

From Privilege to Advocacy: The Cultural Growth Experienced by Secondary Agricultural Education Teachers During an International Experience to Costa Rica

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

As the world has become more globally interdependent, the need for cultural competence has become important for secondary teachers across subject areas (Santoro & Major, 2012). Consequently, improving the global and cultural knowledge of secondary agricultural education teachers has become critical (Conner & Roberts, 2013). To this point, some research (Brooks & Williams, 2001; Gorter et al., 2020) has advanced international experiences for secondary agricultural education teachers to gain the knowledge and skills they need to globalize their curriculum. Despite this, little work has explicitly explored how international experiences for secondary teachers may lead to cultural growth that could positively influence agricultural education programs. For this investigation, we used the Cultural Competence Model created by Winters Group (n.d.) as our conceptual lens. The four-stage model describes the linear development that an individual undergoes to become more culturally competent: (1) cultural awareness, (2) cultural knowledge, (3) cultural sensitivity, and (4) cultural competence.

Background of the Study

For this study, eight secondary agricultural education teachers from Louisiana engaged in a one-week international experience in Costa Rica. The teachers participated in a range of opportunities to interact with academic and agricultural experts regarding agricultural and environmental topics. They also collected data to create three instructional case studies during these interactions, i.e., 24 total. To globalize the agricultural education curriculum in Louisiana, the case studies will be distributed to all secondary agricultural education teachers in spring 2022.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural growth of secondary agricultural education teachers from Louisiana after an international experience in Costa Rica. One research question guided the investigation: Did secondary experience any changes regarding their cultural competence during an international experience to Costa Rica?

Methodology

We grounded this investigation in Stake's (1995) instrumental case study design. We bounded the case by place and time, i.e., the secondary agricultural education teachers were from Louisiana and engaged in an international experience to Costa Rica in July 2021. We also embedded Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) standards of qualitative quality into the design of this investigation to promote rigor. Of the teachers, six identified as female and two as male. Meanwhile, their years of teaching experience ranged from three to 28 years. Participants were selected through a competitive application process to ensure diversity. We mobilized 56 audio reflections and 112 photographs and captions as data for this investigation. We further triangulated the data through persistent observations and a two-hour focus group interview with all eight participants on the final day of the international experience. To analyze the data, we used Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding procedures. During the first cycle of coding, all data sources were coded using structural, descriptive, and in vivo approaches (Saldaña, 2021). Then, we used axial coding to scrutinize relationships and reduced them into categories. We also employed thematic analysis to reduce the findings further and emerge the study's four themes during this phase.

Findings

Through our analysis of the data, four themes emerged (1) privilege, (2) over-generalized assumptions, (3) critical comparisons, and (4) cultural advocates. In the first theme, the secondary teachers articulated how their privileged worldviews made their transition to Costa Rican culture challenging. For example, during our observations, we noted that many participants described how the language barrier was a source of discomfort. Further, in a daily reflection, Participant #6 suggested that: "Costa Ricans should be more fluent in English." The second theme, over-generalized assumptions, represented how the secondary agricultural education teachers drew broad conclusions based on limited experiences. For example, during observations, we noted that after visiting an agricultural university, the teachers expressed a misconception that *all* Costa Ricans were highly educated and overwhelmingly proactive regarding sustainability. The third theme, critical comparisons, emerged during the mid-point of the international experience when the teachers began making critical comparisons between Costa Rica and the U.S. As an illustration, in the focus group interview, the teachers spoke about how the U.S. was "very fast-paced" (Participant #1) and "...disjoined from everything else happening [in the world]" (Participant #4). In the fourth theme, cultural advocates, the teachers began to experience shifts. Case in point, toward the conclusion of the experience, the teachers expressed excitement regarding the knowledge and resources they had gathered while in Costa Rica that they hoped to share with their students, colleagues, and community. Participant #2 explained that using visual content from his experience could "immerse students" from a different perspective.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This study sought to examine the cultural growth of secondary agricultural education teachers after an international experience in Costa Rica. Based on the findings of this investigation, we

conclude that the international experience expanded the teachers' cultural competence in critical ways. Therefore, we recommend that decision-makers in states examine ways to promote and, potentially, fund international experiences for secondary agricultural education teachers. We also conclude that the teachers' initial discomfort appeared to catalyze greater cultural knowledge for the teachers in this investigation (Winters Group, n.d.). Although such a notion has been explored in research on undergraduate students (Pigg et al., 2020, 2021; Roberts et al., 2020), this does not seem to have been reported in the literature on international experiences for secondary agricultural education teachers. The findings, therefore, warrant greater attention.

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