TATS *e*Update
Inclusion

Universal Design for Learning in Prekindergarten (Pre-K) Classrooms

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More and more young children with disabilities are being educated with their typically developing peers in preschool programs. Their Individual Educational Plans (IEP) call for accommodations and modifications in their educational environment to facilitate learning. Children from many different cultures and languages are also enrolled in these programs. How does a teacher address the varying needs of all these children in his/her classroom?

One approach being used increasingly in early childhood prekindergarten (Pre-K) environments is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). It supports inclusion by allowing the greatest number of children to be involved in learning. The premise of UDL is that the learning environment is designed in such a way that all children learn. UDL has its roots in the concept of universal design which is a philosophy of designing and developing products and environments to be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. (Center for Universal Design)

Universal design began in the field of architecture, with the idea that buildings and the physical environment should be made as accessible to as many people as possible starting at the design stage, rather than creating a structure and then considering accommodations and modifications. For example, designing a wheelchair ramp into building plans during construction, rather than retrofitting the ramp after the building is completed. Curb cuts are another example of universal design. Curb cuts not only benefit individuals with wheel chairs, but also mothers with strollers and bicyclists.

What is Universal Design for Learning?
Universal Design for Learning takes this concept and applies it to the education of all the different types of children that are in a school. “Universally designed learning environments consider how children of varying disabilities, linguistic diversities, and varied learning style can access the educational environment, participate meaningfully and benefit through flexibility and creativity. (Cunconan-Lahr, 2006). It benefits all children. It is a way for teachers to respond to individual differences.

In addition to the physical environment, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) applies to teaching, learning, and assessment within a broad definition of curriculum. It is a

research-based approach that responds to a variety of individual learner differences and includes development of educational goals, processes, procedures, materials, and assessments. UDL provides learners with alternate methods to obtain information and fosters skill development and enthusiasm for learning.

UDL supports and maintains high educational standards. It requires forethought and planning to achieve the greatest benefit. While accommodations and modification focus on one child and are made to enable the child to "fit" into the environment, UDL creates a learning environment (including curriculum, activities, assessment, and the physical environment) that embraces and supports all children. By considering the range of diversity of learners at the initial planning stages, educators will be able to provide a positive educational experience and reach a greater number of learners with less curricular or programmatic accommodations or modifications. Modifications and accommodations may still have to be made for some children, but for the majority, a universally designed learning program will require much less of these.
The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) has identified three important principles of UDL:

- *Multiple means of representation* - to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge. How do we help children gather facts, identify and sort what they see and hear? Recognition tasks – the "what" of learning.
- *Multiple means of expression* - to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know. How do they organize what they know and how do they show us what they have learned?
- *Multiple means of engagement* - to tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation. Helps learners become motivated, engaged, excited about learning.

What does it look like in a (Pre-K) setting?
The following scenario illustrates the concepts of UDL at work in a Pre-K classroom. Karin is the teacher.

> As circle time concludes, Karin offers activity choices that support the current curriculum topic, how we are alike and how we are different. Children can use markers, finger paints, glitter glue, or a computer drawing program to make a self-portrait. Later in the day, children have an opportunity to dictate, draw, or use a computer program to share with classmates what they enjoy doing, or a picture of something they like. The computer program allows children to choose items from a picture library and create a composition that can be printed out. The child can click on each picture and it will say the word out loud. Tommy who has a speech delay, Mara who is learning English as a second language and Betsy who is visually impaired, are also accommodated by

> the computer program which can record children's speech, or a song they may want to sing or hum to accompany their drawings.
>
> (The teacher's) materials and approaches consider the needs of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Activities and routines allow for alternative ways of participating in tasks based on each child's way of attending, organizing information, interacting and understanding of the English language. (Blagojevic, Twomey, Labas, 2007, p. 1)

Future eUpdates on Universal Design for Learning will apply the concept to Pre-K programs and provide ideas and strategies.

Reflection

After reading this, can you see the advantages of incorporating UDL practices from the start into your curriculum rather than modifying the curriculum each time for individual learners?

The most important knowledge teachers need to do good work is a knowledge of how students are experiencing learning and perceiving their teacher's actions.

- Steven Brookfield

References and Resources

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Cunconan-Lahr, R. (2006). Inclusive child care begins with universal design. *Pennsylvania Early Intervention, 18*(1), 1-3.

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)

Center for research, professional and policy development that develops educational resources and strategies based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). http://www.cast.org/index.html

The Center for Universal Design
A national research, information, and technical assistance center that evaluates, develops, and promotes universal design in housing, public and commercial facilities, and related products. http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/

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Technical Assistance and Training System (TATS)
Statewide project providing technical assistance and training to programs in Florida serving prekindergarten children with disabilities. Website provides information and resources on curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, family involvement, inclusion, program effectiveness/quality, and transition, as well as, linking early childhood partners.
www.tats.ucf.edu

Universal Design for Learning and Assistive Technology: Resources and web links. National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center. Retrieved on July 29, 2008 from http://www.nectac.org/topics/atech/udl.asp

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