

Diversifying the Approach: Perceptions of Book Circles as Professional Development

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Introduction/Need for Research

Goal one of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) (2017) strategic plan asks members of the association to “reflect the broader discipline and provide a coordinated response to social science issues affecting agriculture and related sciences” (p. 1) with respect to building a more inclusive culture. Given current events relating to inequities of underrepresented groups, conversations and action surrounding the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are of relevance and importance to society, including the field of school-based agricultural education (SBAE). The challenge of educational inequity is tied to the differences between teachers and students (Howard, 2010). Efforts to promote education equity via professional development focused on DEI within SBAE are challenging as perceptions of SBAE teachers vary greatly concerning the benefits of DEI (Lavergne et al., 2012).

To approach the topic of DEI in the professional development of SBAE teachers, the California Agricultural Teachers’ Association (CATA) implemented a summer book circle focused on a DEI title. Book circles are shown to be more effective than traditional professional development (e.g., conferences, lectures) as participants are actively involved (Blanton et al., 2019). This active engagement includes collaboration, community building, opportunity to interact, and lifelong learning not limited to the professional development event itself (Blanton et al., 2019). Still, there is little research in terms of using book circles to develop teachers (Blanton et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of SBAE teachers after participating in a DEI professional development event organized as a book circle.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Guskey’s (2000) model of teacher change was used to frame this study. The testable, linear model focuses on professional development in the context of the school setting (Guskey, 2002; Boylan et al., 2018). The model has four sequential phases; the professional development event itself, followed by changes in teachers’ classroom practices, changes in student learning outcomes, and changes in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes (Guskey, 2000). To complement this model of teacher change, Guskey (2002) offered a model for evaluating teacher professional development which included five levels: 1) *Participants’ Reactions*, 2) *Participants’ Learning*, 3) *Organization Support and Change*, 4) *Participants’ Use of Knowledge and Skills*, and 5) *Student Learning Outcomes*.

Methodology

This qualitative case study was rooted in constructivism to build upon realities formed from multiple experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The target population was members of the CATA who participated in a book circle focused on implicit bias using the title *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). The researchers used purposive sampling to select participants with respect to key criteria (Richie & Lewis, 2003) and to represent heterogeneity via maximum variation (Patton, 2005). Participants represented a cross section of demographics including sex (1 male and 5 females), years teaching (1-23 years), age (26-45 years old), and race (1 Hispanic or Latinx, 1 African American or Black, and 4 White). Participants also represented a variety of positions within SBAE including secondary educators ($n = 3$), CATA leadership ($n = 1$), department of education leadership ($n = 1$), and the state community college system ($n = 1$).

Participants engaged in 20-minute semi-structured interviews recorded via Zoom, which was also used to generate transcripts. The interview questions were developed using Guskey's (2000) framework and focused on levels two and three (*Organization Support and Change* and *Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills*). Participants were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Items were compared to identify common themes within levels for theoretical triangulation. Constant comparative analysis was used to code items to develop themes, reviewed two times by two researchers. Glaser (1965) suggested revisiting the data as a component offering increased credibility and transferability when using constant comparative analysis. Trustworthiness was established via the researchers' familiarity with the participants; the use of member checks; the triangulation of notes, recordings, and observations; use of an audit trail; and coding of themes (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 2007).

Results/Findings

Concerning *Organization Support and Change*, the first theme was lack of connection. When asked about their organization's support, Denali responded, "my administration actually does not know that I participate in the book circle, they haven't really asked. So I just kind of keep it to myself." The second theme was that of inconsistency. When asked about any barriers to the implementation of strategies learned, while one participant, Zion, said there were no barriers, Joshua admitted societal perceptions and their own current knowledge level as being troublesome. Additionally, the theme of external factors surfaced regularly. These variables included current distance learning environment structures, societal pressures, and scheduling conflicts preventing book circle participation.

With respect to *Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills*, the themes that emerged were empathy, overall awareness, and empowerment. Elias said, "...the impact that the book had on my classroom was that I'm a much better teacher, and I can feel like I can relate to a lot of my different students from all different kinds of backgrounds. I can recognize my own biases that I thought I already knew existed, and clearly I did not know what I was missing out on until I took this until I read this book and participate in that book circle." Participants, like Bryce, also described how they took what they learned and implemented it: "...we've really focused with our officers...on being more inclusive of different cultures, developing virtual activities that appeal to a wider variety of students...and I think it's gotten a really positive response."

Conclusions/Recommendations

This study sought to explore SBAE teachers' perceptions after participating in a DEI professional development book circle. Book circles were perceived to develop participant empathy, overall awareness, and empowerment. However, greater emphasis on the intentionality of these book circles as professional development should be reinforced when interacting with site administration as well as how to encourage greater SBAE teacher participation. While teachers felt they better related to others and were empowered in their own teaching spaces, they still did not appear to be comfortable sharing their experience with others.

Future research is needed to better understand the relationship between SBAE teachers and their administration to establish why agriculture teachers failed to communicate about their participation in the book circle. While this research only addressed two levels of Guskey's (2002) evaluation framework, additional research should explore teacher perceptions across the remaining evaluation levels. Emphasis should be placed on exploring the impact on student learning outcomes and overall change in teacher beliefs and attitudes (Guskey, 2000).

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