The Pursuit to Develop a Theoretical Approach to Obtaining Multicultural Autonomy in Agricultural and Extension Education

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As far back as 1969, scholars in agricultural education recognized the need to (a) determine how to prepare educators for underrepresented populations and (b) that it would be a difficult task to prepare teachers for populations who may live a life different from their educator (Boykin, 1969). The profession waited 35 years for a philosophical perspective to assist agricultural education in a growing diverse society as Bowen (2002) provided his reflections to the profession as the Distinguished Lecturer at the American Association for Agricultural Education in which he introduced the ITAP model of progression: Intolerance, Tolerance, Appreciation, and Proactive Behavior. Unfortunately, the profession has allowed gaps in appreciation and proactive behavior as reflected in the demographics of post-secondary enrollment since the 2002 charge.

Since 1965, the American Association for Agricultural Education has continued to monitor the supply and demand of students pursuing a degree in agricultural education and entering careers as teachers in secondary agricultural classrooms. Throughout the duration of the supply and demand studies (Camp, 2000; Kantrovich, 2010; Lawver et al., 2018) a continual theme emerges; a homogenous population of teachers that does not reflect the expanding population of diverse learners (Boser, 2014). In fact, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), 2020 is the first year that most public-school students are ethnic minorities. Lehman (2017) determined that the growing homogenous teacher education students continue to increase the lack of connectivity to the ever-increasing heterogenous student population.

Racial heterogeneity is only one of the many cultural differences that agricultural educators experience with their students. According to a Pew Research Study (2020), the religious landscape in the United States is more diverse now than at any point in the country's history. While the religious landscape has changed minimally in rural America, other cultural differences exist. For example, while divorced rural homes were once considered abnormal, now over a 50-year period, rural families have surpassed that of families in urban communities (Pew, 2016). And, as communities expand in industry and global opportunities, language barriers rapidly exist in rural secondary schools (Tancredi, 2018). Furthermore, as societies become more familiar with cultural identity, youth become more open and comfortable identifying their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (Godin, 2020; Polderman et al., 2018).

Within agricultural education, LaVergne et al. (2012) identified barriers that teachers perceived toward an inclusive classroom environment and recommended that strategies and/or solutions be proposed and implemented that will assist in nurturing inclusive learning. Today, teachers are entering a multicultural classroom which comes with challenges in connecting to each student. Alsubaie (2015) recognized the added responsibility of leading a diverse class of students through a new curriculum and unchartered territories; thus, posits that specialized learning techniques, practice, and education are all needed to lead a diverse class of students through contemporary curriculum and unchartered territories of the learning experience. As a result, specialized learning techniques, training, and education are needed to educate a broader, multicultural classroom effectively.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to work effectively across cultures is essential for addressing global challenges, particularly in agriculture, extension, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These sectors often operate in diverse environments where cultural norms, communication styles, and approaches to problem-solving vary widely. Preparing individuals to navigate cultural differences fosters mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration, which are crucial for implementing sustainable agricultural practices, improving food security, and addressing climate change. Moreover, culturally aware professionals are better equipped to engage local communities, respect traditional knowledge, and adapt solutions to meet specific needs (Suvedi, 2019). On an international scale, investing in cross-cultural training enhances the impact of initiatives (Caligiuri et al., 2005), reduces misunderstandings (Ko & Yang, 2011), and strengthens partnerships (Harrison, 1994), ultimately contributing to more effective and inclusive global development efforts (Waham et al., 2023).

An educator of good intent desires to make a positive difference. Although this intent is noble, it is limited in the ability of an individual to bring a positive impact to a broad, diverse learning environment because it does not assure action. Simply providing details for learning a particular task does not seem to reflect a methodology that inherently creates a positive life-long effort to make change.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

In 1973 counseling psychologists met in Vail, Colorado, to explore patterns and levels of training in professional psychology. From the meeting, recommendations and decisions were made that changed the way institutions trained counseling psychologists (Fretz, 1974). The intent was to explore how the profession could reach a broader audience while improving the impact among underrepresented patients. Today, counseling psychologists consider the Vail conference as a philosophical revolution in the profession. Among the revolutionaries was a professor by the name of Derald Wing Sue, who led a movement in defining a term coined as cultural competence.

Multicultural Competence is the ability to engage in actions or create conditions that maximize the optimal development of individuals or individual systems (Sue & Sue, 2008). This change is developed through an individual's acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic society; and on an organizational/societal level, advocating effectively for the development of new theories, practices, policies, and organizational structures that are more responsive to all groups (Sue, 2001).
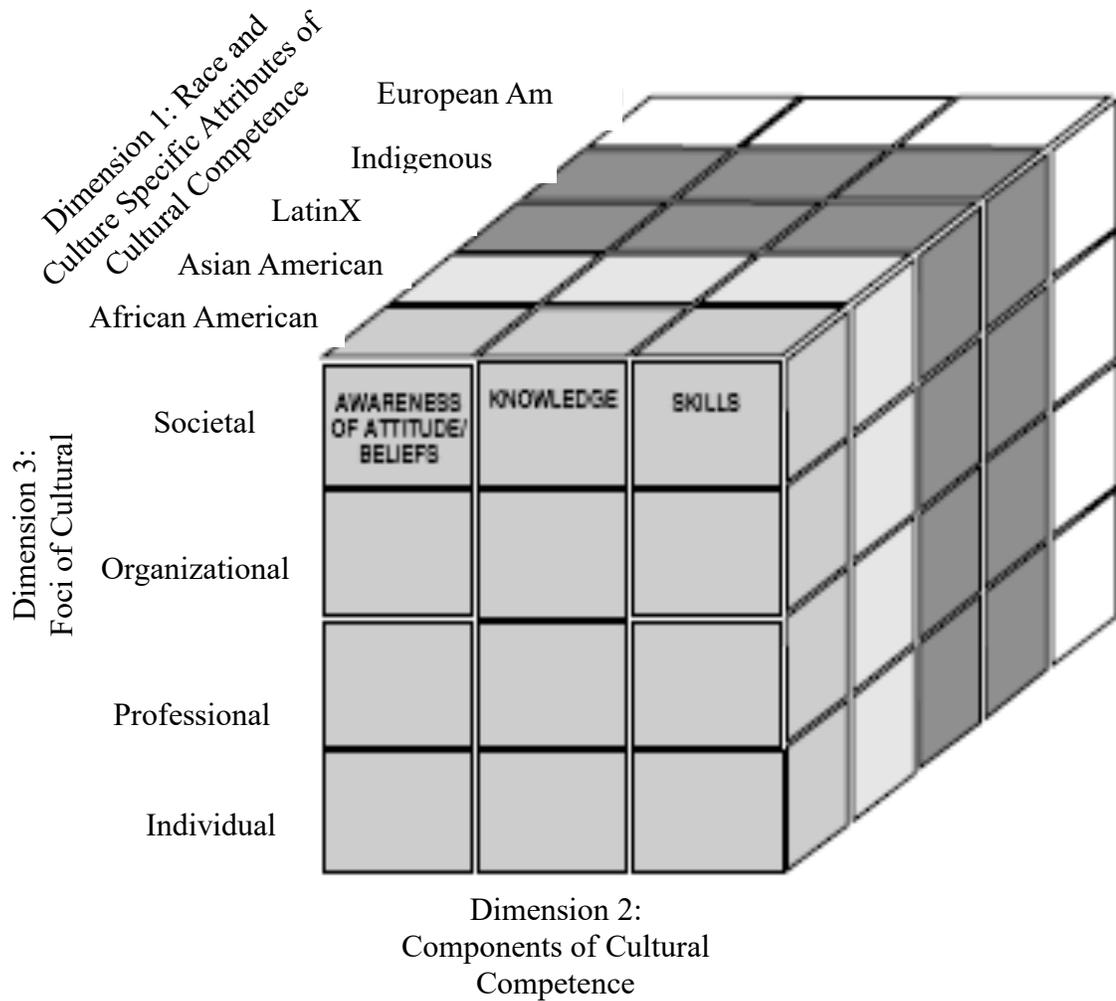
Banks (1995) explains the importance of education in the form of the three constructs of multicultural competence. The first construct, awareness, describes ethnic pluralism as a growing societal reality that influences the lives of young people. In contrast, the second, knowledge, states that in one way or another, individuals receive knowledge or beliefs, sometimes invalid, about ethnic and cultural groups. Finally, the skills reflect the beliefs and knowledge about ethnic and cultural groups and can either limit the perspectives of many or make a positive difference in the opportunities available to individuals.

Sue (2001) developed *the Multidimensional model for Developing Cultural Competence* (MDCC). The MDCC consists of three primary dimensions of multicultural competence: specific racial/cultural group perspectives, components of cultural competence, and foci of cultural competence (see Figure 1). Each cell in the model represents a combination of the three major dimensions. Dimension one pertains to acknowledging race or culture, while dimension two is composed of the constructs from the multicultural counseling competencies: knowledge, beliefs, and skills (Sue et al., 1998). The focus of dimension three examines the person versus the organizational systems of analysis. The work on multicultural competence begins and typically focuses on the individual level (Bingham et al., 2002) then gradually moves from individual to the individual in their professional setting. If the individual, as a professional, gains competence within the selected cultural dimension, it is only then that they can begin to focus on change within the organization, followed by the community.

Within agricultural education, the model assisted Vincent and Torres (2015) in identifying student perceptions of their teacher's multicultural competence levels. Within the study, they determined that even in classrooms that were not culturally diverse, students could identify the personal and professional level of their teacher's multicultural competence, which inadvertently reflected the diversity of their classroom enrollment.

Figure 1

Multidimensional Model for Developing Cultural Competence (Sue & Sue, 2008)

Dimension 1: Race and
Culture Specific Attributes of
Cultural Competence

European Am

Indigenous

LatinX

Asian American

African American

Dimension 3:
Foci of Cultural

Societal

Organizational

Professional

Individual

AWARENESS OF ATTITUDE/ BELIEFS	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS

Dimension 2:
Components of Cultural
Competence

Purpose

In response to the desegregation of public schools, Dr. Henry Schmitt (1971) asked the Agricultural Education profession, "How do teacher education institutions prepare and nurture in a vocational agriculture teacher the energy, sensitivity, enthusiasm, intellectual competence, and empathy necessary to teach minority youth and adults?" (p 20). Today, Schmitt's question still lingers as the profession seeks a model for equipping a homogenous population of graduates for

a heterogeneous population of learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to propose a model for developing Multicultural Autonomy that will balance theory and practice for the agricultural educator who will teach youth and adults from multiculturally different identities.

Philosophical Foundations & Methodology

From an epistemological approach, the research utilized a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2017). Social constructivists base their decisions on social interactions and occur within the zone of proximal development rather than in the biology of cognitive structures, which proceeds learning.

As the researchers began to formulate an approach toward the purpose, important terms were established in the philosophical underpinnings. Terms such as *provenance* was developed to represent the origin of one's social development. An individual *provenance* is based upon the environment one surrounds themselves, by choice and by chance (e.g., topography, geography, religious affiliation, community, socio-economic, racial/ethnic surrounding, social groups, etc.), to develop boundaries and solidity; a sense of feeling protected and safe (Harris, 2001). Often one's provenance is formed over a childhood of living in an environment, obtaining comfortability with a defined normal, which inadvertently provides a measure of relationship building skills.

Additionally, the term *Multicultural Autonomy* (MA) is an identity that is not static, continues to be open to new information and ongoing self-examination with a multicultural lens (Helms, 2014). At the peak of MA, the agricultural educator has the unique skill to gain trust, express empathy, and provide cultural content examples to learners from various provenances without dissimilating from a single cultural element of their own provenance. At this point in the teacher's pedagogy, they are considered a *Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator.*

Multicultural Autonomy Growth Model

The vision of who one may deliver content to and how one delivers content is biased toward only what has been seen, exposed to, and experienced. However, it is never a bias, rather a similarity in provenances toward a distinct cultural subset of individuals. The comfortability allows the individual to begin conversations that relate to individuals who they know and individuals with whom they subconsciously profile to be similar. In the art of teaching, a positive impact is assured among students who have homophilic provenance to that of their instructor. The provenance allows the teacher to have already a multicultural lens to work with, as it relates to the cultural elements within their provenance.

A problem occurs when the cultural elements of the student's provenance begin to differ from that of the teacher. As the differences increase, the vulnerability for the teacher to disengage, alienate, and create distance becomes a deep concern. Teachers are giving in to the vulnerabilities as students with different distinct provenances struggle to obtain academic success (Kets & Sandroni, 2019) unless approaches, primarily taken by the student, occur, such as assimilation (Yinger, 1981).

But what if the teacher's awareness, behavior, and skill level were strong among multiple provenances? One could infer the more knowledge and awareness the teacher has within provenances, the larger their skillset is to educate and connect to a broader set of learners. Psychology refers to this expanded knowledge, awareness, and skillset as multicultural competence (Johannes & Erwing, 2004), while educators consider this Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2002). As a result, the teacher has a distinct gift to connect individuals from diverse provenances, which creates a plethora of engagement opportunities. In this essence, the educator is reaching a level of Multicultural Autonomy (MA).

A Multicultural Autonomous educator doesn't simply engage themselves in cultural elements different from their own; rather, they immerse themselves within culturally different communities free of anxiety and judgment. To fully obtain MA, the individual, or in the essence of this manuscript, the agricultural educator, would not change the core cultural elements that identify who they are or, more importantly, their life-long developed cultural provenance.

An individual cannot simply decide they are multicultural autonomous, nor can they maintain the status and then disengage from cultural elements of the provenances that assisted in their arrival of MA The impression takes work, patience and is on-going. To begin a possibility of autonomy, an agricultural educator must continue in engaged self-reflection of a) awareness, b) attitude, and c) skills, then begin the same process toward the newly discovered cultural elements within different provenances. For a visual of the reflective elements necessary to gain MA, see Figure 2. Within the figure, perforated lines around each construct constitute the cognitive expansion as the educator reflects upon their own identity and newly immersed cultural discovery. This continued reflection results in growth/cognitive expansion of their self-provenance. As the educator's self-provenance expands, so does the ability to empathize among a more diverse group of individuals; hence skill development (Sue, 2001). Simultaneously, an increase interest should begin to form in the educator with the desire to learn more about the new provenance through a variety of approaches (e.g. cultural immersion, readings, interviews, and storytelling) which is grows/expands the educator's Cultural Discovery provenance; resulting in the overall cognitive growth of the educator's Multicultural Autonomy expands as well.

Figure 2

Development of the Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator
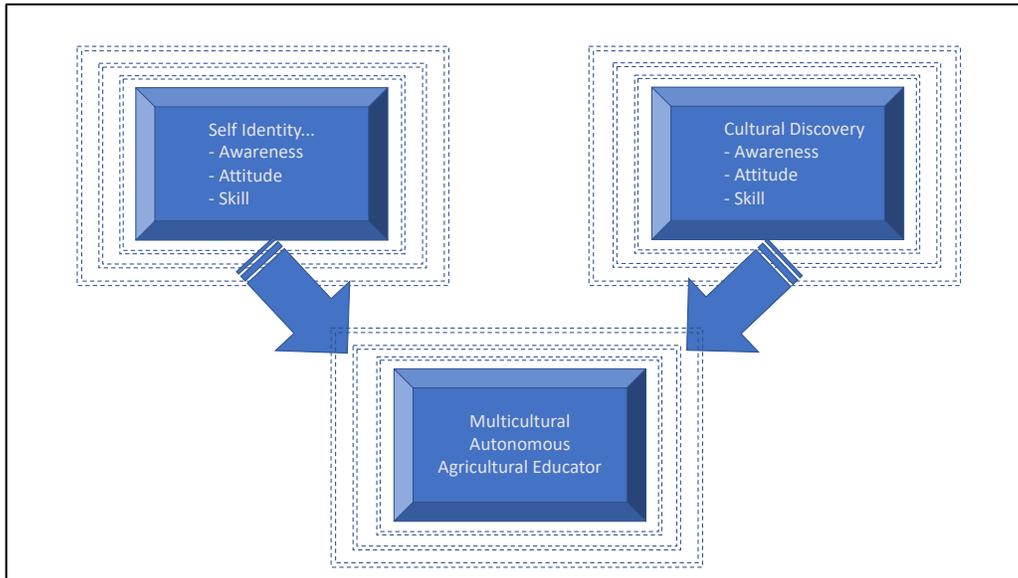
Self-Identity vs. Cultural Discovery

Growing as a Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Education cannot occur unless growth occurs first within the Self-Identity and Cultural Discovery domains. Like Sue and Sue (2008) recommendations, to grow multiculturally, an educator must begin with self before they begin to gain autonomy toward an individual, in this case a learner, with a cultural provenance different from their own. Once the self-evaluation and reflection begin the educator will proceed in expanding their Cultural Discovery of the newly identified provenance with similar approaches (awareness building, attitude reflection, and skill building).

Awareness

Harris (2001) recognized that a lot goes into the identity of self. An individual labels and identifies the identity of others (Layder, 2004), whether it is correct or not, through *social identifiers* (i.e., race/ethnicity, language/dialect, religion, age, sexual orientation, educational level, body type, socioeconomics, ability, family structure, geographic location, etc.). Social identifiers can be helpful and harmful in the perceptions of those around us. However, our self-identity also encapsulates an area that many individuals never see or value, known as *personal identity* (Layder, 2004*)*. Personal identity (i.e., talents, likes, peculiarities, personality, political beliefs, ways of doing things, introvert vs. extrovert, skills,

uniqueness, etc.) plays a major role in defining the individual and truly reflects the group to whom they resonate, acknowledge, and gravitate.

As a teenager, youth grow in their self-awareness (Erikson & Erikson, 1981), which creates a strange dynamic in one's attitude. Gay and Kirkland (2010) believed it was crucial to self-reflect on perspective during critical cultural moments. These critical moments often occur in the presence of major global events or simply the environment that individuals are surrounded by (i.e. friends, places of workshop, home, social media, etc.). Each creates critical moments of self-reflection in our growth area of awareness. The same reflection must occur when experiencing anger, sadness, excitement, happiness, and disappointment (Vincent & Drape, 2019). It is important to note that the reflection of these attitudes is explicit awareness and should not be confused with implicit attitudes (Benaji & Greenwald, 2016).

Attitude

It is easy to gauge someone's attitude by observing their activity on social media, such as the posts they like, share, and follow, especially during times of heated debate. Without social media, people engage in face-to-face discussions or debates with colleagues from time to time. In these moments, educators may encounter a wide range of emotional reactions that reveal their attitudes toward certain cultural contexts or elements.

Attitude is crucial in how one is perceived and in the interpreted perception in another individual's perspective. Subconsciously, our attitude toward others is driven by our provenance; thus, playing a role in our interpretation and decision-making toward someone else. The attitude is led by thin slicing (Croskerry, 2006), a form of critical thinking that the brain completes when only provided minimal information. Among students with similar provenance, a teacher establishes thin-sliced decisions, often in the form of discipline, that is more accurate and interpreted more accurately. Unfortunately, gaps exist in the action and decision making when provenances differ – creating issues such as microaggressions and systemic racism (Anderson, 2003; Crutchfield et al., 2020).

Skill

Within teacher education programs, students begin to determine and define their style of teaching that works effectively among the cultural elements they are exposed. This pedagogical approach comes into question when the methods that worked in previous situations become ineffective among learners from different cultural elements. At that moment a teacher begins to reestablish the pedagogical skill set and expand from what worked among learners of similar provenances to learners who reflect the newly discovered cultural provenances. Skill is necessary to identify among ourselves and what works among other cultural identities;

however, skill development toward Multicultural Autonomy cannot occur until knowledge and awareness are addressed (Sue, 2001).

Growth within the Self-Identity domain is important and is a positive improvement to the individual; however, if Cultural Discovery (CD) domain is not addressed and growth doesn't occur, growth in MA cannot be obtained. To mirror the growth areas of the self-identity domain, the teacher should work toward expanding their CD through awareness, attitude, and skill.

Conclusions

Multicultural Autonomy, as Constantine and Sue (2005) posit, counselors and educators may see growth in their multicultural competence, yet never fully reach a pinnacle; the same can be said toward one's Multicultural Autonomy. The development and the progression of the Multiculturally Autonomous Agricultural Educator (MAAE) is based upon the time committed by the educator. Each learner who enters an educator's environment brings with them a new set of provenances. Within seconds of entering the classroom, the individual learner begins scoping for similar provenances to determine the level of likeness. Without having conversations, the learners look for *social identifiers* to establish a form of critical mass (Ball, 2004) to maintain a level of safety and security. It is the educator's responsibility to help learners identify common *personal identifiers* to establish a larger critical mass that will result in ownership of the curriculum, the interest of their colleagues, an expanded mindset, and the learning environment.

By seeking a classroom that contains a broad diversity of provenances, an educator is inadvertently increasing inquiry, creativity, and workforce preparedness within the classroom environment (Wells et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the learner does not gain access to the benefits of a diverse set of provenances unless a Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator (MAAE) is present and finds pedagogical approaches to exposing the value to each provenance. The MAAE creates paths to reveal provenances; thus, taking initial steps in gaining personal awareness and knowledge (Sue, 2001) not only for themselves but also young multiculturally autonomous students. As the agricultural educator continues to refine their teaching skills (Sue et al., 1998) to work with the newly discovered provenances, their autonomy expands, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Bias toward one particular identity occurs when the provenances present are minimal and likeness prevails. In 2008, McKown and Weinstein found that when a bias toward one or more racial group of students exists, it has significant impact on academic achievement. The author(s) posit that MA and Sue's (2001) multicultural competency model could positively impact academic achievement gaps as teacher expectancy bias are minimized.

Figure 3

Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator Growth Model
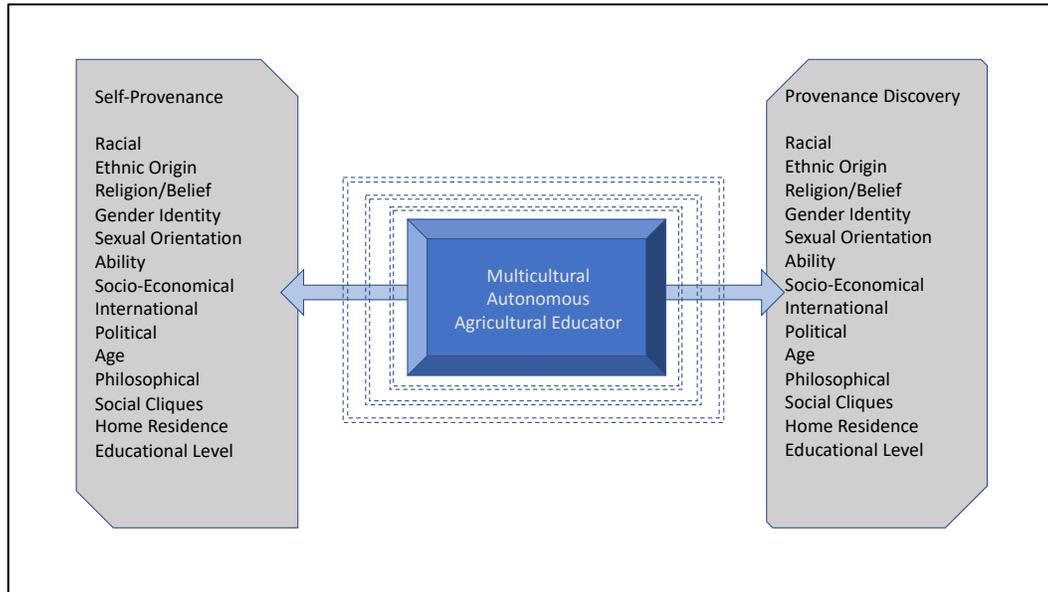
Discussion & Proposed Recommendations

Dr. Henry Schmitt (1971) asked, "How do teacher education institutions prepare and nurture in a vocational agriculture teacher the energy, sensitivity, enthusiasm, intellectual competence, and empathy necessary to teach minority youth and adults?" (p. 20) Fifty years later, agricultural education continues to ask questions regarding teacher effectiveness, connectivity, and impact to learners that do not reflect similar provenances. In an ever-changing global society, it is imperative that an industry that feeds, clothes, educates, and advocates seeks multiple approaches for assuring the occurrence of learning.

Just as Paulo Freire (1996) admitted to the flaws in the philosophical development of *Critical Pedagogy*, the scholar(s) here identify that the concept presented should serve as a foundational tool for future amendments and refining. The development of philosophy to conception and from conception to theory comes from utilizing research to model, search for limitations, and seek further explanation. Thus, it is recommended that scholars utilize the concepts for discussions, tools for research, incorporate into teaching as a beginning platform, and encourage others to seek the next steps for an intersectionality growth mindset within agricultural education.

Multicultural Autonomy is to be gained rather than to be attained. Provenances continue to change, emerge and originate; thus, pushing for continued engagement and skill development. To identify whether an educator is at the point where they can consider themselves autonomously competent within a provenance different from their own, they must experience immersion that creates memorable thought/life-provoking experiences. Janet Helm coined the immersion experience as the pseudo-independent phase within her six phases of identity development. Helm posits that once pseudo-independence occurs, the individual would seek to gain more knowledge and find themselves desiring to immerse in the group. Faculty at post-secondary institutions who seek to develop Multicultural Autonomy among their students should create assignments that encourage immersion experiences and individual global travels, which foster opportunities for pseudo-independence to occur. As a result, provenances are expanded, cultural knowledge is gained, behavior is transformed, biases are held in check, and skills to connect multicultural audiences are tested and valued.

Later in 1971, Schmitt and Bender challenged the secondary Agricultural Education profession with a charge of "will middle-class White Anglo Saxon Protestant vocational agriculture teachers accept minority youth and adults enrolled in vocational education in agriculture?" (p. 282). Agricultural education, for over half a century, has allowed gaps to exist between marginalized and unmarginalized communities (Barajas et al., 2020; Croom & Alston, 2009; Talbert et al., 1999; Jones & Bowen, 1998; Schmitt, 1971) with minimal effort to develop paths for closing the achievement gaps. As a MAAE, opportunities exist for successful pedagogical and andragogical practices that open opportunities for underrepresented populations and connect groups of diverse philosophical differences. By doing so, the MAAE becomes a leader in school reform, community education, agricultural literacy, and non-profit leadership; thus, assisting populations of socio-economic struggle, racial minorities, gender differences, topographic diversity, varied religious beliefs, and other communities of differences.

Unfortunately, Self-Identity and Cultural Discovery rarely occur when it comes to a multicultural growth mindset which creates unnecessary resistance and anxiety for dialogue between a teacher and student (Carter, 2005). The opportunities for dialogue are important and the missed opportunities further divide opposing provenances as social, familial, environmental, physical, geographical, and philosophical issues are never discussed and confronted. Nevertheless, Sue and Sue (2008) posit that many minority groups believe that including individuals, who have never addressed their own [provenances], in multicultural dialogue will enable the individual to never deal with the hard issues related to an "ism".

To believe that one can fully become multiculturally autonomous makes the concept meaningless as the concept deserves a commitment that extends an entire

lifetime. And to believe that all teachers are multicultural perpetuates a continual mindset that equates all differences with individual differences.

Further Implications & the Political Climate of Today

The profession is bombarded with quality exploratory studies of the *cultural growth, cultural adaptation, cultural learning, cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, cultural expansion,* etc. of students engaged in immersive international agricultural experiences (Bost & Wingenbach, 2018; Conner et al., 2024; Dado et al., 2023; Dobbins et al., 2020; Dooley et al., 2023; Hains et al., 2012; Janeiro et al., 2011). In each of the studies, students were engaged in a variety of learning experiences that challenged their frame of reference and positionality; however, did a longitudinal change occur? Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) began to identify practices for assisting faculty in developing a successful international experience prior to departure, during the departure, and following the departure. As scholars utilize the studies mentioned in preparation for student growth, we encourage them to educate students on how to become a Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator. The philosophy provides a road map for student growth as they seek to expand their provenances. All university-led international experiences should aim for developing autonomy among their students so they are best prepared for individual immersion and emersion that create sustained relationships which will benefit agriculture globally.

Over the past 25 years, scholars have explored the term *communal orientation*, which relates to the interpersonal abilities one processes toward an individual who is culturally different than themselves (Le et al., 2012). The scholars posit that an individual high in communal orientation cares for the welfare of others and more love for humanity. As the awareness for communal orientation needs expands, the model for developing the Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educators becomes more apparent. Jenkins (2022) noted a lack of informed, aware, and skilled professionals when distributing food and aid to Haitians while Haynes (2021) recognized the demise of communal orientation while investigating religion and international relations. The scholar pleads for an improved understanding in how religion impacts our international relationships. We posit that an individual who embraces the Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator model can assist in the needs requested by that of Jenkins and Haynes.

The concepts presented in this manuscript are based upon the lived scholarly experiences of two researchers over the course of their career. Recent events in the last five years of the manuscript's origin have resulted in an increasing of awareness and publications regarding the realm of diversity, inclusion, equitability, and belongness (Jones et al., 2023). Coincidentally, the increase of scholarship since 2020 are reflective of gender and racial bias with limited grounding in theoretical foundations (Dewidar et al., 2022; Hattery et al., 2022). Currently in the United

States, legislation is occurring that effects scholarship that assists in shaping movements within the realm of multiculturalism (Noone & Murray, 2024). The utilization of the Multicultural Autonomous Agricultural Educator model can serve as a bridge between social scientist and society in educational reform, framing of research, and the engagement of local communities.

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