

**Pre-Service Agriscience Teacher Perceptions of Their Preparation to Teach Diverse Underrepresented Populations**

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### **Introduction**

With the globalization of classrooms, teachers may be facing greater expectations and challenges relative to understanding and embracing diverse underrepresented cultures in their learning environments. As the classroom continues to become more diverse, innovative teaching methods are needed for preparing educators to meet the needs of learners, and to recruit underrepresented populations into agriscience education programs (Davis & Jayaratne, 2015). Sleeter (2001) highlighted several challenges facing pre-service teacher candidates related to diverse underrepresented populations including: a lack of cross-cultural background and knowledge, naivety and stereotypic beliefs of diverse learners, and a lack of awareness and understanding of discrimination.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) provided a foundation for building the theoretical framework to guide the study. Culturally Responsive Teaching requires cultural proficiency and the positive inclusion of cultural resources during the teaching and learning process (Gay, 2013). To truly implement CRT, one must go beyond respecting others cultures; one should learn factual information about the groups being served.

Cultural Critical Consciousness (CCC) also contributed to the theoretical framework for this study. Developing CCC pushes beyond recognizing diversity; it involves the act of self-reflection, understanding across cultural groups, and modifying the environment through equity practices (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011). As in CRT, each individual must first understand one's own culture, and then become aware of the cultures around him/her (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to describe pre-service, secondary, public school, agriscience teachers' perceptions of their preparation to teach diverse underrepresented populations. The study was guided by the following research objectives: describe the types of cultural immersion programs undergraduate students in Agriscience Education are attending; describe pre-service teachers' knowledge of diverse underrepresented populations in secondary, public school agriscience education learning environments; and describe the ways in which pre-service secondary, public school agriscience teachers plan to recruit diverse underrepresented populations into their learning environments.

The research was a descriptive, qualitative research design that utilized a self-contained focus group (Morgan, 1988). The population for this study was pre-service teachers (N= 12) enrolled in the Agriscience Education (ASE) degree program at The Ohio State University. The structure of the focus group interview was a combination of two structures outlined by Patton (1990); a combined standardized written response question period and an open-ended question period. To minimize bias in the students' responses, the researcher used external personnel to moderate and transcribe the focus group interview.

### **Results**

Participants were asked, specifically, what cultural immersion programs they had attended at The Ohio State University that related to diversity. Participants' answers were

categorized into six themes. In order of frequency mentioned, these themes included: *coursework, campus cultural events, Greek life, study abroad, student organizations, and resident life*. In addition to this question, participants were asked how they found out about these opportunities. Five themes emerged including: *becoming more knowledgeable, required, sounded interesting, networking, and showing support*.

Additionally, participants were asked to define both diversity and underrepresented populations, in their own words. When defining *diversity*, all participants used the words different, differing, differences, or various in their definition. The word *different* was usually tied to words such as, characteristics, appearances, race, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, education level, and culture. Definitions for *underrepresented* varied between participants. Common themes of wording that emerged related to: minority groups of individuals who lack a voice within the majority group, or a group of people not proportionally present during a given scenario, and lastly, minority groups not represented at all.

Later in the focus group protocol, participants were asked what types of diversity they were seeing at their cooperating schools. The most prominent theme was *very little diversity*; most participants only spoke of race as diversity, indicating that the schools in which they were working are predominately Caucasian, with a few African-American or Hispanic students represented in the school population. A few participants also added *socioeconomic status*, with race. Other areas of diversity mentioned once were *sexual orientation, religion, and education*.

Finally, participants were asked how they felt they could recruit *diverse* populations of students into their future agriscience education programs. The most prominent response from participants included, making the program appealing to individuals from all backgrounds and not focusing on recruiting any one type of student.

## **Conclusions**

Pre-service teachers tended to see diversity and underrepresentation as relating predominately to race. During responses to definitions and identification of diverse and underrepresented populations, participants focused on racial differences. The researcher concluded that participants were not examining diversity in its broadest sense. Sleeter (2001) found similar themes related to lack of cultural proficiency in pre-service teachers. It was further concluded that pre-service teachers might not know how to identify underrepresented populations. When asked to identify or recruit underrepresented populations, participants made general statements related to making the Agriscience program appealing to all audiences. No comments were made indicating how participants would identify who the underrepresented populations were in their communities.

## **Recommendations & Implications**

It is recommended that diverse underrepresented populations be discussed more purposefully throughout the pre-service Agriscience Education immersion experiences at The Ohio State University. The discussions need to be tied to the cultural proficiency course concept of understanding that there is always *my perspective, your perspective, and the missing perspective* (Marsh, Marsh, Whittington, 2012), in all learning environments. If purposeful activities are created for encouraging conversations related to diverse underrepresented populations, in the broadest sense of the definition, students will become more familiar and more comfortable with applying culturally responsive teaching concepts in their agriscience education programs.

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