

## Universal Design for Learning: Promoting Inclusive Education in an Empathic Manner

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### Abstract

Access to quality education is deemed a basic human right around the world. To this end, universal primary education is available in many countries around the world. To bolster countries' efforts in their quest to support this noble aspiration, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 whose stated aim is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all<sup>1</sup>”. Notwithstanding such noble efforts, learners with disabilities unfortunately find themselves facing discrimination, prejudice and exclusion from mainstream educational opportunities, or find themselves at the receiving end of arguably lower quality standards of education if granted such access. Whereas there are specific challenges depending on the type and degree of disability, a significant number of learners could perform in terms of literacy through empathic attitudes and interventions by teachers, coupled with improvements in learning environments, content delivery and more effective modes of engagement. This position paper explores the efficacy of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a novel approach to Inclusive Education in Kenya, and in so doing seeks to promote this more empathic and inclusive pedagogic and didactic ethos towards teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** *Attitudinal Barriers; Disability; Discrimination; Empathy; Exclusion; Inclusive Education; Literacy; Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*

### INTRODUCTION

Disability remains a primary cause of educational disadvantage and exclusion – it accounts for the largest single group of learners of all ages, both boys and girls who remain out of school. UNICEF (2017) report indicates that children with disabilities are ten times less likely to attend school than those without. Even when they do attend school, they are more likely to drop out early and typically a lower level of schooling than that of their peers.

In all countries of the world, people with disabilities have lower literacy rates than people without disabilities (Singal, 2015; UIS, 2018; United Nations, 2018). Significant differences exist based on the nature of the disability resulting in higher levels of illiteracy among children with visual impairments and those with multiple or mental disorders when compared to children with motor disabilities (Singal, 2015).

When they do attend school, children with disabilities consistently score lower in mathematics and reading tests (Wodon *et al.*, 2018; World Bank, 2019). Additionally, girls with disabilities are penalized even further due to disadvantages occasioned by their gender (UNESCO, 2018). Generally speaking, disability tends to compound social inequalities. Studies in the United States of America have shown that students with disabilities achieve better academic outcomes and

social integration when studying in a mainstream environment than students studying in segregated or specialized classes (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Every child has the right to education regardless of disability, race, language, religion, gender or poverty. When all children regardless of their differences are educated together, everyone benefits and this is the cornerstone of inclusive education. Inclusive education values diversity and the unique contributions each student brings to the classroom. Classrooms around the world from pre-school to the university need to be more inclusive to ensure that all learners are exposed to high quality education. Every learner needs to feel welcomed, supported, and safe although this is easier said than done.

The model of teaching/learning of separating learners into specialized institutions which is currently favored in so many schools does not enable each child to receive quality education that would make them productive members of the society. Inclusive education involves interrogating ways in which schools, programmes, classrooms and lessons are designed so that all children can participate and learn. It is about finding different ways of teaching so that classrooms actively involve all children. Further, separating children with special learning needs from mainstream institutions only serves to entrench psychosocial prejudices, stigma and discrimination.

## **HISTORICAL AND LEGAL TRENDS OF INCLUSION**

Inclusive Education is a product of several social and political movements that emerged in the middle of the Twentieth Century. In the United States, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s intensified awareness that many individuals were still being excluded from social institutions, including schools. By the late 1960s and 70s movements such as the disability rights movement arose in order to combat other forms of exclusion such as those due to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability. One significant outcome of these movements was the passage and implementation of laws and policies designed to ensure opportunities for all including access to education

Many countries around the world have passed laws and policies implementing inclusion. Inclusive education has also been mandated by international and non-governmental organizations. These include the Salamanca statement of the United Nations (1994) and the UNESCO *Dakar World Declaration on Education for All* (2000). The increase in the number of children diagnosed with disabilities has led to the emphasis in inclusive education. The rise in numbers can be attributed to an increased focus on assessments and early detection, development of new assessment technologies and a lowering of diagnostic thresholds. Education and training for children and adults with disabilities has therefore become an important initiative in most countries of the world and this has led to major educational reforms especially with emphasis to inclusive education (Fergusson, 2008).

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the sector policy for learners and trainees with disabilities in May 2018. This sector policy succeeds the *Special Needs Education Policy Framework* of 2009 (MoE, 2009). The previous policy had some gaps and this necessitated a review. Some of the gaps included that it came before the promulgation of the constitution and thus required to be aligned with Kenya's 2010 Constitution and other national and policy frameworks. It had also focused on twenty-two categories of disabilities that was too broad and thus required a revision to eleven categories. Further, it lacked implementation guidelines

meaning that the implementers were unable to implement the policy that the current sector policy has addressed. Perhaps, the most significant focus of the current sector policy is the recognition that Kenya needs to move towards inclusive education instead of segregated education. Inclusive Education is an overarching principle in this sector policy, advocating for the right of every learner with disability to be enrolled in a regular classroom together with his/her peers without disabilities. However, the shift to Inclusive Education according to the sector policy, recognized other education delivery models such as special institutions of learning, special units in regular institutions of learning and home-based education for learners with severe disabilities. Consequently, Kenya recognizes the need to specifically maintain special schools while striving to transition towards Inclusive Education.

If embraced, Inclusive Education is both a means of ensuring access to educational opportunities for all children and a way to combat discriminatory attitudes and to socialize diverse generations to be more accommodating and tolerant towards a wider spectrum of human diversity.

### **Issues and Constraints to Inclusion**

According to UN (2016), the barriers to an Inclusive Education setting are multifaceted ranging from attitudinal, environmental, institutional and information barriers. In Kenya, attitudinal barriers take the form of prejudice, discrimination and stigma towards persons with disabilities. In terms of environmental barriers all schools are not physically accessible to persons with disabilities and the curriculum is not responsive to learners with disabilities. There also lies the misconception about the roles of special schools and special education. Often times, inclusive education is perceived as a threat to the existence of special schools. It is seen as merely putting a child with a disability in a regular classroom without support and resources.

Management of inclusive classrooms pose a great challenge to teachers and this could probably explain the favor of educating children in specialized institutions. The teacher is faced with the dilemma of creating environments where students can accomplish their best learning. Students in an inclusive classroom have differing capabilities, learning styles, ways of expressing themselves and modes of interacting with physical and social environments. They can have differences in their ability to focus and pay attention, sit still, make sense and respond to social cues and regulate themselves in response to stimuli.

Teachers, as facilitators of learning, must create and maintain order, structure and safety all of which are necessary for a successful learning environment. Classrooms involve routines and patterns of interactions. All learners must be included in building a classroom community where every learner feels a sense of belonging with their learning, development and social needs met. The teacher must ensure effective classroom management because learners must learn how to regulate their behavior to minimize the risk of stigmatization and exclusion. This helps the teacher to implement academic and social curricular in order to help every learner maximize their potential. To achieve all this, the teacher has to cultivate a culture of inclusion where everyone in the classroom becomes like a member of a well-functioning team. This calls for an integration of many different practices that work together to reinforce inclusivity (M'Rithaa, 2011).

### **Integration of Universal Design for Learning in Inclusive Education**

The concept of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) originated in architectural practice and was designed to provide accessible environments for entire populations (Nelson, 2014). Although this

concept was initially developed to ensure accessibility of people with disabilities to physical structures, these principles have been applied to other areas of pedagogy and didactics. In education the term was adopted as a set of principles, strategies, and actions that aim to make education accessible and functional for all people. It is important to emphasize that universal learning design comes to the area of Special Education since it visualizes individuals in a unique way and proposes to think about their peculiarities.

There are many ways to adapt pedagogical techniques, curricula and other aspects of teaching/learning to meet the varied needs and abilities of students. UDL can make learning accessible to a wide range of learners. It can be applied to how teaching/learning resources are prepared as well as on how teachers plan and execute the curricular. Further, it can also involve building an individualized approach into the way curriculum is constructed and lessons taught.

Lessons and learning activities can be designed to provide multiple ways for students with disabilities or different learning modalities to access learning material and learn. This type of curricular planning and presentation is similar to designing an elevator so that people can use it whether using wheel chairs, walkers or walking unassisted. Similarly, UDL makes academic and social aspects of school arguably more accessible to all learners – especially those living in majority world contexts such as Africa where accessibility is a major challenge to inclusion (M'Rithaa, 2011).

### **Principles of Universal Design for Learning**

The overall goal of UDL is to use a variety of teaching methods to remove any barriers to learning and give all students equal opportunities to succeed. It is about building in flexibility that can be adjusted for every student's strengths and needs (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). UDL ultimately benefits all learners.

This approach to teaching does not specifically target learners who learn and think differently. However, it can be especially helpful for the learners with these issues — including those who have not been formally diagnosed. UDL provides that same kind of flexibility in the classroom. By applying UDL principles, teachers can effectively instruct a diverse group of learners. They do this by building in flexibility in the ways learners can access information and, in the ways, students can demonstrate their knowledge.

UDL is a framework for developing lesson plans and assessments that is based on three main principles. The first principle is providing multiple means of engagement, the second is providing multiple means of representation and the third is the provision of multiple means of action and expression— these principles are elaborated in Sections 5.1-5.3 (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). According to Nelson (2014), the concept of UDL is informed by neuroscience, which argues that each individual learns in a certain way and through different stimuli. It is therefore a continuous process to think about teaching planning. Although UDL has been designed to meet the demand of the entire population and its various characteristics, it is important to reflect on its influence in the area of Special Education.

### ***Principle of Engagement***

UDL encourages teachers to look for multiple ways to motivate students. Letting kids make choices and giving them assignments that feel relevant to their lives are some examples of how

teachers can sustain students' interest. Other common strategies include making skill building feel like a game and creating opportunities for students to get up and move around the classroom (Meyer *et al.*, 2014).

### ***Principle of Representation***

UDL recommends offering information in more than one format. For example, textbooks are primarily visual. But providing text, audio, video and hands-on learning gives all kids a chance to access the material in whichever way is best suited to their learning strengths. (UDL enables teachers to practice inclusion because the greater the possibilities of presenting new knowledge, the greater the possibilities of learning it (*ibid*).

### ***Principle of Action and Expression***

UDL proposes giving learners more than one way to creatively interact with the material and to show what they have learned. For example, students might get to choose between taking a pencil-and-paper test, giving an oral presentation or doing a group project (*ibid*).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Educational systems need to focus on educational needs of all learners regardless of disability, gender, race or religion. This can be done by developing curricular and pedagogy that addresses the diverse needs of all learners. The Universal Design for Learning approach is critical in incorporating inclusion into pedagogy and didactics at every level of formal schooling – from pre-school then primary school all through to higher and tertiary levels of education. Though progress has been made, much work remains before this effort achieves its full potential, particularly within the present challenges and imperatives of Open, Distant and e-Learning (ODeL) occasioned by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Consequently, the authors recommend that UDL be incorporated into education-specific courses, as well as generally as a module offered across all disciplines and course offerings so as to proffer the benefits of an inclusive educational ethos to as many learners/students as possible.

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