

**Promoting Culture, Diversity, and Inclusion in
Agricultural Education and Extension**

Jason Bullock
Graduate Student
North Carolina State University
jhbullo2@ncsu.edu

Joy Morgan-Fleming
Assistant Professor
North Carolina State University
jemorga2@ncsu.edu

Daniel P. Collins
Graduate Student
North Carolina State University
dpcollin@ncsu.edu

212 Ricks Hall
Box 7607 NCSU
Raleigh, NC 27695
Phone: (919) 515-6080

Introduction/Need for Innovation

Research recommends that agricultural education and extension programs need to focus on creating diverse and inclusive learning environments to maximize the impact and reach of their respective programs (Boehm, 2019; Lavergne, 2008, 2016; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Talbert & Edwin, 2008). An understanding of culture, diversity, and inclusion within the agricultural education and extension profession is essential to begin improving current instructional delivery structures and provide diverse and inclusive learning environments (Lavergne, Jones, Larke, & Elbert, 2012). Through conversations with individuals from both professions and the experiences of the program leaders, focused professional development training (Lavergne, Jones, Larke, & Elbert, 2012; Warren & Alston, 2007; Wood, 2007) was selected as a proactive approach to helping meet the need for creating diverse and inclusive learning environments in agricultural education and extension programming.

Program leaders determined the purpose of the professional development opportunity was to provide an interactive workshop designed for agricultural education teachers and extension professionals to bring awareness and understanding of differentiating instruction to promote inclusion of diverse learner populations. Objectives for the program were to 1) provide training for education and extension professionals on how to work with exceptional audiences, 2) provide an education resource kit with tips and strategies for working with various participants with diverse needs, and 3) instruct education and extension professionals on how to differentiate instruction based on learner needs.

How It Works

During spring 2019, one faculty member and two doctoral students from NC State University planned a workshop entitled “Planting SEEDS (Supporting Education and Extension through Differentiated Strategies)” across the state of North Carolina for agricultural education teachers and extension professionals. Program leaders met to discuss the goals and objectives of the program and to develop an agenda with respective responsibilities. Agricultural education teachers at the middle and high school level as well as extension professionals within the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service were encouraged to participate in the interactive workshop designed to bring awareness and understanding of differentiated instruction to promote inclusion of diverse learner populations. Participants would also receive a digital differentiated instruction resource kit.

To encourage registration, correspondence was sent out to the target audience through the NC FFA listserv and extension email list. Registration was open to an unlimited number of participants for each date and preliminary registration numbers guided the reservation of facilities and confirmation of actual location for each workshop. Marketing materials were also created by one of the doctoral students and distributed at NC FFA Convention and various extension activities. Participants were directed to register through a Google spreadsheet and provide their name, email, occupation, workshop date/location, and any dietary restrictions. Email correspondence was sent to registered participants two to three days prior to each workshop to remind participants of the workshop location and time, \$10 registration cost for lunch, and any details specific to parking. At the completion of each workshop day, participants completed an evaluation form.

Results to Date/Implications

The Planting SEEDS workshops were hosted in the eastern, central, and western part of North Carolina during July of 2019. Each workshop began at 9am with check in and ended at approximately 4pm. Participants completed various interactive and discussion based activities throughout the day based around the following topics: the diverse needs within participants specific program, school, and community; how to modify programs to meet varying abilities; participants own abilities and the lens through which they view their abilities; promoting leadership through diversity and inclusion in their respective programs; differentiating instruction within agriculture to meet the needs of all learners; and thinking beyond curriculum and assessments. At the end of the day, participants were asked to share best practices they are using in their programs. This sharing time contributed to valuable discussions that sparked new strategies for fostering inclusive practices. In addition, participants shared email addresses for future collaborations.

During the “Leading through Diversity” section of the workshop, participants were asked to name the first word/phrase that came to mind when they heard the terms: Culture, Diversity, and Inclusion, separately. The entries were recorded using polleverywhere.com and compiled to create a word cloud that showcases the initial perceptions of the terms with repeated entries increasing in size within the word cloud. The top 3 words for each prompt were: 1) DIVERSITY– difference, unique, and variety; 2) For CULTURE – background, tradition, and family; and 3) INCLUSION – acceptance, included, and together. The word clouds emphasize that when we think of culture, diversity, and inclusion, especially in the context of education and extension, educators often do not think about all of the “diverse” needs that should be considered to promote a more inclusive learning environment.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Based on the feedback provided by the evaluation forms, email communications, and personal conversations, it was recommended that changes be made to the workshop design to incorporate activities that are targeted for agricultural education teachers and extension professionals separately as the dynamics of their respective programs vary regarding curriculum and instructional delivery. Extension professionals expressed an interest in developing understanding of differentiated instructional strategies, but struggled with fitting the strategies and ideas presented within the frameworks of extension programming in a non-formal educational setting. The extension professionals are not provided with any information related to potential individualized education plans (IEPs) or 504 plans which can make advanced modifications and accommodations more challenging. This was an area extension professionals would like more professional development.

Costs/Resources Needed

Through planning and implementation of the Planting SEEDs workshops, program leaders were able to secure facilities at no cost to the program, materials were provided through department resources, and travel and lodging for program leaders was supported through departmental grant funding approved from the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences. Lunch costs were provided by registered participants at the cost of \$10 per individual. Securing funding to provide the workshops at no cost to participants is encouraged for future implementations of professional development training.

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