

Exploring Motivations of Volunteers to Teach Agriculture in West Africa

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Introduction / Need for Research

AgriCorps is a non-governmental organization which seeks to aid in the alleviation of hunger and poverty in West African countries. The mission of AgriCorps is operationalized through a model that immerses American agriculture graduates in high-need communities for one year (AgriCorps, 2018). During their year of service, fellows are tasked with teaching agriculture in the local primary or secondary school, developing the local 4-H program, and assisting farmers with their operations. Often, fellows are recent college graduates, have limited professional experience, and little-to-no teaching experience. Why then, would they volunteer to teach agriculture alone in a rural African community for one year?

While motivations to volunteer abroad and motivations to teach agriculture have been studied, little is known about connections between the two. Research investigating motivational factors to engage in volunteer activities has largely pointed to multi-motivational goals (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Motivations to volunteer specifically for international experiences include altruism and egoism (Mustonen, 2007; Rehberg, 2005), travel and adventure (Stoddart & Rogerson 2004), cultural immersion and exchange (Wearing, 2001) and personal growth and learning (Otoo, 2013). Literature exploring why teachers are motivated to choose education as a career suggests intrinsic, altruistic, and extrinsic factors at play, and often a combination of reasons for choosing to teach (Thomson, Turner, & Nietfeld, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

We utilized a functional approach to understand what motivated AgriCorps fellows to volunteer to teach agriculture in West Africa. A functional approach is “the attempt to understand the reasons people hold the attitudes they do” (Katz, 1960, p.170). Reasons which, according to Katz (1960), are motivations existing at the psychological level. People seek out volunteer activities and make decisions about engaging and continuing volunteer activities to serve varied individual functions (Clary & Snyder, 1999). The guiding functionalist principle is “that these decisions and behaviors depend on the match of an individual’s motivations to the opportunities afforded by the volunteering environment” (Clary & Snyder, 1999, p.157-158).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations of AgriCorps fellows to teach agriculture in West Africa. To explore this, we conducted one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the 2017-2018 AgriCorps fellows ($N = 8$) during the summer of 2017 while fellows were engaged in their preservice training. The interviews were between 10 and 15 minutes long during which participants were asked to discuss their motivations for joining AgriCorps, their motivations for wanting to teach agriculture in West Africa, the experiences that prepared them, their expectations, and what they were most nervous and excited for in regards to teaching agriculture in West Africa. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture the rich and detailed responses of the participants (Maxwell, 2005). We used a retroductive method (Bulmer, 1979; Katz, 1988) of data analysis, which included close readings of the data, open coding, focused coding, and integrative memoing through an iterative process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). As salient themes emerged, we searched for discrepant evidence and negative cases to

ensure valid conclusions (Maxwell, 2005). We received institutional review board approval to conduct this study.

Results/Findings

While our initial research question was to explore motivations of AgriCorps fellows to teach agriculture in West Africa, it became evident as the interviews unfolded that participants largely were not motivated to teach agriculture at all. Rather, teaching was largely seen as a distant role they had not given much consideration. In light of this, three themes emerged from the interview data including, (a) teaching as a shortcoming, (b) teaching as complementary yet circumstantial, (c) teaching as pivotal. Two participants viewed teaching as a shortcoming of the AgriCorps experience. Justin for example said, “At first I was like thinking of teaching as a downside.” Similarly, Samuel was doubtful about the prospect of teaching saying, “teaching is actually nowhere near on my playlist of things to do”. Four participants viewed teaching as complementary yet circumstantial to the AgriCorps experience, indicating that the teaching component sounded intriguing. For these participants, teaching was discussed as something they would do during their time abroad, but not as a long-term career option. Two individuals, the only participants who held degrees in agricultural education, viewed the teaching role of AgriCorps as a pivotal component of their experience and a driving force in their decision to pursue AgriCorps. For example, Beth, when asked about her motivations to teach agriculture in West Africa, stated matter-of-factly, “I’ve always wanted to teach”. Julia, on the other hand, spoke about her motivations to teach agriculture as stemming from a “little fuzzy feeling” that blossomed into long-term career goals to teach agriculture.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

It became evident that participants in this study were largely unmotivated to teach agriculture in West Africa. Rather, the teaching component of their position as an AgriCorps fellow was seen as a shortcoming or a complementary yet circumstantial component of the experience. Katz’s (1960) functional theory posits that motivations to engage in a particular volunteer experience align with an individual’s motivations. Our data revealed teaching agriculture largely did not serve as a function of their motivation to engage in AgriCorps. Future research should include more broad inquiry about why fellows apply for AgriCorps. This may illuminate other functions of motivation to become an AgriCorps fellow or an international agriculture volunteer. More research is needed concerning the specific functions of various motivational factors on the decision to volunteer to teach internationally. For instance, does the teaching component begin to serve a more important function over time, or is the “strength” of other motivational factors enough to overcome the perceived circumstantial function of the teaching component? Answering these questions will provide practical implications related to recruitment of AgriCorps fellows and other international volunteers.

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