

Challenge Me: Using Livestock to Connect SAE for All!

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Introduction

Since the inception of what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, students with disabilities are guaranteed access to free and appropriate public education (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). The National FFA Organization's Federal Charter, originally passed in 1950 as Public Law 81-740, was recently reviewed, amended, and passed as Public Law 116-7 and specifies the FFA as "an integral component of instruction in agricultural education, including instruction relating to agriculture, food, and natural resources" (Future Farmers of America Federal Charter, 2019, para. 4). Moreover, the Federal Charter additionally outline the purposes of the organization to specifically seek inclusion and diversity of all critical personnel including the membership (2019).

We see a multitude of exceptional learners enrolled in agricultural education courses today who desire inclusion in not just the agricultural class curriculum, but also in leadership development and in supervised agricultural experiences. The Council's renewed focus on Supervised Agricultural Experiences in the form of "SAE for All" (2019) reinforces a need to reach all learners regardless of background or ability to ensure experiences both in and out of the agricultural classroom. Finally, the American Association of Agricultural Education's fourth research priority outlines specific queries about "the most effective models for delivering agricultural teacher education programs to reach nontraditional audiences" and the need to "make project-based learning more relevant and contemporary in youth programs in agriculture and natural resources" (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016, p. 39). This priority indicates a need to assist preservice agricultural education teachers in developing skills, abilities, and confidence to work with all learners in their agricultural education programs, including exceptional learners and their exposure to leadership development through the FFA and application of agricultural content outside of the classroom through Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE).

While there is a clear need, myriad studies reveal teachers lack the self-efficacy to work with exceptional students (Andreasen, Seevers, Dormody, & VanLeeuwen, 2007; Faulkner & Baggett, 2010; Kessell, Wingenbach, & Lawver, 2009). A recurring recommendation across these empirical pieces was the restructuring of agricultural teacher preparation programs to better equip preservice agricultural educators with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to work with students with special needs (Andreasen et al., 2007; Elbert & Baggett, 2003; Kessell et al., 2009; Stair et al., 2010).

With regard to these considerations, the Challenge Me Swine Showing Program was developed and implemented at Murray State University to partner preservice agricultural education teachers with intermediate and middle school students with moderate to severe disabilities from Trigg County Schools. The goal of this program was to use the university's show pig operation and undergraduate agricultural education students to teach the exceptional learners how to bathe, groom, and show market swine animals in preparation for a livestock show, while helping the preservice teachers learn compassion, patience, empathy, and teaching strategies for reaching exceptional learners in a project-based environment.

How it works

Through a university Quality Enhancement Program grant and additional funds from the University of Kentucky's Cooperative Extension agency, the agricultural teacher educator at the university contacted the principal and special education teacher at Trigg County Schools to establish a partnership for teaching the students with moderate to severe disabilities about showing hogs.

Simultaneously, undergraduate preservice agricultural education teachers were recruited to volunteer for the program. The two prerequisites for volunteers were that they were agricultural education majors and they committed to two of the three weekly sessions in their entirety. The middle school students were bused to the university campus exposition center on three Fridays in April 2019. On the first Friday, the six undergraduate preservice agricultural education teachers greeted the six middle school students at the exposition center. The first 30 minutes involved preservice teachers leading the middle school students through three rounds of icebreaker activities. After getting to know one another and to be the decision makers, the middle school students each chose one of the undergraduates to be their official “buddy” for the program. Once the buddies were paired, they spent another 45 minutes using pig whips and beach balls learning to move hogs properly around cones, chairs, and people. Following a lunch break, the exceptional learners were then introduced to live market weight hogs and encouraged to use the whips to practice moving them around a holding pen. The students each named their pigs as well.

During the second weekly session, the students were offloaded from the bus. Following a review with the beach balls, the middle school students were taught how to bathe the hogs in preparation for the show ring. After lunch, they practiced showing their hogs in a larger holding pen. During this session, they were introduced to holding a small brush and acclimated to having an exhibitor number clip on their waistband.

For the final week, the undergraduate students and the swine unit student workers set up a show ring under the university’s pavilion with panels, shavings, holding pens, ferns, and pen markers. The students arrived along with their school administrators, parents, and university faculty from the colleges of agriculture and education to watch from the bleachers. A graduate student with a specialization in swine served as the show official for two classes – one for intermediate grades and one for middle grades. The students brought their pigs out of the holding pens, moved them around for the judge, and then listened to a critique of their showmanship skills. They were awarded a trophy and each student had a show picture with their pig and their buddy given to them in a frame.

Results to date

Since the conclusion of the program, two of the eighth grade students completed their assessment to move into high school and requested to enroll in agricultural education classes. Additionally, the Challenge Me 4-H program for Trigg County was reestablished and several of those students are now members. The undergraduate students have shown an increased interest in working with students with disabilities. In a separate research component describing their self-efficacy working with students with exceptional needs and Supervised Agricultural Experiences, the results showed their was an increase in their efficacy after this experience.

Future plans

This program will be repeated in the Spring 2020 semester with the intent of transitioning the preservice teachers to roles working directly with the Challenge Me 4-H Club in that county. The hope is that their county fair will reintroduce a livestock component in which these students can participate.

Costs

Bus Transportation:	\$500	Whips, Brushes, Clips:	\$200
Participant Lunches:	\$150	Participant Show T-shirts:	\$200
Trophies:	\$100	Total:	\$1150

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