

deaFFA: Field Experience in a School for the Deaf

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Since its foundation, School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) has been making strides to be more inclusive for students from all walks of life. Historically existing solely in rural school systems, SBAE programs in urban and suburban schools have become more common in recent years, with FFA chapters existing in 11 of the 20 largest cities, including New York, Chicago and Philadelphia (National FFA Organization, 2015). The experiential nature of SBAE makes it ideal for all students, including those with learning or behavioral disabilities. However, one demographic of students, deaf students, is underserved in SBAE. This idea aligns with Research Priority 4 of the 2016-2020 American Association for Agricultural Education Research Agenda: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 87.5% of deaf or hard of hearing students are enrolled in regular public schools and in general classes, rather than in separate schools for students with disabilities (US Department of Education). In the preparation of teachers of SBAE, completing an American Sign Language (ASL) course is not commonly a required component of their special education curriculum. These statistics suggest teachers of SBAE will encounter deaf or hard of hearing students in their classroom, but are ill-prepared to service their needs as they do the needs of the other students in their classroom.

One school in Kentucky, the Kentucky School for the Deaf, is tackling this problem head-on. The Kentucky School for the Deaf is a residential school for deaf and hard of hearing students ranging from preschool to high school. The NCES states only 3.1% of all deaf or hard of hearing students are enrolled in separate residential institutions, which makes the Kentucky School for the Deaf a leader in serving this population. In fact, the FFA chapter at the Kentucky School for the Deaf is one of only two of its kind in the country. Enrollment numbers are small across all grade levels at Kentucky School for the Deaf, with just under 100 students total. The high school enrollment sits at about 50 students, 21 of whom are enrolled in a very special program: agriculture. This particular innovative SBAE program is led by one remarkable teacher, and for the first time ever this year, a student teacher from the University of Kentucky.

Early in her student teaching experience, the aforementioned student teacher was helping log kids into the computers to work on a project, and caught a glimpse of one of their computer screensavers, which read, "Deaf can do anything except hear!" These students can do anything a hearing student in a public school can do, but because of their lack of hearing ability, they have found their way to the Kentucky School for the Deaf in order to be surrounded by a community that understands their specific needs.

How it Works/Program Phases/Results to Date

Prior to beginning her student teaching experience, the student teacher was required to complete an ASL course in a neighboring county. This ASL course was completed on her own time and her own budget. Throughout the semester prior to student teaching, in conjunction with taking her ASL course, the pre-service teacher was asked to specifically teach lessons in her Methods of Teaching course at the University of Kentucky as if she were teaching to deaf or hard of hearing students. This additional preparation allowed her to take the signs she was learning in her ASL course and apply them to an SBAE classroom environment.

The Kentucky School for the Deaf agriculture department has a variety of resources they use to educate the unique students in their program. Some of these include a greenhouse, a

chicken coop with 18 laying hens, a 23-acre student farm, a poultry laboratory, a small engines laboratory, an aquaculture system, a mechanics shop with a variety of farm equipment, a classroom/computer lab combination, and one class rabbit named Chloe. While the student teacher appreciates the abundance of resources available to her in education her students, she has also encountered some struggles.

While SBAE often boasts about the “learning by doing” occurring in its classrooms, the student teacher at Kentucky School for the Deaf has found, for these students, it is not quite so simple. Because deaf students have a visual and bodily-kinesthetic language, they also have a visual and bodily-kinesthetic learning style. Deaf students are concrete learners, and perform best when they can see or touch the content being covered. The abundance of classroom facilities and resources above has been invaluable to the student teacher in teaching agriculture-specific content, but many of the abstract FFA and leadership topics covered in SBAE classrooms, such as parliamentary procedure, simply cannot be taught.

In a deaf classroom, if the students are not looking directly at the teacher, they are not listening. The student teacher had some difficulty with this concept at first, especially when attempting to utilize worksheets or other visuals in her classroom. With this population of students, teachers must stop instruction to give the students ample time to view and process the visual before they are ready to turn their attention back to the teacher.

Furthermore, the student teacher has found deaf students do not know the English language the way hearing people do. Their writing is extremely difficult to read, because they often write how they would sign. They drop unnecessary words, so their answer in their mind might be, “You must commit to owning your dog for the duration of its life and invest time and money into the pet”; but they might write, “Commit dog for life money time needs forever” on the test. This has changed the way the student teacher views assessment in SBAE.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Once the student teacher from the University of Kentucky completes her student teaching experience at the Kentucky School for the Deaf, faculty at the University of Kentucky wish to continue to find innovative ways to serve underserved populations like deaf and hard of hearing students in SBAE. More importantly, efforts must be made by SBAE Teacher Preparation Programs, professional development organizations, and in-service teachers to meet the needs of these students in an SBAE classroom.

One tangible way to service the needs of deaf and hard of hearing students in SBAE and in the National FFA Organization would be to make ASL interpreters more available at conferences and functions. The students at Kentucky School for the Deaf have never attended their State FFA Camp for this reason, thus have not had the opportunity to interact with other SBAE students. The inclusion of these students at conferences and functions would allow them to feel the same sense of community other students from SBAE programs feel when they attend them.

Costs/Resources Needed

The first step in the inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing students in SBAE is providing pre-service ASL courses or certification to teachers at professional development events. Furthermore, teaching strategies for this population of students should be emphasized either in the SBAE curriculum, or implemented into the special education curriculum at post-secondary institutions. If more teachers were ASL certified and had the desire and knowledge to teach deaf and hard of hearing students, this population would no longer be underserved.

References

National FFA Organization. (2015). Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.ffa.org/about/what-is-ffa/statistics>

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *The Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014), Table 204.60.