Partnership at Work: 2e Symposium in Puerto Rico

Last month members of the TAG board had the privilege of partnering with Dr. Ana Miro-Mejias and the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus, to host a 2e symposium for educators and stakeholders in the area. The symposium was the result of years of dreaming and hard work by Dr. Miro-Mejias and her UPR team. Sessions at the symposium included identification, differentiation, social-emotional needs, and services tailored to the needs of twice exceptional learners. As a result of the symposium and this partnership, we have decided to focus this issue of *The Update* on 2e learners and the work being done in the De AFEECTo Project in Puerto Rico.
Persistence and collaboration. These are qualities we strive to teach our students, as they are key elements to long-term success. The TAG board was reminded of this as years of persistence and collaboration between board members and Dr. Ana Miro-Mejias resulted in an exceptional symposium on twice-exceptional students in May. Dr. Miro-Mejias leads the De AFEECTo project at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. It is a program that provides services and support to twice-exceptional students through a multi-disciplinary approach. It is the only program focused on 2e students on the island.

Dr. Miro-Mejias led a remarkable team of volunteers, including university students, faculty, and staff, who welcomed 400 education professionals to the symposium. Nurses, psychologists, counselors, and special education teachers all came to the event to learn more about gifted and 2e students. TAG board members offered sessions on a range of topics from identifying 2e students to the dark side of being gifted, as well as engaging students in real-world problems and the importance of challenge. Throughout the day, attendees discussed ways to take action on their learning. At lunch and during transitions, board members and attendees shared stories about students and our shared challenges in helping others understand the need to serve students who are gifted and twice-exceptional.

The closing of the symposium was incredibly powerful. Remarkable violin performances were provided by young adults with a backdrop of images highlighting the beauty of the island. In a recorded interview, a highly successful businessman from Puerto Rico shared his educational story of struggling in school as a 2e student. Finally, TAG presented two schools with suitcases of materials and supplies from two TAG board members, along with a sizable check thanks to the generosity of TAG members, families, and friends. On behalf of the principals of those schools, thank you to our donors!

Persistence and collaboration made the symposium possible. Persistence and collaboration are needed moving forward to ensure gifted, and particularly twice-exceptional, students receive the services and support they need not just in Puerto Rico, but across the United States. The TAG board is ready to continue our collaboration with Dr. Miro-Mejias and to build new partnerships so that others are empowered to meet students’ needs. How might TAG collaborate with you to support the work you’re doing to support gifted learners? Together, we can continue to make an impact through persistence and collaboration.

Lynette Breedlove, Ph.D.
PROJECT DE AFEECTO:
Serving Twice Exceptional Students in Puerto Rico

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Introduction
Project DE AFEECTo, which can be translated to mean Twice Exceptional: Supporting Families, Students, Schools and Community through Interdisciplinary Teamwork, is located at the College of Education, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. It aims to promote the development of the educational, personal, and social potential of gifted, twice exceptional (2e) students by supporting families, schools, and communities to improve educational quality with interdisciplinary interventions, an ecological approach, research based practices and differentiated instruction.

An interdisciplinary team integrates separate disciplines into unified teamwork. Individuals from different disciplines are encouraged to step outside of discipline boundaries to work towards the best outcome with a common goal of student success (Jessup, R., 2007). This shared goal facilitates the exchange of information and interactions between different team members. Achieving work goals, belonging to a group, being adaptable and feeling committed to work are characteristics of an interdisciplinary model (Torrelles-Nadal, Paris-Manas, Sabria-Bernardo, & Alsinet-Mora, 2015). Tasks such as planning, decision making, task completion and monitoring are completed together as a team. Cooperation and motivation between stakeholders are key components of the project (Gómez-Ruíz, 2015). These traits differ from a multidisciplinary model in which professionals work independently, meaning that professionals from different disciplines do not necessarily communicate with each other. Each person individually conducts his or her evaluation and planning process. Since 2e students have a complex profile due to their asynchronous development, it is necessary to work within a holistic vision, integrating different perspectives as proposed by interdisciplinary team work.

The ecological model considers the different scenarios in which the student interacts. The model implies that it makes no sense discussing relevant aspects isolated from the student’s context since context can define behaviors. Ecosystems are the scenarios in which the student interacts. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) formulated the Ecological Systems Theory to explain how the inherent qualities of a child and the environment interact to influence how the child will grow and develop. Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of studying a child in the context of multiple environments, also known as ecological systems, in an attempt to understand their development. Coleman (1992) established that these ecological systems could include the school, classroom, and home, but also considers variables such as persons, psychological variables, and the curriculum in a child’s life, among others. At our project we have a strong family component and we also take into consideration school variables. In addition, we include the various professionals that serve the students. Figure 1 presents our ecological perspective.
Differentiation within the ecological model involves planning, preassessing to determine a child’s starting place, and providing differentiated learning experiences based on that data (Roberts & Inman, 2015). Students work best with an appropriate degree of challenge (Rivera-Cintron, 2008). We work to provide challenge by considering students’ strengths and needs as the basis for planning, and focus on making learning decisions based on multiple intelligences and the interests of students (Miró-Mejías, 2008).

**Services**
The five basic services offered in Project De AFEECTo include students, families, professionals, research, and internships (see Figure 2).

**Students.** Through our interventions we develop the social-emotional competencies of students, encouraging their strengths while compensating for weaknesses. We develop intervention sessions directed to different content or developmental areas, with the ultimate goal of developing social-emotional competencies. Interventions are based upon the results of interviews with the family, document analyses, and various inventories (see Figure 3).

Prior to interventions, the project’s personnel develop a plan with objectives that focus on specific skills according to the theme of the activity, integrating different subjects and areas of development in the activities, with the main objectives always directed toward the development of social emotional competencies. Content objectives are evaluated simultaneously with social-emotional skills.
Activities have included STEM, physical education, art, robotics, chemistry projects, motor and sensory skills, cognitive and critical thinking skills, and Lego projects among others. Some of the social-emotional skills addressed through the activities include, assertiveness, teamwork, problem solving, cooperative work, relationships, self-control, responsibility, emotions, empathy, tolerance, respect, introspection, and leadership.

During intervention sessions, personnel are assigned to observe or to intervene (see Figure 4 for specific personnel included in teams). The observation team documents narrative observations of the process. The intervention team conducts the session, implementing the activities and managing behaviors. At the end of the session, the teams meet to rate different behaviors and/or skills based on a standardized instrument, evaluate results according to objectives, and discuss the adequacy of the activity as well. This debriefing session is important because it provides in-depth feedback as to the participant’s progress, and results in future interventions that are relevant to students’ particular needs. Since each participant has different needs and different progress rates, students are only compared to themselves.

Families. In addition to student services, the project offers personalized assistance, orientation, and support groups for families. Monthly group meetings and continuous individual follow up are conducted according to particular needs, situations at school and home, and contexts. Through the Family Support and Empowerment Group 2E (FSEG), we hold group meetings with parents while students are receiving their interventions. These focus on training parents to implement strategies in educational or family scenarios and monitor progress of their students’ social competencies. Social learning and modeling are among the strategies taught to parents. Strategies to cope with emerging situations are shared as well. Giving and receiving positive feedback is an important strategy discussed in our sessions. The sessions are organized in dynamics as well as content topics. For example, dynamics such as Chocolate Personality, Lifeline, Life Photo Drama, Johari Windows, and Maternity Challenges, have been implemented. Topics such as Sensory Development, Identifying 2e Profiles, Positive Behavior, Dealing with Emotions, and Legal Rights as a 2e Student have also been included in the program. We provide opportunities for participants to reflect on how their participation in the project has helped them as a parent. Our main goal is to empower families to deal assertively with the educational process, as well as rearing practices at home, considering parents as experts in their own child.

Professionals. We provide professional development activities to professionals of different disciplines, as well as services to community organizations that are committed to improving education and quality of life opportunities for our students. Among our personnel we have professionals from various disciplines: Psychologist, Social Worker, Professional Counselor, Occupational Therapist, Rehabilitation Counselor and Educator (see Figure 4). We are the only project in Puerto Rico with an interdisciplinary team, working for the twice exceptional student population- who are gifted and have disabilities. We have participated in several conventions, workshops, conferences and other types of professional activities in the private and public sector as well.

Once during each semester, we offer a free professional development activity for school personnel belonging to schools that our participants attend. Since personnel, especially the classroom teachers, might change annually, professional development is offered each semester.
Research. Project De AFEECTo uses a qualitative research approach in which multiple possibilities are emphasized and are rooted in the opinions and perceptions of the participants. This is of utmost importance in our project. This approach is based on the understanding and meaning of social interactions and observations (McMillan, 2012). Therefore, it is the approach that best fits our study. In addition, some quantitative techniques are used to prepare frequency tables with the data that are collected.

We conduct individualized case studies to determine appropriateness of the educational process within an educational and legal perspective. Stake (2007) stated that case studies involve an intensive and in-depth study of various aspects of the same phenomenon. In addition, simple single-case research methods provide the proper basis for evaluating effective instructional approaches in special education (Maggin, Cook, & Cook, 2018). In addition, case study methodology helps achieve more complex and complete explanations of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, we deem it to be the proper methodology to develop our research.

Case studies are carried out with each participant. The case studies are based on the Systematic Analysis and Interactive Evaluation (SAIE) Model. This Model has measures of content validity (90%), criteria validity (82%) and reliability (89%). SAIE is enriched with the perspectives offered by the different professionals that belong to the project’s team. Some member of the team have worked as experts in legal processes involving court cases. The process is centered around three main areas: Evaluation, Individual Educational Program (IEP), and Procedural Safeguards. SAIE is comprised of the following steps: organize documents, explain the scope or meaning of the main areas, analyze the information included in documents and other sources, evaluate the information in an interactive way, establish conclusions, and offer recommendations. The interactive perspective is very important because it evaluates the effect of one process upon another. For example, the relationship between the psychological evaluation and the IEP is considered. At the same time, information is gathered to ensure that the procedural safeguards were followed regarding the evaluation process. An extensive written report is given to families with findings and recommendations for each child.

We use two protocols to observe students during the interventions and to plan activities. With each of these, we collect quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate social-emotional skills development, level of objective accomplishment, and adequacy of activities. After establishing a baseline, data are collected on the progress after interventions. Narrative observations are collected to complement data for each child. Additionally, families evaluate each session to determine satisfaction and pertinence of information provided.

Data related to professionals are also collected. For in-service professionals, a questionnaire is administered to determine their knowledge regarding twice exceptionality and to determine further professional development needs. This questionnaire is administered to every professional attending any of the professional development activities. For future teachers, we administer a pre and posttest on 2e topics to determine change in knowledge after training is provided.
**Internships.** We are a field and laboratory center for undergraduate and graduate students from different fields of study, as well as for interns in Special Education, Social Work, Leadership, Elementary Education, and Curriculum. We also train volunteers using a protocol to ensure that the information presented is as equitable as possible.

**Major Finding**

One major finding of our pilot study is the usefulness of an interdisciplinary intervention with 2e children to strengthen the development of their social skills. Due to the particular profile of 2e children, they confront conflicts related to the development of social skills which merit adequate attention to promote their well-being through learning experiences that permit 2e children to be successful (Baum & Owens, 2004; Trail, 2011; Besnoy, 2006). While there is considerable literature about social skills, the literature about interventions to develop these skills, specifically with 2e children, is scarce and mostly limited to individualized therapeutic models that focus on psychological and/or linguistic aspects. Through Project De AFEECTo, an innovative interdisciplinary intervention was conceived, carried out, and studied to strengthen the development of social skills with 2e children, which included individual and group sessions and a parent counseling component. The interdisciplinary dimension of the intervention was achieved through the collaboration of different professionals from diverse fields. In all phases of the project, the combination of perspectives and capabilities from the different fields led to highly coherent and integrated work. The design of the intervention took into account the profile of diverse needs of the participants in this study in relation to the development of social skills.

**Summary**

The Twice Exceptional Project of Puerto Rico aims to develop the personal, educational and social potential of students that present both exceptional capabilities and weaknesses. The main emphasis is on the development of social-emotional competencies through interdisciplinary interventions integrated into diverse developmental and content areas. It follows an ecological interdisciplinary approach with research and differentiation based practices. The five basic service areas focus on twice exceptional students and their families, and include professionals from different disciplines. Through a qualitative research design, the development of social-emotional competencies, the achievement of objectives and the adequacy of activities is assessed. Case studies are carried out using the SAIE model to determine the adequacy of the educational process from educational and legal perspectives. Finally, the project also serves as a clinical practicum and internship site for undergraduate and graduate students.

**References**


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Parent:
As a mom to a precocious 6-year old with asynchronous development, I face many challenges of raising a twice exceptional (2e) learner. Despite having an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a learning disability, his school does not provide any academic or social-emotional supports to meet his present level of performance.

At a recent Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meeting, I requested that the school provide a stronger curriculum to challenge him at the nexus of his ability and preferences, and to consider recognizing his uneven development where his performance is average to significantly above average in most cognitive areas, yet needs to improve in other areas like social-emotional growth.

The school is their own Local Education Agency, and we requested that they include some social-emotional goals and academic supports in his IEP to accommodate and challenge him. However, the school stated they would not provide any additional services since he was performing at or above grade level and making good grades.

We left the MDT meeting defeated and sent a follow-up email to request that the school provide some targeted instruction to focus on his areas of growth and challenge. Unfortunately, the school and MDT denied the following supports:

- Leadership opportunities
- Access to high-level reference books
- Independent study
- Working with a partner
- Learning contracts
- Logging of his work (daily and weekly)

They also denied modifications and differentiation to meet his needs in these areas:
- Content (related topics to add depth)
- Resources (appropriate or high-level references, computers, etc.)
- Product/Response/Outcome
- Skill (thinking)/Level of question
- Pace

What can parents do to advocate or support children like my child whose school focuses on the challenges and ignores the strengths?

See page 9 for a response from a professional in the field of gifted education.
The keys communication, and collaboration:

Educators, as well as all professionals in contact with your child, must be able to recognize and understand the characteristics and needs of 2e children.

Nontraditional identification methods are needed due to the interplay of challenges and strengths.

All stakeholders from parents to special education specialists work together to form a plan that addresses the whole child. (Your son’s MDT meeting lacked a gifted education professional.)

They must take interests, needs, challenges, and strengths into consideration.

The team problem-solves wherein they identify needs, analyze data, make and implement a plan, then assess the effectiveness of the plan.

A variety of services for the whole child should be available and the appropriate ones implemented (including so many of the ones you listed). These include cognitive, social, and emotional services.

The plan changes as needed. (Baldwin et al., 2015)
This probably seems like a very tall order—and, honestly, it is. But it all starts with one step. I suggest you share the article I’ve referred to in this article: Beyond Stereotypes: Understanding, Recognizing, and Working with Twice-Exceptional Learners (Baldwin et al., 2015) as well as the National Twice-Exceptional Community of Practice’s (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015) definition of twice exceptional students available at this website: cectag.com/resources/national-2e-cop/

References


DE AFEECTO  (continued from page 7)


Technology integration in the classroom is more than students viewing a presentation via PowerPoint. Technology integration involves students engaging in the learning process using tools to help them investigate, collaborate, and communicate. Technology tools can help provide and/or increase content knowledge and skills, enable creative problem solving through shared ideas, and offer opportunities to learn in an authentic, real-world environment. These types of experiences are beneficial to our advanced learners, especially twice exceptional learners. Twice exceptional (2e) learners benefit from experiential learning through doing rather than seeing (Winebrenner, 2003). Additionally, 2e learners need opportunities to use higher-level thinking skills (Franklin-Rohr, 2012) as they create and build projects, models, and visual representations of their learning, ideas, concepts, and solutions (Winebrenner, 2003).

It is important to note that technology does not replace good teaching. An effective teacher will utilize technology as a tool, not a replacement for teaching. This article will focus on technology tools for investigation. In the coming TAG newsletters, we will also discuss the effective use of technology tools for collaboration and presentation.

Technology Tools for Investigation

There are multiple tools to assist students in learning new content, using content in new contexts, and engaging in creative and critical problem-solving. Utilizing tools such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) allows students to gather information, data, and/or evidence from a seemingly authentic environment. For example, in a recent episode of a fictional medical show, surgeons were preparing to remove a difficult brain tumor. Before the surgery, medical personnel used an augmented reality application to maneuver and manipulate the brain to remove the tumor. Through this process, surgeons were able to practice this difficult procedure in a risk-free environment. In reality, a recent advance (True 3D) is allowing surgeons to create a 3D interactive image of a patient’s anatomy before surgery. The interactive image can be manipulated to help the surgeon anticipate any abnormalities before surgery begins (zspace.com/blog/Doctors-Use-VR). Through the advances in technology, our students have these type of experiences at their fingertips. Augmented reality applications such as QuiverVision (www.quivervision.com) allow students to manipulate and bring to life various objects such as cells, volcanos, and the moon. Human Anatomy Atlas (bit.ly/HumanAnatomyAtlas1) enables one to explore and dissect parts of the human body in the virtual world. For younger students, My Incredible Body (bit.ly/MyIncredibleBody1) provides students an immersive experience while exploring the human body.

One of our favorite VR/AR applications is Google Expeditions (bit.ly/GoogleExpeditions1). For reasons including finances and safety, sending students on field trips is a rare occurrence. Google Expeditions and other VR/AR applications provide students the field trip experience without ever leaving the classroom. Students can visit a place of interest through VR and bring abstract concepts to life with AR...all in Google Expeditions. Through these experiences, students can visit castles and museums, explore the ocean, space, and other geographical areas, and tour landmarks and battlefields. VR/AR allow students to visit the world virtually, providing students immersive experiences not limited by space or time. The International Society of Technology Educators has a list of 25 resources for bringing AR and VR into the classroom, which can be found at bit.ly/25TechResources.
There are too many tools to mention in this short newsletter article but we encourage you to learn about the technology tools that are available. The technology landscape is changing daily but do not let that scare you. Try to learn at least one new tool each year to use with your students. More than likely, your students will help you learn the technology. One way we keep abreast of technology is through professional conferences. CEC always has a technology strand providing useful information and presentations. Additionally, we subscribe to a newsletter called Free Technology for Teachers (practicaledtech.com). Subscribe to the newsletter and Richard Byrne will send you helpful technology tips each week.

For more information, please contact Debbie (ddailey@uca.edu) or Michelle (mbuchanan@uca.edu).

References:


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**LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**

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I hope that this edition of The Update finds you all enjoying the summer season, soaking in opportunities to relax and renew your energy as well as taking advantage of the additional time and space that summer allows for personal and professional growth.

This edition of the TAG newsletter has been especially fun to pull together as the board has begun dreaming about ways to make the newsletter more helpful and informational to our members. As a result of these conversations, we have added two columns that appeared in this issue and will continue to appear in future issues as well - TAG Team, which has a focus on parent/professional interactions and a column on technology integration in the gifted classroom. If there are other topics that you would be interested in reading more about or if you’d be willing to contribute, I’d love to hear from you! Please feel free to get in touch with me at kim.hardin@acu.edu!

Thank you to Dr. Ana Miro-Mejias and her team in Puerto Rico for collaborating with TAG to bring more attention to 2e student populations and for contributing to our summer newsletter!