

Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Transformative Learning: A Photovoice Exploring the Impact of Educational Partnerships on Personal Growth and Global Understanding

Introduction & Purpose

From a global standpoint, there exists an increasing need for the enhancement of agricultural educators essential skills repertoire (Barrick et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2014; Kabasa et al., 2015; Lindner et al., 2003; McCormick & Whittington, 2000). One approach to enhance essential skills development (e.g., communication, social and emotional intelligence, critical thinking, etc.) in agricultural educators is to deliver quality international education experiences (Dado et al., 2023; Serin, 2017; Wright, 2020). In July 2023, a group of 10 multidisciplinary educators participated in a USDE funded, month-long immersive trip to Uganda. US educators partnered with Ugandan agricultural educators to catalyze project-based learning agricultural experiences in poultry science and aquaculture at secondary schools in the Northern region of the country. To describe the personal impact of this experience, US participants engaged in a modified photovoice; therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how an immersive international experience impacted US educators.

Method

Researchers employed a modified photovoice. Photovoice is a type of participatory action research (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants engaged in self-observation, capturing images of themselves, their surroundings, and their experience over the month-long trip (Spence et al., 2023). These self-taken photographs served as documentation of their experiences, while observations were made through the naturalistic interpretation of these images and a subsequent focus group discussion (Spence et al., 2023; Wang & Burris, 1997). To analyze the data, researchers paired each speaker with their corresponding photographs and redacted any identifiable details to uphold confidentiality protocols (Jurkowski & Paul-Ward, 2007). Subsequently, researchers applied systematic coding techniques (Jurkowski, 2008) to analyze the transcribed interviews, adhering to the Constant Comparative Method (CCM; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Researchers established trustworthiness and credibility during the investigation by engaging in reflexive journaling, prolonged engagement, audio recordings, verbatim transcriptions of focus group sessions, and the incorporation of photographs and accompanying focus group descriptions and discussions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

This research resulted in 3 themes: (1) Focus on enriching US students' education; (2) Relation to Ugandan Educators through the care for student education; and (3) Increased cultural competencies and understanding. An emergent theme resulting from this research was a (1) *focus on enriching US students' education*. Throughout the focus group, participants expressed how they kept their US students at the forefront of their minds during the experience. Participants articulated bringing lessons learned and experiences back to their US classrooms to enrich their American students' education. One participant explained, "I think that for me, this project will be an example for my students. So the story behind this project is definitely going to be forefront on the bulletin board in my classroom for students to see that the experience itself, a portion of the components for this will be to carry that forward." This quote reflects on the transformative impact of the experience and the participant's intention to share lessons learned with their students. Throughout the photovoice focus group, participants expressed (2) *relation to Ugandan educators through the mutual care for their students' education*. One participant explained how

their excitement for the students felt mutual with both educators and school administration, stating, “I think that everyone who is at the meeting is completely all in and doing it for the kids” The same participant expressed their excitement for their Ugandan students, stating, “I think in years to come, these gentlemen that are there will look back and remember this moment. So I think it will be perhaps pivotal for some of them, but definitely a moment of pride for them and for the whole school.” Participants expressed the emergent theme (3) *increased cultural competencies and understanding*. This manifested in many forms, including the feeling of having connection through agricultural activities. One participant stated, “so much of my life is where I live, agricultural education. So I thought I would feel more out of my comfort zone, but the day that I got to talk about beekeeping was part of what I do... I think in the United States, I don't always relate the gardening habit that I have... as part of ag business but seeing it on small scale farming here I think has made me realize that I have a lot more in common than I ever realized.” The participant reflected on the cultural exchange and realization of shared experiences between their own agricultural practices and those observed during the trip, highlighting the potential for personal growth, and understanding through exposure to different perspectives.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Analysis of study results led us to conclude that international experiences can enhance educators’ essential skills. The study confirms the potential of international experiences in enhancing the soft skill repertoire of agricultural educators, aligning with existing literature highlighting the benefits of such experiences (Barrick et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2014; Kabasa et al., 2015; Lindner et al., 2003; McCormick & Whittington, 2000). Additionally, we conclude educators participating in an immersive international experience, such as the USDE funded trip to Uganda, resulted in transformative experiences for the US educators involved. These experiences enriched their personal and professional growth as well as having a direct impact on their approach to teaching and engaging with students with potential continuing impact on their US students through the educators’ global experiences. Lastly, it is evident cross-cultural collaboration and understanding increases due to international experiences. Through partnerships with Ugandan educators and engagement in student-focused agricultural projects, the US educators deepened their cultural competencies and developed meaningful relationships with their Ugandan counterparts underscoring the importance of authentic opportunity cross-cultural collaboration in educational initiatives.

Based on these conclusions, we recommend the promotion of international experiences to US educators. Educational institutions and organizations should actively promote and support international experiences for educators, recognizing the value they bring in enhancing teaching effectiveness and fostering global perspectives among faculty members. Additionally, we recommend incorporating experiential learning components, such as international projects and partnerships, into educational curricula. This has the potential to provide teachers and students with valuable cross-cultural experiences and enhance their understanding of global issues. Finally, we recommend further research be conducted to explore the long-term impacts of immersive international experiences on educators, and how it impacts their US students. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into the sustained benefits to the US educational system by supporting educators’ ongoing development through international experiences.

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