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4-H Programs with a Focus on Including Youth with Disabilities

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4-H Programs with a Focus on Including Youth with Disabilities

Abstract

Youth with disabilities often have limited opportunities for integration within their communities. The mission of "Intentionally Inclusive 4-H Club Programs," a 4-year pilot project, is to purposefully create accessible 4-H environments and engage communities to address the needs of people with disabilities. During year one, a collaborative team developed an experiential curriculum for 9 to 12 year-old youth entitled "Shine Up and Step Out." In year two, selected counties used the materials and developed specific training and resource opportunities. A formative evaluation showed how 4-H staff are raising awareness and involving youth and volunteers with disabilities in community programs.

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Inclusion involves creating environments where all people feel they are welcome and can access meaningful involvement. Because 4-H serves a broad spectrum of youth, people with disabilities should be included in the myriad of programs offered. Disability should not be a deterrent to any young person or adult volunteer who wishes to be involved with 4-H.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1991 mandates that programs accommodate people with disabilities. The ADA specifies that no one shall be denied opportunities, segregated, or otherwise discriminated against based on their disabilities. The outcomes of this law are yet to be fully articulated and enforced, but the implications for the need for inclusion for people with disabilities are clear. This article describes the rationale for inclusive 4-H programs and presents some preliminary information about the efforts being undertaken in North Carolina to facilitate inclusive 4-H programs.

Definitions and Background

Many people have impairments (i.e., a temporary or permanent diminishment in strength) in their physiological functioning (e.g., they need to wear eyeglasses) that may be inconvenient but do not interfere with their ability to manage their lives. Disability, on the other hand, is the inability to perform one or more major life activities of self-care, range of motion, manipulation,

communication, learning, working, cognitive processing, or maintaining relationships (Dattillo & Williams, 1999).

Disabilities may include a wide range of developmental, psychiatric, and physical problems that may be chronic or acute. A handicap is a limitation that varies from situation to situation based on the environment and the individual (Dattillo & Williams, 1999). For example, a person who uses a wheelchair may be handicapped in some sports, but generally would not be handicapped when playing video games.

Other terms are associated with disabilities that may be useful to understand. Stereotypes are often associated with disabilities. Stereotypes generally involve the beliefs that people associate with characteristics about certain groups. Stereotypes may be positive or negative and may be somewhat accurate or entirely inaccurate (Dattilo & Williams, 1999). Prejudice involves the development of a judgment, irrespective of that individual's rights, that may lead to damage in some way. Discrimination involves making a distinction categorically rather than individually about a person and then acting differently toward that person than someone not in that same category. Negative attitudes often lead to negative behaviors that may be manifested explicitly or implicitly (Dattilo & Williams, 1999). For example, segregation results in the separation or isolation of a group or an individual, and it often results in different treatment for a group.

Language can be a subtle way to focus on differences among people. The use of language can be particularly important when addressing the integrity and potential of youth and adults with disabilities.

"People first" language is preferred because it literally places the emphasis on the person and not the difference (Dattilo & Williams, 1999). Identifying the person before the disability is important (e.g., a person with a visual impairment rather than a blind person) because it reminds us that our first concern is with the person and not the disability. In addition, it is important to avoid grouping people by medical diagnosis (e.g., the retarded or the deaf).

Language can be used to communicate dignity and respect. Identifying people who are not disabled as "people without disabilities" is preferable to saying they are "normal." Paying attention to language is important if inclusion is to occur and youth and adults are to feel comfortable in Extension programs.

Inclusion means that people with disabilities have the same opportunities for involvement in meaningful and satisfying experiences as afforded other segments of the population. Sometimes people with disabilities will choose to participate with people with disabilities, but in other cases they may want to participate in programs designed for the general public.

Rather than offering special programs only for people with disabilities, the trend today is toward providing supports to increase inclusive opportunities within all programs open to the public. For most individuals, the elimination of physical and social barriers reduces the need for special programs. This inclusion, however, involves more than just placing people with disabilities into a group. It involves social interaction as well as physical integration. Providing support expresses an acceptance of a person and their abilities and helps the individual participate at his or her level of independence. Inclusion means altering the environment more than forcing the person with a disability to change.

4-H and Inclusion

People with disabilities have been an area of limited study in Extension research. McBreen (1994) described what Extension staff should know about the ADA. He suggested that educating the public about people with disabilities and ADA was a vital role of Extension and that this legislation would have far-reaching effects. McBreen emphasized that Extension staff would have to address issues of facilities, marketing, decision making, faculty knowledge, resources, policies, and evaluation.

Tormoehlen and Field (1994) described a project at Purdue University that examined the rationale and outcomes of 4-H programs aimed at getting more youth with disabilities involved. Another Extension program to address health issues was described by Williams (1997) and included a "Bustin the Barriers" program aimed at disability education. A recent survey of Pennsylvania Extension professionals about diversity issues indicated that 91% of staff strongly agreed, agreed, or slightly agreed that "physically challenged individuals" should be involved in 4-H, and 89% believed that "mentally challenged young people" should be involved (Ingram, 1999).

North Carolina's 4-H Inclusion Project

The issue of youth with disabilities and 4-H involvement is not new, but evaluation of programs that have been responsive is not widespread in the literature. Because of this scarcity of resources and information about successful practices, a proposal was written and awarded to North Carolina Extension by the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities to undertake a 4-H inclusion project.

The mission of the "Intentionally Inclusive 4-H Club Program" is to purposefully create accessible 4-H environments and engage communities to be better able to meet a variety of needs. The

program is designed not only to benefit people who have disabilities or who will acquire disabilities, but also to benefit everyone in the community. The purpose of this program is not just to place people in 4-H clubs, but also to make inclusion a philosophy of 4-H. Inclusion occurs through proper planning, preparation, and supports.

During the first year of the pilot program, a collaborative team joined forces, including:

- Professionals from the disability field,
- Parents of youth with disabilities,
- Community volunteers,
- Youth with disabilities and non-disabled youth, and
- County and state 4-H professionals.

Together they developed a fun-filled experiential curriculum for youth ages 9 to 12 years, "Shine Up and Step Out."

"Shine Up and Step Out" is a curriculum designed to raise awareness among 9 to 12 year-old youth about people with disabilities and disabling illnesses. The 12-lesson curriculum features activities such as navigating an obstacle course while simulating mobility and vision impairments and doing a site evaluation for accessibility. Several of the lessons emphasize empathy, including gaining a better understanding of their friends and classmates who have disabilities. Youth also learn etiquette and people-first language through role-playing.

The first-year pilot program also developed three new inclusive 4-H marketing pieces. These colorful and interactive media tools illustrated the desire of 4-H staff to work with all youth and engage volunteer support. Through marketing, staff in the NC 4-H program hoped to actively invite youth and volunteers with disabilities into all of its program components.

In the second year, applications were solicited from county 4-H staff who wanted to test the materials and develop training and resource opportunities. Staff received funding to hire a part-time program assistant. The three counties of Wake, Wilson, and Bertie participated in the program, and the following summary provides examples of what they achieved in the initial year. The next 2 years will add additional counties with more data collected regarding ways to make 4-H programs inclusive.

Inclusion in the North Carolina Experience

Each of the three counties selected approached the inclusion project in slightly different ways. Data were collected by in-depth interviews with county agents and program assistants, telephone conversations with these individuals, and examining newly developed written materials.

In these conversations, the evaluators were interested in determining all the activities undertaken within the county to address inclusion. The materials developed in the county were examined to ascertain how they were contributing to the county's overall plan for making 4-H more inclusive.

In finding what was done in these pilot counties, state 4-H staff hoped to determine what possible models might be effective in other counties in the state. The following sections describe each county's initial approach to inclusion. This information combined with additional data collected in the next 2 years will provide a baseline of examples that might be used successfully in other parts of the United States.

Bertie County

Bertie County applied for the inclusion grant because staff saw an opportunity to expand their programming and to gain the knowledge necessary for reaching new members. In the rural sparsely populated county, Extension staff faced challenges of limited economic resources and support services within the county. 4-H became a primary contact for inclusion information in this county. Bertie County's efforts toward inclusion awareness reached over 600 people, used more than 250 teens and adults to assist with inclusion projects, and trained 65 volunteers in inclusion awareness.

The first step taken by staff was to identify county partners. Over the course of several months, they identified five primary partners:

1. Bertie County Board of Education ♦ Special Needs Program;
2. Bertie County Schools ♦ Exceptional Children's Program;
3. A retired educator with experience with exceptional children and member of the State Extension Advisory Council;
4. A staff psychologist at Roanoke-Chowan Human Services; and
5. Three representatives of the Compensatory Education Program at Martin Community College, Bertie Campus.

As the inclusion efforts developed, they formed other partnerships, including the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, the JP Long Cougars, and the county schools with whom they collaborated for special programs.

Bertie County developed two useful resources to support their teen and adult volunteers. The first was a program kit with the necessary materials for teaching the inclusion curriculum designed through the state 4-H office. The second resource was an extensive in-house collection of reference materials. The collection included:

- A staff-developed, color-coded dictionary of disabilities and inclusion techniques,
- Reference materials from the Department of Education,
- Articles from the Internet, and
- A list of Internet resources on disability-related subjects.

The resources also included an array of marketing materials to distribute at school (through the assistance of the school secretary) with the parents being the primary target audience.

The Bertie County staff found the curriculum useful with multiple applications. For example, to increase parental involvement and acceptance, the staff used a curriculum activity as an icebreaker when presenting inclusion to parents. They found that the activity educated the parents on 4-H's ability to provide inclusive programming for youth outside of the inclusion curriculum. Parents often demonstrated willingness for their young people to attend other 4-H programs.

Volunteers also presented the curriculum in several retreat-type settings. The retreats were educational not only for youth, but for the volunteers who recognized that they were more tolerant of unusual behaviors when they had been informed about the nature of disabilities. Consequently, 4-H staff tried to provide information to volunteers about their audience before they presented programs. Because of this program, the positive attitudes about the need for including people with disabilities in all aspects of the 4-H increased.

Wake County

In urban Wake County, approximately 50 youth were involved in the Horticulture Program that was the main basis for use of the inclusion curriculum. The Horticulture Program consisted of club meetings once a month and a Middle School Program that reached 30 youth with some crossover from other clubs. The Middle School Program began in response to a need for faculty education and to provide a learning experience for youth with and without disabilities. About half of the youth in these groups had identified disabilities.

Wake County staff attributed the social relationships that developed among the youth and the leadership of teens in the program as the keys to success. Teens as leaders were particularly important to the inclusion curriculum in Wake County because their involvement provided the leadership to encourage individual performance among all the 4-H participants. In the summer, four teens were trained for the day camp program. Additionally, the summer horticulture day camp involved 47 youth, including 12 young people who had identified disabilities.

Several newsletter articles were published concerning inclusion. These articles, published through ARC and the Autism Society, reached over 1000 people in Wake County. Public events concerning 4-H Inclusion were held at Exploris Museum (a children's museum) and through the Wake County Youth Garden Contest.

One major problem faced by Wake County was that they have low turnout for programs marketed as "inclusion." Therefore, they incorporated elements of the inclusion curriculum into their New Leader Training. They found this approach to be a successful way of educating their leaders without the stigma that is often attached to attending "sensitivity training."

A second problem involved program leaders who were hesitant to hold inclusion workshops at their facilities for fear of liability issues (e.g., the horse programs). Education for 4-H program leaders is ongoing to help them make decisions based on current liability laws while working within the ADA guidelines.

Wayne County

In Wayne County, there are approximately 4000 youth involved in the 4-H program, with 500 students each day in after-school programs, including outreach in communities. They regularly conduct programs including a Saturday Academy for the school system, enrichment and academic programs, and retreats. They also have a science-based enrichment curriculum where they train teachers who can then take the curriculum back to the classroom.

Wayne County incorporated the inclusion curriculum into their pre-existing programs and created several new programs. 4-H staff integrated the curriculum into camps, retreats, and after-school programs.

In addition, they had a pre-existing structure of TRY (Teens Reaching Youth) teams who mastered the activities from the curriculum and took the curriculum back into the community. Staff found that youth were more receptive to learning the information when presented by a teen rather than an adult. Although the county used the TRY teams for several curriculums, they noted how much

the teams enjoyed using the inclusion curriculum.

The county has several internal support structures for their TRY teams to contribute to their success. One of these support mechanisms is the use of evaluations that give data on team performance and the program's success including the activities used. Another support was the development of program kits. One of these kits included the necessary materials for the inclusion curriculum so that the team could concentrate on delivering the material rather than gathering it.

Conclusions and Discussion

Each of the counties took a different approach to the 4-H inclusion opportunities. These differences were laudable in that each county addressed its particular situation in determining how best to disseminate information and address inclusion issues. The nature of the county as urban or rural resulted in different challenges.

The focus of this first year in the counties was primarily on basic education about disability issues and the value of inclusion. This awareness was focused on adult leaders, parents, teen leaders, and 4-H members. Materials were widely distributed to 4-H volunteers (including adults and youth), to parents, and to members of the general public. In addition to the materials that were available, individual counties also developed their own materials and resources to assist with the project. Leader (adults and youth) training was a central core for distributing materials and beginning the process of inclusion in the counties.

The staff noted that having an individual, the program assistant, devoted to the work of inclusion in the county provided a critical "jump start" for initiating inclusion in 4-H. Another key area that enhanced the success of the inclusion programs in each county was the connections made with other community groups that either had resources or were interested in disability issues. Partnerships were important for promoting this program as well as gaining community support and awareness.

The county and state staff learned more about inclusion during this initial year of the program. Understanding the nature of disabilities and the stigma and stereotypes associated with physical, mental, and emotional impairments requires ongoing training and education. The development of curriculum materials and the training of adult and youth volunteers are only the beginning of more opportunities that might be pursued to assure that 4-H programs are inclusive.

The number of individuals with disabilities in 4-H programs did not seem to change appreciably in the first year. These numbers, however, were difficult to precisely determine due to possible invisible disabilities and county reluctance to track disabilities. The focus in the first year was on awareness, but future years within these counties must also focus on how to actually get individuals with disabilities integrated into existing 4-H programs. The progression of information must move beyond awareness to recruitment.

Additional materials will be needed for those counties that have done the training with the original materials. These new materials need to focus on recruitment and retention, age appropriate activities, developing partnerships in communities, and training for advocacy. Working with other community groups is essential if this 4-H Inclusion program is to make a difference and have an impact.

For inclusion to become a focus of 4-H, all staff in Extension must be trained and must become advocates for inclusion. Although it was helpful to have an individual dedicated to doing the initial work, all county staff and policy makers must "buy in" to the concept and to the curriculum.

North Carolina 4-H has taken an initial step to focus on the spirit of ADA beyond meeting the requirements of the law. Future years of this project will provide more information helpful to others who are committed to disability inclusion issues for adults and young people.

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