

On the Outside Looking In: What Are Students Taking Away from the Teach Ag Academy?

Rebecca Mott, Jon Simonsen

301 Gwynn Hall, Columbia, MO 65211

573-882-1208

mottr@missouri.edu

simonsenj@missouri.edu

Introduction

Each year the University of Missouri hosts a summer Teach Ag Academy. The goal of the three day academy is to expose high school students to what it is like to be an Agricultural Education teacher. Activities at the academy include: interaction with current teachers, introduction to cutting edge agriculture curriculum, presentations by state agriculture staff, and campus exposure including an athletic facility tour and experiential activities to further develop communication and leadership skills. Upon completion of the experience the question is always what did the students take away from the experience. In an attempt to answer this question the researchers utilized Photovoice. This innovative evaluation project addresses AAAE Research Priority 3.2: “What methods, models, and practices are effective in recruiting agricultural leadership, education, and communication practitioners (teachers, extension agents, etc.) and supporting their success at all stages of their careers?” (Roberts, Harder, and Brashears (Eds), 2016. This project explored how the Teach Ag Academy impacted students who attended. Ultimately, the goal is to describe components of the Teach Ag Academy that are most beneficial in recruiting youth into the field of Agricultural Education.

How it Works

Photovoice is a participatory action research process that allows participants to tell a story through the use of pictures (Wang & Burris, 1997). This method will allow educators involved with the academy the possibility of seeing the program through the eyes of youth participants. Photographs, combined with written and spoken language, are a powerful communication tool that allows for more richness and depth than traditional survey methods (Wang & Burris, 1997). This project allows academy participants an opportunity to engage with others from similar backgrounds and experiences, using group dialogue to build on each other’s thoughts. Through the project, participants become familiar with one another, building ties and friendships within the peer support group that will prepare them to solve problems and work together (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000). Additionally, the PhotoVoice project gives youth an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives with Agricultural Education Faculty, University Missouri administrators, and parents. Perspective gained from the youth will help Agricultural Education faculty evaluate and improve future Teach Ag Academies.

There were 13 high school upperclassmen that chose to participate in the project and each were asked to:

1. Using a phone or camera, take pictures that show how the Teach Ag Academy is impacting them. These pictures may be of anything that represents their story.
2. Choose the photo that best explains their most impactful experience at the Academy.
3. Write a description (250 words or less) that tells about their photo.
4. Reflect and participate in a discussion with others at the camp about their photo and experiences at the academy. Discussion was facilitated by the researchers and audio recorded.

An adapted SHOWeD model of questioning was used (Wallerstein, 1994, Wang, 1999). The researcher also probed deeper on other themes as they emerged. At the close of the academy, researchers examined photos, the audio recording of the discussion, and students’ writings. Transcriptions were hand coded and examined for significant statements that provided an

understanding of how youth see the Teach Ag Academy. Meaningful statements were highlighted. Next, clusters of meaning were developed as these significant statements were categorized and transformed into themes.

Results/Implications

Five essential themes emerged from photos, discussion, and students' writings during the PhotoVoice project. For the sake of brevity participant quotes have been withheld.

1. Students realized the breadth and scope of teaching agriculture.

Many students talked about how their ag teachers had inspired them to want to become a teacher. During their experiences at the academy, it occurred to many of them the extent of knowledge, skills, and responsibility that successful ag teachers have to possess.

2. Students felt the academy gave them the courage to leave their comfort zone and follow their passion.

Although students saw that ag teachers have tremendous responsibilities, many spoke about the academy providing them with the courage they needed to pursue a teaching career. They knew the journey would not be easy, but also knew that they needed to leave their comfort zones in order to grow.

3. The academy validated students' career choices and/or college choices.

Several students shared that being at the academy confirmed their plans to go into the field of agricultural education or attend school at the University of [State].

4. Students realized that there is more than one way to teach.

Students were exposed to innovative teaching methods and techniques, and participated in many hands-on experiences throughout the academy. Several students realized that not all educators teach the same way as their high school ag teacher.

5. Students felt they made connections with others with similar passions.

Many students had a sense that they would connect with some of these same people again in college. They believed that they would easily connect again and be friends because of their shared experience of being at the academy together and passion for agriculture.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

During rich conversation and deep reflection, it became clear that the vast majority of students wanted to become agriculture teachers because they had been so inspired by their own teacher. Many students look to this person as a hero, and want to pass on to others what that teacher has given them. However, when sharing their career plans, they are often told, "You are smart. Why would you want to be a teacher? You can do more with your life than that." It is a challenge to recruit the best and the brightest to teach when they are hearing this message. It appears that getting students on campus and into a teaching mindset helps them find the courage to pursue their passion and confirm career plans. More research that seeks to obtain student perspectives is needed at other institutions to determine if bringing younger high school students to campus for similar programs is an effective recruitment method.

Costs/Resources

There was not any cost of the project beyond the time of the researchers. The youth in this study all had cell phone access to take and transmit the pictures. When utilizing the process of Photovoice, one would want to have access to additional picture taking devices if participants did not have access to a device.

References

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