

(FCEC, 2016).

**Florida Council for Exceptional Children Teach-In: Inclusion, Involvement and Innovation**

 The Council for Exceptional Children is an international community of professionals who are the voice and vision of special and gifted children. The CEC’s mission is to improve, through excellence and advocacy, the education and quality of life for children and youth with exceptionalities and to enhance the engagement of their families (FCEC, 2016). My attendance at the Florida Council for Exceptional Children’s 2016 *Teach-IN: Inclusion, Involvement and Innovation* was an inspiring professional development opportunity that has furthered my career as a preservice teacher. Members of the local and state CEC board were in attendance, Superintendents from various school districts were present, as well as a representative from the Florida Department of Education. Throughout the 3-day experience I was able to collaborate with experts in the field, as well as provide my own insight from the perspective of an undergraduate student. The conference focused on 6 components of reinventing special education, including: a shift in focus from Regulatory Compliance to Result Drive Accountability, the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), Individual Growth Plans for students below 35th percentile on screening assessments, certification and licensure based on demonstrated skills, flexibility in the use of local/state/federal funds, and IDEA eligibility only for those whose disability has a significant adverse impact on learning and development. The MTSS has replaced the “wait to fail” special education eligibility models.

 An innovation introduced in the beginning of the conference was the inclusion of music therapy to meet student’s needs. An educator from Oak Park School in Sarasota presented the impact of using music in a therapeutic relationship to reach physical, cognitive, social-emotional and academic goals with his students. The student’s joy and progress was evidenced by their smiles recorded as they danced, sang, played instruments and listened to music at the school. As an advocate for the arts in education, I was inspired by the impact of music on the lives of Sarasota students.

 **“Town Hall Meeting”**

*The conference began with an informative and reflective presentation by the respectable Dr. Bill Heller, Dr. Rosalind Hall and Dr. Fartun Mohamud.*

Dr. Bill Heller, a University of South Florida (St. Pete campus) professor, has an outstanding history of involvement in special education; his influence is recognized from the 1950’s to now. The charming and witty professional shared historical documents dating back to the 1960’s. Progress in exceptional student education is especially evident in the case of the 1962 brochure addressing “Mongolism,” now known as Down’s syndrome (Heller, 2016). Since P.L. 94-142’s mandate of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), students with disabilities have had full access to schools and many spend most of their day in the general education classroom. Instructional resource and technological innovations have changed the nature of teaching and learning, as educators seek to meet the needs of all students in the general education classroom. This is supported by an inclusive mindset among educators, with a strong awareness of the range of student needs when planning, programming and identifying improvement efforts. Dr. Heller shared a brief history of special education from his own experiences and first-hand accounts, including public laws, notable conferences and President John F. Kennedy’s significant contributions to the development of special education programs. Surprisingly, the U.S. Department of Education was not established until President Jimmy Carter instituted the department in 1979 (Heller, 2016). Dr. Heller’s wisdom, experiences and extensive knowledge was inspiring and recognized the advancements that have been made toward meeting the needs of students.

Dr. Rosalind Hall received a room of applause as she declared special education as a service, not a place (Hall, 2016). Educators, administrators and influential members of the CEC emphasized the importance of discussing supports and services first in an IEP meeting, then establishing an appropriate least restrictive environment. The conference advocated collaboration and cooperation to provide all students with their civil right to a free and appropriate public education. Dr. Fartun Mohamud elaborated by declaring mainstreaming practices as a student’s own right (Mohamud, 2016). Dr. Hall shared the quickly approaching, July 2017, implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). The bipartisan bill advances equity in education by maintaining protections for America’s high-need students through holding all learners to high standards (Hall, 2016). The inclusion mindset promoted at the conference endorses all students to achieve expectations that will further their academic, social and lifelong success. With superior instruction and truly knowing your students, a valuable education will be provided to all learners. The room burst into applause again as Dr. Hall proclaimed Response to Intervention as a practice effective educators have always applied, not just a roadmap to ESE (Hall, 2016).

Dr. Fartun Mohamad led a reflective discussion that encouraged the conference attendees to engage in thoughtful dialogue with their table. I was able to speak with recognized professionals in the education field about the impact of preservice teacher training and inclusion in classrooms all over the state. The discussions included a focus on the parent’s power and role in an IEP team. With knowledge from my own studies at the University of South Florida, I was able to contribute to participate in discourse about the disproportionate representation of minority, or culturally/linguistically diverse, students in special education and gifted programs. The conference advocated superior instruction and knowing your students to offer all learners an exceptional academic experience.

**What Can Inclusion Look Like?**

 I attended an exceptional workshop, “What Can Inclusion Look Like?”, presented by Laurel Colgate (who I had the honor of sitting next to for the Town Hall Meeting) and Georgia Plath which addressed how to support the general education teacher, including considerations for what impacts student’s learning and practical supports that can be applied. Laurel Colgate teaches in an innovative inclusion model as a self-contained ESE teacher who also acts a resource teacher as students come in and out of her room. This modified inclusive model allows for learners to be encompassed in a normal setting, while receiving the additional supports they need.

The workshop addressed possible medical conditions and disorders of students, various models of inclusion, and information on documents important to assist in instruction. Ms. Colgate and Ms. Plath recommended first considering what data and information has been obtained regarding a student, from the IEP meetings/plans and cumulative files, and being proactive when recognizing a student’s strengths and deficits in academic, social skills and classroom behaviors. The workshop gave practical strategies for setting students up for success by teaching organizational skills and student’s responsibilities, including using a timer, providing checklists, giving explicit instructions daily (through visual and verbal directions) that support student’s executive functioning (Colgate & Plath, 2016). Academic problems linked to executive functioning deficits and reading comprehension includes predicting outcomes, recalling facts from a story, character analysis, establishing sequence of events, and establishing author’s purpose (Colgate & Plath, 2016). The workshop acknowledged that every lesson, in any discipline, is a reading lesson. Presenting vocabulary in different modalities, as well as providing outlines, copies of lecture notes, establishing learning partners, and backward scaffolding were promoted as practical strategies to make learning accessible to students. Providing differentiated levels and scaffolding responses for response to instruction presents learners with disabilities with a manageable number of questions, allows for verbal testing, scribing/recording responses, and chunking of test questions to demonstrate understanding (Colgate & Plath, 2016). Pre-teaching, maintaining attention with cues, concrete objects as aides, graphic organizers, representative symbols, mnemonics, and rehearsal through verbalization, visual or manipulatives and games were strategies recommended to assist students in the academic environment.

Additionally, the workshop confronted behavior in the classroom that interferes with student’s own learning or the learning of others. Excessively interruptive or off-task behavior is often addressed with a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), which provides the antecedent, behavior and consequence in the classroom. The FBA contributes to the development of a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) that seeks to prevent the antecedent so that behavior doesn’t occur, or the BIP advocates replacing the behavior with something for appropriate and teaching the appropriate behavior. The workshop provided tools for addressing students with Emotional or Behavior Disorders, including effective communication, maintaining a sense of humor, setting up a system of rewards, providing fidgets and offering a cool down place for sensory overload.

**Beyond the Textbook: Leading Collaboration for Rigor in the Inclusive Classroom**

 Erin Vacchio and Tracy Webley, associated with the University of Central Florida, led the session “Beyond the Textbook: Leading Collaboration for Rigor in the Inclusive Classroom” to enlighten participants to overcome a culture of overreliance on publisher-produced textbooks to provide all students with equal access to the rigor of the state standards.

The presenters began their workshop by introducing the application of The Golden Circle (Babin, 2016) in education. Ms. Tracy and Ms. Erin addressed “Why” to make meaningful learning experiences by facilitating learning discussions to offer elaboration. Textbooks provide information, but do not promote hands-on experiences that engage students to explore concepts and require reflection. To answer “How” to engage students in tasks, the presenters promoted designing questions that elicit higher-order thinking. Question stems were provided to initiate students to experiment (how would you determine if?), problem solve (develop a strategy to…), make decisions (what is the best way?), and investigate (how/why did this happen?) (Vacchio & Webley, 2016). Leading with the questions stems mentioned will present students with a problem, allowing educators to facilitate learning. When students invest in their learning, they retain the information (Vacchio & Webley, 2016). All of these quick tricks into rigor are done without a textbook. In order to push students to higher thinking, the workshop promoted starting with the “Why” in learning, setting goals, and a teacher demonstration of “How.” Often, instruction begins with the “What” of the golden circle and never reaches higher order thinking opportunities to address “Why.” Ms. Tracy, a school administrator, works with a professional team to write the curriculum, which they then deliver to teachers who revise the curriculum to meet their student’s needs. This collaboration process has allowed for the school to address student’s learning needs through engaging methods, without relying on the rigid structure of a textbook.

**Lesson Planning for all Learners: The Four Essential Elements of Universal Instructional Design**

 Dr. Christopher Elliott, of Rollins College and Orange County Public Schools, led a workshop (Lesson Planning for all Learners: The Four Essential Elements of Universal Instructional Design) promoting curriculum layers in lesson planning to effectively reach all learning profiles. “These layers help promote learning and retention for all learners regardless of their disability profile,” (Elliott, 2016). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn (CAST, 2015). Principles of UDL include providing a variety of ways to present material to students, considering different ways for them to show what they have learned, and incorporating unique ways to motivate student engagement (McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westling, 2013). Universal Instructional Design is composed of four key elements, including discussion, prior knowledge, application and reflection. In order to offer students 21st century learning skills, like adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving, and research; Dr. Elliott recommends an instructional lesson planning approach that considers students’ executive functioning skills; organization, planning, focus/attention, and time management, as well as concepts of UDL (Elliott, 2016). Universal Design for Learning is complimented with multiple means of providing information, setting goals and giving students options. UDL calls for high interest topics, prior knowledge, vocabulary study, activity-based learning, and reflection (Elliott, 2016). Dr. Elliott supports inclusion for students with disabilities, as Universal Instructional Design benefits all students.



(CAST, 2015).

 Dr. Elliott proposes beginning a lesson with a whole class discussion to address the affective or “why” of learning. This discussion will provoke student engagement, identify prior knowledge and indicate how students are feeling. Students who are identified as gifted can be sensitive or prone to high levels of anxiety, so it is important to consider if your students are having “on” or “off” days. To activate the recognition network, or the “what” of learning, accessing prior knowledge will allow students to tie learning into their personal lives (Elliott, 2016). Vocabulary instruction in context should provide students with a common language for discussing academic concepts. Activity-based learning appeals to the strategic neural networks, or the “how” of learning (Elliott, 2016). Dr. Elliott recommends reinforcing learning in different ways as students apply their newly learned skills. To foster the development of strategic, goal-directed learners, educators should differentiate the ways students can express what they know. A shift in education is leading educators away from direct instruction, to a more student-centered indirect instruction that promotes students researching topics of interest to them. Dr. Elliott advocates building reflection into class time as students will move their learning from short term memory to become embedded knowledge in their long term memories. Writing is an excellent tool for reflection, as reflecting and summarizing requires synthesis, analysis, and deep contextual understanding.

 From an administrative perspective, Dr. Elliott stated that administrators should support teachers as they determine what is best for a child and provide appropriate changes in the levels of support. In an inclusive setting, educators should recognize that students with intellectual disabilities may need basic skill set training in addition to quality, UDL instruction.

**2e: Gifted Students with Disabilities**

Dr. Wendy S. Leader and Ms. Cindee W. Schwartz led a workshop revealing characteristics of learners identified as gifted, who also have disabilities (twice-exceptional), how to identify these students, and strategies to meet their academic and affective needs. To begin the interactive workshop, participants rotated the room to write characteristics they were aware of for students identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Intellectual Disabilities (InD). Through discussion, participants were led to recognize the need for noticing student’s strengths, not focusing on learners from a deficit perspective.

Learners identified with giftedness, as described in the presentation, demonstrate a strong desire to learn, broad or focused interests, enhanced communication skills, a heightened problem solving ability, strong memories, quick insight to deeper meanings, notable curiosities, logical and analytical reasoning skills, high levels of imagination or creativity, unusual or mature humor, sensitivity, and intensity (Leader & Schwartz, 2016). A student recognized as gifted is often intense in their reaction to different stimuli, sometimes referred to as their “overexcitabilities.” These overexcitabilities are often manifested in five forms: psychomotor, sensual, emotional, intellectual, or imaginational (Leader & Schwartz, 2016).

For students who are identified as twice-exceptional, recognizable cognitive characteristics may include: uneven standardized test scores, superior verbal and communication skills, visual learning with strong perceptual reasoning skills, high levels of reasoning and problem-solving abilities, conceptual thinking, inability to think in a linear fashion, auditory processing deficits, and difficulty following verbal instructions (Leader & Schwartz, 2016). Academic characteristics of learners who are twice-exceptional include an uneven or inconsistent demonstration of academic skills, advanced ideas and opinions, a wide range of interests, advanced vocabulary, penetrating insights, a specific talent or consuming interest, difficulty expressing feelings or explaining ideas, extremely messy work, poor penmanship, avoidance or failure to complete school assignments, and these learners may appear apathetic or lacking academic initiative (Leader & Schwartz, 2016). Intrapersonal characteristics of learners who are twice-exceptional include a high level of sensitivity to criticism, perfectionist tendencies, denial of problems, impulsive behavior, low self-esteem or self-efficacy, high levels of anxiety or depression, and these students may be easily frustrated. Interpersonally, these students have difficulty relating to their peers and may feel isolated (Leader & Schwartz, 2016).

Educators are often confronted with a puzzle when students who are twice-exceptional are not identified. Students who are twice-exceptional may not be able to do basic skills, like reading or simple mathematics computation, but they may engage in higher order thinking. Identification of these students is often difficult, as typical strengths and weaknesses of students who are twice-exceptional often mask each other (Leader & Schwartz, 2016). Students who are hidden and twice-exceptional, function at their grade level, but well below their potential and rely on their high intelligence to mask any disabilities (Leader & Schwartz, 2016). Paradoxical behaviors include heightened creativity that manifests as the generation of many excuses. These students are task-committed, but may appear to have a short attention span. This paradox leads to underestimation of student’s abilities, leading to frequent inability to meet the criteria for gifted programs. For identification, educators should conduct comprehensive and inclusive assessment, considering parent participation and input, as well as looking at the student’s performance and behaviors at their highest level of engagement. A team approach, including teachers, parents, special education coordinators, counselors, and gifted/talented personnel, to identification should consider data from the student’s achievements, passions, learning styles, multiple intelligences, aptitude, areas of disability, and the learner’s social/emotional needs.

Through the initial reflection activity and introducing students who are twice-exceptional, the presenters emphasized the importance of changing educator’s perspectives to recognize students’ strengths first. Students who are identified as gifted, as well as having a learning disability, are creative and resourceful learners with advanced ideas and an imaginative curiosity. Though these learners may exhibit inconsistent academic performance, difficulty with social interactions, and may seem argumentative, their progressive problem-solving ability and interests should be built upon to serve these students appropriately.

**The FCEC Fall Meeting**

The chief of the Florida Department of Education’s Bureau of Exceptional Student Education and Student Services, Dr. Monica Verra-Tirado, hosted a Fall Meeting at the conference. Dr. Verra-Tirado presented data and legalities relevant to Florida’s education system. Florida strives to move from access to attainment, promoting a statewide equity and excellence stance that supports Florida’s result-driven concentration. Dr. Terra-Virado prescribes that educators make the least dangerous assumption, in which decisions are made based on data that will have the least dangerous effect on a student’s ability to function independently as adults (Verra-Tirado, 2016). Applying this idea, teachers should assume student competence and that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy between the curriculum, instruction and student, not as a result of student deficits. In order to support students with disabilities as 21st century learners, Assistive Technology should be integrated to change the materials or procedures in curriculum, not the standards of achievement (Verra-Tirado, 2016). The number of 10 day or more out-of-school suspensions for students with disabilities has decreased by 25% (Verra-Tirado, 2016).

The focus of Florida’s education system is to improve the graduation rate of students, decrease dropout rates and improve post-school outcomes for learners (Verra-Tirado, 2016). IDEA 2004 mandates each student to be educated in the least restrictive environment, which Dr. Verra-Tirado advocates as the general education classroom, where students can prepare for life in the real world. For the 2015-2016 school year, 73% of students with disabilities were in regular education classrooms 80% or more of the time (Verra-Tirado, 2016). Florida’s exceptional inclusion model leads the largest 7 states. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* requests states create a way for students who take alternative assessments to graduate with a standard diploma, which Florida has already begun. Since Florida’s innovative inclusion practice has been implemented, graduation rates for students with disabilities have increased, with dropout rates decreasing (Verra-Tirado, 2016). Access Points, as alternatives to traditional standards, allow students with significant cognitive disabilities to meet federal requirements. Access Points promote inclusion as they are setting neutral and can be met in the general education classroom.

**Empowered Educators: Tools, Tips and Tricks to Implementing Evidence-based Strategies for Students with ASD**

Jack Scott and Susanna Launder from Florida Atlantic University’s C.A.R.D. (Center for Autism and Related Disabilities) presented an exceptional tool for collaboration between the general educator and support staff in the inclusive classroom environment. The Autism Spectrum Disorder Classroom Tool is a document with domains and indicators that consider the effectiveness of various factors in the inclusive classroom (Launder & Scott, 2016). Ecological factors that are measured include the physical setting, scheduling, activities, intensity, language and social communication. Behavioral systems and curriculum and instruction are also examined through application of the tool to identify areas for improvement in the classroom. The tool provides a summary of the classroom setting and behavioral supports, with well-constructed pie charts, to elicit a conversation between adults who work with students in the classroom.

**Strategies for Inclusion in the Primary Setting**

Sandy Smith and Sandra Erickson of T.A.T.S., the Technical Assistance and Training System to support prekindergarten students with disabilities, presented “Strategies for Inclusion in the Primary Setting.” T.A.T.S. envisions that all young children achieve their greatest potential in an evidence-based and inclusive early learning environment (Erickson & Smith, 2016). A high quality early childhood learning and environment can be identified by access, participation and supports. Inclusion practices benefit children with special needs and their families, typical children and their families, and society as a whole as students attend schools in their home communities. One particularly powerful example that was shared demonstrated children advocating for the well-being of their peer with Autism to administration at their new school. Concepts of Universal Design for Learning were discussed, based on the insight of building a ramp, instead of stairs and a ramp, which all children can access.

Educators should select an interest-based activity and adjust the activity in ways that a child can participate independently (Erickson & Smith, 2016). For example, a child who is nonverbal could participate in story retelling by using props to answer questions or reenact the story’s plot. Environmental adaptations and incorporating visual, kinesthetic and auditory aids will support every child’s participation in the classroom. Material adaptations allow a child to manipulate or use any material to participate in an activity (Erickson & Smith, 2016). Simple adaptations include taping paper to a student’s desk, large grips (hair curlers) on writing utensils, and incorporating popsicle sticks as tabs to turn pages of a book. Instructional adaptations include modifying or adjusting instruction and requirements so a child can participate completely and independently (Erickson & Smith, 2016). Shortening the number of steps, providing extended time, clear visuals, illustrating instructions, and allowing students to stand will encourage inclusion in the classroom. Educators should consider how a child could be more involved, how the adaptation will enhance the experience, and generalize that adaptation to other activities.

Participants in the workshop received a copy of C.A.R.A.’s kit, which provides strategies and modifications to Create Adaptations for Routines and Activities. The adaptation hierarchy provided in C.A.R.A.’s kit seeks to use the least intrusive adaptation, beginning with the less impactful, their hierarchy recommends adapting the environment, daily schedule, activities/routines, materials, and finally, the requirements or instruction (Erickson & Smith, 2016). The presenters warned that assistance should only be provided if all adaptations have been unsuccessful, as children could then develop learned dependency. C.A.R.A.’s kit provides the situation, for example, “Children are having difficulty sharing books during book time,” and adaptations for the environment, activity, materials, requirements and assistance (Erickson & Smith, 2016). From the least intrusive, the teacher could limit the number of children in the reading area, to the most intrusive assistance adaptation, providing a book buddy to share reading with.

**Creating Differentiation in Inclusive Classrooms Using Current Strategies, UDL & Technology**

The keynote presentation, “Creating Differentiation in Inclusive Classrooms Using Current Strategies, UDL & Technology” was hosted by two charming women, Rebecca Hines and Lisa A. Dieker from the University of Central Florida. The professionals strongly advocated including the use of a timer in the classroom, which they modeled throughout the presentation. To support their suggestion, research has shown that achievement is impacted by socioeconomic status, innate ability, family background, quality of instruction and time (Dieker & Hines, 2016). Society is inclusive and it is important that we are preparing students to be successful members of the workforce with communication and social problem-solving skills. An innovative model of inclusion to support success in society that was mentioned includes bringing students in general education into a self-contained classroom.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* adds Universal Design for Learning concepts, which originated from brain research and architecture, to encourage course materials that help each student. Adding layers and options to content and customizing learning will ensure every student receives an adequate education. The presenters introduced the “5 Finger Test,” designing every lesson for a student who can’t walk, see, hear, talk or behave (Dieker & Hines, 2016). Universal Design for Learning demands multiple means of engagement, action or expression, and representation. The National Center on UDL was announced as a resource that provides guidelines and checkpoints for specific learners. Appealing to multiple intelligences will promote UDL, especially making students aware of their best and least effective learning styles. Active learning research considers the retention of information through reading (10%), hearing (20%), seeing (30%), talking about (70%), and seeing and hearing (50%) (Dieker & Hines, 2016). The most impactful, 90%, for the retention of learning is obtained through what we say as we do it (Dieker & Hines, 2016). Special education servicers were provided with a strategy to promote simple collaboration by asking, “What do you want every kid to do by the end of the lesson?” When planning lessons, educators were encouraged to consider what they want all students to be able to do and add layers to make the content accessible to every learner. To achieve UDL in representation, students should be able to access information in multiple ways. Providing brain breaks, every 8 to 10 minutes, will refocus students’ attention. 4 modes of instruction were identified: telling (expository), asking (inquiry), showing (demonstration) and doing (activity-based) (Dieker & Hines, 2016). Universal Design for Learning calls for a higher percentage of doing in classrooms. To promote motivation and active participation, every student should answer every question a teacher asks, through hand signals, unison response, or flashing answers. Schools are print heavy, but research indicates that students only read print 6% of the time outside of the classroom (Dieker & Hines, 2016). Incorporating UDL principles in students’ demonstration of their learning involves providing choice for expression through exhibition assessments or oral assessments.

Shockingly, less than 10% of students with disabilities go to college. *Think College!* is an excellent resource that was shared for parents of students with intellectual disabilities to discover options and information on attending college. The conference ended with an inspirational video of a young student with a disability receiving the news of being accepted into the University of Central Florida.

In closing, there is nothing more empowering than a roomful of people clapping for a single scholar.

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