

An Equity-Based Evolution of Universal Design for Learning: Participatory Design for Intentional Inclusivity

Gayitri Kavita Indar

Special Education Department, University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS, United States

Gindar@ku.edu

Abstract

Co-design of learning environments, with explicit accounting for the socio-historical underpinnings of educational inequities and disparities in America, has been missing in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) discourse and implementation. Accordingly, UDL has primarily accounted for the interactions among micro-level (individual) variables, while disregarding their dynamic interaction with macro-level (structural) variables. This paper calls for greater use of participatory design and critical theory understandings of UDL implementation to promote a co-designed learning environment model, rather than a teacher-centered design model.

Keywords

Participatory Design, Equitable Instruction for All, Culturally sustaining pedagogy, Designing to the edges, Critical Participatory Design, Intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Premised on the idea that education was the equalizer needed to erase color lines, the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling desegregated American public schools and provided non-White students with access to all-White schools (Kozleski, 2007; Smith & Kozleski, 2005). Instead of increased access resulting in a more equitable school system, however, it contributed to White flight from public schools (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Smith & Kozleski, 2005). Furthermore, public schools were internally restructured to support ability tracking, leading to the eventual association of race with ability (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2005; Sleeter, 2010). The association eventually manifested in special educators' ongoing debate about the overrepresentation of African American students in disability categories dependent on the subjective judgement of professionals (e.g., Mental Retardation, Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disability), while their White peers were identified with disabilities with organic roots (Annamma et al., 2013; Reid & Knight, 2006; Sleeter, 2010). Therefore, creating accessibility did not substantively improve equity for historically marginalized students, but rather reconfigured mechanisms for inequity. In other words, access is not tantamount to equity.

REPURPOSING UDL FOR EQUITY

If Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is conceptualized as *designing to the edges* (Sailor, 2015), the American public-school system was designed to the edges of Whiteness-defined by Gillborn (2015) as "a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that place the interests and perspec-

tives of White people at the center of what is considered normal" (p.278). The UDL framework is intended to proactively design curriculum to decrease barriers in the learning environment, improving instructional accessibility for *learners in the margins* (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2011; Edyburn, 2010; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Presumably, if UDL is implemented with efficacy, improvement in instructional access should result in equitable outcomes.

AN EQUITY-BASED APPROACH TO UDL

The Equal Opportunity Project (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018) utilized Census data and federal income tax returns from 1989-2015 to determine the intergenerational persistence of racial disparities. They found that African American and American Indians, particularly males from high-income households experienced higher rates of downward mobility, despite their perceived economic advantage. Additionally, family characteristics (e.g., marriage rates, education) did not explain the intergenerational mobility and income gap between Black and White males. They concluded that cross neighborhood and class initiatives were the most promising for decreasing the gap, including mentoring programs for Black males, reducing racial bias among Whites, decreasing criminal justice discrimination and increased interaction between the races. Thus far, it has been the most comprehensive understanding of impactful factors in racial disparities and inequities.

Since race is a major determinant of economic success, an equity-based approach to UDL begins with an accurate accounting of participant demographics. This is apparent in Ok, Rao, Bryant, and McDougall's (2016) literature review of the academic and social impact of UDL based instruction. Of the 13 studies selected for review, only 6 reported complete data about the ethnicity of participants. Additionally, 8 of 13 studies did not provide socioeconomic status (SES) data for participants. These findings supported Rao, Ok, and Bryant's earlier (2014) recommendation for disaggregated data, emphasizing the collection of specific demographic data for participants to understand the comparative effect of UDL-based instruction for different learners.

The first proposed component of an equity-based approach to UDL utilizes intersectionality, with its origins in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, for a complex understanding of demographic data (Crenshaw, 1989). Similar to UDL's assertion that addressing the needs of those at the margins would inherently meet the needs of learners in

the middle, Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes that meeting the needs of the multiply disadvantaged (e.g., African American, female, disabled) would inherently address the needs of the singularly disadvantaged. Additionally, utilizing intersectionality counteracts the Western tendency to arrive at fragmented understandings of participants, either focusing on only one demographic component or as viewing each as a separate entity (Lorde, 1984). Methodologically, it prevents an imbalance in the explanatory powers assigned to single categorical identifiers (e.g., only disability status), and thus, undermines efforts to address racism and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Erevelles & Minear, 2010).

The second component of an equity-based approach to UDL advocates for policy extension to address the diversity of the teaching workforce. Presently, UDL policy has been incorporated into the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), Race to the Top Assessment Program (USDE; 2009), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015), and the National Education Technology Plan (NETP; Office of Educational Technology, 2016) and currently focuses mainly on training and professional development (Nelson & Basham, 2014). Although, there has been a slight improvement in the racial/ethnic composition of the education workforce it remains relatively homogenous, with 82% of teachers identifying as White (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2016). Moreover, distribution of White, Hispanic, and African American teachers remains associated with the socio-economic makeup of schools, with more African American and Hispanic teachers serving in high-poverty schools, and more Whites serving in low-poverty schools (USDE, 2016). Education leadership has similar representation concerns, with only 20% of education leaders identifying as an individual of color, as of the 2011-12 school year (USDE, 2016). In special education, the over- or under- representation of African American students, particularly in disability categories with negative life outcomes (e.g., high disciplinary referrals), is attributed to the normative expectations of White teachers with biased understanding of the educational performance of non-White students (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2005; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Reid & Knight, 2006). Presently, UDL positions this predominantly White, middle class educator workforce as the central designers and implementers of the UDL framework (Nelson & Basham, 2014). The continued lack of workforce diversity in education is problematic for the efficacious utilization of UDL, increasing UDL's risk of reproducing the historical and structural barriers that disadvantage marginalized learners.

While the racial composition of the workforce is not indicative of teacher capacity to optimize learning of diverse populations, it does have implications for the inclusionary values of both White and African American students. As expressed by Education Secretary John B. King, Jr. in a speech at Howard University, a more diverse workforce

would provide both non-White and White students with benefit, providing the former with roles models and the latter with examples of diverse leadership in classrooms (USDE, 2016).

The third component of an equity-based approach shifts the design processes from teacher-center designs to participatory designs to ensure that UDL does not replicate ahistorical understandings of the learning experiences of those at the margins. Participatory Design, defined by Robinson and Simonsen (2012) as...

a process of investigating, understanding, reflecting upon, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between multiple participants in collective 'reflection-in-action' (Schon, 1983)". The participants typically undertake the two principle roles of users and designers where the designers strive to learn the realities of the users' situation while the users strive to articulate their desired aims and learn appropriate technological means to obtain them (p. 2).

Both user and designer are central to the constantly changing needs of their learning environment, and more importantly, support the intentions of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Whereas Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was reactionary and could be accounted for in the UDL implementation process, CSP is both proactive and ongoing, "sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Finally, an equity-based approach to UDL advocates for the inclusion of positionality statements in future UDL research. Rather than identifying conflicts of interest, these statements provide researchers, at best, with an opportunity to identify the personal and professional experiences that impacted their written work. In addition to researcher positionality, the self-identified categorical description of participants should be specified in future UDL studies utilizing an explicit equity-based approach. To provide a brief example, this written work was informed by my experience as a woman of color engaged in complex, interactions with a predominantly White learning system. The power dynamics of higher education changed my views of UDL's capacity to act as a tool for empowerment and equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

An equity-based approach to UDL in the American public schools is timely, given the enduring gap in achievement between racial/ethnic groups and the impact on the life outcomes of these learners. Furthermore, the projected demographic changes indicate a need for proactively designing to address race and culture. The Census Bureau's projections for Non-Hispanic Whites currently accounts for more than 50% of the U.S. population, but will decrease to 44% of the population by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2014). According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2014

National Projections, America will increasingly become a *majority-minority* nation, or a nation where no one racial/ethnic group represents a majority of the population, by 2060. Instead, a *plurality* of racial/ethnic groups will prevail.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Dr. James Basham and the University of Kansas for their financial and scholarly support.

REFERENCES

- Artiles, A. J., & Trent, S. C. (1994). Overrepresentation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *Journal of Special Education*, 27(4), 410–437. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002246699402700404>
- Artiles, A.J. (2013). Untangling the racialization of disabilities: An intersectionality critique across disability models. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 329-347. doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000271
- Annamma, S., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1–31. doi:10.1080/13613324.2012.730511
- Carbado, D., Crenshaw, K., Mays, V., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 303–312. doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349
- Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST]. (2011). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.0*. Wakefield, MA: Author.
- Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Jones, M.R., & Porter, S.R. (2018). Race and economic opportunity in the United States: An intergenerational perspective. Retrieved from http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/race_paper.pdf
- Colby, S.L. & Ortman, J.M. (2014). *Projections of the size and composition of the U.S. population: 2014 to 2060, Current Population Reports* (P25-1143). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Connor, D.J., & Ferri, B.A. (2005). Integration and inclusion—a troubling nexus: Race, disability, and special education. *Journal of African American History*, 90, 107-127.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Edyburn, D. L. (2010). Would you recognize universal design for learning if you saw it? Ten propositions for new directions for the second decade of UDL. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 33(1), 33–41.
- Erevelles, N., & Minear, A. (2010). Unspeakable offenses: Untangling race and disability in discourses of intersectionality. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 4(2), 127–145. doi:10.3828/jlcds.2010.11
- Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-95, § 4104 (2015).
- Gillborn, D. (2015). Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and the Primacy of Racism: Racism, class, gender, and disability in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), 277–287. doi:10.1177/1077800414557827
- Kozleski, E. (2007). Beyond convictions: Interrogating culture, history, and power in inclusive education. *Language Arts*, 84 (4), 351-358.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 465–491.
- Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal Design for Learning: Theory & Practice*. Wakefield, MA: CAST Professional Publishing.
- Nelson, L.L. & Basham, J.D. (2014). *A blueprint for UDL: Considering the design of implementation*. Lawrence, KS: UDL-IRN. Retrieved from <http://udl-irn.org>.
- Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Future ready learning: Reimagining the role of technology in education, 2016 National Education Technology Plan*. Retrieved from <http://tech.ed.gov/files/2015/12/NETP16.pdf>
- Ok, M., Rao, K., Bryant, B., & McDougall, D. (2016). Universal Design for Learning in Pre-K to grade 12 Classrooms: A systematic review of research. *Exceptionality*, 1–24. doi:10.1080/09362835.2016.1196450
- Paris, J. (2010). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97. doi: 10.3102/0013189X12441244
- Podell, D. M., & Soodak, L. C. (1993). Teacher bias in special education. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 86(4), 247–253.
- Rao, K., Ok, M. W., & Bryant, B. R. (2014). A review of research on universal design educational models. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(3), 153–166. doi:10.1177/074193251351890
- Reid, K., & Knight, M. G. (2006). Disability justifies exclusion of minority students: A critical history grounded in disability studies. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 18–23.
- Sailor, W. (2015). Advances in schoolwide inclusive school reform. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(2), 94-99. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0741932514555021>
- Sleeter, C. (1987). Why is there learning disabilities? A critical analysis of the birth of the field in its social context. In T.S. Popkewitz (Ed.), *The formation of school subjects: The struggle for creating an American institution* (pp. 210-237). New York, NY: Falmer Press.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy. (2016). *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development.

Neal, L., McCray, A., Webb-Johnson, G., & Bridgest, S. (2003). The effects of African American movement styles on teachers' perceptions and reactions. *The Journal of Special Education, 37*(1), 49–57.
doi:10.1177/00224669030370010501

Smith, A., & Kozleski, E. B. (2005). Witnessing Brown: Pursuit of equity agenda in American Education. *Remedial and Special Education, 26*(5), 270–280.
doi:10.1177/07419325050260050201