

Rooted in Relationship: A Phased School–Community Partnership Model for Preparing Agricultural Education Student Teachers Through Immersive Field Experience

Introduction & Need for the Strategy

Effective teacher preparation demands more than content knowledge and classroom simulation; it requires immersive, relationship-centered experiences embedded in authentic community contexts. Yet preservice programs frequently structure field experiences around institutional convenience rather than intentional partnership development (Zeichner, 2010), leaving candidates without the trust, relational capital, or contextual knowledge that effective teaching requires (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000). This challenge is particularly acute in agricultural and career and technical education, where candidates are increasingly called upon to serve diverse learner populations, including students with exceptionalities, yet have historically had limited access to community-embedded immersive experiences that build collaborative competencies and inclusive instructional confidence (Ramage Martin et al., 2025; McCray & McHatton, 2011). This paper describes a semester-long, phased community partnership model embedded within a senior-level agricultural education methods laboratory course, developed through a reciprocal school–university partnership that explicitly positions community partners—including transition coordinators and special education staff—as co-educators, curricular collaborators, and instructional coaches.

Connection to Literature

Zeichner (2010) argues that effective preparation requires "hybrid spaces" where academic, practitioner, and community expertise interact on equal footing, expanding learning opportunities while producing more contextually responsive practice. Relational trust is foundational to this work; Hoysala & Morris (2025) identify competence, respect, integrity, shared vision, care, a culture of listening, and meaningful interactions as essential to partnerships that move from transactional arrangements to genuine co-investment in learner success. For preservice agricultural educators, structured immersive experiences with diverse learners can shift candidates from apprehension toward instructional competence and professional agency (McCray & McHatton, 2011; Ramage Martin et al., 2025), supported by the mastery experiences and social modeling embedded in well-designed community partnerships (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

How It Works & Implementation of the Strategy

The model is implemented as a Teaching Laboratory embedded within a senior-level agricultural education methods course and unfolds across six intentional phases designed to progressively deepen partnership engagement, build relational trust, and integrate community expertise into instructional preparation.

Phase 1 – Orientation & Context Building: The semester opens with a structured roundtable co-facilitated by the course instructor and the district transition coordinator - a partnership-

launching event, not an orientation lecture - establishing shared language, mutual investment, and equal standing between university and community co-educators.

Phase 2 – Relationship Development: Prior to any instruction, candidates visit the community partner's building for informal, non-instructional time with program participants. This deliberate inversion of power dynamics - candidates as learners and guests on the partner's "turf" - builds the relational capital effective collaboration requires (Hoysala & Morris, 2025).

Phase 3 – Leveraging Expertise Through IEP Engagement: Two weeks before instruction, each candidate meets with the transition coordinator for a dedicated review of participants' IEPs, with the community partner serving as the authoritative source of learner knowledge driving instructional design.

Phase 4 – Instructional Vetting & Coaching: At least one week prior to instruction, candidates submit lesson plans for formal review by community partner staff, who assess appropriateness, accessibility, and IEP alignment. Partner clearance is required before instruction may proceed, ensuring partners hold real, not performative, authority.

Phase 5 – Immersive Instructional Delivery: Each candidate facilitates a 45-minute session with a small group of transition program participants in the community partner's building—the culminating expression of the partnership's investment. Sessions are recorded to support reflection and partner feedback.

Phase 6 – Structured Debrief & Anchored Reflection: Within one week of instruction, candidates engage in a one-on-one debrief with community partner staff—a forward-looking partnership conversation, not a performance evaluation—and complete a written reflection on best practices in inclusive, community-responsive instruction.

Results to Date / Implications / Impact

Preliminary outcomes suggest that candidates engaging in this model report increased instructional confidence, reduced apprehension about teaching in community settings, and improved ability to design instruction informed by community partner knowledge. Community partners have demonstrated sustained investment, moving beyond logistical coordination to active roles in curriculum design, instructional coaching, and candidate assessment, signaling a genuine shift from transactional to transformational partnership.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Future development will focus on formalizing assessment of candidate self-efficacy and partnership competency across the six phases and expanding the model to additional community partners across diverse contexts. Institutions seeking to replicate this model are advised to begin with relationship before logistics—build genuine trust through co-facilitated orientation, informal community presence, and shared decision-making authority, and resist treating community members as logistical conveniences rather than co-educators.

References

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