

# Integrating Universal Design for Learning in Schools: Implications for Teacher Training, Leadership and Professional Development

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## **Abstract**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has gained momentum in K-12 education over the last decade. It enables educators to go beyond deficit model approaches to inclusion, and offers sustainable practices for the inclusion of diverse learners through intentional design for instruction and assessment. Promotion of UDL has taken many forms, from provincial projects to school communities of practice. A challenge remains, however, when comes time to widen implementation efforts. There remain specific challenges with regards to the scaling up of implementation strategies across schools and school boards. The process of management of change towards wider UDL buy-in is complex and leads to a necessary questioning of current professional development practices for in-service teachers, and of pre-service teaching in its present format. This chapter will explore these contemporary issues, as well as the wider reflection around leadership that must accompany this process.

**Key Words:** Universal Design for Learning; Inclusion; K-12 Education, Professional Development; Pre-service Teacher Training; Leadership

## **Context**

Inclusion in the K-12 sector has been legislatively mandated in most Global North countries for almost two decades, but this imperative has rarely included details of how exactly Inclusion is to be achieved (de Bruin, 2019). As a result the current landscape offers diverse, and at times contradictory, examples and models that seek to achieve Inclusion in the

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means to deliver. In order to do so, however, UDL cannot remain a mere conceptual notion, or a vague objective that remains unattainable. It must be placed at the very center of pre-service teaching, and its exploration must be pragmatic, detailed and realistic.

The urgency to make UDL the cornerstone of our institutional and societal move towards inclusion is not just felt in pre-service teacher training. UDL must also become a priority in professional development efforts within schools. This in-service training around UDL must be, once again, hands-on, exhaustive and empowering. As schools focus more PD around UDL, they may hence simultaneously become aware that the very nature and favour of PD needs to radically change in order to become more effective. The chapter has evidenced how the scope of this PD must change to allow more depth, richness, frequency, more hands-on implementation, and a format of delivery that mirrors the values it is trying to instill.

Lastly embracing UDL also means rethinking school leadership around the key concept of inclusive school climate that necessarily has transformative repercussions on many different practices and policies within schools. It is argued that UDL, beyond simply being an object of leadership reflection, in fact revolutionizes school leadership itself because it becomes a cathartic tool. Indeed, it compels school leaders to demonstrate in their approach to staff the very values they would like to see deployed with the learners. It brings to the forefront the issue of flexibility, accessibility and diversity as key values in leadership itself.

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