

# How Universal Design for Learning Transformed My Teaching: An Elementary Educator's Journey of Implementation

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of research and recommendations for implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the elementary school setting through a review of the literature (2016 – 2021), one teacher's account of UDL implementation with elementary school-aged students (K-5) in a fully inclusive public education system in New Brunswick, Canada, and the findings of action research undertaken through a partnership between the New Brunswick Department of Education & Early Childhood Development (EECD) and University of New Brunswick (2013 – 2015). The goal of the action research was to determine what tools will help facilitate the implementation of UDL in elementary school classrooms to improve student engagement. Implementing UDL in the elementary school setting results in observable gains in inclusion, student engagement, and academic achievement. Teachers can take a personalized and incremental approach to UDL implementation guided by CAST's UDL Guidelines.*

When I was an early career teacher, I was continually streamlining the process of offering accommodations to students who, for a variety of reasons, had difficulty meeting grade-level curriculum outcomes. I planned lessons for the “average” student and tried to provide prescribed accommodations to large numbers of students who

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had varying needs. Students' needs can be quite diverse given that I work within a fully inclusive public education system in New Brunswick, Canada, in which every student attends their community school and participates in the common learning environment. Given the vast variability in the educational, social, emotional, and physical needs of my elementary school students (grades K-5), offering accommodations that meet everyone's needs can be a monumental task. I was looking for ways to help my students meet me where I was teaching, and they had so many ways to get there. It was exhausting trying to reactively adjust lessons to meet everyone's needs. Why was this so hard? Because I was trying to teach to the average learner, which doesn't exist.

*“Variability is the rule not the exception” – Todd Rose*

As I learned about and began to gradually implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in my practice I discovered that I could reduce or even eliminate the accommodations I needed to offer to many students by reshaping the learning environment to consider their needs from the outset. UDL helped shift my focus from identifying deficits in learning so I could accommodate for them, to identifying barriers to access so I could proactively eliminate them through careful design of instruction and/or the learning environment. Identifying and eliminating barriers from the outset reduces and possibly eliminates the need for many accommodations. Instead of responding to variability, I began to anticipate it and plan accordingly. I offered choice. I focused on the goal of the lesson and considered multiple pathways that students can take to meet these goals, eliminating barriers wherever possible. For example, a student could use letter tiles or a device to spell words instead of completing pencil and paper tasks, as these can present barriers to students who struggle with fine motor tasks.

In a classroom that respects learner variability, students should not have to require a diagnosis or label to access options that help them experience success, and everyone is meaningfully included in the learning environment. The more barriers that can be identified and eliminated from the outset, the less there is a need to retrofit the learning experience in the moment in attempts to include everyone. Offering accommodations to everyone also destigmatizes them. For example, dark lined paper can be offered to all students to write on, not only those who have visual impairments or difficulties with fine motor planning. A variety of styles of paper (along with the option to use devices to complete work if this is feasible) to complete writing assignments could be available for everyone to choose from. This eliminates the need to ensure that certain students are the only ones who use different tools to complete work, and everyone can select the option that better meets their interests, plays to their strengths, and increases access to learning for all. This is the kind of

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