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The Aspiring Educator's Path to Disability Inclusion and Belonging in Secondary Education

So you want to be a secondary education teacher. In spite of, or maybe even because of, the current political climate, financial instability, and lack of job security, your passion for enriching the lives of young people through a classroom education persists. The most readily available way to become a teacher is to stay a student, which you're already doing by reading this. What lies ahead of you is a rough guideline of best practices for disability inclusion and belonging in secondary education. In any context, special education or not, the best classroom is a classroom that is prepared to reflect the world around it. Preparation to be a teacher is more than a lesson plan. It is creating a space for inclusion where every and any student can thrive. Currently, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are being implemented state-wide and schoolwide from early to higher education as a way to create a classroom that caters to every student. While UDL principles are a progressive notion, their concrete nature replaces the need for a teacher's radical love and acceptance of their students regardless of ability. Aspiring secondary education teachers should refer to Universal Design for Learning as secondary to disability principles, like those of Sins Invalid in order to ensure a classroom that goes beyond disability inclusion.

Before understanding what Universal Design for Learning is, it is important to have an understanding of why people are seeking out inclusive classrooms. While inclusivity in academia

may seem like a universally recognized notion, the reality is that belonging in the classroom goes beyond legal mandates. The top search result when making a quick google search of "disability in secondary education" is the ADA National Network's fact sheet of "Disability Rights Laws in Public Primary and Secondary Education: How Do They Relate?". While laws provide a firm foundation for inclusive policy, there is no signed document that can guarantee the complete acceptance of a disabled child in a classroom. Unfortunately, the effects of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 are nowhere near as productive and supportive as a teacher's dedication to including, welcoming, and encouraging a disabled student in their classroom.

The problem is that rules and regulations cannot guarantee the holistic inclusion of a disabled student. In *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life,* Margaret Price expresses concern for higher education professors with mental disabilities lack of say in academic discourse. Price writes, "I perceive a theoretical and material schism between academic discourse and mental disabilities. In other words, I believe that these two domains, *as conventionally understood*, are not permitted to coexist" (8). The inherent disconnect between academic discourse and disability that Price perceives can easily be related to a secondary education context along with disability of any nature. The difference in Price's acknowledgment of ableism in higher education, a hierarchical and elitist system, especially towards those with disabilities, and ableism in secondary education, is that there exists a very limited set of expectations for disabled students at a secondary level. While disability in higher education may be dangerously perceived as "overcoming" a challenge, disability in secondary education is the result of a student simply being propelled through the system. You, reader, don't want to be the teacher that includes a disabled student simply because a student is put in your classroom to

receive their highschool diploma, as is the norm. There is simply no reason that a disabled student is not in secondary education to participate in the same academic discourse that all their peers are participating in, as well as getting a high school diploma. Price offers a guiding question to be kept in mind while continuing with these best practices, "What transformation would need to occur before those who pursue academic discourse can be "heard" (which I take to mean "respected), not *in spite of* our mental disabilities, but *with* and *through* them" (8). With the understanding that there are people included in academic discourse and others not, Universal Design for Learning makes sense on a surface level; it's a method of including everyone regardless of ability. It is the complete acceptance of these guidelines that leads to a bigger problem in disability inclusion in secondary education.

Universal Design, created by David Rose and his colleagues at CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology), contains three main parts: multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement. The creation of UDL stemmed from a realization that diagnosis is not enough to change schooling; in other words, justified reasoning for accommodated learning is not enough. Rose's realization may serve as relief to some as students are not being victim to the over medicalization of their disability status, which is as valid a feeling as the understanding that this is also scary. If educators are not accepting of facts provided by medical providers, how can families, students, and school communities be sure that feelings, thoughts, or ideas expressed by disabled students are acknowledged? UDL has received public backing with a 2012 law in Maryland requiring Universal Design for Learning to be implemented in classrooms on a public level. The well-known Gates Foundation funded a project helping four school districts implement UDL. At the same time, no number of high brow donors can completely cause disability inclusion in the

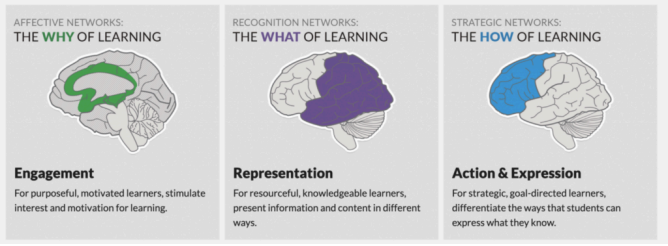
classroom. Katie Bacon of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Ed. Magazine writes, "For UDL to work the way it's supposed to, teachers have to understand it in a holistic way, understand their students, and then figure out how to implement it themselves." That is how UDL is implemented in classrooms: through genuine care, understanding, and compassion for students.

Finding tools on how to implement Universal Design for Learning is an easy task with books, blogs, and wikis dedicated just to finding every single area of the classroom in which UDL can be implemented. For example, lab settings, one-on-one interactions with students, and tests and exams are just a few areas in which academic and founding editor of Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, Jay Dolmage, has been able to apply UDL principles on his Universal Design: Places to Start wiki page. Such a page outlines the three goals of UDL: 1. "Give learners various ways to acquire information and knowledge," 2. "Provide learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they know," and 3. "Tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation." If you find that this is echoing the concept of multiple types of learners like auditory or visual learners, you would be correct while simultaneously supporting one of the main problems of Universal Design for Learning.

Maybe you've seen posters in more progressive classrooms outlining the different styles of learning or you've heard a peer respond to a low grade by saying that the teacher's lectures don't work with their visual learning. It is absolutely true that there is not one type of learner, but by putting labels onto students with diverse learning habits, teachers manage to dismantle one structure and subsequently put their students into another. By being labeled a student as a visual learner, the student's access to tools in a non-visual format is limited and their ability to pick and choose from a diverse range of tools and methods will be questioned, if at all encouraged.

Another problem with UDL is the way that it is most often presented to teachers: as a set of checklists. Although you are learning how to create a disability inclusive classroom on a secondary level, many universities have fully embraced UDL guidelines. For example, Cornell University's Center for Teaching Innovation has a whole page on Universal Design for Learning underneath the guise of methods for "Designing Your Course." At the bottom of the page, Cornell links a course accessibility checklist on a website called UDL-Universe which has been archived as of November 2024 and can no longer be guaranteed to meet accessibility standards. UDL-Universe's official course accessibility checklist is divided into six parts: accessibility for all, print materials, syllabi and handouts, powerpoint, documents, and images. It shouldn't take more than a brief glance to identify that this is not a holistic approach to a disability inclusive classroom. Cornell is suggesting that the extent of accessibility in their classrooms be centered around accessible technology. While accessible technology is an extremely important step towards disability inclusion in any classroom, it is a meager way of accurately measuring complete disability inclusion.

Universal Design for Learning also encourages the use of charts that create an argument for UDL by connecting the three principles of UDL to a different part of the brain. Calling upon scientific language like "affective networks," "recognition networks," and "strategic networks," Universal Design for Learning is supporting a concept referred to as a neuroclaim. Researcher Jordynn Jack refers to neuroclaims as "reduc[ing] complex conceptions (often subjectivity or identity) to measurable entities in the brain through reduction." By using similar color-coding and brain imagery as depicted in UDL charts, even



CAST is perpetuating the false scientification of neurodiverse brains. All in all, there is only so much that science can do to explain a difference in learning and classroom behavior and it is up to the teacher to foster an environment that values a student as more than a purple brain on a graph.

After reviewing checklists, charts, and rigid guidelines provided by UDL it may come as no surprise to find out that UDL does not actually target students who have learning disabilities. American University's School of Education outlines Universal Design for Learning's purpose as being, "to create an improved educational experience for all students, including those who have learning disabilities of one kind or another." So, while UDL principles may promote general inclusion, they are not a foolproof or one and done method of creating disability inclusion in a secondary education classroom.

While integration between disabled and able bodied students in the classroom is essential for an inclusive learning environment, it is important to adopt principles directly aimed at creating a safe, enriching environment for students with disabilities. One powerful tool used in artistic and academic community spaces is the Sins Invalid 10 Principles of Disability Justice. Sins Invalid is, "a disability justice-based movement building and performance project that celebrates disabled people, centering and led by disabled Black, Indigenous, and people of the global majority, and queer, trans, and nonbinary disabled people." Unlike Universal Design for Learning, which attempts to create a new normal for the classroom, Sins Invalid aims to identify existing spaces where "normal" and "disabled" are questioned and replace tension with acceptance. Indeed, Sins Invalid lays out their principles of disability justice as a list, which is in a similar fashion to UDL guidelines, but the noticeable difference is that Sins Invalid's language is full of powerful, aggressive intentions. The ten principles of disability justice are as follows:

intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politics, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation. Sins Invalid is clear about their mission but does not enforce strict guidelines of how to apply their principles into your community.

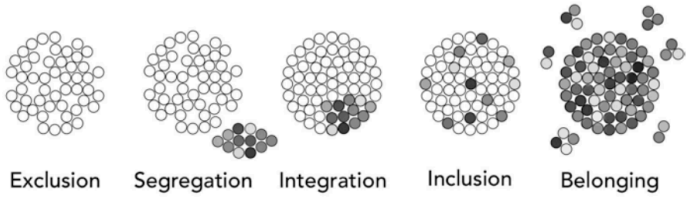
As an aspiring teacher, it is up to you to actualize these principles in your classroom as you see fit. Maybe you have a strong idea on how to celebrate intersectionality and collective liberation but you don't see how anti-capitalist politics or interdependence can be concrete enough to have a place in your classroom. It is impossible to sacrifice one principle for another, but a classroom with all 10 principles is something to strive for, not to expect. When seeking a classroom of love and acceptance, the disability principles "recognizing wholeness" and "sustainability" are some of the most imperative founding principles in a disability inclusive classroom.

Sins Invalid explains recognizing wholeness as, "People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life." In recognizing the wholeness of a student, you are making sure that no aspect of their being is sacrificed when focusing on creating a disability inclusive space for them. It is essential to remind students that they belong no matter who they are, disabled or not.

Sustainability is outlined as, "We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation." Five years of a classroom that accepts and includes students with disabilities is never going to be enough. Ten years of a classroom that makes conscious efforts to promote acceptance and

inclusion in a way that fully integrates the disability principles for all that they are is a major step towards creating sustainable disability inclusive practices in the classroom.

No matter how much effort you decide to put into Universal Design for Learning or the Sins Invalid Disability Principles, a disability inclusive space is only a single step towards the radical belonging and acceptance that your students deserve. In Chapter 2 of *Belonging and Resilience in Individuals with Developmental Disabilities*, Erik W. Carter focuses on the different dimensions of belonging. Carter explains, "Belonging is experienced when people are *present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, heard, befriended, needed,* and *loved*" (16). Acceptance is only one of many aspects of complete and total belonging. Carter explains that people want to be more than simply integrated, which is only one part of his multiple portraits of community for individuals with IDDs. Perhaps the goal of a disability inclusive classroom is to become a classroom of belonging. Is it possible that UDL guidelines promote integration and the 10 Principles of Disability Justice foster inclusion?



With belonging identified as the full realization of all the disability principles, all the UDL guidelines, and all portraits of community, belonging is supported and desired across classrooms by activists, academics, and students; but belonging in a classroom is impossible if you, the educator, does not seek it. How do you foster belonging? Belonging may take persuasion of teachers, administrators, and students. If you are seeking belonging for the students in your classroom with disabilities, encourage them to advocate for what they need. By fostering conversation, utilizing UDL and disability principles, and actively engaging with how you can

make your space integrated, inclusive, and one of belonging, you are already advocating for your student. Teaching your disabled and able bodied students self-advocacy is essential to ensuring that those who will benefit from belonging the most are those at the front of the fight. This doesn't mean that you are taking a step back as much as it means that you are prioritizing the second principle of disability, "leadership of those most impacted." At the center of your work as an aspiring educator and the work of your students is the love within your community. Love for the self, for others, and for the world is what motivates humans to create access tools like Universal Design for Learning and Sins Invalid's 10 Disability Principles. Carter writes, "...love leads people to care about someone's flourishing throughout all 7 days of the week—after school dismisses, outside of the workday, and beyond the benediction" (26). Love is recognizing wholeness and being sustainable. Love is belonging.

There are always going to be new resources and tools to promote disability inclusion in a classroom. Whether or not you implement these tools in your classroom is up to you. The hope for young educators is that you choose to move through the world with love for your able bodied students and your disabled students. Love to make the classroom a space of inclusion so that you can make it a space of belonging, is the love that will make your student feel most able to exist and learn under your wing.

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