mr. Morris said, “I don’t fight the kids as hard. If they say no, I just say, okay, if you don’t want to do it” [Mo: 140-142]. The agriculture teachers in this study knew their limits, and they valued life balance over winning competitions. They remain productive, yet do not maintain the same workload as they did during their establishment or early maintenance stage. They matured gracefully by identifying the thorns in teaching agricultural education, actively sought to blunt the thorns in the process, saving enough blooms for all, resulting in the essence of teacher retention, *a rose with no thorns*.

Discussion

The results of this study support Super's (1957) theory in every aspect, in addition to illuminating the process in the agricultural education context. Participants transitioned through each career stage successfully. The most challenging transition for the teachers was from establishment to maintenance as there were multiple thorns to be thwarted. Learning life balance and with the support of their communities, the teachers successfully transitioned from establishment to maintenance and are now in the process of disengagement as they consider retirement. Figure 1 juxtaposes Super's theory in the context of the essence that emerged.

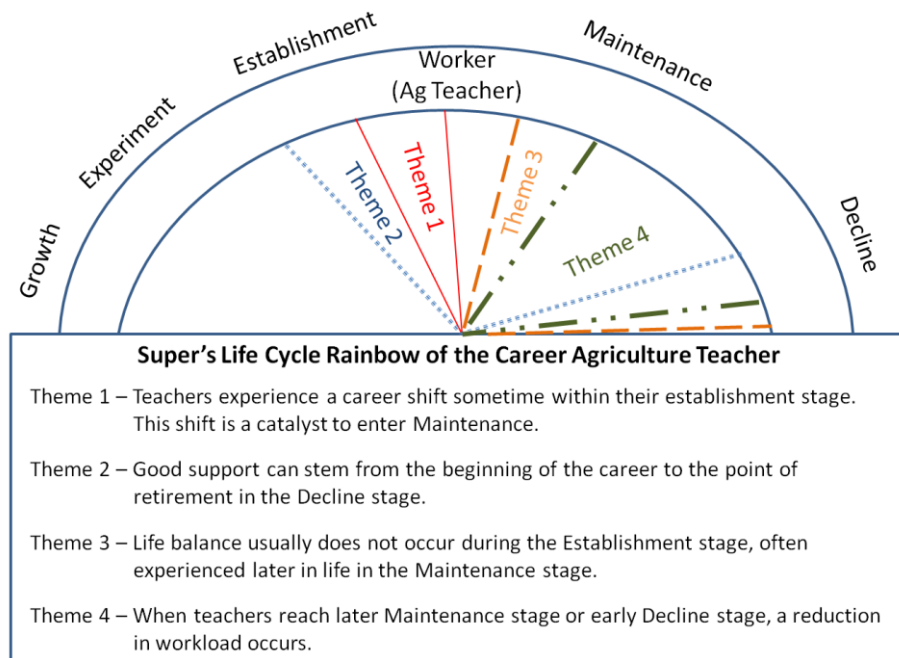


Figure 1. Super's Life Cycle Rainbow of the Career Agriculture Teacher.

Teachers in this study were generally satisfied with their careers as agriculture teachers, which is supported by the findings of Walker et al. (2004), who also found teachers who stayed in the profession longer were satisfied with their careers. The final product of phenomenology is to deduce the data into the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The essence for these teachers: they experienced a rose without the thorns. In other words, outside of normal stressors, these teachers had supportive schools, students, parents, administrators, and family. Due to a high level of support, the teachers were fortunate to have a high level of autonomy, as their motivation was not controlled by outside demands, similar to what Clark et al. (2012) found. In addition, the reduction of extrinsic factors may have increased their job satisfaction (Jewell et al., 1990). Aside from their initial career shift, which was related to transformational learning, teachers defined their role of teacher as a central identity (Mezirow, 2000). They were not deterred from the profession. Once firmly situated in the maintenance stage, they achieved contentment with their supportive families and constructed perceptions of good students who had supportive parents, in a decent school within a solid community. As with all qualitative studies, the findings should not be generalized. Instead, results of qualitative inquiry have utility in being transferrable.

Recommendations for Practice

The current study added to the literature by highlighting individuals who successfully navigated through Super's (1957) predictable career stages. Many teachers in the establishment phase of career development can learn from mature, career teachers as a model to emulate for developing coping strategies that lead to a long-term career in a profession that experiences a high burnout rate (Croom, 2003). Mearns and Cain (2003) reported that teachers who rely on active coping strategies experience lower levels of stress and burnout. Teacher educators are advised to teach preservice teachers about coping strategies through social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum to help navigate through the thorns they will face. Emotional maturity is evidenced by the ability to accept life's challenges objectively, with freedom from superstition and prejudice (Jordan, 1939), developing the capability to be accountable for one's life and actions. Goleman's (1995) five domains of emotional intelligence could be integrated into preservice curriculum to help students gain skills in self-motivation, handling relationships, and managing their emotions. If preservice teachers are educated about coping strategies and developing emotional intelligence to make wise career and family-related decisions, perhaps they will encounter fewer thorns and experience deeper job satisfaction, leading to retention.

Teachers in this study can serve as a model to help teachers in the establishment phase make wise decisions, leading to retention within the profession. Super's theory does not fix itself on age categories; therefore, teachers can experience any one of the stages at any time, resulting in the ability to adjust work and/or personal life according to one's unique life circumstances.

Agricultural education researchers should continue to examine career teachers by exploring their ability to transition from one stage to the next. Administrative support was critical to the success of the teachers; therefore, it is recommended to also investigate administrators who are supportive of agriculture teachers to identify characteristics desired by administrators to achieve a conducive work environment.

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