

**Do You Belong? Stories from Minority FFA Members and
Their Feelings Towards the Florida FFA Association**

Sophia Jaramillo-Vasquez

Dr. Carla Jagger

Dr. Katrina Alford

Dr. Stacy Vincent

325 Cooper Drive Lexington, KY 40502

(407) 473-1580

sophia.jaramillo@uky.edu

carlajagger@ufl.edu

trini@ufl.edu

stacy.vincent@uky.edu

Introduction

Since the creation of the National FFA Organization in 1928, the organization has become more inclusive over the course of its existence, allowing membership to people of color and women. As the organization has developed, conversations regarding agricultural education have increasingly shifted to focus on the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the years since (Elliot & Lambert, 2018; LaVergne et al., 2012; Vincent et al., 2015). In a 2013 study that assessed FFA chapter demographics in relation to schools and communities, the primary membership demographics across chapters were found to be 55% male, 45% female, 80% reported as white, 19% as other ethnicities. This led to the conclusion that as diversity has increased in schools, that diversity has not been reflected in agricultural education programs, (Lawrence et al., 2013). As agricultural education programs continue to be established in more diverse urban areas, more research must be done to explore how agriculture teachers and programs can overcome barriers to student participation (Martin & Kitchel, 2014). The purpose of this study is to investigate how minority members feel about their sense of belonging during their involvement in the Florida FFA association.

Theoretical Framework

The primary epistemology for this study is based on social constructivism. Social constructivism was originally developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who argued that cognitive functions originate from social interactions and highlighted the importance of the relationships between individuals in forming knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism outlines that knowledge is the result of active cognizing by individuals; cognition is an adaptive process; cognition organizes and makes sense of an individual's experiences; and that knowledge roots back to biological construction, and social, cultural, and language-based interactions (Doolittle & Camp, 1999). To understand how individuals form knowledge and learn, it is vital to understand the influence of social interaction (Doolittle & Camp, 1999; Young & Collin, 2004). In an educational context, social constructivism can guide thought on how educators' social experiences impact the treatment of students with different backgrounds and experiences (Smagorinsky, 2007). Because thinking is social in origin, individuals often assume that their own knowledge is the accepted norm (Smagorinsky, 2007). Social constructivism accounts for the ways that power, economics, politics, and social factors impact how people build knowledge and learn about the world (Yilmaz, 2008).

Methodology

The methodology for this study utilizes a qualitative multiple case study approach (Yin, 2014). Each participant was treated as a single case and cross-case analysis was utilized with all the cases. The 5 participants (n=5) were recruited through snowball sampling through email and in-person. The participant sample is minorities who have been a member of Florida FFA. For the purpose of this study, minorities are defined as individuals of non-European descent and who do not identify as white. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide instrument (Longhurst, 2003) and lasted about 120 minutes. One participant interview was conducted in-person and 4 were conducted online with video conferencing. Participants were asked to create or supply artifacts (drawings, word clouds, photos, and cartoons/memes) with the interview, but not all artifacts were received. Data was analyzed using constant comparative data analysis and coding was based on the four factors outlined in social constructivism: power, economics, politics, and social factors. Field notes were taken during each interview and the researcher kept a reflective journal after each interview.

Results

Findings were organized into four central themes: power, economics, politics, and social factors. The interview responses outlined how the leadership presence held by the state, in the form of state officers and state staff, influenced the perceived power dynamic in the state association. Economics seems to largely impact what participants felt the targeted image of FFA to be, this included how participants felt the “ideal FFA member” looked and acted like. Several artifacts were collected to illustrate this image. Several participants also mentioned the impact that socioeconomic status had on their ability to assimilate and feel a sense of belonging to other members. The influence internal politics had within the Florida FFA Association were also seen in the interviews. Some participants mentioned the impact their advisor’s political views regarding the FFA had on them as members. One participant notably discussed an experience at FFA State Convention, and how conventional political figures lessened his feelings of belonging because of the conservative viewpoints. Lastly, all participants discussed several social factors that led to their involvement and feelings of belonging – or lack thereof. A lack of adequate representation, presence of cliques between members, encountering insidious discrimination, cultural differences, and sense of local community were all prominent social factors.

Conclusions

Overall, the primary conclusion is a need for action by the Florida FFA Association regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. All participants in this study recounted experiences of insidious discrimination. This discrimination must be addressed in order to increase diverse student membership’s feeling of belonging and to increase involvement. In order to combat the negative impacts of these microaggressions, which include a drop in participation, it is recommended to reframe education to include deeper cultural reflection, prepare educators to respond appropriately to microaggressions, and acknowledge individual biases that educators and students have. The image of Florida FFA also needs to be more reflective of its membership to increase diverse membership. Perceiving connection and feeling a sense of belonging to a group is largely intertwined with social identity (Ashford & Mael, 1989). This leads to the conclusion that more diverse representation is required for students to feel more welcome (Lawson et al., 2021).

Recommendations

The Florida FFA Association can act by creating opportunities for members to explore their identities, revisiting leadership trainings and materials with a critical lens, and increasing transparency and communication regarding actions taken by the board of directors. The researchers of this study recommend that teacher preparation programs work to address concepts surrounding racism, microaggressions, imagery in classrooms, proper verbiage and language, and integrating culture in curriculum. Students should be encouraged to express themselves openly through clothing, music, and hairstyles. More diverse representation is needed in Florida FFA. Images and examples of achievements made by people of color should be shared in curriculum, marketing, and decorations. Speakers from various backgrounds should also be invited to participate at state events and activities. Participants also made explicit recommendations to the researchers which included: providing materials in multiple languages; increasing diversity-based education regarding the agricultural industry; having Florida FFA take a firm stance on the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion; creating consequences for discriminatory behavior; and the creation of a state staff position that specializes in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

References

- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20-39. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4278999>
- Doolittle, P. E., & Camp, W. G. (1999). Constructivism: The career and technical education perspective. *Journal of Vocational and Technical Education*, 16(1), 23-46. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jcte.v16i1.706>
- Elliott, K. M., & Lambert, M. D. (2018). Urban and rural Latino students' experiences in agricultural education: Toward defining rural privilege. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(3), 198-212. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.03198>
- LaVergne, D. D., Jones, W. A., Elbert, C. D., & Larke, A., Jr. (2012). The effect of teacher demographic and personal characteristics on perceptions of diversity inclusion in agricultural education programs. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 53(3), 84-97. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2012.03084>
- Lawrence, S., Rayfield, J., Moore, L. L., & Outley, C. (2013). An analysis of FFA chapter demographics as compared to schools and communities. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 54(1), 207-219. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2013.01207>
- Lawson, C., Doerfert, D., & Filson, C. (2021). State FFA Association Use of Instagram to Promote Membership Diversity. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 62(2), 97-118. <http://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2021.02097>
- Longhurst, R. (2003). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. *Key Methods in Geography*, 3(2), 143-156.
- Martin, M. J., & Kitchel, T. (2014). Barriers to participation in the National FFA Organization according to urban agriculture students. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(1), 120-133. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.01120>
- Smagorinsky, P. (2007). Vygotsky and the Social Dynamics of Classrooms. *The English Journal*, 97(2), 61-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30046790>
- Vincent, S. K., & Torres, R. M. (2015). Multicultural competence: A case study of teachers and their student perceptions. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 56(2), 64-75. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2015.02064>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (M. Cole, V. Jolm-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>
- Yilmaz, K. (2008). Constructivism: Its theoretical underpinnings, variations, and implications for classroom instruction. *Educational Horizons*, 86(3), 161-172. www.jstor.org/stable/42923724
- Yin, R. K. (2014). Case study research: Design and methods. SAGE.
- Young, R. A., & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64, 373-388. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2003.12.005>