

UNIVERSAL DESIGN AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the praxis of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

—Paulo Freire

SETTING THE STAGE

This chapter is split into three sections. In the first section, we introduce the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, a powerful framework that was created to eliminate inequalities, and discuss how the implementation of the framework helps to build equity in our schools and classrooms. Next, we define the concept of social justice education and make the connection between UDL and social justice explicit. Lastly, we provide concrete examples and case studies to help educators see the connection between UDL and social justice and to take first steps in deconstructing systems that don't work for all students.

THE POWER AND PROMISE OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Privilege: an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain “oblivious.”

—Peggy McIntosh

Privilege is a funny thing. As McIntosh (1988) shares, it's an invisible package—those who carry it often have trouble seeing it. When carrying privilege, you don't have to follow the same rules. You can get

in anywhere, and then once you're there, it's easy to chalk up the journey to hard work, discipline, and innate talent. Increasing segregation and widening wealth inequality are startlingly harsh realities playing out amid mythic claims that we live in a world where everyone has equal opportunities to succeed (Swalwell, 2016).

We are all born with equal potential in an unequal world that stacks against us quickly. The parents who bore us, the city we live in, how we identify, and the milieu around us make the deck loaded quickly in a multitude of different directions. The hand you're dealt is the hand you play, and when you're carrying around a full house, it's easy to say it's a fair game. At the same time, if you are dealt an inequitable hand, you can't play that round. That is the reality of many of our best and brightest young scholars due to no fault of their own.

As educators, we are expected to implement a personalized, educational framework built on the belief that "all means all," but we are faced with very political and public rhetoric that sends a different message. This corroborates the fact that we have a very shallow understanding of "all means all" and a lack of understanding of the level of complexity that is involved in supporting growth, learning, and the development of young minds. Recent breakthroughs in research on neurology and brain science have provided insights into how complex, challenging, and possible this work is.

Zaretta Hammond (2015), a renowned teacher educator, shares a growing body of research focused on how building brain power is the missing link to closing the achievement gap for underperforming culturally and linguistically diverse students. She argues that productive struggle grows brain power and can build habits of mind, intellectual capacity, and cognitive processes and structures that will prepare them for independence, complex thinking, and academic success.

Students do not have equal opportunities to reach for high expectations, grapple with complex thinking, and learn how to learn when teachers design curriculum and instruction using "one-size-fits-all" approaches to teaching and learning. You know the ones. Every student is expected to read the same books at the same pace, listen to the same lectures, and complete the same math problems using the same materials. These "one-size-fits-all" solutions expect nothing more than compliance and favor those students who don't face significant barriers to learning. Many of the "tried and true" techniques and curricula perpetuate privilege and compliance rather than focusing on the power of learning, productive struggle, and empowerment. Luckily, there is a framework that rejects these "one-size-fits-all" solutions and empowers educators to proactively design curriculum and instruction so all learners can increase their brain power and accelerate their learning. The framework is Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

What Is Universal Design for Learning?

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind and endorsed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) numerous times as the framework to ensure that all students experience success. UDL calls explicitly for expert learning or teaching students how to learn, how to set goals, and how to share what they know to reach those goals in authentic, meaningful ways. Because students come to us with a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses, the UDL framework calls for educators to transfer power to students so they have options and choices for how to learn and how to share what they have learned.

UDL, which is built on decades of research in neuroscience, is grounded on a foundation of three principles, all of which remind educators to provide students with options for personalizing their education:

1. Multiple means of engagement
2. Multiple means of representation
3. Multiple means of action and expression

Universal Design for Learning (UDL):

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (2020) appropriates the UDL definition found in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 as a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that (A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who have limited English proficiency.

Multiple means of engagement: Affect represents a crucial element to learning, and learners differ markedly in the ways in which they can be engaged or motivated to learn. There are a variety of sources that can influence individual variation in affect including neurology, culture, personal relevance, subjectivity, and background knowledge, along with a variety of other factors. Some learners are highly engaged by spontaneity and novelty while others are disengaged, even frightened, by those aspects, preferring strict routine. Some learners might like to work alone, while others prefer to work with their peers. In reality, there is not one means of engagement that will be optimal for all learners in all contexts; providing multiple options for engagement is essential.

Multiple means of representation: Learners differ in the ways that they perceive and comprehend information that is presented to them. For example, those with sensory disabilities (e.g., blindness or deafness), learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), language or cultural differences,

and so forth may all require different ways of approaching content. Others may simply grasp information quicker or more efficiently through visual or auditory means rather than printed text. Learning and transfer of learning also occur when multiple representations are used, because they allow students to make connections within, as well as between, concepts. In short, there is not one means of representation that will be optimal for all learners; providing options for representation is essential.

Multiple means of action and expression: Learners differ in the ways that they can navigate a learning environment and express what they know. For example, individuals with significant movement impairments (e.g., cerebral palsy), those who struggle with strategic and organizational abilities (executive function disorders), those who have language barriers, and so forth approach learning tasks very differently. Some may be able to express themselves well in written text but not speech, and vice versa. It should also be recognized that action and expression require a great deal of strategy, practice, and organization, and this is another area in which learners can differ. In reality, there is not one means of action and expression that will be optimal for all learners; providing options for action and expression is essential.

Source: CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018. www.cast.org

The UDL foundation serves to eliminate barriers to learning. In contrast, when teachers design curriculum to be “one-size-fits-all”, students in a classroom are expected to have the same learning experience each day. This results in barriers for many students. These barriers can be categorized into barriers to access and barriers to engagement.

The purpose of education for centuries was the acquisition of knowledge, and even that was secured for the most privileged students. Teachers were hired as subject-matter experts, and it was their calling to transfer this knowledge to the next generation. You probably remember the classrooms of our childhood: a middle-class white woman as teacher, worn brown or grey desks, heavy textbooks, worksheets, multiple-choice tests, no mention of race, class, gender, religion, or sexual identity, and teacher-directed lectures while we feverishly took notes in composition books. Without Siri and Alexa, we had to [gasp] memorize information because unless we had access to a college library and encyclopedias, we may never have the opportunity to learn it again. And many teachers assured us, usually without providing context and/or relevance, “You will need this later.”

Now this knowledge is at the fingertips of our students, so we need to transform classrooms to teach students how to use all this information in meaningful ways and how to think critically at high

levels. Because knowing how to apply knowledge and resources to accomplish something is far more important than acing a multiple-choice test.

If teachers require all students to read the same text to build knowledge, they are not recognizing that the text may not be accessible to many students. In inclusive classrooms, some students may not decode at that level yet, are English language learners, are visually impaired, struggle with fine motor skills, struggle with executive function, and/or may face cultural barriers. A traditional novel or textbook is not the best tool for these students. When using the principles of UDL, teachers are reminded to provide options for representation so texts are accessible. For example, students can be encouraged to access the traditional text or access the same content in audio or video or in an e-book so they can customize the display of information. Providing these options for all students embraces diversity, values all learners, and provides students with access to rigorous curriculum.

Making learning accessible, however, is only the beginning. Educators must also provide options and choices so students are engaged with content that is relevant, authentic, and meaningful. In the example above, not only would educators be challenged to encourage students to choose text representations that are accessible, but they would also allow students to choose resources that are engaging and culturally sustaining. In UDL, student voices are critical. When providing options, we can share our standards with students and then ask them, “What do you already know about this and what else do you need to learn?” “What is the most accessible way for you to learn it?” And finally, “How are you going to express what you learned so we both know that you met the standard?” This allows for both linguistically appropriate and culturally sustaining options for all learners, and most importantly, the learning is student-directed and learner voice is optimized.

When teachers align the design of learning experiences to the three UDL principles, all learners personalize their journey to the same destination, and this celebrates every student as they drive the learning that is taking place. The two words that drive UDL are “choice” and “voice.” How often, in your learning environment, do all students truly have choice and voice?

Where to Begin? Reflecting on Ourselves, Our Students, and Our Systems

To implement UDL, the beginning of every learning journey is paved with self-reflection and self-assessment. In order to set meaningful goals for your journey to eliminate inequities, you have to understand where you are starting from. Before diving deeper into UDL and its connection to privilege, equity, and social justice, ask yourself some

tough questions. One teacher suggests simply asking the following questions to students, but we believe these questions must also be turned on ourselves. When you think about teaching and learning, the questions can be framed as a starting point to examine systemic inequality in your school or district (Blake, 2015).

- When decisions are being made, how is “who has a voice and who is left out” represented?
- How are who benefits and who suffers reflected across race, class, gender, and religious lines?
- Who determines if and why a given practice is fair or unfair, and what is their identity and background?
- What is required to create change, and who is responsible?
- What alternatives can we imagine if we reimagine our system? What would change and why?

These questions allow us to grapple with our own contributions to the systems we inhabit. Whether we are in a place of privilege or not, we own this problem, and we have the potential and power to address it through actions that communicate positive change.

Many students do not have access to learning opportunities that support their cognitive development or their personalized journey. To fight against this injustice, educators should examine their own implicit bias (see callout box for definitions of “bias”) and beliefs, their power and privilege, and create classrooms and schools where all students have equal opportunities to learn, share their voice, speak their truth, and work toward meaningful, authentic, and relevant goals.

Bias is a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, and so forth are better than others, which often results in treating some people unfairly.

Explicit bias refers to attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) that we consciously or deliberately hold and express about a person or group. Explicit and implicit biases can sometimes contradict each other.

Implicit bias includes attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) about other people, ideas, issues, or institutions that occur outside of our conscious awareness and control, which affect our opinions

Once we ask ourselves tough questions, we have to acknowledge that our students witness and experience hate, discrimination, marginalization, and apathy based on race, sexual and gender identity, homelessness, religion, socioeconomic status, immigration, language, and disability both inside and outside our schools. These experiences affect their readiness to learn when we implement traditional, one-size-fits-all curriculum and pedagogy.

Educators hold incredible power: power to design learning experiences, power to set expectations for students, power to elevate and celebrate student voices, power to inspire and motivate students, power to create consequences, and power to allow

for choice and personalization. We have to understand that all of us carry that power and privilege and we must use it as a tool to confront and dismantle inequities so all students have equal opportunities to learn.

There are times of tragedy where student voices are amplified to the nation. As one example, consider what occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. In February 2018, a gunman opened fire with a semiautomatic weapon at his former high school, murdering 17 classmates. In the aftermath of the event, students Cameron Kasky and David Hogg founded Never Again MSD and became leading voices in the nation's debate on school safety. A tragedy thrust them onto the stage of advocacy where suddenly the power of rhetoric, ideas, and words became relevant, authentic, and meaningful. But why should other students have to wait for tragedy to strike to have their voices heard? They don't.

Education today should be designed to elevate and celebrate the voices of students. A focus on teaching advocacy and channeling student passions in our classrooms needs to replace our focus on depositing knowledge to students sitting passively in rows. These boys and their peers aren't inserting themselves into national politics because they learned to diagram sentences, analyze Shakespeare, and complete worksheets of quadratic equations. They have a voice because someone taught them how to be motivated, self-directed, purposeful, and resourceful.

We don't know the GPAs of Kasky and Hogg, and in truth, we don't care. Those grades don't matter because these kids are speaking out to make a difference, in spite of critics, hate, and politics. All students should have the same opportunity to have their voices heard.

In a meeting between Parkland students and the "Peace Warriors," a group of predominantly black high school students from Chicago who have been fighting gun violence for 10 years without garnering much attention from the outside world, Sarah Chadwick, a Parkland survivor stated, "I acknowledge my white privilege. . . . I said it because it's true. White privilege does exist, and a lot of us have it. . . . If we could use our white privilege to amplify the voices . . . then we're going to use it, the more we ignore it, the worse it gets" (Chan, 2018).

She is acknowledging that Parkland, a wealthy suburb of Broward County, had been named one of the safest communities in Florida before a gunman killed 17 students and faculty in a mass

and behavior. Everyone has implicit biases—even people who try to remain objective (e.g., judges and journalists)—that they have developed over a lifetime. However, people can work to combat and change these biases.

Confirmation bias, or the selective collection of evidence, is our subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information and other evidence in ways that affirm our existing beliefs, ideas, expectations, and/or hypotheses. Therefore, confirmation bias is both affected by and feeds our implicit biases. It can be most entrenched around beliefs and ideas that we are strongly attached to or that provoke a strong emotional response.

Source: Facing History and Ourselves (2020)

shooting—while more than 3,400 people were shot in Chicago in 2017 alone, according to police. Arieyanna Williams, a 17-year-old Peace Warriors member, shares, “We felt like we weren’t alone in this situation and we finally can use our voices on a bigger scale.” The meeting reaffirmed her belief that she had to stop accepting gun violence as normal. She goes on to add, “Parkland is one of the safest cities in Florida. . . . It’s a different moment for them to realize that just because they had that title that it wouldn’t happen to them. We see it every day. The difference is the amount of violence going on, the similarity is the hurt. They thought for so long they’d never see the violence and we thought for so long that we couldn’t see it stopped.” Through the sharing and acknowledging of voice and difference, the two student groups realized they had a lot in common; they are “fighting for the same thing.” (Chan, 2018)

The tragedy at Parkland and the public acknowledgment of privilege have provided students around the country with an opportunity to see the power of voice, of motivation, and of passion. And this is why we teach our kids. Students need to know that education is about creating a better world and making changes where changes need to be made. As Cameron Kasky tweeted (3/10/2018), “Guys I just heard a crazy wild ridiculous bonkers rumor that amendments can be amended. . . .”

By implementing UDL, we are focused on providing more students with the type of education that will prepare them to identify problems and create strategies to solve them and make a new and better world.

Next Steps

Take time independently or with colleagues to journal your answers or foster courageous conversations in a professional learning community or faculty meeting using the following questions.

- What is our desired impact?
- Who do we want our students to become?
- What world, society, and/or time period are we preparing them for?
- What does it look, feel, and sound like when we are successful?
- What role do we play in student success?
- How have we engaged in courageous conversations?
- How do we acknowledge and celebrate differences?
- Do all members of our school community feel safe, seen, and heard?
- Does our work validate the lives and experiences of folks from different backgrounds and/or identities?

Reflection Questions

- What is privilege? Name examples of the different forms of privilege that exist within your institution, practice, and/or classroom.
- How does the UDL framework ensure that all students have equal access to teaching and learning?
- Why is it important to consider race, class, gender, religion, and sexual identity in addition to ability level, and/or language when designing learning experiences?

Additional Resources

- Learn more about the UDL Framework by reviewing the UDL Guidelines at <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- Visit Zaretta Hammond's website, Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, at <https://crtandthebrain.com/>

CONNECTING UDL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

How can we, as educators, align our practice to UDL so all students learn how to sustain effort and persistence, to know they matter, to question everything, to think critically, to be resourceful, to collaborate, to be global citizens, and to set meaningful goals to change our world for the better? The following steps are critical signposts in the journey.

Identify the Barriers

To start, we need to identify and acknowledge all of the potential barriers that stand in the way of teaching and learning being universally accessible and engaging, so that we can design environments, lessons, units, curricula, and learning experiences that ensure that all of the learners in our classrooms have authentic access despite ability and/or language. Then, we must take this a step further by going beyond access through acknowledging that the barriers that must be addressed and removed cannot be limited solely to ability and/or language but must include race, class, gender, religion, and sexual identity.

Embrace Variability

UDL is critical for educators to design and deliver an education that meets the needs of all students and empowers them to personalize their pathways. UDL isn't a one-size-fits-all framework, which means if all students in your class are expected

Variability is the dynamic and ever-changing mix of strengths and challenges that make up each individual. Often, lessons are designed based on perceived ability, but ability is only a single variable in the mix of strengths and challenges, and it varies widely depending on the task.

to be doing the same exact thing, it's not UDL. Given their variability and their different needs, one curriculum, without embedded flexible options using the principles of UDL, cannot possibly build equity within the classroom. Instead, educators need to embrace a framework that acknowledges and celebrates the unique identities of students and provides all students with whatever they need to be successful.

Reflect on Our Biases

Next, we need to examine our practices, tools, and resources to ensure that they are not biased, therefore limiting access to students based on identity and/or culture, so that all students have authentic, engaging opportunities to learn. We often have the tendency to believe that some people, ideas, and so forth are better than others, which often results in treating some people unfairly. This can manifest implicitly as well as explicitly with the former perhaps being the most dangerous. Again, we must consider race, class, gender, religion, and sexual identity to confront whether or not our practices and materials reflect all of our learners by treating their respective identities with respect and dignity.

Expect Discomfort

We need to normalize discussing and addressing issues that typically make us uncomfortable: privilege, race, class, gender identity, religion, sexual identity, and ability. We must embrace the fact that our classrooms and school need to be brave spaces in order to truly be transformative. Brave spaces are ones in which we have the courage to lean into discomfort for the sake of authentic conversation, dialogue, and practice. The desire to maintain a sense of comfort, while addressing issues of inequity, reflects privilege, which can easily be surfaced by asking whose level of comfort we are concerned with: Is it that of our students who have been disabled by the system and our practices, or is it that of our own?

Amplify Student Voice

As educators, we need to empower all learners. To create a world that is socially just and equitable, we need to arm these kids with powerful weapons—their voices. To do this, we need to transform our schools and ensure that students and all stakeholders learn to embrace their own identity, appreciate, value, and respect diversity, and take action against hate and injustice by participating in courageous conversations and sharing their stories using multiple means of representation. We need to ensure that the culture of our system, schools, and classrooms are welcoming to all and we truly elevate and celebrate the voices of all students and provide them with a platform to share

their voices, all while ensuring that the notion of difference is both thoroughly embraced and celebrated and kept at the center.

Take Action

Most importantly, we have to take action. We need to have the courage to examine our thinking, practices, traditions, and culture to ensure that despite whatever we believe our intentions to be, we don't get in the way. We must acknowledge that the impact of our action or lack of action, in and through the lives of our students, matters more than our intentions. Therefore, we must value impact over intention to make changes in our classrooms, learning, and schools.

Our goal as educators is clear. We must create learning environments that give all students equal opportunities to personalize their education, share their voices, and create their own paths to success while embracing their own identities. This is not to say that we don't have academic goals for students—we do, but those goals and objectives must fit into a larger context/journey for our students—one that leads them to academic and social growth, empowers them as agents of change, and builds positive identity development.

Too often, schools are focused on the power of a packaged curriculum in changing the outcomes of students. Among practitioners of UDL there is a saying that gets to the heart of this—"kids over content." Standards and curriculum are important, but they are only the beginning. If empowering young minds is what our work as educators is about, then we need to keep our students, their humanity, their lives, and their experiences at the center of our work and decision-making; a UDL approach and a social justice lens work in tandem to make this possible.

Social Justice as Moral Imperative

A socially just approach to education is rooted in the core belief that our systems are broken and that all educators, despite their role and/or title, must do more than what has been prescribed to them to positively impact the lives of the students and families that they serve. In an education system that purports to value inclusion, many students have been excluded from the same opportunities bestowed on their peers, and this must be fixed. We, as educators, cannot remain silent. As Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor penned, we cannot remain neutral.

As educators, we must examine the dispositions that are needed to build a foundation for a socially just education in all of our schools and fight until these systems are in place. Recent research on the importance of social justice education argued that educators must have a moral commitment and courage to make changes that will transform education for all students—especially those who

have traditionally been underserved by our schools (Allen, Harper, & Koschoreck, 2017). We must summon such moral commitment to acknowledge and address the harsh truth that our systems do not work for all students. Instead, they function as if they are rigged to serve a small number of privileged students, while sacrificing all too many. Only by continuously examining our own assumptions, beliefs, and practices can we begin to ensure that we are not contributing to the inequities that the system propagates.

Without this moral imperative, we may provide students with implicit messages about their worth by delivering a hidden curriculum that isn't focused on equality or equity but the perpetuation of the status quo. In short, we have made many of our students the victims of their own education by not acknowledging how varied their identities and experiences of our system and society are.

Hidden Curriculum was coined by Jean Anyon (1980) to explain the phenomenon where teachers share their expectations of students implicitly through their instruction and how they define student success.

As Jonathon Kozol (1991) notes in *Savage Inequalities*, “But what is now encompassed by the one word (“school”)

are two very different kinds of institutions that, in function, finance and intention, serve entirely different roles. Both are needed for our nation's governance. But children in one set of schools are educated to be governors; children in the other set of schools are trained for being governed. The former are given the imaginative range to mobilize ideas for economic growth; the latter are provided with the discipline to do the narrow tasks the first group will prescribe.”

Social Justice as Hidden Curriculum

If students are only ever taught how to follow directions, take orders, and follow along, they will never be creators and thinkers, makers, and writers. They will never learn the power of their own identity, their own thinking, and their own voice. They will be governed by those who continue to have power and privilege and make the rules. They will never have an opportunity to speak their truth, create their own path, chart their own course, and impact our society.

To do this, educators have to be aware of both their explicit curriculum and their hidden curriculum. For example, if teachers are focused solely on classroom management, following directions, not asking questions of authority, and completing traditional assessments using traditional curriculum materials, they are sending a message that it does not matter whether you feel seen or heard and that success is doing what you're told. Think about the message that is sent to those students—compliance, routine, and subservience are the goal.

We often measure the level of compliance through grading. In the text *Grading for Equity*, Feldman (2018) highlights the truth that as much as we have worked to change policies and procedures to

address inequity and disproportionality, teachers have “one remaining island of autonomy” in their grading procedures. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, teacher grading practices reflect their own identity and values. Awarding points for being on time, meeting assignment deadlines, and participating in class reflect a teacher’s belief that those skills are important. These traditional grading practices may have helped to perpetuate inequities in the classroom implicitly.

On the other hand, when teachers focus on embracing identity, voice, diversity, problem-solving, creativity, and personalization through the UDL framework, they are sending a very different type of message on what it takes to be successful. If students don’t have these opportunities to personalize their education so it’s relevant, authentic, and meaningful, they will become what Zaretta Hammond has coined as “dependent learners,” meaning that they will be overly reliant on the teacher to carry the load of the cognitive task, will be unsure of how to tackle new tasks, will not be able to complete tasks without scaffolds, will sit passively and wait until the teacher intervenes, and will not retain information well (Hammond, 2015). In other words, they will be taught a form of learned helplessness.

On the contrary, in a social justice curriculum, teachers work hard to be transparent about their privilege, their practices, and why they have structured things the way they have. There are numerous options and choices for students to share their voices and their feedback about the design of instruction. When we universally design curriculum and elevate student experiences and their voices, our “hidden curriculum” is transparent and empowering.

Social Justice as Equity

In order to ensure that hidden curriculum is socially just, it’s important that educators understand the distinction between equality and equity. Boris Kabanoff (1991), a professor at the University of New South Wales, wrote a compelling article titled “Equality, Equity, Power, and Conflict.” This piece provides a foundation for differentiating the two constructs.

Equality is the belief that all people have equal value as individuals and should therefore have equal inputs and outcomes. In short, equality is equal distribution where everyone gets the same thing, distributed evenly among them because everyone has the same worth. Sounds warm and fuzzy, doesn’t it? Equality, through an education lens, generally translates into an argument of high expectations using one-size-fits-all practices. When focused on equality, we, as educators, have the same high expectations for all students and provide them with the same instruction, curriculum materials, and assessments as if providing students with the same high quality of education will result in equal outputs. Equality of outcomes, according to

Kabanoff, emphasizes a “common fate” and cohesion, thus, in theory, promoting solidarity. The problem with this is that no educator could possibly argue that what we have been doing has resulted in “common fates” for any of our students. There’s a reason for that. In organizations that focus on equality, according to Kabanoff, the main function of equality is to maintain and preserve the arrangement of roles or relationships created by the system. That’s clearly what has happened in education.

Equity, in comparison, is focused on productivity, or ensuring that everyone has what they need in order to be successful. This “fair distributive principle” means that marginalized individuals will need significantly more inputs to have the same, or similar, outputs than individuals with privilege and power. The conflict here is that often people in power perceive equity as unjust because they feel they deserve an equal share. People in power and privilege often want equality when what we need to transform education is equity if our goal is to provide access to all learners. The UDL framework was designed to eliminate inequities, not perpetuate equality.

This is the reality we face. This is not about blame, shame, or judgment, but embracing the reality that our educational system does not take into account the condition of learners when they walk through our doors. Learners who are brown, broke, and have emotional, behavioral, and learning and/or physical disabilities, are English language learners or are LGBTQ individuals and have not been the beneficiaries of the best that we have to offer, because they have been systemic afterthoughts. In short, the best we have to offer is equally distributed, and those who need it the most simply get “their share” at best, while those with power and privilege continue to flourish.

Kozol (1991) explores this concept further when he notes, “Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school—and to the public school in our district. Thus the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequality, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives.”

Social justice is about the belief that every person deserves an equal opportunity to succeed—or, as Kozol would say, an equitable life. The truth is this: If we believed that, we would create public schools where all students have equal access to high-quality teaching and curricula that allow them to feel safe, seen, and heard while providing them with the skills they need to overcome inequity. We would all invest our best resources into public schools, and we would fight like hell.

Social Justice as Impact Over Intentions

A socially just education is not solely about what we say or what we aspire to; it’s about what we do. It’s about how we measure impact.

It's about being morally courageous enough to acknowledge publicly that what we are both currently doing and expected to do isn't working for all students. It's about acknowledging and owning the fact that it never worked—that being well intentioned is not good enough. Systems must acknowledge that the work is not just about our presence but what specifically we are doing and how we measure impact in and through the lives of our students.

In a recent article, “Equity in Our Schools: A Pretty Little Lie,” the concept of “good enough” was examined for its incredible hypocrisy in an educational landscape where teachers are evaluated in teaching all students (Fritzgerald & Novak, 2019).

The answer to improving our schools is not to settle for “pretty good” or to create newer and “better” options. Instead, we need to invest in our current schools and deconstruct the systems we have established that do not meet the needs of teachers and marginalized students. We need to create opportunities where every single student is treated with dignity and respect, held to high expectations, and supported academically, behaviorally, and social-emotionally. This change does not require new buildings or new frameworks but instead involves an acknowledgment of and alignment to the evidence-based ideas about equity and race that are endorsed today that are being ignored.

As the world, through daily technological advances such as the widespread usage of social media, becomes a smaller and smaller place, the acknowledgment of difference has become more commonplace. Fortune 500 corporations know that to turn a profit and stay competitive in the world of today, they must embrace diversity and expand their knowledge of cultural intelligence, however imperfectly. Schools are one of the few structures that exist in our world that purport to recognize and embrace diversity; however, our systems clearly have not adapted to the point that such a claim can possibly be substantiated. We are rooted in traditional ideals of how students should be taught and how they should behave—norms that are relics of a time in which our society openly oppressed any who did not fit into the typical upper-middle-class, white, male prototype.

Through engaging with this work, you will be inspired to stand up and challenge the status quo through your actions and decision-making. You will learn from the examples and strategies that we present you with as well as implementation examples from our colleagues that social justice is about action. To be socially just is to do work that leads to powerful impact. It is to make change. We have written this text as a guidepost, one with multiple entry points. You don't need to be an expert to believe in and do this work; you just have to be open, humble, and committed. We do not profess to have all of the answers, but we have concrete strategies to share—strategies that work.

Our work as social justice educators is fluid, and a commitment to engaging in such work requires us to forever be open to learning new methods, strategies, and approaches. We believe in this vision, and if you're reading this, it's because you do too. So, game on.

Next Steps

Sanjin (2009) notes that “during his or her stay in school, the student experiences three types of education: useful, unnecessary and negative” and made an explicit connection to these three types of education and hidden curriculum. Take a moment and consider your own education. What strikes you as being the most useful thing you learned in school? The most unnecessary? The most negative?

Useful	Unnecessary	Negative

Once you are done, consider how the negative education you received may have been underpinned by a hidden curriculum, such as a teacher's teaching style, the system of punishments and rewards, the climate and culture of the classroom, and the educational space (Safta, 2017).

Reflection Questions

- What is a socially just education, and how does it align with the principles of UDL?
- How can a socially just education address some of the disparities that your students have or may encounter?
- What are the key differences between “equality” and “equity”?
- What is a “hidden curriculum”? What hidden curriculums exist in your institution, practice, and/or classroom?
- What does “impact over intentions” mean to you?
- How do UDL and social justice complement each other?

Additional Resources

- To learn more about UDL and the concept of variability, access UDL Theory and Practice, which is free online at <http://udltheorypractice.cast.org/>
- To learn more about Jonathon Kozol's work, visit his web site at <https://www.jonathankozol.com/>

CONCRETE EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

Many educators have taken on this fight, and you will hear from them throughout the book. We also empower you, as a reader, to begin to change your own system, regardless of where you teach. Every educator can be a social justice educator. To provide an example, we'd love to introduce you to the work of three of our colleagues, Dr. Linda Nathan, Carmen Torres, and Ian Wilkins.

Teacher as Artist, Educator, and Community-Based Leader

Linda Nathan, EdD, is executive director of the Center for Artistry and Scholarship (CAS). As an experienced leader in education, she actively mentors teachers and principals and consults nationally and internationally on issues of educational reform, leadership, teaching with a commitment to racial justice and equity, and the critical role of arts and creativity in schools.

Carmen Torres, co-founder of the Perrone-Sizer Institute for Creative Leadership, is a veteran urban school educator and school founder. Carmen facilitates workshops and trainings focused on issues of race, equity, and culturally proficient pedagogy.

Carmen and Linda are committed to distributed leadership where educators take on leadership roles within their schools and districts. Their advice for anyone trying to change the status quo? "Leadership is about adapting and evolving with a sense of humility and a sense of humor. Listening is a much underrated element of leadership."

One critical aspect of UDL is to empower student voices as you design learning experiences that impact them. As you develop your leadership potential, don't forget to foster collaboration and community with the students you serve by providing them with options and choices to be co-designers and to make them an integral part of the decision-making process. As educators, as you consider stepping into your school community or department as a social justice leader, consider how the following implementation spotlight can support you on your journey to optimize voices of students as you eliminate barriers to authentic, rigorous learning.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY DR. LINDA NATHAN AND CARMEN TORRES

We deeply believe that the schools we have today should not be the schools we have tomorrow. If we are going to speak seriously about delivering culturally responsive and equitable education for all students, we must acknowledge the scope of the
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transformation required, the vision, self-reflection, creativity, social capital, technical expertise, and raw talent we will need from every individual involved.

Any great change requires great leadership, of course, but so much “school reform” today seems to rely on what we like to call the Superman or Superwoman mentality—that we need a hero to swoop in to save us, who through the use of data or a new reading strategy will “fix” all that is wrong. And too often, the professional development provided for emerging leaders perpetuates this superhero myth and the never-ending quest for the quick fix.

So, a few years ago, we asked ourselves, what would be a revolutionary approach to educational leadership development that would foster equally revolutionary change? We knew we wanted to cultivate leaders who build and depend upon networks and partnerships, who walk beside rather than in front of the communities they serve, and who take an artist’s or designer’s approach to experimentation and creative problem solving. We wanted to nurture creative, community-focused leaders who would motivate their colleagues, communities, and students to try, fail, and try again until we begin to close the gap between today’s reality and what we believe is possible.

The Perrone-Sizer Institute for Creative Leadership (PSi) develops creative, innovative, equity-focused leaders of both schools and youth-focused nonprofits, who apply the perspective of three lenses to the challenges they face:

- The Artist – accessing inspiration and utilizing creativity, design, risk-taking, and experimentation to solve complex problems; artists persist and consider, refine, and illuminate many different approaches.
- The Educator – committed to racial justice and equity, and informed and driven by research; drawing upon a deep knowledge of child and adolescent development; and applying a profound understanding of the learning process to prepare students for academic and personal success.
- The Community-Based Leader – employing a culturally proficient understanding of the needs of youth and families in a given community to engage effectively in a dynamic collaborative process of community growth, development, and networking.

At the center of PSi is the Capstone Leadership Project, which the program builds toward throughout the year. It is participant driven and independently designed to suit the professional goals and interests of each individual in the cohort. The Capstone Leadership Project must: 1) address an opportunity for growth in the participant’s learning community, and 2) leverage a partnership between a community-based organization and the home organization. Participants are expected to develop a project that improves outcomes for youth and their families.

The following vignette written by a PSi student about her Capstone project illustrates the potential of a network of colleagues and of organizational partnerships both to solve common challenges and to challenge and change beliefs that stand in the way of culturally responsive teaching and leading.

A shift to the students’ perspective

When I started my Capstone project, I thought it was a technical fix to class size overage. We started “Leadership Elective” because there weren’t enough specialists to cover the middle school

planning block. We selected older students with behavior problems with their grade level peers and placed them in a “leadership” role in a younger classroom. We observed that many behavioral problems disappeared. This led us to expand the program school-wide, opening the opportunity for all middle school students to participate in leadership roles throughout the building. Discussions then turned toward creating a community service component by partnering with a local elder care facility. I took on the role of liaison between the community partner and the school.

Going into this partnership program, I had the mentality that my students were the only ones who stood to gain from the experience. I was going to teach them how to care about others and how to show social responsibility—how to act for the benefit of the community at large rather than just for themselves. What I learned, through the reflections and questioning of my cohort members, instructors, and guests who came to speak with us at PSi, was that my students already had a strong sense of who they were and how to act in authentic community situations. The experience and insights of fellow educators helped me recognize that my students already brought a wealth of kindness, consideration, and compassion that teachers often didn’t have the opportunity to see within the confines of the regular school day. What I discovered was a bigger issue that needed to be addressed: how to fix the cultural value mismatch that sometimes presents itself when students enter an artificial community, such as that of a school. How do we help students feel representation and agency within a school?

With a new lens, I was able to shift my work to help both students and teachers better visualize how student voice and agency could be valued. The adaptive challenge at hand was how to shift the traditional school structure so that students could see their assets honored. I’ll never forget a student at the beginning of the program who responded angrily when reminded of how he was expected to conduct himself on our first community service trip because he was representing the school. “Yah, but does the school represent me?” he challenged. It was then that I realized we didn’t have a behavior problem at my school but a deeply seated cultural problem. If students don’t feel empowered and embraced by their school community, they will not engage. I believe that by trying to repair that broken connection, we can take steps towards helping students have a vision of what social justice can mean within a school. And that, in turn, has become the new focus of my Capstone project.

—Amy Wedge

This emerging leader, through conversations and work with colleagues who challenged her assumptions, and through her ever-improving ability to listen to colleagues and collaborators in this work, has deepened her own self-knowledge and her ability to see and build upon the assets of their learning communities. And she has embraced not the heroic, but the collective effort that is required to ensure that we don’t “allow cultural bias and access gaps to continue to flourish within new structures.” As Zaretta Hammond suggests—and our students understand—we are the strategy

Next Steps

- Identify, if any currently exist, or develop opportunities for students who are currently considered as disengaged to positively contribute to the school community in nonpunitive ways, for example community service, as mentioned above.
- Create a list of potential community service opportunities and resources for students.

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- During a faculty meeting, discuss the following questions:
 - What are we allowing our students to teach us?
 - Are we explicitly valuing their funds of knowledge or treating them like empty vessels to be filled?
- How are we helping students to feel representation, agency, and self-efficacy?

Additional Resources

- Learn more about the Center for Artistry and Scholarship's Perrone-Sizer Institute for Creative Leadership at www.artistryandscholarship.org/psi
- Linda Nathan blogs regularly at www.lindanathan.com.

Finding the Social Justice Key

Ian Wilkins is a quiet force in the classroom. Standing at over six feet tall, he is as foreboding as a linebacker, but speaks in a soft voice, knows how to craft a guitar from raw wood, and spent his summers studying literature at the Bread Loaf School in Vermont. He started his career as a musician and embraced the grunge scene in Seattle at its height. He wears a rust-covered cardigan from which his knuckles peek out, tattooed with “Rock” on the fingers of one hand, and “Roll” on the other.

Ian Wilkins is a high school English language arts teacher. After many years of pursuing a career in music and working blue-collar jobs to make ends meet, he had an epiphany that ultimately led him to obtain a BA in English/secondary education. “Teaching is in my family, and I always had it in the back of my mind. My time playing in bands had run its course, and I wanted to do something that mattered. I’ve always been an agent for change, even when working in the most trivial jobs, and I thought, ‘Maybe I can bring this into a classroom, a school, a community, and see if I can make a difference.’”

Ian approaches his teaching and role in the school community with a focus on authenticity. All of the real-world experience he gained prior to returning to school helps to add important perspective to the learning and training he has received and puts into focus for him what his responsibilities are as an educator. When he considers the power of design, he looks for opportunities to make dynamics of power and privilege more visible to students so they can begin to work to eliminate the status quo. The concepts of “voice” and “choice” go far beyond any benefit of personalized learning. UDL is focused on distributing privilege and empowering diverse voices. This is important in every district and in every classroom.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY IAN WILKINS

“I work in a school district that is based in a couple of middle-class to upper-middle-class towns, with a student body that is demographically very non-diverse—mostly white, mostly secure socioeconomically. We have great resources and a very comfortable working and learning environment. The challenge here is that the students and the community don’t necessarily feel the realities of social injustice in their daily lives; they live in a bubble.

“I’ve struggled since coming here to figure out how to pop that bubble and bring a dose of reality to these students. And I’ve struggled to feel like I’m doing something meaningful by teaching in a place like this, where you don’t necessarily see the difference you’re making in individual lives, definitely not in the same way as when you work with underserved students in communities that face many more hardships.”

The problem of how to have an effect as a social justice-oriented educator in a privileged community has been at the forefront of Wilkins’s mind ever since he transitioned from his student teaching in a low socioeconomic, highly diverse school district to his current job, although some of the roots of it can be traced back to his own school and life experiences. It can seem daunting, yet he never doubted its importance and has come to some deep realizations about it.

“Almost all of my students are coming from a place of privilege. These are kids who will get great educations, and will go out into the world and be influencers and wielders of power. It’s one thing to empower marginalized groups in society’s hierarchies; the crucial importance of this is obvious. But eventually they will come up against others who hold the power to make decisions—about things like employment, housing, finance, politics. Where are those in power coming from? What kinds of perspectives do they have? Unless someone with influence along the way has purposefully challenged them to consider the world they live in from a social justice standpoint, I don’t feel confident that they will use their power and privilege in just ways. It seems like a huge challenge, but I have a sense of responsibility to it that motivates me. I could easily ignore the outside world and go about my business here in a culturally myopic way and nobody would ever really challenge me on that. Which, I think, makes it more imperative that I work hard to bring as much awareness as I can to issues of social justice.

“Yet, what kind of difference can I really make as one person? I have a metaphor that I find very useful in seeking an answer to this question: There is a castle, heavily fortified, gates shut. Outside the walls, disease, hunger, war, and all manner of other problems plague those who live there. Of course, things are very comfortable and safe inside. There are people outside who work hard to make those people’s lives better, in the trenches with them. Some of these altruists even grew up inside the castle and, having peered over the walls by some twist of fate or influence, chose to leave the comfort and venture out to make a difference. But mostly the castle-dwellers are content and inward-looking. What if the castle were to open its gates? What if there was one person on the inside, one person with influence and drive, who convinced the castle-dwellers that it is their responsibility to allow access to their resources, to open the gates and create a free flow between the inside and outside? Maybe they could make space in their castle. Maybe they could help build other castles. Maybe they can’t afford to ignore what’s going on outside the walls

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anymore. That one person, if she is successful, could have an incredibly outsized influence on the state of the kingdom, as it were.”

While Wilkins is still in his early years of teaching, he has had some successes in having an effect on his students and on the culture of his school. He sees what he is doing as a step-by-step process, one that requires equal parts passion, practice, and persistence, which Singleton and Linton (2006), editors of *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, consider the three critical factors or the three Ps of courageous conversations.

Next Steps

BY IAN WILKINS

Start Small, Be Observant. Metaphors can be useful in understanding the general philosophical underpinnings of an idea, but every school community is different and therefore requires a different approach for the educator who seeks change. For example, saying that a school district is nondiverse and privileged actually tells you very little about it. It's important to fully understand all of the complexity at play: Who are your students? What kinds of families do they come from? What do they think about and care about? How do they self-identify? What are their hopes and dreams? Who are the administrators and leaders in your school? Who are your colleagues in teaching, guidance, and so forth? What are the historical events in the district and school that have shaped the attitudes and perspectives there?

As a teacher, you have multiple avenues for finding answers to these kinds of questions. Design lessons in your classroom that prompt students to think critically and to be self-reflective. Engage your students in discussions about themselves and their lives. And introduce them to concepts of social justice through your curriculum (e.g., choosing texts to work with that give them perspectives they don't normally get, discussing the history of the subject matter you teach with a focus on diverse groups, and encouraging them to question their own ideas and beliefs).

Look for the Key: Now that you've taken the time to get a full sense of what it is you are working with (and up against), try to find the key to the gate, to return to the castle metaphor. You can't try to change everything all at once, but if you can find one thing, one issue or way of thinking that you identify as fundamental to how the community operates, you can focus your attention and efforts. For example, Wilkins found that while it's important to bring diversity to his students by introducing other perspectives, other lives, and so forth, they fundamentally remain concerned with what's right in front of them. This means that, when he teaches something like the history of how African Americans have faced individual and systemic racism, or the origins and fallout of the Iran-Iraq war, or issues facing the post-Duvalier Haitian diaspora, his students can be engaged on an academic level but tend to stay emotionally and psychologically removed. What he realized was that when he prompted them to look at an issue from a gender-equity perspective, they were engaged on a much more personal level. Why? Because for all of the homogeneity in the student population in terms of socioeconomic and race, gender diversity is present in their immediate experience, which means it is unavoidable for them. Based on proximity and/or acknowledged connection to an issue, we respond to it either emotionally, intellectually, morally, and/or relationally

(Singleton & Linton, 2006), and the more he thought about it, the more he saw the ways that his school is locked into gender stereotypes. A look at gender issues appears to be the key to the gate.

Take Your Ideas and Run With Them: Now that you've been observant and patient, and the key has been identified, the next step is to go big! Look for ways that you can take what you've found to the whole community. Wilkins, once he had identified gender as the key, immediately began reworking some of his lessons to take on a feminist critical lens. He also took the opportunity to volunteer to design and lead a professional development series titled "Gender Stereotyping in Our School Community." This had several positive effects: He was able to collaborate with colleagues on this key issue, getting their perspectives and creating allies simultaneously; it identified him as a leader, someone who is looking to have those difficult but important conversations; and it let the rest of the school community know that this issue was being looked at in a serious way. He then was given the chance to learn more about how other schools approach gender issues by attending a conference where he identified a gender violence awareness program that he plans to bring to his school in the next couple of years. And he is now leading a group whose purpose is to investigate the causes of gender-based gaps in standardized testing throughout the district, an opportunity that all of his previous work had set him up for perfectly. He believes that altering the way the school community thinks about gender will establish a framework for other social justice issues to be thought about in a more authentic way

Reflection Question

Regardless of where you teach, what is your "key"? To ask a different way, what inequalities exist in your learning environment that you can explicitly name and use as a foundation to discuss more implicit inequities?

Additional Resources

- www.jacksonkatz.com – Jackson Katz is an educator, speaker, filmmaker, and public intellectual who challenges his audiences to see that while gender issues have traditionally been seen as women's issues, they are equally men's issues.
- www.mvpstrat.com – Mentors in Violence Prevention is an organization, started by Jackson Katz, that provides training and curriculum in professional and educational settings on how to understand, recognize, and prevent gender-based violence.
- Follow Ian on Twitter – @IanPWilkins – to see how all of his efforts are going!

