



NASET's Practical Teacher

A Classroom Without Walls: A New Method for Teaching Life Skills

By Alison Mabery

This issue of **NASET's Practical Teacher** was written by Alison Mabery. In her article, she discussed that special education continues to explore new and innovating methods to educate children with special needs. She partnered with Reigning Grace Ranch in Palo Verde, Arizona to create a classroom without walls to enhance life skill development through exploratory education. The project participants were students with mild to severe disabilities who participated in a nine week program consisting of a 90 minute weekly lesson at Reigning Grace Ranch working with miniature horses. Students learned leadership, communication, and other life-skills necessary to be productive and independent citizens through activities like grooming and leading miniature horses through obstacle courses. The high school students made significant behavioral, emotional, and social growth during this exploratory program such as: increased social skills, fewer meltdowns, greater independence at school, increased communication skills, heightened teamwork abilities, increased initiation of task completion, and improved confidence and self-esteem levels.



Figure 1: Smiles for Days. Student enjoys a lesson at Reigning Grace Ranch as she grooms a miniature horse.

Abstract

Special education continues to explore new and innovating methods to educate children with special needs. I partnered with Reigning Grace Ranch in Palo Verde, Arizona to create a classroom without walls to enhance life skill development through exploratory education. The project participants were students with mild to severe disabilities who participated in a nine week program consisting of a 90 minute weekly lesson at Reigning Grace Ranch working with miniature horses. Students learned leadership, communication, and other life-skills necessary to be productive and independent citizens through activities like grooming and leading miniature horses through obstacle courses. The high school students made significant behavioral, emotional, and social growth during this exploratory program such as: increased social skills, fewer meltdowns, greater independence at school, increased communication skills, heightened teamwork abilities, increased initiation of task completion, and improved confidence and self-esteem levels.

***Keywords:* Reigning Grace Ranch, special education, life-skills, exploratory learning, Marvelous Minis**

Introduction

The twenty-minute bus ride from Fountain Hills High School to Reigning Grace Ranch in Rio Verde, Arizona runs parallel along an untouched patch of the Tonto National Forest and the Fort McDowell Yavapai Reservation. It is a quiet ride through the quintessential desert landscape buzzing past saguaro cacti that have been around longer than the state of Arizona. As we arrive at the 15-acre sanctuary, the cool crisp aroma of fresh air mixed with typical farm fragrances of dirt, hay, and manure fill students' lungs as they get off the bus. The friendly hellos of community mentors and horses neighing echo throughout the ranch while chimes clank and birds sing. The sight of 40 plus horses, both miniature and full-sized, roaming carefree across the sanctuary bring smiles of joy and excitement to the students' face. Just west of the corrals a pergola extends from the tack room, creating a classroom without walls. Here shade, chairs, tables, and supplies are located for students to begin their weekly lesson.



Figure 2 and 3: Classroom Without Walls. Students participating in a lesson lead by Program Director Amanda Moore.

Outside, rain or shine, students come to learn life skills in this unconventional classroom. With no concrete barriers, electronic devices, constant buzzing of air conditioning units, or artificial lighting, the quiet slow-paced country life is a change of speed for most students. Here the demands and thoughts of traditional and state regulated education quickly fade, as friendly and familiar miniature horses begin their walk to the grooming station. Tomator and Winnie are two class favorites. Tomator is a feisty jet-black male who likes to nip fingers or step on people who are not paying attention. Winnie is his polar opposite; she is white, calm, loving of everyone around her, and missing one ear.

The motto at Reigning Grace Ranch is clear, “Redemption, Strength, and Discovery” (Moore & Moore, 2016). The program’s core focus is on leadership, responsibility, task completion, rules, communication, decision making, self-awareness, teamwork, patience, focus, compassion, and respect (Moore & Moore, 2016). These skills are often weaknesses for students with disabilities, as they also struggle with attention, oral language, social skills, psychological processing, and

information processing problems (Lerner, 2000). At Reigning Grace Ranch, participants can work on these skills in a nonthreatening environment through exploratory learning in a mentorship collaboration with community members and ranch employees (Moore & Moore, 2016). Combining academic activities with exploratory/experiential opportunities is key to students' overall success.

Inspiration

During my graduate program, where I was working on my Masters of Art in Teaching degree in the biological sciences with a focus on advanced inquiry and nature-deficit disorder, I aimed to experience first-hand the benefits of a non-traditional outdoor classroom for students with special needs. As a special education teacher for the past 10 years, I have seen the impact that traditional indoor classrooms have had on students with exceptional needs and had been looking for an alternative to the typical indoor learning environment. As a horse lover, exploratory learning with miniature horses sounded great in theory and enjoyable for my students and me, but I was interested to learn if students would show improvement in academics, social skills, job-based skills, and activities of daily living. This opportunity would provide endless potential for hands-on life skill acquisition rather than scripted lesson plans taking place in a highly routine classroom that is often closed off to the real world.

Marvelous Miniatures

Reigning Grace Ranch was started by Amanda and Christopher Moore in 2009, and the Marvelous Minis program, created by John and Debbie Anderson in 2004 was adopted shortly after (Moore and Moore, 2016). As the program is used at a variety of different educational levels aimed towards at-risk or special needs students, it includes modifications to each lesson depending on the needs of individual participants. Over a nine week period, students engaged once a week for 90 minutes in activities such as: grooming horses, helping with farm chores, completing schedule and time management activities, developing and constructing obstacle courses, leading horses through obstacle courses, instructing younger peers through obstacle courses with their miniature horse, playing different games with minis, painting inspirational and positive self-image words on horses, and ending on a high note of riding full-size horses. Each student was paired with an adult mentor that assisted them through lessons and activities at the ranch. Mentors changed occasionally but most of the students had the same mentor throughout the course. My role was to assist mentors with students' behavior, conflict resolution between students, and help to assist students overcome their fears and frustration of completing new and/or difficult tasks. I also served as a fill-in mentor if there were not enough mentors available for specific activities.



Figure 4. Confidence Boost. Student paints positive self-image on horse. Figure 5. Collaboration Between Schools. High school student leading middle school student through obstacle course with miniature horse.

Outdoor Education Success

Students talked highly about the program, and expressed during “table talk” activities positive experiences, positive emotions, or talked about the expected learning outcomes that they enjoyed or things they learned by participating in Marvelous Minis. The fact that students could articulate these different areas of gains is beyond what I expected from students in the program when I set out to partner with Reigning Grace Ranch. By participating in this program, students gained experiences that they will remember and take with them into the real world when they leave the classroom. I spent a lot of time reflecting upon student responses from different activities they participated in or observations made after attending the Marvelous Minis program to determine the benefits these students made in this exploratory classroom setting.



Figure 6. Connected Souls. Student engages with miniature horse and makes a lifelong friend. Figure 7. Overcoming Fear. Student rides full size horse in the end of the program culminating activity.

What changed in my students after Marvelous Minis:

1. My students made emotional, academic, and social gains.
2. My students had fewer breakdowns during the school day.
3. My students started socializing more at school with a variety of students.
4. My student's confidence levels improved as students were able to handle new situations or challenges willingly.
5. My students' behaviors shifted in the classroom in a positive way with students working together on projects, helping younger students at our preschool (leadership), and staying on task for a longer period.
6. My students took initiative on completing tasks and pride on their assignments increased.
7. My students communicated with more detail, asking for help in a specific way.
8. My students became more aware of their surroundings.
9. My students were almost always engaged and highly motivated in learning activities at the ranch.
10. My students' self-esteem improved while negative self-talk decreased.



Figure 8. Self-Expression. Students described their experience at Reigning Grace Ranch, image created using Wordle.com

Reflections

As a special education teacher, the collaboration between Reigning Grace Ranch and me enhanced the way I construct all of my future lesson plans and programs. It is important that we find as much time as possible at school to get our students outside and connecting with the natural world. All teachers should support students with disabilities through experiential learning opportunities outside, especially ones that motivate students through animals. This project is an example of how outdoor education programs can positively impact students. It is important to remember almost all learning activities can take place in an outdoor environment, but even more important that students reconnect to the natural world around them.

Other Ways to Spend Time in Nature at School

Can't find an outdoor learning venue? Consider the following year-long activities that can be done outside or relating to nature while staying on campus to foster outdoor education to students with special needs.

- Learning Garden
- Scavenger Hunt
- Bird Watching
- Unstructured Free Play Time
- Classroom Pet
- Data Collection
- Live Animal Demonstrations
- School Clean-up Projects
- Outdoor Silent Reading
- Picnics
- Outdoor Science Observations
- Nature Walks

References

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About the Author

Alison Mabery is currently a special education teacher and varsity girls soccer and tennis coach at Skyline High School in Mesa, Arizona. She has worked in special education for 10 years as a resource and self-contained teacher in classrooms from elementary through high school in the public education setting. Ms. Mabery is currently finishing her masters degree at Miami University in Oxford, OH through the Advanced Inquiry Program and will earn a Master of Arts in Teaching in the Biological Sciences. She earned her undergraduate bachelor degree from Gannon University in Erie, PA where she dual majored in K-12 Special Education and Elementary Education. Ms. Mabery wants to acknowledge Project Dragonfly at Miami University in Ohio for support and inspiration in creating this partnership along with Amanda and Christopher Moore for allowing Fountain Hills Students to be part of their amazing program pro bono as a way to give back to the local community. A final special thank you to all the volunteers and classroom assistants that made this program so successful, without you this could not have been possible.