

Linguistic Diversity: One Piece of the Puzzle to Greater Inclusion in FFA

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The National FFA Organization (FFA) is the largest intracurricular student organization in the United States with approximately 760,000 members representing all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. 115,831 FFA members identify themselves as Latinx (National FFA Organization, 2020) and presumably speak Spanish as their first language. Many chapters in the United States have a large Spanish-speaking membership, and Puerto Rico, a Spanish-speaking territory and FFA member since 1934, conducts all its ceremonies in Spanish (Hurst, 2019). Considering this, generations of Latinx youth in FFA have failed to hear their language legitimized or their identities wholly acknowledged at the national level.

The first priority of the National FFA Research Priority Interests focuses on “making FFA accessible, diverse and inclusive” (Crutchfield, 2013, n.p.), however, there is no mention of the inclusion of diverse languages. Linguistic diversity is essential for FFA and agricultural education in general, given that the Latinx community represents approximately 18.5% of the total U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2019). It is important to note that in recent years, FFA has done an extraordinary job of providing FFA resources in Spanish for Latinx members, however, we advocate for the need for these efforts to be reflected at all levels of FFA, especially at the national level.

To help us frame our research and the development of this philosophical paper, we relied on the concept of linguistic diversity. *Linguistic diversity* is notable when members of an organization or community communicate through different languages, or their first language is different from that of others (Knotter et al., 2011). This is an increasingly common phenomenon in the United States, and educators and education advocates must be prepared to address it. (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Recognizing and promoting linguistic diversity is an important tool for people in terms of identity, communication, and social integration (UNESCO, 2017). We posit that promoting linguistic diversity will pave the way for FFA to promote and legitimize more languages within the organization in the future. In addition, including and promoting linguistic diversity in its agenda will help the organization meet its research priority number one so that more students in agricultural education programs benefit from better academic and professional development.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this philosophical study was to understand the current state of Spanish-language diversity within the National FFA Organization. To achieve this purpose, our guiding objective was to examine published works about Spanish-speaking Latinx youth in agricultural education and FFA. Our objective aligns with the AAAE Research Priority 3, Question 1: “What strategies are effective in recruiting diverse populations into agriculture and natural resource careers?” (Roberts et al, 2016).

Methodology

For this philosophical paper, we chose to employ content analysis which is viewed as “a method for describing and interpreting the written productions of a society or social group” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 166). The documents we reviewed included three different types of published materials, thus allowing us to triangulate data based on research, organizational, and membership perspectives. First, we did a search of published articles from the Journal of

Agricultural Education (JAE), including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies. We also examined the Spanish-language documents and resources created by the National FFA Organization which are available on their website. Additionally, we reviewed online articles published in *FFA New Horizons*, the official magazine of FFA. When searching the JAE database and the FFA website we used key search terms such as *bilingual*, *English language learner (ELL)*, *Latino*, *Latina*, *Latinx*, *Hispanic*, and *Spanish-speaking*. Although not all documents were scholarly in nature, reviewing a variety of documents allowed us to better understand the discussions about Spanish-speaking Latinx youth in FFA.

Findings

When a search was conducted on the JAE database using our selected search terms, we discovered four relevant publications that could have potential impacts on language diversity in FFA. These publications addressed topics such as Latinx ELL student-teacher relationships (Barajas et al., 2021), Latinx student participation in agricultural education programs (Barajas et al., 2021; Elliot et al., 2018; Velez et al., 2018), and Latinx recruitment and participation FFA programs (Roberts et al., 2009). Of these four articles, only the Barajas et al. (2021) article explicitly made connections between language and Spanish-speaking Latinx student's participation in FFA. To examine the resources provided by FFA, we searched in the Spanish Resources database on the FFA website. We found that this database includes over 135 resources and documents including lesson plans, SAE supports, CDE/LDE guides, and the FFA Student Handbook. Additionally, the FFA website also has a Spanish-language version of the FFA manual. A search of articles from *FFA New Horizons* using the same search terms resulted in three relevant articles. An interview with Yomar Roman, a former National FFA officer about Hispanic heritage and agriculture (Mozo, 2020), an article spotlighting a local chapter's decision to conduct bilingual English/Spanish ceremonies (Mozo, 2019), and an article highlighting the Spanish-language opening ceremonies at the 92nd National FFA Convention (Hurst, 2019); each of these mainly focused on language and FFA participation.

Implications and Recommendations

Linguistic diversity is one of the pieces to the puzzle when working to achieve greater diversity and inclusion. Although the FFA has made significant progress over the past decade to be more inclusive of the Spanish-speaking Latinx students including the Spanish opening ceremonies in 2019 and the creation of a wide variety of support documents and resources in Spanish, there is still more that can be done. Our recommendations align with the documents examined and the National FFA Research Priority Interests. The FFA should continue to collect demographic data about its membership but begin including first/home language of students as a data point; this data point has not been published in recent years. This data should be used to inform decision-making to address linguistic diversity. Conducting opening ceremonies in Spanish should become a permanent feature of the National FFA Convention moving forward as a way to further legitimize the language of Latinx youth in attendance. The FFA should also continue to translate and provide Spanish-language documents, lesson plans, and other support documents, however, FFA should also seek to provide professional development opportunities to agricultural educators and FFA advisors to help them effectively use these resources to support Spanish-speaking Latinx students. Furthermore, the lack of research in agricultural education that advances linguistic diversity, particularly among Latinx students, is a gap that needs to be addressed.

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