TESTIMONIES FROM FOUR AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION STUDENT TEACHERS RELATED TO COMPLETING AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

Grant (1994) and Holt (2001) deemed it necessary to provide international teaching experiences to assist in a teacher's preparation program with the overall goal of becoming globally educated. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a rich description of four student teachers experiences related to completing an international student teaching internship in Australia. It was found that student teachers returned to the United States more confident and independent. In addition, each student teacher was exposed to many global issues and became more globally aware while in Australia. Overall, each student teacher felt that the international student teaching experience was life changing.

Introduction

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1997) had advised universities to assist in developing students in several areas, two of which were leadership and global perspectives. Developing global perspectives can be achieved through many avenues but for student teachers it may be experienced through teaching in an international environment. Grant (1994) and Holt (2001) deemed it necessary to provide international teaching experiences to assist in a teacher's preparation program with the overall goal of becoming globally educated.

Global education is defined as "education that develops the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are the basis for decision making and participation in a world characterized by cultural pluralism, interconnectedness, and international economic competition" (Merryfield, 1995, p.1). Future teachers of agriculture need to experience this global education first-hand as part of their professional development so they can better lead their future students. In addition, learning about cross-cultural experiences and the way in which local agriculture interfaces with national and international agriculture, will place teachers at an advantage in the teaching field.

Cross-cultural experiences, as described by Wilson (1993), develop individuals to have substantive knowledge of other cultures, world issues and global dynamics; perceptual understanding of other people and cultures; personal growth in areas such as leadership, self-confidence and independence; and the ability to establish interpersonal connections with people from other cultures. However, gaining these cross-cultural experiences must be acquired through active engagement by an individual (Piaget, 1954) in order for an individual's leadership, education and knowledge to truly flourish (Dewey, 1938).

Engagement in meaningful activities that are representative of future tasks and obstacles provides optimal learning environments for the individual (Paper, 1991). Furthermore, Blocher (1978) identified seven characteristics which can create an optimal learning

environment. Those characteristics are involvement, challenge, support, structure, feedback, application, and integration.

Student teachers in agricultural education have the unique opportunity to apply and integrate classroom work within the environment (school system). They are eagerly placed into high school classrooms where they can apply classroom knowledge and gain valuable, hands-on teaching experience in a local high school. Student teachers obtain technical and non-technical skills; however, they are only exposed to the current needs of the state and/or communities in which they are involved. Most student teachers are not exposed to international markets, commodities, or education. However, with the changes in agriculture (e.g. globalization) and education (e.g. teaching students from other countries, national teaching standards), future teachers need to experience these changes and associated issues.

A problem in agricultural education is the lack of engagement in global societies (Persons, 2000) and lack of knowledge of how globalization affects the United States and international agribusiness environment. Persons (2000) challenged universities to equip future agriculture leaders with globalization perspectives because of the expanding global society. To substantiate this challenge, statistics were obtained from the Office of Trade and Economic Analysis (2003). Statistics provided Census data on the amount of exports and imports per U.S. citizen over a 40 year period (see Figure 1).

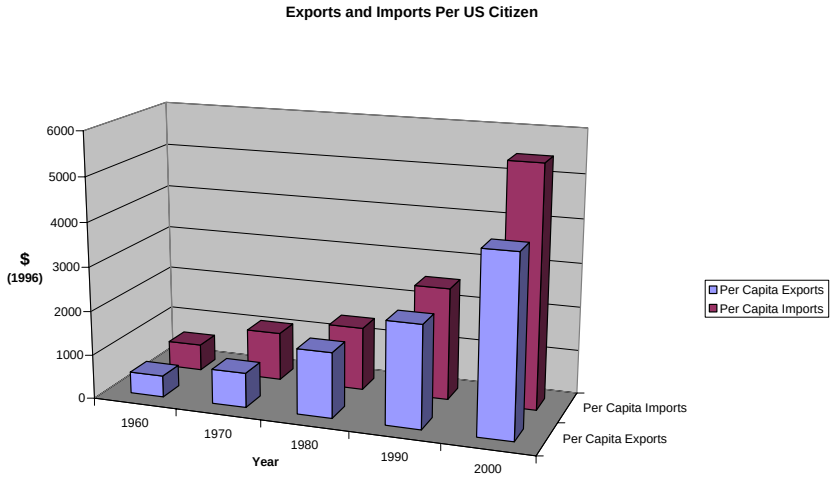

Figure 1. Exports and Imports Per US Citizen

In constant 1996 dollars, on average, U.S. citizens imported $500 worth of products in 1960 compared to $5200 worth of products in 2000. In addition, exports have increased from $200 in 1960 to $3200 in 2000 per U.S. citizen. Based on the substantial increase of import and export goods, teachers of agriculture need to have an understanding of global markets and trade. This understanding will prepare teachers to educate the general public and future agriculturists about causes and effects of globalization.

Student teachers need to experience how global education can impact and improve the U.S. and other countries, states of residence, and local school systems (Mahon & Cushner, 2002). Second-hand learning about the global agricultural system and the ways in which local agriculture interfaces with national and international agriculture places agricultural education teachers at a disadvantage in appreciating and relating the importance of the emerging global economy. Therefore, the disadvantage has created a leadership gap in the agricultural curriculum that must be addressed.

Australian Agriculture

The areas in which students were involved included the Outback and Riverina regions of Australia. In the Outback, Broken Hill was the town selected for the student teaching location. Broken Hill is situated beyond the Darling River on the edge of "sundown", as if there was nowhere further to travel in Australia. In addition, it is home of the "Line of Lode", the seven kilometer strip of what was once the biggest deposit of Silver, Lead, and Zinc in the world. Mining, once a primary economy in Broken Hill, has diminished; however, a small percentage of people (10%) still obtain their income from mining. In addition to mining, sheep and wool production, Quandong (a tart Australian fruit) production, and tourism helps the town of Broken Hill thrive.

The Riverina region, known as the food-bowl of Australia, has diverse agricultural commodities. Some areas of agricultural production are unique to Australia (e.g. quandong production), and some are applicable to the United States (e.g. hay crops, fruits and vegetable production, ornamental horticulture, and sheep production). The Riverina area provides 25% of the state's fruit and vegetable production, 42% of the state's grapes, and 50% of the country's rice production (Landcare New South Wales, 2001). In addition, dairy, beef, and sheep production also provide a significant portion of the area's income (New South Wales Meat Industry Authority, 1999).

International exports and imports are common in NSW. Major enterprises include botanical gardens, orchards, rice, grapes, tomatoes, sweet corn, onions, aquaculture, wheat, barley, oats, hay, dairy, and beef. Also, the Riverina area houses several international agricultural business headquarters. These include Cargill, Buckman Laboratories (provides chemical treatment technologies and extensive technical service to resolve a variety of complex problems), Chargeurs Wool (Australia's largest early stage wool processing plant) and Precision Parts.

Background of Program Set-up

Based on a partnership which was developed three and one half years ago, Charles Sturt University and a Southern University collaborated to provide an international student teaching experience for agricultural education majors. Currently, there are very few countries outside the United States that offer agricultural education as a major. Therefore, these two universities deemed it appropriate to collaborate in order to provide students with the opportunity to increase their global awareness.

After conducting three on-site visits to Wagga Wagga and Broken Hill, NSW, Australia, the university supervisors from a Southern University and Charles Sturt University progressed with the set-up of the international student teaching internship. A student teacher from a Southern University was placed in Broken Hill, NSW, Australia at Willyama High School during the 2005 spring semester. She remained there for eight weeks and was actively engaged in teaching and community activities.

Based on the success of the 2005 student teaching experience, three more student teachers were placed in Broken Hill during the 2006 spring semester. Two males accepted teaching responsibilities at Willyama High School and the female accepted teaching responsibilities at Broken Hill High School. Both cooperating schools engaged student teachers in program planning and curriculum enhancing activities. On a weekly basis, active engagement was given through faculty and departmental meetings to collaborate with other educators.

Background of Student Teaching Schools

Willyama High School is a rich academic school with intense science based learning. Innovative agricultural practices are used in a multi teacher department focused on conservation and sustainable agriculture. An emphasis is placed on plant and soil sciences with experiential learning conducted in agricultural plots on school grounds.

Broken Hill High School transitions modern science based curriculum into more traditional styles of vocational agriculture. Animal sciences and crop production systems are used to enhance an understanding of conventional agriculture on a global perspective. Through working in lab activities on the school farm, learning objectives were achieved with an application based approach to classroom instruction.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a rich description of four student teachers experiences related to completing an international student teaching internship in Australia.

Methods/Procedures

This qualitative study centered on four student teachers experiences related to completing an international student teaching internship. Because the study was focused on unique experiences related to each individual, the qualitative method was utilized (Taylor and Bogden, 1998). Four student teachers were purposely selected because of their interest in international student teaching. One student teacher (Missy) completed her student teaching during the spring 2005 semester. Two males (Donald and John) and one female (Tina) completed their student teaching during the spring of 2006. Furthermore, each student teacher was assigned a pseudonym to insure confidentiality of their statements.

The qualitative method assists researchers in the process of locating emerging themes in the data to construct "grounded, inductive theory" rather than setting preconceived hypotheses and objectives (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Specifically the researcher sought to understand student teachers' experiences by utilizing a case study approach (Merriam, 1998). The case study approach provides the researcher the opportunity to understand the phenomenon at hand in addition to being descriptive about their experiences.

To gain different perspectives of on-going experiences of student teachers, field interviews and visits were conducted periodically, student teacher reflections were collected on a weekly basis, and semi-structured interviews were conducted after the student teaching experience to gather a variety of data. In order for the researcher to be subjective and gain understanding each student teacher's experiences, the researcher also utilized personal documents to express her feelings (Taylor and Bodgen, 1998). The personal documents were used as data for this study. Therefore, all of these documents and the literature by Wilson (1993) guided the interview questions for this study.

One to two field visits were made to each student teacher before departing to Australia. During each field visit, the researcher obtained information through classroom observations and interviews with the student teacher. All four student teachers spent 10 weeks in Australia and were supervised and visited by the university supervisor for one week. During that week, classroom observations were made, community involvement was observed and each student teacher was interviewed once. In addition, each teacher participated in a structured interview at the finale of the student teaching experience. The interviews focused on Wilson's (1993) literature related to cross-cultural experiences and opened ended questions related to their teaching experience. The interview protocol asked for student's personal and professional growth; impact on leadership abilities in and outside the classroom; skills which had been greatly hindered and/or strengthened because of the international student teaching experience; knowledge of other cultures, world issues and dynamics; understanding of other people without stereotypes; self-confidence and independence; and the ability to make interpersonal connections with people of the other cultures. In addition, questions asked were, "How will you utilize the experience to strengthen your teaching and educational advancement; What were your feelings prior to leaving for Australia, and What are your feelings about the international experience now that you are back in the United States?" On a weekly basis, student teacher reflection journals were also collected and analyzed by the researcher.

Field notes were recorded and analyzed. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were taped and transcribed. Emerging themes from all data collection were coded and sorted into specific categories by the researcher (s). Once data were placed into specific categories, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized to refine and strengthen ideas to assist researcher (s) in a move to a higher level of conceptualization.

Dependability was established by keeping detailed records of the data collected and analysis procedures. Member checks were also used to address credibility by mailing student teachers a copy of their interview transcript and a draft copy of the report.

Findings

There were two female student teachers (Missy and Tina) and two male student teachers (Donald and John) who completed a portion of their student teaching internationally. Each had his or her own reservations about leaving the United States and each experienced some turbulence along the way. This study provides a rich description of those experiences.

Educational Advancement

Advancing one's education during student teaching comes naturally because the student teaching experience is such a different aspect to the student teacher's education. However, in an international setting, that advancement escalates. When asked about educational advancements, John, Donald, Tina and Missy stated

> My leadership abilities have been impacted in the fact that I can go into any situation as an agriculture educator and succeed. We went into the community of Broken Hill, Australia, and made friends, got involved with the community professionally and socially, and were successful in teaching many different diverse areas of agriculture to many different grade levels of students. If I decide to take a teaching job or any job in an area that I am unfamiliar with, I know I can adapt to the community and to the job because of my trip to Australia (John).
>
> It has created a great deal of leadership in the classroom for me due to being placed in classes I was unfamiliar teaching. I am a firm believer a teacher must have content knowledge of the class they are teaching; however, I do feel teaching skills are embedded in an instructor and once they are in place, the teacher can adapt to several classes. While I spent more time preparing lessons for the Australian classroom, teaching is teaching and the most important part is using a variety of resources in anything you deliver and to present the material the best way for different classes. I feel it is important for an educator to possess good teaching skills because then you can be placed in a class that is not what you normally are comfortable teaching and be effective, as well as efficient, in delivering the instruction (Donald).
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> Within the classroom, I have become a more confident disciplinarian. Whenever a problem arises, I now have many more experiences, from various circumstances, from which to draw ideas. This experience has also caused me to look at situations as they arise and try to take the appropriate action to prevent them from growing into problems. Outside the classroom, I have become a more confident individual. I now realize that although I am not the best, I have qualities which are unique to me and can benefit others (Tina).
>
> I just became more open to change. I went to my student teaching site in the United States and I knew the system. It was good to just get thrown into somewhere else where you didn't know what was going on and you really weren't

> sure exactly what the system was. Basically, you had to learn it [system] pretty quickly. The first two days I was here it was like 'oh my, what am I doing here and what the heck am I going to do?' I had to take a step back and look at their system as a whole-what works and what doesn't-and it was a lot better. I think it will help me to adjust to a new system now and be a better teacher (Missy).

Substantive Knowledge of Cultures, World Issues and Global Dynamics

Student teachers were exposed to many global issues and became more globally aware while in Australia. Some knowledge gained included first hand experience with the drought of the Darling River (depleted by cotton farmers in Queensland), understanding the effects of the wheat board controversy, exposure to innovative irrigation farming and Australian crops, and global beef export competition for the Japan market with the United States. Global awareness was achieved as well. Student teachers wrote

> I have learned not everyone likes America, and they judged us even before they knew anything about us just because of where we were from. I had not experienced that, it was frustrating but it makes you think of how different the world is in places. I also think people voice their opinion on things (such as world politics) without knowing the whole truth and they will not believe the truth (John).
>
> This trip has made me see world issues from a different perspective. I have learned that there is more than one side to every situation. In addition, I have developed a better understanding about why countries have problems cooperating. Every country has its own cultural issues which influence its beliefs and each country believes its beliefs are correct solutions for the entire world (Tina).
>
> We were in a culturally rich part of Australia so I became more aware of the language and the social activities... Bar-B, races, good times. I learned a lot about how countries work together on trading with commodities. In addition, I learned about the effects the wheat board controversy had on people in Australia (Donald).

It is fascinating to learn about other cultures and customs but it is just as fascinating to watch and learn about their everyday fears and responsibilities. As Missy emphasized

> It's a whole different world I mean its nice to know America is not the center of everyone's attention…a whole other perspective in Australia…like native people because their dealing with the same stuff America was dealing with before they started the casinos. I mean their dealing with what do we do with aboriginals and just obtaining a whole other perspective on that. I like the environmental aspect of Australia. They are very conscious of water because they have to be, except for the car wash that runs across the street 24 hours a day! But, when it comes to water quality they have to pipe their water in from a 100km away. Therefore, they have to be very conscientious when it comes to water quality and water

> usage. I think they are a lot further ahead of the United States in areas like recycling. Recycling is huge and is just a way of life.

Perceptual Understanding of Other People and Cultures

"There are all kinds of different people in the world and that is the bottom line, understanding them would take a lifetime, but people do stereotype cultures before knowing the truth and that is a shame (John)." As John stated, there are all types of people and getting to know their culture is so important. Plus, Tina wrote, "Stereotypes degrade the people of our own and other cultures. In Australia, I was given the opportunity to meet people that surpassed the stereotypical Australian. The people are more than crocodile hunters, they are intelligent individuals. Likewise, the people I met got a chance to meet a real American. I was told that I didn't exactly fit the American stereotype either."

So often, we tend to label cultures by what we see on television. "I was amazed that the students at Willyama High School watched the *Simpson's* on the television and thought people in America lived like that (Missy)." However, as Donald experienced, "having the opportunity to just sit and talk to people and learn about what they believe and how they live…we found it to be a great place. The key to being accepted and knowing people is to get involved."

Self-Confidence and Independence

Gaining confidence in a situation requires careful planning of an experience and providing support to individuals when needed. Explaining to student teachers, who are leaving the country for the first time, that student teaching in an international environment will be beneficial is quite complicated. However, their testimonies explain the life changing impact of such an experience.

> Everything about the trip gave me a huge amount of confidence in knowing that I did it and enjoyed myself. Doing something on the magnitude of this level promotes self confidence and urges you to continue to challenge oneself. Being at home now, I am proud of myself for going and for being there the whole time. I have always been pretty independent though. What does make it beneficial for your independence is the ability to develop a budget and follow that budget (Donald).

> My self confidence has been greatly improved. I cannot begin to explain the change in my concept of personal worth. I have come to realize the qualities that I have to offer. I have also learned how to use those qualities to benefit myself and others. Likewise, I have become a much more independent person. Living alone for 10 weeks taught me how to depend upon myself. At times I needed the help of others, but it wasn't because I couldn't do a job, it was because they helped to make the job more efficient (Tina).

> I have always been an independent person, but not to the extent of not knowing anyone or anything about a place. At first it was scary but after a few days it was the best feeling in the world. Being young and in control of my life was essential for my career and personal growth (John).

> I haven't gotten back yet to see what the effect will be but it has been good to be alone for awhile. Back home there are always people around and here I have to get by on my own. I have a lot more confidence in my self as a person and teacher, especially in the area of classroom management because I didn't really have to deal with that in my United States teaching center. I have grown so much from doing this international experience but I don't think I'll ever finish growing from this trip yet (Missy)!

Establishing Interpersonal Connections with People from Other Cultures

Obviously, developing relationships while in an unfamiliar place is important. Important as it may be, student teachers felt it was a necessity. Missy stated, "This trip definitely makes you understand how to make friends-fast! Plus, it would not have been fun if I had not met people who made my experience that much better." Donald expressed the same feelings.

> This was one of the best parts of the trip for me. I really enjoyed meeting new people and building those relationships. It was unique because they wanted to learn about us just as much as we wanted to learn about them. Australians are very laid back and are keen on talking and listening to people who are interested in them. We were very fortunate because we worked and were residents in the community for 10 weeks. The average tourist would have never been able to see and do all the things were we lucky enough to do.

Moreover, Tina expressed, "I have learned that all people are different. No two people have the exact same beliefs or ideas. Thus, when connecting with other people, you must overlook the differences and search for the common ground to stand on. Then, you can build a relationship, regardless of the cultural differences." Overall, these four students had a phenomenal experience that will forever change their lives. Upon their return, collectively they commented

> Now, we have a different perspective on how teachers teach in different regions of the world. It also gave us a more professional outlook on the way we will teach during our careers. Personally, this trip gave us a chance to evaluate our lives from in an unfamiliar environment which allowed us to come to terms with future career goals and expectations.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Cross-cultural experiences, as described by Wilson (1993), provide individuals the opportunity to obtain substantive knowledge of other cultures, world issues and global

dynamics; perceptual understanding of other people and cultures; personal growth in areas such as leadership, self-confidence and independence; and the ability to establish interpersonal connections with people from other cultures. After completing the international student teaching experience, one can conclude that these student teachers are now more comfortable going into any situation. As John stated, "I can go into any situation as an agriculture educator and succeed…because of my trip to Australia." In addition, Missy commented, "I just became more open to change." Adapting to a new environment was difficult for them but the trip made them more comfortable in unfamiliar environments and adapting to change.

Stereotypical barriers were also overcome during the trip to Australia. Tina met Australians who "were more than crocodile hunters, they are intelligent individuals." In addition, Australians met Americans which changed their views of American citizens as well. Overcoming stereotypes is difficult but when you are immersed in the culture, as these student teachers were, one begins to see people for who they are.

Student teachers developed more self-confidence, increased their leadership abilities, and became more self aware. "My self confidence has been greatly improved," Tina commented. According to Donald, his leadership abilities were enhanced in the classroom by "being placed into classes he was unfamiliar teaching." By placing student teachers in an unfamiliar setting, each student teacher more fully developed as a leader. Based on the data, one may conclude that student teachers leadership development was enhanced more because of their international student teaching experience. Furthermore, student teachers became more self aware of their abilities and inadequacies.

> I cannot begin to explain the change in my concept of personal worth. I have come to realize the qualities that I have to offer. I have also learned how to use those qualities to benefit myself and others. Likewise, I have become a much more independent person (Tina).

Becoming more globally aware was a major accomplishment for these four student teachers. As noted by John

> I have learned not everyone likes America, and they judged us even before they knew anything about us just because of where we were from. I had not experienced that. It was frustrating but it makes you think of how different the world is in places. I also think people voice their opinion on things (such as world politics) without knowing the whole truth and they will not believe the truth.

In addition, Donald wrote

> We were in a culturally rich part of Australia so I became more aware of the language and the social activities... Bar-B, races, good times. I learned a lot about

how countries work together on trading with commodities. In addition, I learned about the effects the wheat board controversy had on people in Australia.

Data obtained in this study has shown that four student teachers enhanced their self confidence, leadership abilities, and global awareness by participating in an international experience. Research conducted by Grant (1994) and Holt (2001) also deemed it necessary to provide international teaching experiences to assist in a teacher's preparation program with the overall goal of becoming globally educated. Therefore, student teachers should participate in an international teaching experience in order to *truly become globally educated.* Therefore, this study could be a road map for other agriculture education preparation programs to follow.

Research questions did emerge from this study. Future research questions should strive to answer the following:

1. What will the long-term impact of the international teaching experience have on teachers in their selected careers?
2. By having international teachers as part of a community, how are members of that community impacted?
3. What impact will a teacher who has completed an international student teaching experience have on the public school system?
4. Do individuals who complete an international student teaching experience go on to become more competent in their chosen career?

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