

Kansas Ag Teachers' Perceptions of Diversity & Inclusion in Agricultural Education

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Introduction/Literature Review

Agricultural education programs continue to become more diverse and dynamic. However, diversity does not necessarily ensure equity or inclusion (Elliott & Lambert, 2018). Vincent (2010) stated the variety of multicultural training, years of teaching and other teacher characteristics correlated with the ethnic diversity of FFA membership, and in the same sense, agricultural education enrollment. Agricultural education teachers' perceptions of *diversity inclusion* in their programs are variables that may have a strong influence on the number of students who enroll in agricultural education (LaVergne et al., 2012). Agriculture teachers within diverse FFA chapters have a higher multicultural knowledge score than teachers in non-diverse FFA chapters (Vincent & Torres, 2015). Problems for creating proper multicultural understanding and teaching concerns result from the lack of essential multicultural preparation, isolation of teachers among their ethnic groups, and the possession of professional training that excludes direct, meaningful interaction with different cultures (Vincent et al., 2014). As schools continue to become more ethnically diverse, so too should school-based agricultural education programs (Bowen & Rumberger, 2002). In order for agricultural education programs to maintain success, a thorough understanding and recognition of students of color and students with disabilities must be relevant to agricultural education teachers (LaVergne, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

LaVergne's (2008) conceptualization of diversity inclusion served as the framework for this study. The practice of diversity inclusion encompasses strategies of multicultural education, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching. Agricultural educators who desire to promote diversity and inclusion in their programs and FFA chapters welcome all learners by actively engaging them in secondary agricultural education programs regardless of their race, ethnicity, or exceptionality (LaVergne, 2008). Diversity inclusion is also the act of acknowledging these differences and in turn, fostering an atmosphere to teach every student effectively in the classroom. LaVergne et al. (2012) found that agricultural education teachers' attitudes about the perceptions of diversity inclusion influenced in their education practices. The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine the perceptions of diversity and inclusion in agricultural education of Kansas agricultural education teachers.

Methodology

The following objectives guided the study: 1) Determine Kansas Ag Ed teachers perception of diversity and inclusion, 2) Identify strategies to increase diversity and inclusion among Kansas Ag Ed programs. A researcher-developed survey was distributed to purposely selected participants ($N = 65$) via Qualtrics in February 2019. The survey consisted of 10 multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions. The responses were analyzed for common themes. There were efforts to establish reliability and validity of the instrument. Limitations exist in the mode of data collection used for this study. Teachers were selected from each of the state's seven districts to allow representation from across the state. Also, the school location, school size, and years of experience teaching were used to select the participants. After two follow-up emails, a response rate of 51% was obtained ($n = 33$). The average number of students in each program was 69.4 with an average FFA membership of 65.6. Majority of teachers were in the 6-10 years ($n = 11$, 33.33%) and 2-5 years ($n = 11$, 27.27%) experience ranges. Additionally, data were collected on program type with 60.61% ($n = 20$) of respondents not from an FFA Affiliated program, while

39.39% ($n = 13$) were Affiliated.

Findings

Findings for objective one focused on teachers' definitions of diversity and inclusion. The central theme found in the definition of diversity was *differences*. Several teachers responded that diversity included differences in thoughts, cultures, and beliefs, gender, learning styles, and religion. "*Diversity is when a population (i.e., students in an FFA program) is made up of multiple races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, and cultural backgrounds.*" The main themes found in defining inclusion were acceptance, participation, and opportunity. One response included, "*Inclusion means that everyone has the opportunity to participate no matter their limitations.*" Others stated that acceptance and sense of belonging were elements of inclusion as well as open-mindedness and appreciation of one's differences, "*accepting everyone without judgment.*" Additionally, teachers reported the size of the school determined whether an FFA chapter was diverse or not, including whether a program was traditional or nontraditional. "*Really, in my opinion, I consider diverse FFA programs to be the non-traditional ag programs usually...I think of programs that are at 6A size schools.*"

The second research objective identified strategies to increase diversity and inclusion. We identified three themes related to training in diversity and inclusion: 1) little/no prior training, 2) coursework from college, and 3) professional development offered from the school district. Most responses indicated no prior training. Some teachers took classes during their pre-service education while others had one to two-day workshops offered by their school districts. One teacher replied, "*Just the courses offered in my block classes in college, as well as a few sessions in our school's professional development.*" Several teachers reported they learned through experience and being in the classroom. The most common type of training suggested was that in the form of workshops. However, several teachers responded they were not sure what kind of training they needed or wanted. One response was, "*I am not sure. I think it is important, but I don't know where to start on this topic. Sometimes it can be a touchy and hard subject to talk about.*" A few teachers commented they did not want any training. Finally, many teachers suggested including chapter officers and having training at the state's chapter leadership conference.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Teachers described the most prominent differences represented in their classrooms as rural/nonrural backgrounds, sex, and students with special needs. Additionally, there was a perception that *size* of the school equated to increased diversity of a program. In their 2012 study, LaVergne et al. determined there was a statistically significant difference between teachers who taught in a suburban or urban setting and teachers who taught in a rural setting on proposed solutions to increase diversity inclusion in agricultural education programs. Teachers in this study believed they include all students in their program and FFA chapter, but did not have specific strategies to promote diversity and inclusion in their classroom. Increased intercultural sensitivity and multicultural competence may increase teachers' perceptions of and responsiveness to diversity in their classes and communities. According to LaVergne (2008), the success of agricultural education will depend on Ag Ed teachers' ability to provide appropriate instruction to students through diversity and inclusion. More research on diversity and inclusion practices in Kansas is recommended. Additionally, we recommend a statewide commitment to teacher training in diversity and inclusion, professional development specifically targeted to diversity and inclusion, and more coursework in the pre-service curriculum.

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