

# Impacts of American Agricultural Education Student Teachers on Eleven Community Members in A New South Wales, Australia Community: A Qualitative Study

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*The purpose of this study was to evaluate the influences of American agricultural education student teachers on a rural community in New South Wales, Australia. The study analyzed interviews with eleven participants of the American student teacher program in a rural New South Wales community. Results of the study were formulated by two researchers. Both researchers were student teachers in the New South Wales community for ten weeks and taught agriculture in one of the community's two high schools. After one year, the researcher returned to the community and interviewed eleven individuals involved with the program. Interviewed participants were questioned based on a predetermined protocol. Interviews were transcribed, coded and categorized into themes by researcher two. Using participatory action research, the researchers were able to identify areas of influence suggested by participants. Participants identified nine areas of influence made by the American agricultural education student teachers within the school and community: cultural awareness, stereotypes, language, classroom distractions, teaching methods awareness, cultural changes in community members, student performance, community unification and impact of student teacher presence.*

Keywords: international education, globalization, agricultural education

## Introduction

In this age of globalization, greater attention has been placed on increasing individual's understanding of stereotypes, language barriers, and cultural awareness. Since greater attention is being placed on these areas, educating future teachers on how to accommodate or adjust to these areas becomes imperative. According to Alfaro (2008), in recent years, it has become "increasingly clear that there is an awareness of the need for the globalization of teacher education programs . . . to prepare globally minded teachers for service in the United States" (p. 20). As globalization becomes an increasing focus, teachers and teacher education programs should embrace the opportunities to widen their perspectives of world cultures.

Based on the lack of international student teaching experiences in agricultural education, the University of Tennessee partnered with Charles Sturt University in Australia to provide opportunities for agricultural education student teachers to complete a portion of their student teaching in Australia. Several studies have been conducted to evaluate the benefits to student teachers. Benefits to student teachers included increased awareness of teaching, culture and communicating effectively within a diverse community setting (Fritz & Little, 2007). International teaching experiences have proven to be positive in other academic areas as well. Sandell (2007) reported over two-thirds of participating international student teachers had increased knowledge in the areas of

professionalism, international perspectives and personal development.

When two cultures are in contact with one another, new ideas and systems are shared. As a result, both cultures are influenced by one another. This influence extends to the neighborhoods or communities involved. Homan (1999) noted that neighborhoods continuously change and Benokraitis (2009) suggested that culture changes and adapts to various circumstances, including diffusion, discovery and external pressures. When cultures change, individual responses to that change is dependent on the community environment. Sarason (2000) commented “psychology is the detection, delineation, and understanding of how changes internal to people, as individuals or collectivists, transact with changes in external social–physical contexts” (p. 920). Therefore, psychology becomes significant to community change.

Psychology has been described as “the science of mental life” (Butler & McManus, 1998, p. 1). In other words, psychology is concerned with thoughts and feelings. Carmichael (1957) claimed that psychology explores mental processes that can be generalized to all men and, based on generalizations, recognizes the way individuals are alike and different. In addition, thoughts and feelings of individuals are unique. Therefore, people have different perceptions of the same circumstances. As a result, a need for formal psychology arises. Since any science, including psychology, is “only as good as the *data* on which it is based” (Butler & McManus, 1998, p. 8), it becomes critical that methods be used which will allow psychologists to determine which understanding is most likely to be accurate. To this effect, psychologists attempt to separate subjective views of individuals from factual information (Butler & McManus, 1998).

Social psychology is “the scientific study of those aspects of human behavior and experience that pertain to other people” (Marcuse, 1954, p. 182). By this explanation, one may think of all psychology as social psychology since human behavior is affected by others. MacLeod (1954) stated that social psychology begins with the individual and focuses on basic mental functions. On the other hand, sociology begins with societal structure, organization and development which are viewed as most

important. Since social psychology is a combination of psychology and sociology, it is important to distinguish that social psychology is different for each person based on customs, morals and values which influence individual developments (Marcuse, 1954).

While the impacts of international experiences on student teachers have been widely evaluated, the impacts of those student teachers on the communities in which they reside have received less attention. Nevertheless, students, schools and communities cannot be successfully separated. As noted by Wright and Smith (1998), “school, and community environments may support each other and be mutually beneficial” (p. 146). Therefore, it must be considered that international student teachers in any community could make some impact on that particular community.

As part of the learning process, international student teachers should obtain a greater understanding of how cross–cultural experiences can influence the U.S. and the international community. International student teachers should be able to recognize the possible lasting influences their presence will make. Hence, the benefits and risks involved with joining two cultures, through education, should be evaluated. Thus, a study examining the impact of international student teachers on the communities in which they work was needed (Fritz & Little, 2007).

### **Purpose**

This study was to evaluate the impacts of American agricultural education student teachers on a rural community in New South Wales, Australia. Specifically, the study examined influences made by American agricultural education student teachers on the students, parents, school administrators and community members in a rural community in New South Wales.

### **Methodology and Procedure**

As noted by Creswell (2009), three basic research methodologies exist for use by scholars: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. The qualitative method was selected as the method for which to acquire information. In

this study, researchers were concerned with community changes as a result of American agricultural education student teachers being infused into a rural community in New South Wales, Australia. In addition, researchers were interested in how community members felt they were personally influenced and how the community as a whole was impacted.

In 2004, a faculty member from the University of Tennessee partnered with an agricultural education faculty member from Charles Sturt University to establish an international student teaching program in New South Wales, Australia. A rural community in New South Wales was recommended for the American student teachers based on the cultural value they would receive and the unique experiences they would encounter. The faculty member visited the rural community in New South Wales to establish the program. During the visit, the question was raised as to whether the rural community in New South Wales would accept or benefit from hosting the American student teachers. Additionally, community members expressed concerns related to cultural and language barriers. Therefore, after repeat visits by American student teachers to the rural community, the research question seemed appropriate to explore.

Researchers were active participants in the New South Wales community; therefore, the role of action research was utilized. Participatory action research being a subdivision of participatory research requires members to engage in research while adding an element of social action to assist in social or systemic change (Taylor, et al., 2004). When using this method, some provision is made to allow participants to aide in the development of the research question. "This type of reflexivity is a key component of the researcher-participant relationship in any participatory approach" (Taylor, et al., p. 5).

During spring semester 2006, two researchers spent ten weeks as American agricultural education student teachers in the New South Wales community, Australia. During this time, researchers participated in community events such as town meetings, educational forums and cultural activities in addition to their student teaching responsibilities. Additionally, both researchers were involved in improvement projects at their

respective schools and spent time in community members' homes. Newspaper articles were published and radio interviews were conducted focusing on the presence of the American agricultural education student teachers.

After completing the student teaching experience, researcher one returned as a full time graduate student in pursuit of a Master's of Science. Researcher one sought for and received Institutional Review Board approval on February 19, 2007 to return to the community in New South Wales to conduct research. Researcher one, along with a sociology expert, created an interview protocol to serve as a guide during the interview in the event that participants did not provide rich descriptions. However, these questions were not asked verbatim during the interviews. Instead, the researcher used open-ended questions that focused on the influences of the American agricultural education student teachers in the rural New South Wales community.

One year was allowed to elapse between the American student teacher exchange and the interviews. This time frame accommodated for completion of one academic year in hopes of obtaining a better analysis of program impacts. In addition, timing was partially influenced by the availability of research funding. Eleven community members were selected by school administrators based on their involvement with the student teaching program and the community to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants in order to protect their confidentiality. Principals from each participating school were selected to represent their school. Both of these individuals, DeWayne and Terry, were critical characters in the development of the program. One deputy principal, James, was also selected based on his involvement with the program. Principals identified parents and teachers who could provide valid feedback related to the study. Two mentoring teachers, Kathy and Robbie, were selected based on their involvement with the American agricultural education student teachers in the classroom. One math teacher, Gary, and one related art education teacher, Aaron were also selected. One school support staff member, Martin, was identified as a beneficial participant. Two parents of separate students, Debbie and Sherry, were selected. Finally, one area businessman, Preston, was selected to provide

an opinion not related to the educational setting. Prior to interviewing, each participant signed an informed consent assent form.

Interviews were conducted from February 23 to March 8, 2007. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Interview questions attempted to identify changes in the community observed by participants during the student teaching experience and after the departure of the international student teachers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed at a later date. Financial restraints prohibited the interviewer from returning to the community for a second interview.

The researcher transcribed the interviews and coded and assigned themes. The researcher utilized thematic analysis and was responsible for a subsequent review of literature to validate the findings of the study. Glesne (2006) defined thematic analysis as “a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (p. 147).

Glesne (2006) described research validity as the *trustworthiness* of the research. In order to establish validity in qualitative research, Creswell (2007) identified eight procedures to be used by researchers. Validity in this study was established using five of Creswell’s procedures. First, by living in the community for ten weeks the researcher spent an ample amount of time in the field doing the study. Second, the researcher used interviews, personal notes and related literature to ensure consistency. Third, the work of the researcher was reviewed by a peer familiar with the project and understood its complexity. The peer reviewer looked for consistency between participant responses and conclusions. The peer reviewer also looked at the conclusions to ensure that the researcher biases did not alter the results. Fourth, the researcher acknowledged the presence of biases in review of the data, and finally, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the procedures, interview results, and conclusions.

Decrop (2004) declared that dependability “consists of looking at whether the results are consistent and reproducible” (p. 159). Miles and Huberman (1994) identified ten procedures which can help researchers to establish dependability. In congruence with Miles and Huberman the researcher outlined general

research questions that were imperative to the study. The researcher then outlined the various duties, along with personal biases. Also, findings among the eleven participants, of various roles, were found to be closely related and were applicable to each participant in the study. In addition, a detailed outline of the theoretical constructs and frameworks were provided. Finally, a peer review was utilized to assist in increasing dependability.

Member checks were conducted by interview participants to establish credibility. Each participant in the study was emailed their individual transcript and a copy of the report to review. The transferability of this study to other cultures was not expected to yield the same results. “Transferability...is concerned with the extent to which the research findings are applicable to another setting or group” (Decrop, 2004, p. 159).

The researcher in this study identified biases that could have been influential on the reported outcomes. However, in an attempt to strengthen confirmability, a peer reviewer was utilized to decrease the impacts the researcher bias would have on the outcomes. “Confirmability means that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination” (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004, p. 107).

#### *Researcher Biases*

Researchers in this study were participants in the American student teacher/New South Wales, Australia program. As a result, researchers acknowledged that personal biases existed. Due to the fact that both researchers were student teachers in the community, the researchers desired that the influences on the community were viewed in a positive light. Researchers hoped that the influence of American agricultural education student teachers benefited the community in which they worked. Furthermore, researchers also desired that community members would deem the program successful.

Both researchers knew several of the community members personally. Therefore, in analyzing the data, each researcher’s personal perception of the participant could have been imposed on the meaning of the responses. It is also possible that the interviewer allowed personal knowledge of individual’s beliefs to influence the direction of the interview.

### Findings/Conclusions/Implications

Based on participants' responses, several themes emerged. Those themes were cultural awareness, stereotypes, language, classroom distractions, teaching methods awareness, cultural changes in the community, student performance, community unification, and impact of student teacher presence. In addition to the findings being presented, conclusions to each theme will also be discussed.

#### *Cultural Awareness*

Student teachers in the Australian classroom were interacting and educating Australian students about agriculture and about American cultures. Merryfield (2004) declared students who are exposed to other cultures can develop the ability to interact with individuals of a different culture. Kathy (mentor teacher) stated "I think that socially and generally in terms of cultural awareness and kids thinking about the world...this helped the kids to understand the world differently." In turn, students who were involved with the American student teacher program may be better equipped to work with individuals of different cultures.

According to Homan (1999), in order for cultural awareness between groups to occur, all groups involved must acknowledge that there is much to learn from both sides. Likewise, DeWayne (principal) noted that "it was a cultural exchange." Furthermore, Aaron (teacher) expressed that the program was "a learning tool both ways."

Community members also expressed benefits of the program. Martin (support staff) noted that "to actually speak to young kids that came from over there [USA], their different aspects of life, are really eye opening." James (deputy principal) noticed that due to the American agricultural education student teachers "students were more informed about the U.S....I think everyone goes through cultural changes, and certainly opens their eyes up to certain cultures and different things....You tell me about things that go on in your community, and that certainly opened my eyes, I was not aware of." Gary (teacher) suggested "it is a tremendous opportunity to be able to learn something about people from somewhere else, people that do not exactly live the same life that we do." For the most part, influences of the American student

teacher program reached beyond the classroom and into the community.

Additionally, five participants noted the cultural influence of the experience on the American agricultural education student teachers. These individuals were willing to accept that they had been culturally influenced, but noted that the American agricultural education student teachers had also gained from the experience. The participants also had a tendency to assume American agricultural education student teachers left with a positive impression of the New South Wales community and Australia.

#### *Stereotypes*

Tavris and Wade (2001) noted the importance of stereotypes to the ability of people to quickly assimilate information. However, the quick assimilation of information can often be misleading or blatantly wrong. In the interview with Terry (principal), he discussed common stereotypes of Americans by Australians. He also alluded to the importance of teachers realizing the problems with stereotypes.

People have preconceived ideas about different cultures....In Australia, you either have people that are very pro-American or very anti-American....Your [interviewer] presence and the other's presence here has allowed teachers especially to see that you cannot stereotype different cultures. Even if it is American...you just have to take people as you find them.

Furthermore, Kathy (mentor teacher) stated "I know that when Donald [American student teacher] was just talking with some of the kids about what his life was like in the U.S., it was completely different from what they [Australian students] expected from the movies." Therefore, the presence of the American agricultural education student teachers helped clarify some of the preexisting stereotypes that Australians had about Americans.

While some preconceived stereotypes were altered, some individuals developed new incorrect stereotypes. Gary (mentor teacher) commented "As a math teacher, I do not know much about teaching agriculture, but from what I have seen, agriculture usually meant that students are not terribly able and speaking with

some of the American agricultural education student teachers, I have found...agriculture is a huge part of the curriculum in the United States.” While Gary’s statement might hold true for certain areas of the United States, certainly agriculture is not a major part of the curriculum in all areas. Nevertheless, the American student teacher that Gary had spoken with described his hometown as having a large agricultural education program. Thus, Gary derived a new stereotype based on one town in the United States.

Perhaps Preston (businessman) best identified benefits of the American agricultural education student teachers to stereotypes of Australians and Americans alike. His comment suggested that as American agricultural education student teachers and the New South Wales community citizens worked together, stereotypes could be disproved by both groups. In the process, each could learn about the other, but more importantly, learn about one’s own self. He shared “I think I understand the country where I was born much more because I listen to all these perspectives.” He further explained that as he eliminated stereotypes and gained realizations, his understanding of his culture increased. Moreover, interviewed participants thought the program not only allowed them to reevaluate preconceived stereotypes about America but also to reassess individual understanding of their own culture.

### *Language*

In relation to culture, language is a highly debated topic. Does language influence culture? Does culture influence language? Linguistic scholars for years have debated the relationship between the two. Although a wide array of opinions exists, the underlying factor that language and culture are interrelated remains. In regards to culture and language, Martin (support staff) stated, “the first and obvious thing is the different tone of voice and accent...the words you [American agricultural education student teachers] come out and say are very Americanisms.”

Aaron (teacher) expressed benefit of language differences to students and student teachers. Twice he commented, “I think our students are motivated when the American agricultural education student teachers are in the classroom because...they are different, they have

a different way of speaking” and “students do respond a lot differently....American teachers are new faces to the school...they have a different way of speaking.” Likewise, Terry (principal) felt that the interest of students was heightened by the difference in language. In regards to high school students, he commented “with the teenage kids, they are more interested with the accents.”

Terminology differences may appear to be insignificant; however, the ability to respect small differences in language and build a respect for an alternative form of communication is the beginning stages of cultural awareness (Byram & Morgan, 1994). The ability to communicate, despite variations, is critical to successful interactions. Australian community members and students had the opportunity to successfully discuss business transactions, educational opportunities and social dilemmas. As stated by Robbie (mentor teacher) “the accents were a lasting impression.” While it may seem unimportant to share various terms and accents, acceptance of another’s language can be the acceptance of another’s culture.

### *Classroom Distractions*

Regardless of cultural differences or likenesses, distractions in the classroom generally occur. Behnke et. al. (1981) noted that classroom distractions may exist in many forms. For example, distractions come from students, visitors, staff members, and special activities. Likewise, Ahrentzen and Evans (1984) noted both visual and kinetic stimulants prove to be classroom distractions.

“The kids wanted to find out things...it’s natural for kids,” Robbie acknowledged. However, in regards to cultural awareness, the ability of students to ask questions related to the American culture was often considered beneficial. James (deputy principal) noted “I do not think they are distracters. I think what was taking place was just normal general classroom participation.” Furthermore, Robbie (mentor teacher) acknowledged that students were “distracting the teachers by asking about America....You cannot kind of stop on that...but you got to be able to control it.”

Thus, it was concluded that American agricultural education student teachers did cause some distractions within the classroom. However, those distractions were not always

considered negative distractions and some distractions were minimal. Participants in the study generally felt that distractions as a result of student enthusiasm for cultural inquiry were of more benefit than harm. Beyond the cultural awareness that was brought forth in the program, participants believed classroom distractions were normal and would have probably existed with or without the American agricultural education student teachers.

#### *Teaching Methods Awareness*

Studies have shown that various teaching methods are important to the cognitive learning of students (Bovy, 1981; Mayer 1999; Tobias, 1982). Tobias claimed certain instructional variables lead to a greater level of achievement. Likewise, Mayer declared the design of instruction contributes to the cognitive learning of individuals.

DeWayne (principal) stated "I thought the international program was a great idea, because it made my staff exposed to different ideas and different teaching strategies from overseas." He also believed the program allowed staff members to "pick up different teaching techniques from watching and observing other people....Let staff observe different practices, and it gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own practice." When asked how he felt about the American agricultural education student teachers, Gary (teacher) replied "it has been a very positive experience for me....I have certainly enjoyed speaking with them, finding a little bit more about...how they approach the study of teaching." The presence of the American agricultural education student teachers provided the opportunity for Australian teachers to look at their own teaching methods, while presenting new teaching methods and ideas. As a result, having the American agricultural education student teachers in the classroom could be beneficial to the Australian teachers.

#### *Cultural Changes in Community Members*

Participants were hesitant to respond to questions related to cultural change. Various communities may be acceptant or resistant to change (Harrison, 2000). DeWayne (principal) stated "In Australian schools, the cultures move so slowly." Nevertheless, education is the institution through which social change occurs (Benokraitis, 2009) so when asked if things in

the school had changed as result of the program, Preston (businessman) responded

I think it will take some time to know...It will take a long time before it happens; you really need someone from here to pickup the challenge and go abroad or go out and go elsewhere, come back and say hey, there is a wide world out there.

DeWayne (principal) shared very similar views in regard to cultural change. "School culture is...I have been here 3.5 years and I am struggling to change some of the cultures in the schools." However, he later added "You have got to look deeper for cultural change. You have to learn the system of how people think. The way people interact or a change in process."

Cwick and Benton (2009) identified programs in a school that persist, eventually impact the community. Terry (principal) said "In the ten weeks last year, there is no doubt that there was a very positive impact on school....The things that [happened] impacted the whole school." Likewise, James (deputy principal) stated "I think everyone goes through cultural changes and certainly opens their eyes up to certain cultures and different things." Thus it can be concluded that even though there was some resistance to admit cultural changes, some degree of cultural change may have occurred. Moreover, with the continuation of the program, further cultural changes are possible.

#### *Student Performance*

Participants noted positive impacts on the performance of the New South Wales community in regards to influences of American agricultural education student teachers on the performance of students. Parents noted their children were more interested in learning due to different perspectives the American agricultural education student teachers offered. Sherry (parent) said "students tend to sit back and listen." Therefore, the presence of individuals from a new culture may cause students to focus better.

Overall, teachers noted a change in student performance. Kathy (mentor teacher) commented "behavior wise, they definitely have done better than usual," and they were "a lot more engaged than they were in most lessons that I have seen previously. So overall, yes they

performed at a higher level.” Aaron (teacher) was also decisive in his comments. When asked if students responded differently with American agricultural education student teachers in the classroom, he responded “Yes, definitely. I believe that when American teachers are in the school and in the classrooms, students do respond a lot differently than they do with their normal teachers.” Robbie (mentor teacher) also commented that having American agricultural education student teachers in the school “certainly stimulated interest both student wise and staff wise.” Thus, it was concluded that the presence of the American agricultural education student teachers could encourage students to perform better academically and behaviorally.

### *Community Unification*

Within the realm of psychology and sociology, much research has been conducted on communities. However, from this study emerged a concept that the presence of people from a different culture might cause a community to merge. According to Kathy (mentor teacher) “the political stuff that had been going on for a very long time was dumped underneath the carpet. People...want[ed] to impress you guys and show you how wonderful we all were...everyone was on their best behavior.” The focus of the community during that time was making a positive impression on American agricultural education student teachers.

Other participants acknowledged that the presence of the American agricultural education student teachers encouraged community members to ignore differences and assist in accommodating the student teachers. Sherry (parent) observed “I really do think that when the American students were here that people were motivated to try and do their best.” To the same extent, Preston (businessman) noticed with the presence of American agricultural education student teachers there were “less caustic remarks and less kind of snide remarks...it is not because they do not want to make them...it is because, oh, the Americans are here, we should not do it. But maybe that is a positive thing.”

Therefore, it was concluded that due to the collectivist nature of Australians, they were more likely to put aside their differences to function as a group in hosting American agricultural education student teachers. Several

participants noted a desire for American agricultural education student teachers to return home with a positive impression of their community and school. The unification in this situation did not occur because of some detailed program set forth. Instead, the New South Wales community joined as a collectivist society, to showcase their community in the best light.

### *Impact of Student Teacher Presence*

Participants in the study gave final remarks concerning the presence of the American student teacher program. The program was identified in a positive manner. Gary (teacher) added “I do not think there are any negative, long-lasting things that I can remember. I miss...the positive energy that the student teachers gave me as they were young people starting out their careers.” Terry (principal) also showed much enthusiasm and approval for the program. “I think it is terrific because from what I heard last year, the people were of high quality.” He later continued “all I have heard is positive stuff, and the quality of people that [were] here is exceptional, I mean, the American people. It is all positive.” DeWayne (principal) offered a quick but similar response “we would love to have you back.”

### **Implications**

Social psychology is different for each person based on their customs, morals and values which do influence and impact individual developments (Marcuse, 1954). In this study, the development of individuals from a rural New South Wales community were impacted by the presence of American student teachers, but each had a different experience due to their customs, morals and values. These differences, though, provided a rich description of the impacts that American student teachers made on the community. Overall, interviewed participants expressed that community change did not necessarily occur but that some degree of community unification was demonstrated. Interviewed participants also identified an increase in cultural awareness and acceptance, as well as, an increase in Australian student interest in the classroom.

For years, educational researchers have focused on how the student teaching experience impacted the teacher but often times overlook

how the community was impacted. When establishing an international student teaching experience, one must consider how the community will be affected. The community culture and heritage should be explored and understood before entering the community. In addition, one must be considerate of the community's customs and understand that stereotypes will exist. This study confirms that while the American agricultural education student teachers made some positive impact on the community, there were some distractions as well. However, based on this study, a few questions surfaced. Those research questions

that need further investigation include: what impact did American agriculture education student teachers have after five and ten years had elapsed from the first student teaching experience; after five and ten years, are the New South Wales community members more receptive to international visitors; as student teachers continue to complete their student teaching in the New South Wales community, what cultural changes were accepted by community members; and, after ten years, how do student participants perform academically in comparison to non-student participants?

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