

Using Experiential Learning to Gain Skills for Supporting Students with Disabilities

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Introduction & Need for Strategy

Preservice teachers must be prepared to work with and provide instruction for a diverse population including students with disabilities. Approximately 20% of school-based agricultural education students nationwide receive special education services (Dormody et al., 2006; Easterly & Myers, 2011; Pense, 2008). This is above the national average of 15% for all students enrolled in public education with a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Agricultural educators' perceptions toward students with disabilities in the classroom and FFA program are positive (Giffing et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2012; Hoerst & Whittington, 2009). Aschenbrener et al. (2010) found moderate confidence and moderate success levels among early career agriculture teachers' ability to teach students with disabilities. However, gaps in knowledge continue to exist in best practices for instruction (Faulkner & Baggett, 2010; Griffing et al., 2010; Hoerst & Whittington, 2009). The creation of three experiential learning experiences focusing on awareness, inclusion and methods for teaching students with disabilities were developed for preservice teachers to build upon their required course work in special education.

Connection to Literature

As far back as its inception, agricultural education has embodied the principles of experiential learning (Hoerst & Whittington, 2009). Experiential learning extends beyond secondary programs and is essential for post-secondary agriculture (Coleman et al., 2024). Coleman et al. (2024) exerts that hands-on activities are not enough. Educators must use intentionality when designing experiences for them to truly be considered "experiential". Experiential learning is a student-centered, reflexive process where learners engage in experiences, reflections, applications and conceptualizations (Coleman et al., 2024).

Estepp and Roberts (2011) developed a three-part model to incorporate experiential education in postsecondary agricultural education programs, similar to the three-circle model for school-based agricultural education. This model includes classroom and lab-based instruction, outside-of-class experiential opportunities such as internships and study abroad, and extracurricular activities such as service-learning, involvement in student organizations and the community (Estepp & Robers, 2011). Following the model, out-of-class and service-learning experiences were developed for preservice teachers to better understand and support students with disabilities.

How It Works & Implementation of Strategy

The Agricultural Education Program at Wilmington College began offering authentic, service-oriented opportunities for preservice teachers to gain experience in working with students with disabilities beginning the summer of 2023. Three specific experiential learning opportunities

were established to help increase preservice teachers' awareness of individual needs and to provide them with skills to support students with disabilities in the classroom. The new preservice teacher experiences included:

1. An agricultural education focused short-term study abroad where students worked directly with children with disabilities in a Kenyan orphanage.
2. Development and facilitation of workshops and activities at a fall camp for high schoolers with disabilities as part of the Ag Ed Methods course.
3. Volunteering at a week-long college led summer therapeutic riding camp, working with children with disabilities and collaborating with occupational therapy graduate students.

Results to Date / Implications

Overall, 26 agricultural students, including 12 preservice teachers, participated in at least one of the three activities. Each experience provided different insights and opportunities to learn and grow. Students engaged in the study abroad overwhelmingly made positive references through reflective journaling about working with the children in the orphanage: *"My favorite experience was interacting with all the children at PKC and bonding with them. Amazing children!"* Many students also indicated growth and shifts in perspective as to what they had previously thought about children with disabilities through *"learning and experiencing"*.

Students enrolled in the Ag Ed Methods course planned and facilitated workshops and activities for high school campers with disabilities. In doing so, they learned to create lesson plans that included differentiation and connected pedagogical research to the methods and activities they chose to use. Preservice teachers utilized concepts of multimodality learning, support and scaffolding when carrying out their lessons and activities. They surpassed faculty anticipations by developing creative hands-on activities and adapting content and modifying expectations in the moment while working with the campers.

Students assisting the therapeutic riding camp worked directly with elementary-aged students with disabilities. They learned about the campers and their needs. They also learned skills from the occupational therapy (OT) students as they worked side-by-side to help campers with attention and sensory needs. Working with the OT students modeled collaboration with service providers, something future agriculture teachers should engage in through the school setting.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Wilmington College plans to continue offering these opportunities for preservice teachers. The two camps for students with disabilities will occur annually and students enrolled in the Ag Ed Methods course will continue to be required to participate for course credit. The study abroad trip will take place every other year and will expand the service component with the orphanage in the future. The infusion of well-planned experiences both within and outside of required courses that promote understanding, inclusion and teaching strategies geared towards students with disabilities is recommended for all preservice teachers.

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