

# Navigating the Gap Between Theory and Practice in UDL Implementation Within the K–12 Sector: Understanding an Ongoing Tension

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*This chapter examines the gap which exists between theory and practice in the K-12 Canadian school system in relation to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) implementation. It blends the voices of two academics, one examining UDL adoption from a theoretical and conceptual point of view, and one presenting observations from the field. The chapter argues that the current academic discourse related to UDL integration in schools is misleadingly optimistic, when the reality of on terrain integration is radically grimmer. The chapter argues that this glossy perception of progress must be unpacked and re-examined as it otherwise is at risk of creating and perpetuating a false narrative regarding the efforts that remain to be applied in the area of inclusive design and UDL adoption. The chapter's recommendations*

*include a more pragmatic and realistic assessment of the work that remains to be achieved in the field before UDL can be considered in the process of becoming a reality for teachers and students.*

## **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for inclusion which radically alters the perspective of teachers on learner diversity (Lambert et al., 2023). Instead of presenting learner diversity as exceptionality, it posits that learner diversity is a given in any context. UDL scholars therefore argue that teachers can prepare to address this diversity proactively in the design of their instruction and assessment before they even observe any learner struggling with format. UDL in this sense translates the social model of disability into action and classroom practices (Fovet, 2014). It argues indeed that disability is not an inherent characteristic of the learner but is rather a tension which emerges when the learning environment is not designed with learners' variability and diverse embodiment in mind (Saia, 2023). UDL has been discussed within the K-12 sector for now over two decades. The amount of scholarship focusing on UDL integration in schools has risen sharply within Canada, and this may suggest that there is a degree of success when it comes to spreading this framework to all provinces and territories.

Instead, the on-terrain reality seems much more complex and there seems to be evidence that UDL implementation is not an easy, linear, or sustainable process yet at this stage. There is little evidence of sustained growth, and instead the many initiatives observed around the country appear sporadic and short lived. There is evidence of pilot projects on UDL integration losing steam and momentum (BCUDL, 2010).

This chapter seeks to explore the degree to which this tension is a reality. It seeks to explore the reasons that cause the resistance, slow progress, and frequent failure associated with UDL integration efforts taking place in the Canadian K-12 sector. It highlights the varied and complex factors which contribute to this tension that manifests itself as a clear gap between theory and practice in this area. The way this chapter structures its approach is to combine two narratives: one voice is that of a scholar reflecting on her recent experiences with UDL in the field; the other is the perspective of a scholar more focused on promoting UDL theoretically. The combination and weaving of these narratives offer a wide scope and ecological insight into this complex and rapidly evolving phenomenon.

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