

Communication Beyond the Ring: An Alternative Method Gives a Voice to All Abilities

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Introduction

Since 1968, society has pushed for a more inclusive environment and laws, ranging from accessible media consumption to inclusive education for individuals with disabilities (Teixeria & Edwards, 2020). With the intensified demand for cohesion throughout society, the agricultural education system has tried to elevate its model of education. This mindset of creating a comprehensive model of agriculture education was demonstrated through campaigns such as “SAE for All” by the National FFA organization. This was created to help every student find their place within agriculture (Weinrich, 2018). Even with movements for increased rates of inclusivity at the national level, as a grassroots organization, the change must come from the local level. Leading a call to action for agricultural educators to include more learner-centered and adaptive practices in their classrooms.

When investigating the problem of increasing agricultural teachers' learner-tailored practices thoroughly, there is an unequivocal solution. Through previous studies, it has been established that secondary agricultural educators lack the self-efficacy to establish an inclusive classroom, desire more professional development training to improve their skills, and practical curriculum to assist in the process (Ramage et al., 2021). A study by Pense (2009) illustrated that teachers agree over the lack of accessibility partnered with the limited quantity of adaptable resources to assist agricultural educators when working with students. To aid in the limited availability of adaptive resources, a customized communication board was developed and utilized within a youth livestock show event. Through the creation and implementation of this tool, it allowed for the practicality and adaptability of this inclusivity practice to be assessed for its potential beyond the show ring.

How it works

The Sunshine class embodies the definition of inclusion and acceptance, which readily aligns with the AAAE research values of ensuring diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (AAAE, 2023). With the prerogative of nurturing positive youth development through AFNR systems (AAAE, 2023). The Sunshine class is grounded in creating new opportunities for individuals with disabilities (exhibitors) to have opportunities to exhibit livestock and generate relationships with able peers (mentors). At the event, youth mentors are recruited to donate their animals and time to coach an exhibitor for one class. Mentors are FFA and 4-H members, specifically middle through high school youth who are exhibiting sheep at the Kentucky State Fair. On the other hand, exhibitors include anyone with a disability who would like to exhibit livestock through the Sunshine class. Each team consisted of a mentor and exhibitor, who were naturally paired together. Mentors assist at the level of comfort and independence of the exhibitor.

The mentorship program's influence reaches beyond the exhibitors who participated but leaves a profound impact on the mentors who volunteered. When youth have an opportunity to participate in an event that exposes them to a wide range of disabilities, increased levels of disability awareness and advocacy are demonstrated (Perales, 2019). Due to the vast and unique differences between disabilities in attendance, it can lead to communication barriers between mentors and exhibitors. To mend the gap between each party, a specialized communication board was created. The Sunshine Class communication board consists of fringe vocabulary, which is event or subject-specific terminology (ASHA, n.d.). Common phrases, such as sheep or

halter, were on the board, along with specific steps explaining how to show a sheep, and common conversation pieces revolving around showing. Each phrase or word was paired with a picture to increase understanding. Also, the communication board was enlarged; each square was cut and placed on a ring for easy use by the mentors. Providing the opportunity for practical, specialized communication boards supports active participation from exhibitors and increases their developmental growth (Carrión-Toro et al., 2025). Without such resources, it can lead to ineffective communication between participants and cause a lack of participation or social withdrawal (Carrión-Toro et al., 2025).

Results to date and Implications

Through producing a custom communication board that was practical for mentors and exhibitors, provided a lasting resource for the organization to utilize. Not only did it provide a way for the exhibitors to communicate with their mentors, but it was also utilized by the mentors. The mentors found comfort in having a tool to manipulate when working with their exhibitors after they had gone through a training session, learning to properly utilize the tool.

Even though the communication board keychain was successful within the livestock showing setting, it could be utilized beyond this environment. Teachers could employ this tool throughout their classrooms to incorporate more inclusive teaching practices and modify according to their agriculture pathway. These could include terms that are content-specific and coordinate with lessons or apply them to experiential education opportunities. For example, using vocabulary that is not naturally programmed into their alternative communication devices when working in the barn or greenhouse facilities. Also, when collaborating with the special education department to conduct special lessons or events. It would demonstrate to other students that their needs are considered, but it will also allow them to be incorporated into the activity. This experience can be utilized as a learning opportunity for able students to expand their knowledge about disabilities and agricultural education. Once these resources are created, they can be manipulated in a multitude of ways and utilized for years to come.

Future Plans

The Sunshine Class communication board keychains can be a practical tool to utilize in the future. With the launch and application of these tools in the 2025 Kentucky Sunshine Class, there is an opportunity for adaptation and refinement to improve for next year's show. Since local Sunshine Classes are replicated to imitate the statewide event, these tools could be applied and introduced to their participants. Multiple learning opportunities are associated with completing these tools. All perspectives of the event need to be considered when choosing the vocabulary for the cards; this will ensure clear communication between each entity. Also, the hardest challenge is to guarantee each square is proportional, to ensure uniformity. To overcome this challenge, place a square border around each term, which will help guide the cutting process.

Costs and Resources Needed

The cost to make the communication board key rings was minimal. The following materials were used: a computer, Canva, printer, laminator, and key rings. University resources were able to supplement consumables to offset the overall cost, but only ten dollars was spent out of pocket to cover the cost of key rings. The primary cost of creating these resources was the time spent creating the document, laminating, cutting, and assembling the key rings.

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