

**Preparing Agricultural Education Majors for Racially Diverse Classrooms: Students' Experiences During a Service-Learning Project for Black Youth**

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### **Introduction and Review of Literature**

Changes in demographics in U.S. public schools have created challenges for some teachers and school districts because they have struggled to reduce the achievement gap between racial minority students, especially Black students, and their White peers (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012). Maxwell (2014) argued that these achievement gaps could negatively influence the well-being of the U.S., not only in urban spaces but also in rural areas, by exacerbating the socioeconomic gap between White and minority populations. These trends have also begun to influence the preparation of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers (Roberts et al., 2020). As a result, a need has emerged to prepare SBAE teachers with the dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed to teach students who represent different cultural and racial backgrounds than themselves (LaVergne et al., 2012). One approach that has been advanced to achieve such in teacher preparation has been service-learning (SL) (Roberts et al., 2020). SL has been defined as the merger of academic learning with profound service in which students use critical reflection to connect their learning to issues and problems in a local context (Bingle & Hatcher, 1995). A need emerged to understand whether SL could be used to prepare agricultural education majors for racially diverse classrooms.

### **Background and Purpose of the Study**

This study investigated a SL project for the *Foundations of Agricultural and Extension Education* course at Louisiana State University in the Fall 2020 and 2021 academic semesters. Because the project happened during the COVID-19 global pandemic, it was delivered in a virtual format. We partnered with BigBuddy, an after-school mentoring program that seeks to improve Black youth's academic and professional development in Baton Rouge. Each agricultural education major mentored four Black youth, called a *mentoring pod*, through weekly virtual sessions about career awareness in which the students introduced the youth to various careers in the agricultural and allied sectors. This was accomplished through multiple pedagogical approaches, including formal lessons, readings, and small group discussions. Therefore, using a critical constructionism lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), the purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of agricultural education majors during a SL project for Black youth designed to help prepare them for teaching racially diverse student populations.

### **Methodology**

We employed Stake's (1995) instrumental case study design to ground this study methodologically. In total, 32 (2020 Fall Semester = 20; 2021 Fall Semester = 12) agricultural education majors participated in this study. The agricultural education majors were primarily White ( $f = 29$ ; 90.1%) and female ( $f = 24$ ; 75.0%), with 15 (46.9%) freshmen, 10 (31.2%) sophomores, and seven (21.8%) juniors. The data for this investigation consisted of 219 written reflections, 128 photographs with captions, and focus group interviews, i.e., two total, that occurred at the conclusion of the 2020 and 2021 academic semesters, which lasted for two hours. Throughout the investigation, we promoted qualitative quality by embedding Lincoln's and

Guba's (1985) standards – confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability – throughout each phase. In our data analysis, we used Saldaña's (2021) qualitative analytic approaches to analyze each data source systematically. For this investigation, we used the following first-cycle coding procedures: (a) in vivo, (b) emotion, and (c) values coding. As a result, 682 unique first-cycle codes emerged. To reduce the data, we used axial coding to group similar first-cycle codes into categories. Then, in the final phase of analysis, we used thematic analysis to reduce the categories further and emerge the investigation's themes.

### Findings

The findings for this investigation emerged through three themes: (1) defying stereotypes, (2) recognition of power and privilege, and (3) the reinforcement of professional identity. In the first theme, defying stereotypes, the agricultural education majors expressed how their attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives began to evolve as a result of the SL project. For example, Participant #17 shared in a reflection: "I think Black students are often thought of as low achieving, and we often think they won't be able to keep up in classes." She continued: "However, in my SL project, I realize[d] how bright and remarkable some of these kids are." Meanwhile, Participant #3 shared: "In the media, [Black] people are depicted as criminals and violent. However, in my learning pod, I had some of the sweetest kids ever; it [the SL project] just helped me flip the script in my mind, I guess." When reflecting on their experiences, in the second theme, the agricultural education majors began to recognize how issues of power and privilege negatively affected Black youth. For example, Participant #1 explained, "because of the pandemic, we usually Zoomed [a virtual meeting platform] into the kids' houses. Some of their living situations were pretty eye-opening for me. I forget how lucky I have it." Correspondingly, Participant #14 revealed: "One of my kids apologized for missing the previous week because his cousin was shot. It just kind of made me stop for a few moments because I did not know how to respond. I just don't have any experience with dealing with that heavy of a situation." In the final theme, the agricultural education majors expressed how the SL project contributed to growth in their professional identity as a *teacher*. For example, Participant #1 explained, "I think I was really nervous about teaching before doing this [the SL project]. Now, I feel like I could make a difference in kids' lives that maybe come from a different background."

### Conclusions, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

This investigation sought to describe the experiences of agricultural education majors during a SL project for Black youth that was designed to help prepare them for teaching racially diverse student populations. Using a critical constructionism lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), three themes emerged from our analysis: (1) defying stereotypes, (2) recognition of power and privilege, and (3) the reinforcement of professional identity. As a result, we conclude that the SL project helped the agricultural education majors recognize how various societal forces have created unique obstacles for Black youth. In the future, we recommend that teacher educators create opportunities for students to interact with Black youth more intimately through immersive projects such as SL. We also recommend that teacher educators who use a similar approach consider providing resources for students who may struggle with understanding how such forces may limit opportunities for Black youth.

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