

Professional Learning of Preservice Agricultural Educators Through Global Immersion

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Introduction/Need for Research

The increasing cultural and global complexity of agricultural systems highlights the need for preparation experiences that intentionally develop culturally responsive and globally aware agricultural educators. Preservice agricultural educators are expected to help students understand food and fiber systems shaped by global trade and diverse local practices; however, research has identified barriers to preservice agricultural science teachers' participation in international experiences (Murphrey et al., 2016). Research on international and intercultural experiences in teacher education suggests that immersive contexts can foster changes in cultural perspectives, professional identities, and teaching orientations (Byker & Putman, 2019; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Oh & Nussli, 2014). Within agricultural education, global professional development experiences are often viewed as enrichment rather than an essential component of teacher preparation, and little is known about how they influence preservice agricultural educators' professional learning and future teaching practice. Therefore, this study explored the following research question: How does participation in a global agricultural immersion experience influence preservice agricultural educators' professional learning and future teaching practice?

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which suggests that meaningful learning occurs when individuals encounter experiences that challenge prior assumptions and prompt critical reflection, resulting in shifts in beliefs and practice. Global immersion can function as a *disorienting dilemma*, requiring adaptation to unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and agricultural contexts (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Oh & Nussli, 2014). Through dialogue and reflection, learners may revise their frames of reference by reconsidering effective teaching, cultural understanding, and agricultural practice. Guided by this framework, the Puerto Rico experience was conceptualized as an immersive professional learning opportunity capable of providing conditions for perspective transformation.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995) was used to explore how preservice agricultural educators made meaning of a week-long agricultural immersion experience in Puerto Rico through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997). Participants included four preservice agricultural educators who completed a week-long global agricultural immersion experience focused on Puerto Rico's agricultural systems, culture, and education. The program immersed participants in Puerto Rico's agricultural systems, schools, and culture through farm and agribusiness tours, school visits, interactions with agricultural professionals, and structured reflection. Data were collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. Interview transcripts were analyzed using an iterative three-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2016), including open coding, category development, and refinement into overarching themes aligned with the research question and theoretical framework. Trustworthiness was supported through iterative transcript review, researcher collaboration, and ongoing refinement of the coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Results/Findings

Three professional learning outcomes emerged from participants' descriptions of the Puerto Rico immersion experience: (a) global and cultural awareness, (b) agricultural systems understanding, and (c) teaching and professional orientation. Participants described increased intercultural awareness through authentic engagement with local communities, including learning to understand "what people are meaning to say instead of what they're literally saying" when communicating across language differences. Participants also described greater awareness of the social, environmental, and cultural factors shaping agricultural communities. They further reported an expanded understanding of agricultural systems by comparing production practices in Puerto Rico with those of the mainland United States. As one participant reflected, "*What happens when you can't just grow alfalfa?*" illustrating how the experience challenged assumptions about agriculture and highlighted the influence of environmental and cultural contexts on production decisions. Finally, participants described applying these experiences to their future careers by reaffirming their commitment to agriculture, recognizing the importance of becoming "a good multicultural educator," and identifying new ways to help students develop "a bigger global perspective." Collectively, participants viewed the immersion experience as a catalyst for professional learning beyond disciplinary knowledge.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that a global agricultural immersion experience contributed to preservice agricultural educators' professional learning by broadening intercultural awareness, expanding understanding of agriculture as context-dependent, and shaping future teaching intentions. Rather than simply increasing agricultural knowledge, the experience prompted participants to critically examine familiar assumptions about agriculture, culture, and education while considering how those perspectives could influence their future practice. Participants described learning beyond disciplinary content, including a greater appreciation for interconnected agricultural systems and culturally responsive teaching. These findings suggest that intentionally designed global immersion experiences may be meaningful components of agricultural teacher preparation.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Agricultural teacher educators should consider integrating global agricultural immersion experiences into preservice teacher preparation as meaningful professional development opportunities. Programs should intentionally incorporate structured reflection throughout immersion to help preservice teachers connect cultural experiences with agricultural content and classroom practice. Purposeful reflection may strengthen participants' ability to translate global experiences into instructional strategies, agricultural advocacy, and culturally responsive teaching. These experiences may better prepare future educators to develop intercultural competence, systems thinking, and broader perspectives on agriculture. Expanding access to these experiences may also help prepare future agricultural educators to engage diverse learners and communicate the global nature of modern agriculture more effectively. Given the four-participant case, future research should examine similar experiences with additional cohorts, institutional contexts, and destinations, including follow-up after participants enter the teaching profession. Mixed-methods or longitudinal research could examine how global immersion

experiences influence culturally responsive teaching, curriculum decisions, professional identity, and early-career retention over time.

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