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Camaraderie, Culture, and Connection: A Photovoice of a Long-Term International Fellowship

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Abstract

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Keywords

Ghana, Sub Saharan Africa, International development, Agriculture Education, Transformational learning

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As globalization intensifies, the demand for culturally competent professionals rises, necessitating innovative approaches to international education. This study delves into the transformative learning experiences of participants engaged in long-term agricultural education fellowships in Ghana. The research involved a cohort of nine agriculture graduates participating in a program aimed at agricultural education and food security initiatives in rural Ghana. Through the innovative method of photovoice, participants visually documented and reflected on their experiences, generating rich data for analysis. The findings revealed ten prominent themes encompassing the fellows' initial month abroad, including Camaraderie, Struggles, Recognition of Empowered Women, Appreciation of Culture and History, Exploration, Finding Community, Personal Growth, Time in School & 4-H Ghana, Student Appreciation & Connection, and Agriculture Knowledge Gain and Appreciation. This study provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of long-term agricultural education fellowships, shedding light on participants' intricate interplay with the local community, culture, and educational system. Recommendations for program enhancements, including tailored training on cultural acclimation, gender-specific empowerment, and increased emphasis on historical and cultural site training, are offered to maximize the impact and effectiveness of similar initiatives in the future.

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Introduction and Review of Literature

As our world continues to become more interconnected, the need for a culturally-competent workforce increases (Clarke et al., 2013; Spence et al., 2023a). Posing a solution to this issue, long-term, international experiences provide potential increases in global competency, interpersonal communications, self-reflection, and critical thinking (Elliot et al., 2020). There is much existing research that contributes to the known benefits of international experiences, as well as their motivations and issues (Cully Garbers et al., 2022; Pigg et al., 2020; Pigg et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020). However, the majority of this research centers around the impact and benefits of study abroad to those who participate (Carlson & Burn, 1990; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Hadis, 2005; McLeod, & Wainwright, 2009). To further this issue, much less is studied or known about the impacts on individuals who participate in international long-term fellowships (Dado et al., 2023b). Long-term fellowships involve prolonged engagement within another country, differing when compared to traditional study abroad, volunteer programs or mission trips. These short-term programs are typically three months or less, typically taking place during a university semester or summer term (Dado et al., 2023b; Dwyer, 2004). Therefore, in this context, prolonged engagement can be described as longer than three months. Additionally, fellowships typically involve individuals who have completed a degree, rather than a study abroad involving students, altering the dynamics and impact of the overall experience.

Long-term international experiences in agricultural and agriculture education contexts are increasing in opportunity; the most well-known opportunities are among PeaceCorps since 1969, AgriCorps fellowships since 2011, newly the International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program since 2020, and a myriad of other NGO-based opportunities (Lepcha & Paul, 2021). These experiences have the potential to impact the field of agriculture, and agriculture education, through their growing output of volunteer groups. These opportunities, and their impact, remain pertinent to the field of agriculture because of the ever-present need for agriculture educators to increase—not only quantity—but also quality (Alabi, 2016; Jjuuko et al., 2019). To produce deeper quality of agriculture educators, their soft skills must be developed; one way to achieve this is through agricultural education fellowships and international opportunities (Barrick et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2014; Kabasa et al., 2015; Serin, 2017; Talbert & Edwin, 2008; Wright, 2020).

The existing research on long-term international programs often involves research intervention taking place post-experience, or toward the end of the experience (Dado et al., 2023b). Thus, creating the issue that we know little about long-term international fellowships' impacts, and even less about the participants' perspective toward the beginning of their experience. Therefore, this study aims to examine fellowships as a form of international experiences from the perspective of participants after completing their first month of their fellowship abroad.

Theoretical Framework

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), proposed by Kolb (1984), provides a theoretical framework for understanding the learning process that occurs through *concrete experiences*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization*, and *active experimentation*. This theory is particularly relevant to exploring the perspectives of volunteers during their first month abroad in an international teaching volunteer fellowship.

Concrete experience during the volunteers' first month abroad involves engaging in direct, hands-on experiences within their fellowship. These experiences involve teaching in a different cultural and educational context, interacting with local communities, and navigating unfamiliar social dynamics (Kolb, 1984). *Reflective observation* following their concrete experiences, volunteers engage in reflective observation by actively reflecting on their encounters, interactions, challenges, and successes. Reflective practices, such as group discussions, or reflective exercises, allow volunteers to gain deeper insights into their experiences and examine their thoughts and emotions (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 1999). *Abstract conceptualization* in this stage, volunteers analyze and interpret their experiences by identifying patterns, themes, and underlying concepts. They explore the broader cultural, educational, and social contexts that influence their experiences and perceptions. By linking their concrete experiences to existing knowledge and theories, volunteers derive meaning and develop new perspectives (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 1999). *Active Experimentation* volunteers engage in active experimentation by applying their insights and new perspectives to their teaching practices, interactions with local communities, and personal growth. They experiment with different teaching methods, cultural adaptation strategies, and communication approaches.

By actively seeking feedback and adjusting their approaches based on outcomes, volunteers enhance their learning and development throughout the experience (Dado et al., 2023b; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 1999). Then as a result of their experience, volunteers are able to take the components of experiential learning and apply it into their everyday lives post fellowship (Dado et al., 2023b). The continuous cycle of experiential learning involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation leads to transformative learning experiences, enabling volunteers to develop cultural competence, adaptability, and a broader worldview (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 1999).

Literature Review

Purpose, Research Question, and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the fellow experience through their perspective using data triangulation between photos, description, and focus group discussion, particularly in the beginning month of their fellowship. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do fellows perceive their overall experience in the long-term international fellowship program?
2. How do fellows' expectations of the fellowship compare to their actual experiences after the first month?

Background and Setting

The International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program (IAEFP) hosted by The Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture Foreign Agriculture Service (USDA-FAS) and aims to develop U.S. agriculture graduates through prolonged international fellowships, as well as combat food insecurity and promote agriculture through the implementation of agriculture clubs and activities in conjunction with 4-H Ghana. The first year of IAEFP consisted of nine volunteers, referred to as fellows, who were deployed in various rural Ghanaian communities at junior and high schools. There, they served as agricultural educators with partner teachers from their school. Prior to deployment, fellows engaged in six weeks of training, then lived in their respective communities for 10 months. At the end of each month, fellows would gather at the program headquarters for in-service training and reflection. After the first month of deployment, fellows gathered to reflect over their beginning month at their assignments. During the meeting, fellows engaged in a photo-based reflection activity, known as photovoice, to share their experiences with one another and with the program coordinator, resulting in this study.

Methodology

Researcher Reflexivity

In order to properly represent the study's findings, we must acknowledge our previous experiences, involvement, and worldviews may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. Firstly, it is vital to report that both researchers were also directly involved in the implementation of the study, one being a program coordinator and the other a program evaluator for IAEFP. At the time this study was completed, both researchers had spent extensive time alongside the participants, in a position of authority, through training, travel, deployment and other aspects of the program. Therefore, the researchers have prolonged relationships with participants outside of the study.

Participants

A consensus of fellows completing an IAEFP fellowship was the population for this study. Participants ($n=9$) were 22 to 27 years old and comprised of two men and seven women. Each has a minimum of a bachelor's degree in an agricultural field. Two female participants held master's degrees, one of which was mid-doctoral program, and another was completing their master's degree whilst in the program. Eight of the nine participants had previous international experience prior to the program, most of which was agricultural. Several had previous long-term experience in West Africa, including Ghana. One participant was a dual citizen with another West African country.

Procedure and Method

This study utilized photovoice, in which participants observed themselves, their environment, issues, produced self-taken photographs to document their experience, and lastly, participants were observed through the photos they produced (Wang & Burris, 1999). Participants were assigned to take photos they felt represented their fellowship experience, as per Wang & Burris (1999). These photos were taken during their first month engaging in IAEFP.

We asked participants to take photos that represent their experience over a one-month period. Participants gathered at the end of the month for a two-hour focus group. Before the focus group, we requested participants to select 2-5 photos they believe best represent their experience, triumphs, and struggles within the first month of their fellowship (Spence et al., 2023b). Each participant explained what was in the photo, why they chose it, and how it articulated their experience. During the focus group, participants spoke about their own photos, and other participants could join in with comments and questions about the photo or discussion at hand. Discussion was framed by Wang and Burris' (1997) acronym, VOICE—voicing our individual and collective experience. After each participant shared, they engaged in group conversation about each other's photos and experience (Spence, 2020).

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of audio recording and digital photographs during the time of the focus group. Participants sent in their photographs via email, text, and WhatsApp message to the researcher. The researcher then ordered the photos onto a PowerPoint presentation that was projected onto the wall for all participants to see as each photo was spoken of. The researcher recorded the focus group audio, as well as saved the photos.

Data Analysis

The focus group's transcript was first transcribed verbatim from an audio recording by the researchers. Then, researchers analyzed the transcript data using constant comparative methodology (CCM) as per Glaser and Strauss' (1967) to assess individual's stated thoughts or concepts, known as incidents (Spence, 2020). Researchers engaged in CCM by sorting incidents into like-groups after cross comparing them to one another. Rounds of narrowing took place in which researchers paired down like-groups of incidents until groups were independent of one another and could no longer be combined. Then, researchers deliberated the incidents and were critical throughout the process via peer debrief to ensure mutual agreement upon final themes.

Trustworthiness

To achieve trustworthiness, we employed several strategies, including audio recording with verbatim transcription and data triangulation from both the audio recording and collection of photographs, to achieve credibility, dependability, and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To contribute to transferability and authenticity, we describe themes with thick, rich description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, to increase credibility, we engaged in prolonged engagement and observation (Dado et al., 2023a).

Due to the small sample size participants may be easily identifiable through their statements. Therefore, in order to not link any statements through participant codes or pseudonyms, no participant will be referenced individually. Additionally, for privacy, any unobstructed visual of a face, fellow participant or otherwise, has the upper portion of the face blurred.

Results

This photovoice resulted in 10 themes that describe the IAEFP's fellows' experience after their first month within their communities. The themes were: *Camaraderie*, *Struggles*, *Recognition of Empowered Women*, *Appreciation of Culture and History*, *Exploration*, *Finding Community*, *Personal Growth*, *Time in School & 4-H Ghana*, and *Student Appreciation & Connection*.

Participants described *Camaraderie* as feeling safe, comfortable, and appreciative of one another. They detailed time spent together, appreciation for each other's vulnerability, and the ability to relate to each other. A participant stated, "the [fellows] make it a safe environment." The fellows created this environment through a community culture of sharing with one-another, with another participant explaining the groups' atmosphere by stating, "we open the floor for vulnerability, and I am thankful for that." This feeling of group connectedness and camaraderie came through, in not only their verbal reflection, but also their photo selection reasoning, with one participant explaining, "I picked this picture because I am proud of us and we have had similar experiences," as shown in Figure 1. They further described the photo, and its display of collective positive emotions, stating, "the faces of the... fellows are very happy in this picture."

Figure 1

Fellow camaraderie and happiness



The appreciation for one another extended to their similarities and friendship. Participants reflected on their united mission for the fellowship bringing them together. One participant stated, "[the photo] reminds me of friendship and people that you can, you know, that you can look to because we have similar interests and goals." They also continued, speaking about the camaraderie that occurs at the program house during their monthly in-service trainings, "it just also reminds me that in respect of, you know, what we are doing in our fellow communities, how stressed we are, there's still a space, a place where we can come back to and have fun." To the participants, there was a need to find balance between work and fun, because the experience has its stressors. However, a stress relief was found in coming together as fellows.

The theme entitled *Struggles* articulated fellows experience with illness, personal struggles in adjusting, and struggles at school with teachers or current school norms. The struggle of adjusting to their new school norms was a reason for not taking certain photos, with participants reflecting on having a hard time coping with the punishment practices witnessed, stating, “students weed every day and look miserable with it as a punishment and if I had taken a picture of it I would have hated it too.” To further this, a participant said they are “still learning how to navigate classroom dynamics.” Outside the classroom, participants struggled with illness and bodily issues in a new country with different resources, stating, “being sick [in Ghana] is really hard,” and reflecting on this time by selecting a photo of themselves during a time where they were unwell, as shown in Figure 2. They chose this photo because they felt it represented part of their first month, stating, “[the photo] describes the experience because we are doing something really challenging and hard.”

Figure 2

Struggling with illness in a new setting



Personal struggles were not just physical, as the participants described feelings of sadness and loneliness when in their communities for the first month separate from their cohort-mates. A fellow articulated these feelings, stating, “I was feeling really lonely this week and like I needed a friend.” The participants expressed many moments of hardship, but also finding humor in those moments. One participant shared a story of spilling their dinner on their floor, when they explained, “I picked this photo because it represents things going wrong, spilling fufu, and rolling with the punches,” going on to say, “sad moment but also a funny moment,” as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Finding humor in a moment of sadness



Recognition of Empowered Women resulted as participants took photos of, described, and discussed female students in various situations, including acts of leadership, officer positions, and guidance of fellow students. A participant explained how they saw female leadership within their school and they were personally excited to recognize it, stating, “There is such a strong female leadership role here and someone is finally taking note of it.” Participants also took note of how their female students were excited to take part in agricultural activities, particularly gardening and manual labor, as shown in Figure 4. To explain this in images, a participant stated why they took and chose their photo, stating, “it was important to capture the ladies who are putting in the work, and who have decided to invest in the land.” They later continued, “they come ready, and they are always putting in effort, and the ladies do not hold back.”

Figure 4

Female students leading agricultural activities

Within this theme, participants also reflected on the contradiction of how they were excited and proud to see girls and women in their communities and schools completing tasks that should be “normal” and *not* noteworthy for them to see, stating, “we only take photos when we see something noteworthy, and it shouldn't be noteworthy to see something that should be normal—but in a way it is really cool.” In the same conversation, the same participant reflected on how they had seen social media posts from their cohort-mates recognizing female students completing activities or displaying leadership that “should” be not noteworthy, stating, “it's interesting to see us post photos of women doing certain things.”

Participants described *Appreciation of Culture and History* through their photos and statements, including historical and religious sites, in addition to the culture within their communities. A participant described adjusting to Ghanaian culture by stating, “[I learned] about being patient because Ghanaians have a different way of living life—and it may seem chaotic—but it works out.” Participants also selected photos with Ghanaian culture in mind, with visuals of traditional religious sites included. A fellow mentioned their personal importance on respecting the local culture, stating they chose their photo because it, “represents the community I am in, the culture, and the language that I am learning,” accompanying an image of a local religious shrine, shown in Figure 5. This same participant later explained how their heritage impacted their value of the local history and culture, stating that “being of African American descent, it is important to connect with the roots of the continent.”

Figure 5.

Ghanaian culture represented by a local religious shrine



Another participant reflected on how the impact of historical tours during training impacted their perspective on the fellowship as a whole, including an image of part of a slave castle, shown in Figure 6. The participant stated it was important “to know more about Ghana, and to learn Ghana's history was an important part of my fellowship to keep in the back of my head during my fellowship.”

Figure 6.

Touring significant Ghanaian historical sites



Participants specifically addressed the impact of visiting historical sites such as the slave castles in Ghana. This was particularly impactful to the participants, choosing photos that reflected this experience. Participants explained the cruel colonial history, indicating the memory of taking this tour was an impactful portion of their training. One participant explained, “this is a photo of a site that has three different purposes. The first purpose was where slaves were put in to be able to... They put them there and stowed them there to pass them through the Gate of No Return,” struggling to articulate the hallowing facts of the slave castle’s use. Another participant reflected on not only the treatment of Ghanaians in the slave trade, but also the punishment for those who chose to rebel, stating, “it was just very historical that... If, like, back then, people tried to fight for the rights of the people, but if they’re not doing something... If they’re not doing things that follows the rule of that particular... of that particular country or that particular area, then they keep them in captive to as long as they want to.”

The theme *Exploration* derived from participants' photos and conversation surrounding places they have visited and the general appreciation for spending time outdoors. A participant said, “I see connections where we are away from teaching, and we are able to enjoy new places and new sceneries.” Participants reflected appreciation the experiences they have outside of the classroom or their “fellowship role,” and that general exploration of their communities and other sites greatly added to their individual experiences.

Several other participants chose photos of their time exploring the country, specifically on wilderness hikes to significant locations. These experiences were an important part of their fellowship, with one participant stating, “I picked it because it was a really fun experience to travel, be outside and hike,” speaking about a hike around Wili Falls in the Volta Region shown in Figure 7. Another participant explained that they, “take a hike every Sunday to get out in nature.” Participants also expressed appreciation for exploration with the company of others—specifically other fellows, stating, “it felt like it was, like, one of those times where I was really able to connect with, like, [fellow] and [fellow] and just, like, yeah, I felt like a lot of, like, forming community while also just hiking and being outside.

Figure 7

Exploring nature in the country



Finding Community resulted as a theme as participants described the friends and connections they are making within their respective communities. A participant said they picked a photo of their friend because, “[host family member] came to check on me, and everyone comes to check on me, so it is a big part of my experience.” Another fellow explained how they felt loved by their host family members, stating, “my host sister and mom love me unconditionally, they treat me like I am really part of their family and involve me in everything possible.” Another participant selected a photo of an experience cooking with their co-teacher, explaining how it was a vital representation of their first month’s experience. To explain this photo, shown in Figure 8, they said, “this is part of my experience because I am with [co-teacher] almost every day.

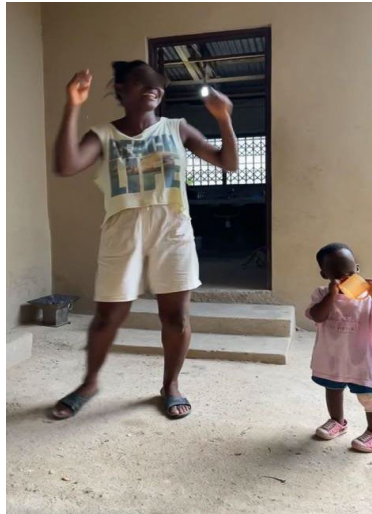
Figure 8

Connecting with co-teacher to find community



Another participant explained how quickly, but genuinely, they formed a connection with their neighbor. They said, “[Neighbor] has been my best friend and I didn't think that I would be able to relate to someone so fast.” This explained why they chose the image of their neighbor and her child—mid dance party—as shown in Figure 9. Continuing, the participant said, “I picked [the photo] because I love this picture because it is blurry because she is dancing to her favorite song.

Figure 9

Dancing to connections

The photo in Figure 10 represents this theme as well, through a story a participant talked about how they found community with a farmer, who did not speak English, but took the time with them. Even though they could not communicate through normal spoken words, the individual took the time to pick oranges from his tree to give them, as shown in Figure 9. The participant expressed feeling safe, and thankful, further stating, “even when people have nothing, they are still willing to give something.”

Figure 10

Connecting without spoken words

The same participant expressed finding community with their neighbors' children, explaining "this picture was taken of a couple of my neighbors, Colleen, five, Erica, eight," as depicted in Figure 11. They told a story of getting to know their young community-members by spending the evening with them on their school's campus. The story started when the participant stated, "I heard laughing, dancing, and people calling me over." They later continued that their young neighbors, "shared joy with me and I appreciated that moment." Another participant commented on the accidental finding of community, wherein they took the time to engage people in their village and ended up connecting with their students' family, stating "the moments where I've just kind of walked up to people and, like, asked to either just start stirring gari or to, like, cut cassava have been, like, some of the ones that I've had a lot of connection with because sometimes they end up being, like, parents of students." This was not only an accidental meeting of someone related to their student, but a display of the participant's intentionality to find community within their community.

Figure 11

Connecting with young community members



The *Personal Growth* theme derived from participants expressing moments where they felt they had grown or learned something new. Participants expressed that, although their role was to teach and partner with the local teacher, they were growing from much more than just educational experience. Participants expressed growing from one another, learning from their own students, and expressing vulnerability.

A participant expressed how their experience has not just been about educating others, stating, “we are all learning more than we are teaching.” One participant chose a photo taken of themselves when they were with their students, as shown in Figure 12, and described it as, “one of those moments where I should be appreciating everything around me.” Another participant expressed similar sentiments, articulating how their students’ feedback helped them grow, stating, “I feel like the students are teaching me, even through my own techniques of teaching, so it’s a lot of I feel like we’re getting a lot more than we are taking, in a sense.”

Participants reflected on the personal growth in terms of their vulnerability to one another. This was especially explained toward the end of the focus group, where all participants joined in the expression of appreciation for each others’ vulnerability and sharing these experiences within the focus group. One stated, “I just wanted to say that I’m really grateful for people’s ability to be vulnerable during this and say, like, oh, I was feeling really, really sad and X, Y, Z, because then it opens up the floor for, like, relatability and feeling like we’re all not alone.”

Figure 12

Learning while teaching



Participants described a significant amount of spent *Time in School & 4-H Ghana*, resulting in the theme. A participant said, “4-H Ghana has been a big part of the experience,” they had within the first month. One participant chose a photo of their students signing their 4-H Ghana banner, shown in Figure 13, explaining how much time they spent starting their 4-H Ghana clubs.

Figure 13

Committing to learning in 4-H Ghana

Within this theme, participants also explained that much of their time was spent teaching in the classroom. They expressed this being a large portion of their experience, and why they chose different photos, as shown in Figure 14 with one participant explaining, “this is a photo after teaching my first class,” which was an important moment as that participant expressed they had not taught prior to that experience.

Figure 14

Time in the classroom with students

Participants were also critical of what they observed whilst spending this time and school and with 4-H Ghana. One student commented on their teaching partner's leadership methods, stating:

He shows up. He calls people in Twi, not everyone, just a handful. They do the work, and then it's done, so this describes my experience in that the club has leadership, and it's pretty strong leadership, but it does not include everyone, myself included, but, like, the work gets done, but there's, like, a lot of room for improvement in terms of, like, the 4-H Ghana club and just in general.

This observation of leadership style within 4-H Ghana and in school continued with another participant stating, "Sir [teacher name] definitely holds the power in this situation, and they don't, the students don't do anything unless he says it's okay, even though it's, like, their garden." Through these instances, the participants expressed their time in school and 4-H Ghana to not always be a positive experience.

Student Appreciation & Connection resulted from many participants' descriptions of their students. Participants expressed how their students were hardworking, excited, intelligent, and helpful. A participant said their students, "teach me every day," and "a lot of my [teaching] is student centered," with several of their photos, including the image in Figure 15, being of their students. Another participant explained how the students are why they chose to be in this IAEFP, stating, "[the students] are the reason I am here and every day I do not want to disappoint them."

Figure 15

Students working in the school garden



Another participant told a story that came with their photo in which they witnessed their students being reprimanded, the association of that punishment with the agriculture program, and the drive to give their students a positive activity the next day and ensure their students do not have further negative experiences. They said:

I actually hate this photo, and that's the reason that I included it is because, um, it was my second 4-H meeting, and we were having a great time electing officers, and, um, my 4-H advisor came in and said that we needed to finish our elections in the next 10 minutes, which we were nowhere ready to be done, and that the students needed to go work in the garden, um, and without any sort of warning, and so I was really frustrated about that. Um, he ended up making him go out to the garden and was yelling at him and screaming at him and made him stay 30 to 45 minutes into their lunch, and I was just fuming, um, and I remember looking out on the garden of all of these members, almost all of them are bent over working in the garden in their uniforms, um, and nobody was smiling, and I just remember looking at that and remembering that I don't ever want to see the students look like that in the garden again, and so the next day I took them out there, and I took a speaker, and I gave them ownership of their own... garden beds to work on, and they had so much fun, and they were laughing, and it was very joyous, and it just, I was just, it was just a really proud moment, because I remember looking back on the day before of this photo and thinking, I don't want to see that again.

Lastly, the theme *Agriculture Knowledge Gain and Appreciation* was emergent through statements and photos, explaining not only the new things they had learned thus far, but also how much they valued that newfound knowledge. One participant explained their discovery of what a new-to-them agricultural product looked like, stating, "I had no idea nutmeg looked like this and I can say that about a million other things I have learned," when explaining Figure 16.

Figure 16

Increasing knowledge about Ghanaian crops



Contributing to this theme, another participant chose a photo, in Figure 17, from an agricultural training where the fellows attended a cocoa production farm. They explained the significance of learning about the crop, stating, “Cocoa beans drying also show how Ghana has many ways of producing agricultural products, and more natural options.” Participants also expressed an increase in Ghanaian agricultural practices in comparison to US-practices. A participant expressed choosing a particular photo to show how harvesting methods were different than they thought it would be, stating, “we were in our farm picking lettuce to sell at the market, so we’re putting it into a black plastic bag, and this... is how a lot of work in the garden goes.”

Figure 17

Exploring Ghanaian forms for agricultural production



Conclusions

This photovoice study provided an in-depth exploration of the IAEFP fellows’ experiences during their first month in their host communities, resulting in 10 distinct themes: *Camaraderie, Struggles, Recognition of Empowered Women, Appreciation of Culture and History, Exploration, Finding Community, Personal Growth, Time in School & 4-H Ghana, Student Appreciation & Connection, and Agriculture Knowledge Gain and Appreciation*. These themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Participants consistently highlighted Camaraderie as a crucial element, noting the importance of mutual support and shared vulnerability among fellows. The safe and inclusive environment fostered by the cohort played a significant role in their positive adaptation to the new setting. The Struggles theme provided evidence to both physical and emotional challenges, including illness, adjusting to new school norms, and feelings of loneliness. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated resilience, often finding humor in adverse situations,

which contributed to their overall growth and adaptation.

Recognition of *Empowered Women* emerged as a noteworthy theme, with participants observing and celebrating female leadership and participation in agricultural activities. This recognition was coupled with a reflective awareness of the significance of normalizing such observations in their daily lives. *Appreciation of Culture and History* revealed participants' deep engagement with and respect for Ghanaian cultural practices and historical contexts. Their experiences at historical sites and interactions with local traditions enriched their understanding and connection to their host country. The theme of *Exploration* illustrated the fellows' enthusiasm for discovering new places and experiences, which contributed to their sense of adventure and appreciation for the natural beauty and diversity of Ghana. *Finding Community* highlighted the importance of building relationships within their host communities. Participants spoke of the warmth and acceptance they received from host families and neighbors, which helped them feel more integrated and supported. *Personal Growth* was evident as participants reflected on their learning experiences, emphasizing that they often learned more than they taught. This growth was facilitated by their continuous engagement with new and challenging situations.

The theme of *Time in School & 4-H Ghana* emphasized the significant portion of their time spent in educational settings, both teaching and establishing 4-H Ghana clubs. This aspect of their experience was pivotal in shaping their daily routines and interactions. *Student Appreciation & Connection* illustrated the participants' admiration for their students' diligence and enthusiasm. The students' positive influence and the mutual learning dynamic were central to the fellows' sense of purpose and fulfillment. Lastly, *Agriculture Knowledge Gain and Appreciation* reflected the fellow's excitement about learning new agricultural practices and crops. This theme highlighted the practical and educational aspects of their fellowship, contributing to their overall professional development.

Although the participants faced considerable physical and emotional challenges within the first month of their fellowship, their described experiences were predominantly positive, marked by cultural appreciation, community integration, and personal growth. The use of photovoice allowed participants to reflect on their experiences deeply, witness and discuss one-another's experiences, and apply their insights as they continued their fellowship. This study affirms that long-term international experiences, when supported by strong community bonds and reflective practices, can lead to significant personal and professional development for participants, aligning with previous research on experiential learning (Kolb, 1976; Dado et al., 2023b; Wright, 2020).

Recommendations

The findings of this photovoice study have several important implications for international agricultural and extension educators seeking to improve the effectiveness of their programs. By understanding the nuanced experiences of the IAEFP fellows during their initial month in their host communities, educators can better tailor their study abroad, fellowships, training programs, and any other cross-cultural or international experiences in agriculture to enhance participant outcomes and program impact.

First, educators, implementers and Extension should recognize the importance of camaraderie and a supportive cohort environment for future students and participants. Participants of this study highlighted how feeling safe, comfortable, and appreciated by their peers helped them navigate the challenges of their new environment. Therefore, we recommend

international agriculture and Extension programs could improve by fostering strong peer networks and encourage activities that build trust and support among participants. Team-building exercises, regular check-ins, and facilitated discussions can help cultivate a sense of community and mutual support.

Secondly, not only recognizing, but addressing struggles and challenges is crucial in international contexts. IAEFP fellows described significant struggles, including illness, adjustment to new cultural and school norms, and feelings of loneliness. It is vital that similar cross-cultural programming should provide comprehensive pre-departure training that includes coping strategies for common challenges, such as cultural adjustment and health management. Lastly, international agricultural extension and education efforts should recognize the importance of cultivating cultural appreciation and historical understanding of the locations in which they engage.

In the results of this study, we gleaned the insight that participants had major appreciation of Ghanaian culture and history enriched their overall experience and facilitated deeper community connections. Therefore, international programs should incorporate cultural immersion and historical education as core components. This can involve cultural orientation sessions, visits to historical sites, and opportunities for participants to engage with local traditions and practices meaningfully.

Through these insights into program design, international agriculture and extension educators can create more effective and supportive environments for their participants, students, and staff. This approach not only enhances individual participant outcomes but also contributes to the overall success and impact of international agricultural programs.

A significant aspect of the Photovoice is its aim of creating policy change (Spence, 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997). Therefore, our final recommendations are directed towards creating policy change within IAEFP and similar organizations, and fellowships.

The theme *Struggles* detailed upsetting experiences of the participants through not only cultural acclimation, but also physical ailments and issues. We recommend increased training in illness prevention of common local diseases, as well as increased training on the preparedness of cultural differences. Additionally, we recommend including increased details of emotional struggles of past volunteers in a program to better prepare future volunteers for what they may endure.

Due to the *Appreciation of History and Culture* theme related to visited sites during training, we recommend increasing cultural site and historical training for IAEFP. Further, we recommend like-organizations include this aspect of preparation and training in their programming. Many of the participants selected photos that contributed to this theme, and many additional participants elevated those photos and the importance of the experiences captured. Therefore, we maintain this is a vital topic to include in future training and provided-experiences to volunteers.

Many participants contributed to the theme *Recognition of Empowered Women* by noting the passionate participation and leadership of female students they worked with. The program the participants participated in did not have a gender-specific training or preparation component. To better support volunteers as they interact with young women students, co-teachers, host family, and other community members, we recommend gender-specific training on empowerment of women to ensure volunteers are supporting women and girls within their community to the best of their abilities.

We recommend international agricultural development stakeholders utilize photovoice as

a means for reflective engagement with their teams and collaborators. Specifically, participants expressed appreciation for the method as a reflection activity after its completion. Continuing to utilize this method will not only enhance perspectives and give voice to the community and culture in which groups operate, but also provide opportunities to strengthen the community among volunteers and open a unique dialogue for reflection and sharing experiences with one another.

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