

## Article

# Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?

Margaret Flood <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Joanne Banks <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Ireland, D02 KH36 Dublin, Ireland<sup>2</sup> School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland; banksjo@tcd.ie

\* Correspondence: Margaret.flood@ncca.ie

**Abstract:** Responding to student diversity has become a key policy priority in education systems around the world. In addition to international and national institutional policies, major changes are underway in instructional practices and pedagogy in many national contexts. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has become a key pedagogical approach used in education systems which seek to promote inclusive and equitable education in response to student diversity. Despite Ireland's policy commitment to inclusive education, UDL has been traditionally focused on the higher education sector with little discussion about the role UDL can play at primary and second-level education to achieve inclusion. Furthermore, there has been no research to date on the extent to which education policy reforms are introducing part, or all, of the aspects of the UDL framework. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which UDL is gaining momentum in Irish primary and second-level education through an analysis of curriculum policy. This paper examines the development and evolution of UDL in Irish education policy over the past decade by exploring the use of UDL in national educational curriculum frameworks. The paper highlights how UDL is slowly and implicitly emerging in education policy at a national level but suggests further momentum could be gained from its inclusion in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and professional development programmes. By exploring the development of UDL within existing policy contexts, the paper argues for a more explicit commitment to UDL as part of ongoing curriculum reform at the primary level, the review of Senior Cycle, and Ireland's broader inclusive education agenda.

**Keywords:** universal design for learning; inclusive education; policy; primary education; second-level education; Ireland



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## 1. Introduction

Internationally, and in Ireland, education systems are being challenged to respond to diverse student populations with a growing recognition that students may come from different socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and learning backgrounds, as well as students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students [1–3]. International policies such as the United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities [3], United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child [4], and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [2] stress the need for countries to provide inclusive and equitable education for everyone. Alongside the ratification of international conventions and introduction of national policies that promote inclusive education, focus has turned to whether instructional practices, or pedagogy, can increase access and engagement with the curriculum for every student [5–7].

Over the past two decades, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has become a key pedagogical framework which seeks to address the traditional 'one size fits all' curriculum that exists in many countries [8,9]. UDL assumes diversity in the student population and provides guidelines where they have flexibility and choices around how they learn and how they can share what they have learned [10] (p. 3). There is growing interest in UDL across education systems worldwide with increasing evidence around its effectiveness in creating more inclusive classrooms across education sectors [11–13].

Until recently, UDL in Ireland has been primarily reserved for higher education and is often associated with support services for students with disabilities. Despite this growing interest in UDL as a possible 'solution' to inequities in further and higher education sectors, there has been little research on the role that UDL could play at primary and second-level education in Ireland. Yet, there is a notable increase in online forums, workshops, and national and international lectures on the topic of UDL in recent years among educators. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which UDL is gaining momentum in Irish primary and second-level education through an analysis of curriculum policy over time and across sectors.

## 2. What Is Universal Design for Learning

UDL is an approach to learning, teaching, and assessment design that is proactive in addressing the varied identities, competencies, learning strengths, and needs of every learner in our learning environment. Developed by CAST in the mid-1980s, studies highlight its potential to promote the engagement and independence of students as it ensures a variety of pathways through choice and flexibility [9]. These pathways provide for: understanding content; goals that are clear and specific to the expected outcome; and student assessment that is flexibly designed to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills in a variety of ways [8]. At the core of UDL are three principles that educators are required to provide: multiple ways for students to engage in their learning (principle one: Engagement); multiple means of representation to provide students with equitable access to the learning content (principle two: Representation); and multiple ways for students to demonstrate and express their knowledge, understanding, and skills (principle three: Action and Expression). These principles are broken down into nine guidelines (three per principle) that provide suggestions to increase access to the learning goal, to build on students' learning and develop their knowledge, understanding, and skills, and to support students to internalise their learning and skills. Each guideline has corresponding checkpoints, thirty-one in total, that provide more detailed suggestions on how to provide multiple means within each principle.

## 3. Principles of Universal Design for Learning

The first principle underpinning UDL, providing multiple means of engagement, is the belief that learning contexts need to be designed in a flexible manner that enables every student to find their path into the learning experience, participate in a meaningful way, build their capacity, and stay motivated when faced with challenges [8]. This principle focuses on the teacher designing learning experiences that the students can connect with [14]. When students can bring their identity, prior knowledge, and experiences into the learning, and this is valued, the student will be more motivated to actively engage [10,15]. On the other hand, teachers are also designing to support students' cognitive load because if there is too much to focus on the learning environment students may not know what to pay attention to or where to direct their cognitive energy [16]. Thus, teachers need to ensure students can access the language, background, and skills to engage in the learning experience and ensure they are not embedding additional layers of skills or activities that may create a barrier to students' meaningful participation.

The second principle underpinning UDL, providing multiple means of representation, is the belief that for learning environments to support the variability of learners to access, engage, interpret, and understand learning content, teachers must present the information through a variety of media and methods [8]. By presenting information in multiple ways to students, teachers reduce barriers to accessing learning, therefore creating an inclusive learning experience for every student. Through creative design, teachers can facilitate different levels of prior knowledge, experience, skills, and capacity, and honour students' diverse backgrounds and identities [10,15].

The third principle underpinning UDL, providing multiple means of action and expression, is the belief that students' success should not be based solely on an inflexi-

ble summative assessment. Rather, it should be personalised (i.e., choice and flexibility) through continuous formative and summative assessment where the means of demonstrating and expressing students' knowledge, understanding, skills, and values is chosen by the learner in line with the goal or learning being assessed [8]. Thus, for a curriculum to be inclusive, it needs to incorporate a variety of options for students to demonstrate their learning and capacity as there is no one-size-fits-all method [12,15,17].

#### 4. Research on the Effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning

Despite the wealth of literature on the neuroscientific origins of UDL [8,18] or the benefits of a UDL approach in achieving more inclusive education systems [10], there are increasing calls for evidence-based research to understand the 'soundness' of UDL [19,20]. Where empirical evidence on the effectiveness of UDL exists, there appears to be more emphasis on teacher change and practice than student outcomes. Indeed, Capp (2017) and Edyburn (2005) note that the principle of multiple means of engagement is the least discussed principle in the literature [12,17]. Student engagement is often a secondary outcome in studies focusing on the principles: multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression [12,17]. The lack of clear measurements to examine the impact of UDL on students' learning outcomes is a significant shortcoming [21] and there is a growing emphasis in research on how to measure UDL's impact on sustained engagement for every student rather than just a targeted audience [22].

#### 5. Student Outcomes

Although empirical studies specifically focusing on the impact of UDL on student outcomes are limited, those available indicate UDL's potential to improve student outcomes. Increased student engagement, participation, and outcomes are noted across several large- and small-scale research studies. In one Canadian study findings show a positive impact of UDL on reducing student stress, improving confidence, and changing attitudes towards their learning [23]. In the USA, an evaluation of UDL projects in Montgomery County Public schools [24] found evidence of varying degrees of positive impacts of UDL practices on students' independence in learning and engagement depending on grade level, processes, and student subgroups. This reflects the findings of another study exploring UDL implementation in six local education agencies across five U.S. states [25]. This small-scale study reported that all educational professionals interviewed observed UDL benefits to students that included improved test scores, improved motivation, and interest in learning, and being excited about school and learning [25].

In one position paper focusing on student outcomes, Landin and Schirmer (2020) listed increased student engagement as a result of teachers respecting students' needs, allowing students to succeed on their own terms by offering them choices in how to demonstrate their understanding in ways that work best for them, improving peer collaboration and cultural inclusiveness through valuing students' unique interests, and enabling students to communicate through mediums that suit their learning profile through developing autonomy and culturally responsive learning [13]. Similarly, a content analysis of the thirty-one UDL checkpoints concluded that applying UDL principles, guidelines, and checkpoints would support students in building deeper knowledge about how they learn best, thus enabling them to build on their learning processes [26].

Other studies focus on the impact of UDL for specific subject areas or based on specific characteristics of students. In one study on emergent-literacy development, the findings suggest that UDL benefits every student regardless of ability or need because the content and learning is enhanced for every emerging-literacy learner through providing students with a variety of materials and learning formats [27]. When putting forward the case for UDL in physical education, Liebermann (2017) noted the reality that students do not want to be different or given special treatment [28]. Thus, if a teacher provides every student with the same options, then no one will stand out or feel marginalised. Additionally, it means that every student is engaged. This potential for engagement was also evidenced in a study

on UDL-designed learning environments for online literacy programmes for students with intellectual disabilities [29]. Findings from classroom observations and teacher and student interviews suggested clear advantages for students with intellectual disabilities as they were able to engage in the UDL environment that was designed to provide meaningful interactions between peers based on age-appropriate content by optimising student choice and autonomy and providing support and challenge [29].

## 6. Professional Learning and Practice

The position teachers take and how they approach teaching is a critical factor in successfully enacting any initiative to improve inclusive education. The quality and strength of learning, teaching and assessment, leadership, and curriculum in schools is dependent on the vision, commitment, and capacity of the teachers who bring the curriculum to life. Enacting UDL into practice requires a preparedness to change how we view diversity and difference and adapt our learning and teaching accordingly. Studies [11,12,27] on teachers' knowledge, confidence, and readiness to enact UDL revealed that not all mainstream teachers, at primary and second-level, had a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of UDL—an opinion shared by Edyburn (2010) who questioned how teachers could implement a construct that they could not define [30].

Other studies have examined the barriers to implementing UDL for teachers (It is acknowledged that the countries referenced here are at different stages in their inclusive education and UDL process and the data presented should be considered in this context.). Alquraini and Rao's (2020) survey of 131 Saudi Arabian teachers revealed that challenges and barriers to teacher readiness to enact UDL included lack of teachers' knowledge and belief in UDL [27]. Results revealed that 50 per cent of respondents did not know much about UDL, 61 per cent had no UDL training, and 75 per cent were not practicing UDL in their classrooms. Results also indicated a lack of teacher collaboration, particularly between mainstream and special education teachers [27]. This is in contrast to studies that reported experiences of collaboration for UDL planning and teaching [31,32]. For example, Smith et al. (2017) noted collaborative partnerships as an effective resource, particularly for using technology resources [32] while participants in Reynor's (2020) study reported speaking with the special education teacher before their placement and asking the class teacher more questions than in previous placements to gain a better awareness of student diversity, differences, and challenges [31]. Teacher confidence also appears to play an important role in UDL implementation. In Capp's (2020) survey of ninety-seven Australian primary and second-level teachers, he found that primary teachers were, in general, more confident than second-level teachers about implementing UDL [12]. Of note, is that both primary and second-level teachers were least confident engaging with principle one, providing multiple means of engagement, and with guidelines and checkpoints in the other two principles that related to engaging students. Conversely, they were most confident providing students with multiple means of representation [12]. This could be because this principle can be considered to be about teacher choice in how they present their lessons and content compared with principles one and three where student voice and agency come to the fore. These findings contrast somewhat with an Irish study of UDL in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) which showed that some of the twenty, fourth-year student teachers' participating were confused by the principle of multiple means of representation and found the UDL guidelines difficult to follow at times with too much information to process [31]. Both studies found that primary, second-level, and pre-service teachers showed varying levels of confidence in relation to the underpinning principles, guidelines, and checkpoints of UDL [12,31]. Furthermore, teachers in the studies continued to reference differentiation and it appears that there may have been confusion about their meanings, that they were using the terms inter-changeably, or that UDL was understood as a differentiation model.

## 7. Supporting Teachers' Learning for UDL

Moving away from thinking in terms of ability and disability and the traditional practice of retrospective differentiation to proactive planning for variability requires a change in teachers' mindsets about difference, diversity, equity, and inclusion. For this change to be successful and affect change in practice, teachers need to be supported through effective professional learning. Recent studies on professional learning have focused on professional learning to develop more inclusive classrooms. In Ireland, findings show that student teachers respond positively to using UDL lesson plan templates, for students that struggle with their work but also in creating an awareness of high achieving students where there may not be adequate levels of challenge [31]. For Greek student teachers, findings also show how exposure to UDL with a focus on representation led to the development of more inclusive lesson plans which improved the learning process for every student [33]. Similarly, an examination of an undergraduate teaching course with a focus on using UDL to develop inclusive lesson plans found improvements in the lesson planning process after the training [34]. Both studies established that the training improved the lesson planning process across all three UDL principles.

Regarding enactment and practice, studies show that professional learning directly impacts on UDL implementation in teacher practice. One study examining the outcomes of UDL and universal design for transition (UDT) training to fifty-two student and practicing teachers found that many of the participants embedded UDL and UDT into their lessons after the course [35]. This was because the participants could use them in activities for students in mainstream as well as students with special educational needs (SEN). Specifically, participants reported that UDL and UDT approaches provided them with the opportunity to include every student in their learning activities and that element of these approaches lent themselves to making learning meaningful and engaging for every student [35]. This reflects other findings on the impact of a weeklong UDL summer course on teacher practice [14]. A comparison of teachers who attended the course with teachers who did not, found that, overall, those who attended performed higher in UDL implementation than those who did not. This included improvements in planning, establishing goals, identifying, and removing barriers to learning, and providing enhanced comprehension opportunities to students through the UDL guidelines [14].

## 8. Challenges to Enacting UDL

The lack of evidence-based research into the effectiveness of UDL, particularly in relation to student outcomes, is perhaps the most significant challenge to promoting and therefore enacting UDL as an effective approach to inclusive education practices. Research by Edyburn (2005; 2020) has informed much of this debate in recent years as, although he asserts that UDL holds considerable promise, he argues that there are challenges to translating UDL theory into practice [17,30]. He believes that once educators understand what the principles are and look like, they are left to figure out how to apply UDL themselves [30]. Another, related, issue highlighted by Edyburn (2005; 2020) is the lack of evidence-based research validating UDL. He argues, "there is urgent and important work to do to capture the potential of UDL in meaningful applications to help all students access, engage and succeed in meeting grade-level expectations in a global society" [30] (p. 341). A final issue raised by Edyburn (2020) is the tendency to link the framework with special education some of which he cautions against given its applicability to every student instead of those perceived to need additional supports [30].

Other research on UDL lesson planning and practice also indicates several disadvantages and barriers associated with its approach [13,31,36], namely, a lack of resources, time, knowledge, support, and professional learning in UDL at ITE and practicing teacher stages [13,35]. These studies highlight how planning and facilitating inclusive learning experiences using UDL can be complicated [13,30] and negotiating the guidelines and finding ways to remove some of these barriers to learning can be difficult [31]. Despite these challenges, many of these studies conclude that with these supports, and despite the



initial time involved, the results of UDL outweigh the effort and that “without a doubt, UDL holds considerable promise” [30] (p. 40).

The literature to date has limitations due to a lack of evidence-based research, the small-scale approach many research papers have taken, and the contextual dimensions of each study, meaning their findings may not be generalizable [35,36]. However, context is a cornerstone of UDL and therefore its potential must be viewed through the lens of students’ variability, the school climate, and the broader demographics of a school or institution. Furthermore, national contexts differ in their societal values, existing policies, and education systems more generally and this must also be considered when translating UDL from its origins in the United States.

### **9. Universal Design for Learning in the Irish Education Context**

Universal Design for Learning is a relatively new concept in Ireland with the potential benefits of UDL beginning to appear in policy documents at both further and higher education levels [37]. This work has been supported by organisations (including the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the further education and training authority (SOLAS)) who are seeking to respond to increasing diverse student populations through supporting educators in developing inclusive practices. However, as Quellett (2004) noted, significantly more needs to be done in these institutions to provide authentic access, participation, and engagement in high quality learning and teaching for every student [38]. Specifically, there is little evidence that UDL is part of programmes of ITE in Ireland where student teachers could gain an understanding of UDL as part of their preparation for learning and teaching in primary and second-level classrooms [31,37]. While an examination of Irish teacher support services suggests professional learning for UDL is slowly developing (UDL is either referenced or included in aspects of provision by organisations such as The Professional Development Service for Teachers, the National Council for Special Education, and Junior Cycle for Teachers), this is at an optional level. No baseline of teacher UDL practice in Ireland (with the exception of Devitt et al., 2021 [39]) has been established. However, there has been a notable increase in online forums, workshops, and national and international lectures on the topic of UDL in Ireland in the last three years. Many of these events are heavily attended by teachers, particularly at second-level, and representatives from teacher organisations that provide professional development.

### **10. The Irish Education System**

The Irish education system is comprised of a mainstream primary and second-level education system and a parallel special school system. Compulsory education begins at age six, although the majority of students attend infant classes by the age of four and five. Additionally, the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) provides two free years of preschool education for children prior to commencing primary education. At second-level, students normally take a nationally standardised examination at the end of lower secondary which is followed by an optional ‘Transition Year’, and a two-year upper secondary programme, at the end of which students take the nationally standardised Leaving Certificate examination.

Special education in Ireland is based on a model of a continuum of supports. While the policy is to ensure the maximum possible inclusion for children with SEN in mainstream settings, depending on the child’s assessed level of need in education, children may attend special classes within mainstream schools and special schools. Though special schools provide primary and post-primary education until the age of eighteen, special schools fall under the remit of the primary sector. There are currently 134 special schools in Ireland with approximately 8407 students enrolled in 2020/2021 [6,40]. Special classes fall under the remit of the school they are in. In the school year 2020/2021, there were 1836 special classes across primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, and each class can have a maximum of 6 students enrolled [41].

## 11. UDL within the Special Education Sector

Until recently, differentiation has been the method of choice in Ireland for teachers wishing to include students with SEN. However, many argue, that the disability is within the curriculum in addition to the learning and teaching environment, not the student [8]. Thus, in recent years, education debates have begun to focus on moving towards more equitable systems of education and the use of innovative pedagogies such as UDL to enhance the school experiences of every student [6,41]. While there is a firm commitment to inclusive education at a policy level [5,42], in practice, the funding and provision of special education operates parallel to the mainstream education system [43,44]. This anomaly was further highlighted in the recent publication and open consultation by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) moving towards a more inclusive system of education [6]. Using inputs from delegates from New Brunswick, Canada, and Portugal who have moved towards models of greater or full inclusion that are informed by UDL, the consultations suggest that students with SEN could, and perhaps should, be educated with their peers in the mainstream. However, it noted that Irish schools, under the current structures, are not ready to successfully enact such a move. Principally, NCSE asserted the need for teachers to be competent in enacting inclusive practices such as UDL so that they have the capacity to teach in diverse classrooms with the full range of student variability.

As legislation developed around special and inclusive education, Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) were tasked with acknowledging these changes and providing advice, guidelines, and directives to teachers on delivering supports to students with SEN. By reviewing these documents through the lens of UDL, some interesting patterns emerge. At the same time that CAST were beginning to articulate their concept of UDL, the NCCA published a seminal paper, *Special Educational Needs: Curriculum Issues* [45], outlining future curriculum developments in Ireland. Although not written from a UDL perspective, this paper is significant as it emphasised that the principles underlying education for students with SEN are the same principles that underpin education for every student. Furthermore, the terminology used in this NCCA paper sets the direction of inclusive language used in curriculum policy, with language such as 'pathways', 'individualised programmes', and 'whole-school approach' appearing throughout later NCCA and NCSE documents on special education [6,46,47]

## 12. UDL within Second-Level Education

### 12.1. Junior Cycle

UDL is, perhaps, most associated with the recent review of the lower secondary curriculum and introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 [7]. For the first time, there is explicit mention of UD in curriculum design in the Framework which was specifically designed with the intention of having one curriculum for every student. It aims to provide "meaningful and valuable learning opportunities for students from all cultural and social backgrounds and from a wide variety of individual circumstances" [7] (p. 26). This curriculum framework is based on eight principles, twenty-four statements of learning, and eight key skills. A unique aspect of the new framework is the choice of pathways students can take to achieve their Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). This clearly aligns with the UDL inclusive mindset of multiple means of engagement and provides greater access to learning for every student. The framework has had a significant impact on meaningful engagement in learning for students with intellectual disabilities. This is provided through the options of Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) which exist as part of the overall Framework for Junior Cycle.

The landmark introduction of learning outcomes linked to student expectations is perhaps where UDL is most prevalent. The principles, statements, and skills are given expression through the learning outcomes [7] and these learning outcomes are flexibly designed to allow them to be contextualised and taught in various ways depending on the school and students. This approach gives teachers more autonomy to provide multiple

means of representation which were less possible with the prescriptive learning objectives of previous curriculum frameworks, further enhancing access and engagement for their students.

Another innovative component of the framework is the introduction of some assessment choices for students. Depending on pathway choices, students undertake a combination of formative assessments including Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) throughout the junior cycle, and summative state examinations, at the end. The nature of CBAs and other formative assessments embodies UDL's multiple means of action and expression as they allow teachers and students the autonomy to co-design the assessment brief and activity. In this way, students can engage with assessment through a medium that will best enable them to demonstrate and communicate their knowledge, understanding, skills, and values.

### *12.2. Senior Cycle*

Senior cycle is currently under review in Ireland. Following extensive research and consultation, it is envisaged that NCCA will present its findings in an advisory report to the Minister for Education in 2021. The review findings indicate an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at senior cycle [48]. The research highlights the extent to which stakeholders believe that the current senior cycle provision is too narrowly focused on students' academic ability. This means many students, including those with SEN and those who would benefit from vocational or apprenticeship options, are left without pathways. The most recent Senior Cycle Review report published [48] shows that there is a keen focus on flexible pathways and assessment in a future curriculum design.

## **13. UDL within Early Childhood and Primary Education**

In recent years, there are some early indications of the introduction of UDL in the early childhood and primary education sector. In early childhood education, recent policy documents recognise the growing social, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in Ireland in recent years and both the Aistear curriculum [49] and the Access and Inclusion Model [50] emphasise the need to be responsive to the changing groups of children each year and their abilities, preferences, and needs. At primary level, there are clear indicators of a UDL mindset emerging in curriculum documents. For example, it was explicitly stated that a new Primary Maths Curriculum (PMC) that promotes the principles of equity and access for children with a diverse range of abilities would be designed in line with the principles of UDL [51]. This specification is still in a development phase. In 2019, a new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) was developed and introduced to schools. Informed by research commissioned by NCCA that references UDL, the PLC incorporates a UDL approach and is the first part of the Irish primary curriculum to be redeveloped since 1999 [52]. Similar to the Framework for Junior Cycle, the PLC marks a significant move in primary education away from content objectives to a learning outcomes-based curriculum. Progression continua were also developed to support every student in progressing towards the intended learning.

Perhaps the clearest indication of a UDL approach thus far is evident in the recent publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, of which the PLC and PMC are part [53]. Similar to the Framework for Junior Cycle, the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework marks a significant move in primary education away from content objectives to a learning outcomes-based curriculum. Furthermore, it recognises teachers as 'curriculum makers' who use these broad learning outcomes within the wider framework of the curriculum vision, principles, and subjects to design a curriculum that is contextual and appropriate for the students in their learning community. Its statement that "in the context of a universally designed curriculum, inclusive education and diversity encourages a move away from thinking in terms of ability and disability to thinking about variability,



competency and opportunity” [53] (p. 20) indicates a commitment to supporting every student and sets the direction of curriculum experiences in a redeveloped primary school curriculum that will draw on the principles of UDL to provide every student with equity of access, engagement and challenge in their learning. The consultation for this Primary Framework is currently ongoing and it is expected to be a number of years before the redeveloped curriculum is introduced to schools.

#### 14. Discussion

The exploration of recent curriculum developments in Ireland indicates a shift in mindset towards UDL as a framework for inclusive education in Irish schools. This paper finds that aspects of UDL are threaded across the curriculum principles that espouse engagement, participation and relevance, partnership, and choice and flexibility, from primary to senior cycle. The potential of UDL to increase student engagement is demonstrated in the most established of these, the junior cycle, where the three UDL principles are reflected in different aspects of the framework. However, this paper illustrates that UDL may be most evident in the new Primary Curriculum Framework. As the newest curriculum development, lessons from junior cycle reform have been learnt. Furthermore, the absence of a high stakes state examination at primary level may increase acceptance of UDL among practitioners.

In line with research internationally, this paper finds a lack of empirical research to support the potential of UDL in improving student outcomes which it argues will have implications for the translation of UDL curriculum initiatives into practice. Establishing an evidence base for UDL is imperative for policy change and development with a clear link required between the relevance and positive outcomes of UDL to inclusive learning, teaching, and assessment in Ireland. This reflects the research into teacher learning and practice which shows that when teachers have the opportunity to engage in professional learning for UDL and inclusion and experience the positive impact of UDL on their students, they are more likely to embed UDL into their practice [35].

Despite UDL gaining some momentum in Irish curriculum documents, professional learning opportunities for UDL remain limited at ITE and practicing teacher levels. A greater understanding of UDL at ITE is required to establish the effect of UDL on student teachers’ knowledge, skills, and practice in the classroom. Furthermore, a systematic approach to UDL in the provision of all professional learning programmes could enhance teacher capacity in increasingly diverse school contexts. However, this paper argues that UDL enactment cannot be the sole responsibility of teachers. Without clear policy and messaging at a national level that supports effective professional learning for all teachers, there are concerns that UDL may become another ‘educational fad’ associated solely with special education, as noted by Edyburn (2020). Embedding UDL in ITE and professional learning programmes will ensure an awareness of the role of UDL amongst all educators. Perhaps what is required is a roadmap for systematic enactment of UDL as a pedagogical framework for every learner and teacher.

Education in Ireland is a critical stage in review and redevelopment across all sectors. Given ongoing discussions around moving to a ‘full inclusion model’ in Irish schools, this is perhaps an opportune time to proactively embed UDL as part of policy and curriculum design as well as part of learning and teaching design and practice.

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