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Universal design for learning as an enabling framework for equity, diversity and inclusion

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In 1973, when BERA was founded, I was an eight-year-old student attending a rural Irish primary school. There I learned the craft of handwriting; each letter was painstakingly curved to perfection using a nibbed pen that was dipped into a ceramic inkwell nestled in its desk cradle. Essentially, this scripted mode of communication was relatively unchanged from medieval times. However, in the space of a lifetime, a dramatic globalising shift has transformed an erstwhile insular, rather homogenous, and rote-based 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum into one that is typified by 'hyper diversity' (Harris, 2013). Continuous and fast-paced changes have disrupted wider contexts of learning, teaching and assessment beyond recognition so that European schools, especially those in urban settings, are typified by inward migration leading to increased ethnic, cultural and linguistic learner diversities. The unrelenting pace of change necessitates a rethinking of traditional approaches to curriculum policy, development and implementation. The following piece charts a potential pathway for realising the imperative for inclusive curriculum development and enactment at global, national and local levels.

Over recent decades, the nature of learner variability has become ever more multilayered. Disability and human rights advocates such as Judith Heumann in the USA and Baroness Warnock in the UK spearheaded the social justice drive for inclusion, which opened the doors of educational opportunity to a wider range of learners across the globe. Nonetheless, educational policy and practice have struggled to keep pace with meeting the differing cognitive, physical and sociocultural learning requirements of diverse student cohorts. The challenge is twofold. First, learners should be enabled to access a relevant, authentic curriculum. Second, they require differing learning and assessment trajectories that enable all learners to demonstrate attainment of appropriate learning outcomes.

International initiatives such as the Salamanca Agreement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), signed some 30 years ago, committed the international educational community to ensure that all students would be integrated within mainstream schools. The agreement also suggested strategies that would enhance educational opportunities for learners with special educational needs and disabilities. Nonetheless, the promise exemplified in early national and international initiatives for inclusion have often fallen short in practice. As recently as 2017, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reported that England's education system 'is not equipped to respond to the requirements for high-quality inclusive education'. The report also noted that, in general, pre-service professional development for teachers 'does not reflect the requirements of inclusive education' (UN CRPD, 2017). So, along with other educational systems, in terms of inclusivity, both curriculum design and teacher preparedness are significantly challenged when it comes to addressing multifaceted and complex forms of learner diversity.

Part of the reason for the gap between good policy intentions and effective inclusive curriculum design and implementation appears to be a lack of insight regarding what works in contexts of learner diversity (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). Early strategies for teachers included 'differentiation' of the curriculum, so that learning was individualised and atomised to meet each learner's specific requirements. However, such an approach may not be sustainable in situations where teachers increasingly encounter multilayered forms of marginalised learner identities and (dis)abilities. A meaningful consideration of how the complex intersectionalities of learner requirements will play out

within learning spaces necessitates an alternative form of curriculum design, planning and realisation (Tefera & Fischman, 2023). Such an approach ought to anticipate, and plan for, the universality of learner difference and diversity as contextual norms rather than seeking to 'retrofit' the curriculum according to individual learning requirements.

In responding to this challenge, educators at Harvard University were inspired by the initiatives of architect Ron Mace who created the Centre for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. Mace sought to promote inclusive design thinking for creating buildings and community spaces that anticipated the needs of a wide range of 'end users'. Mace sought to define a framework for inclusive design that was mindful of people who were blind, or those who were wheelchair users, or those who may have been otherwise (dis)abled. An interdisciplinary team from Harvard, including academic researchers, educational psychologists, curriculum designers and information technologists, combined learning from Mace's architectural design thinking along with Vygotskian and Deweyan social constructivist learning theory, and formulated a conceptual framework for educational inclusion titled universal design for learning (UDL) (Meyer et al., 2014). The UDL framework has three overarching principles that incorporate the use of:

- multiple means of engagement
- multiple means of representation
- multiple means of action and expression.

The first principle seeks to involve learners according to their areas of interest. It corresponds to the affective and relational domains of learning by recruiting learners' interest in salient, attainable learning goals and objectives. The second principle takes cognisance of neurological and linguistic diversities and aims to provide learners with relevant organisational schemata to support the further scaffolding of learning. In promoting the use of learning technologies, this aspect of the framework was prescient in recognising the potential affordances of artificial intelligence along with more standard information technologies (Bray et al., 2023). The third principle covers the enabling ways that learners can evidence their learning through multiple modes of authentic assessment. So, learning and assessment are most effective when applied in meaningful ways that resonate with learners' wider communities and when

they also chime with learners' socio-cultural and economic requirements – a one size curriculum does not fit all. Additional strengthening of executive functioning is provided as learners become more reflective and aware of how best to set and attain realistic learning goals that are mindful of what learners have attained and the strategies they have used to progress their learning.

As educationalists take note of the growing evidence that UDL provides a systems-level enabling framework, so it has been adopted more widely both nationally and internationally (UNESCO, 2020). Given the pace and nature of educational changes in recent decades, it would be foolhardy to speculate what educational systems may be like 50 years hence. Nonetheless, while keeping learner equity, diversity and inclusion as guiding principles, the concept of anticipatory, inclusive, design-based curriculum and pedagogical planning is likely to chart a reassuring way forward for some time to come.

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