

**Sparkling Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Conversations Through a Virtual Book Club**

Carla B. Jagger  
University of Florida

Bradley M. Coleman  
University of Florida

Heather L. Young  
University of Florida

Peyton E. Sweet Moore  
University of Florida

J.C. Bunch  
University of Florida

307B Rolfs Hall  
Gainesville, FL 32611  
(352) 294-1992  
carlajagger@ufl.edu

## Sparking Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Conversations Through a Virtual Book Club

### Introduction

We have seen a trend over the years of our classrooms becoming more diverse. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that our overall student enrollment (K-12) has increased from 47.2 million to 50.7 million between the years 2000 and 2017 (Hussar et al., 2020). Additionally, the NCES reported the percentage of students who are White dropped from 61% to 48% within the same time period and is projected to drop more by fall of 2029. A potential cultural gap is highlighted when you compare the White student population to the reported 79% White teacher population in 2017 (Hussar et al., 2020). Gay (2010) also noted the cultural gap present between the diversity of teachers and students. Specifically, Gay suggested that educators are not aware of their own cultural biases and assumptions, which could result in their attitudes impeding the teaching and learning process. To aid against impaired learning, there is a growing need for cultural competency training within education (Gay, 2010).

Agricultural educators continue to have a need for professional development around diversity and inclusion practices with their programs, including meeting the diverse needs of learners (Coleman et al., 2020; Hoerst & Whittington, 2009; Roberts et al., 2020; Smalley et al., 2020). Eck et al. (2019) identified nine diversity and inclusion effective characteristics of school based agricultural education teachers through a national Delphi study including understands diversity, is culturally relevant, and advocates for all students. To help meet these demands and build effective characteristics, continuous conversations should be had surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in multiple settings so teachers can build their skills throughout the year. The purpose of this virtual book club was to create a space for agriscience teachers to hold conversations centered around DEI within their agricultural education programs and discuss actions they can take to make their programs more inclusive.

### How it Works

The idea for holding a virtual book club came about to address the need for DEI professional development opportunities for agriscience teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. We sent an initial email to all Florida agriscience teachers in August 2020 seeking interest for participation in this style of DEI professional development. Once teachers indicated their interest and provided their top choices for timing of the book club, final plans were established. After looking over teachers' responses, we decided that a four-week series would be the best option to account for the teachers' busy schedules. The book *What If: Short Stories to Spark Inclusion and Diversity Dialogue* (Robbins, 2018), was purchased and shipped to all 19 interested teachers along with the reading schedule on a bookmark. Approximately three short stories were selected for each week of the virtual book club, which typically were not more than 20 pages, for the teachers to read during the week. To accommodate the teachers' fluctuating schedules, two separate one-hour sessions were held each week and participants could attend either session. The virtual book club was held between September 14, 2020 – October 8, 2020.

During the execution of the virtual book club, regular communication with the participants was handled by the facilitator. Reminder emails were sent out Monday morning each week highlighting the reading schedule and providing the Zoom link again. Participants then choose to join the conversations either on Monday or Thursday evening. Discussion prompts

were created prior to each week tied to the scheduled short stories. Although the short stories came with reflection ideas, we felt it was best to create prompts tailored to the teachers' agricultural education programs. Since the book did come with guided reflections, we also highlighted how the teachers could use these short stories with their students to spark DEI conversations and build more inclusive environments in their program. At the conclusion of each week during the series, a follow-up email was sent with the weekly discussion prompts and a summary of the conversations.

### **Results to Date**

Of the 19 teachers who originally signed up and got books shipped to them, eight teachers followed through with the virtual book club generating 33 contact hours of DEI related conversations. Based on the facilitator's reflexive journal and notes, each teacher generated action steps and discussed ways they would work towards creating a more inclusive environment for their students. Weekly discussions were very productive and allowed participants to learn from each other and discuss shared experiences. Overall DEI concepts and themes discussed during the series included: (a) building inclusive environments to help all students thrive, (b) encouraging differing perspectives when solving problems, (c) how our unconscious bias influences the way we act/react/interact with others, (d) reflecting on our current behaviors and how they are perceived by others, and (e) reflecting on DEI efforts already attempted and how to continue making inclusive changes. Most of the discussions circled back around to how they could implement inclusive practices while teaching virtually during their COVID-19 distance or hybrid instruction. Additionally, most of the participants lamented on the lack of overall programming they were able to engage students with outside of classroom instruction while being virtual. All participants tried to offer advice and suggestions on how they could implement any concepts from the book club readings and discussion to support one another in their efforts.

At the conclusion of the series, teachers were very supportive of continuing the virtual DEI book club in the future. A follow-up evaluation of the book club is being created to investigate what teachers have been able to implement based on the conversations held during the series. We have waited to collect this data until April 2021 to allow participants time to build more inclusive programs. We intend to collect survey data from all 19 original participants as well as interview the eight teachers who attended the series. The survey data will evaluate the whole program to help with future implementation, while the interviews will investigate the impact of the series on the participants' agricultural education programs. Additionally, we hope this data will help address the drop of teachers who received the book and who participated in the program so further best practices can be created for future implementation.

### **Resources Needed**

We believe you could either choose our model and purchase the books for the participants or ask them to purchase their own books. We had available funds specifically earmarked for DEI professional development, so it made sense to purchase and ship the books to all participants. Additionally, we created and printed bookmarks to go along with the book which included the reading schedule and Zoom bit.ly link so participants had everything they needed in one place. The total cost for the books, shipping, and bookmarks for this book club series was \$478.33. Additional resources needed are simply, facilitator time, participant time, and Zoom or other virtual meeting space capacity.

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