

NCSI Schools On The Move Podcast: Episode 3 Transcript

Episode 3: Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Matt Navo (00:01):

Welcome to Schools On The Move, a podcast brought to you by the National Center for Systemic Improvement at WestEd and the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. Schools On The Move podcast highlights innovative and promising school practices across the country that enhance outcomes for students with disabilities and create teaching and learning opportunities for educators. Your hosts for today's podcast are miss Jana Rosborough senior program associate with WestEd and Dr. Annie Sharp, Director of Differentiated Assistance with the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. Today we're in Austin, Texas with universal design for learning expert, Mr. Zach Smith. Our topic today is universal design for learning, improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Jana Rosborough (00:52):

We are so excited today to have with us Zach Smith, but before we get started and meet Zach, I just want to do a quick hello to everybody. My name is Jana Rosborough and I'm co-hosting today with Annie Sharp. Hi Annie.

Annie Sharp (01:06):

Hi Jana. Hi everybody. Glad to be here today.

Jana Rosborough (01:09):

Ah, fantastic. Okay, so Zach, welcome to the podcast. Will you please share with our listeners out there a little bit about yourself and your involvement with special education, particularly serving students with disabilities?

Zach Smith (01:24):

Hey, what's up Annie and Jana I'm excited to be here. So yeah, I'm Zach Smith. I'm a former special education teacher in the central valley of California, worked in a smaller district named Sanger Unified. And I also was somebody that was really passionate about inclusion and inclusive practices. I couldn't find a job as an inclusive coordinator or someone that like as an inclusion teacher in the central valley. And so I was like, okay, well, let's try to make one. And so I worked in this district and tried to increase inclusive practice every year. And along the way within that district, I discovered kind of bumped into universal design for learning. This was way back in 2008 and UDL became the strategy that I was always looking for, the framework that I had always longed for, because it finally gave me a clear idea

of what teaching and learning could look like if it were inclusive and if it were flexible, but still rigorous.

And so that's what led me to explore UDL, to do my master's work in UDL. I worked within that same district to try to roll UDL out from pre-K TK all the way up through adult transition, general education, special education. And it's even some of the driving work that I do now. I'm in graduate school at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, working on my doctorate in education leadership to really understand what leadership looks like. That's inclusive, that's equitable, that's flexible, but still provides the supports that allow students to get where they want to go. So, yeah that's a bit of what my why and who I am and yeah. And full disclosure, there might be kids just like running through this podcast because I have no control.

Annie Sharp (03:13):

That's all right, Zach, we love kids around here, right? So Zach, I love this. I love that this is something that you have been so passionate about for so long. Can you tell our listeners a little bit if they have never heard of UDL or if they've heard of it, but don't really know what it is. Can you tell our listeners what is UDL and why did you become so interested in it in the first place?

Zach Smith (03:32):

Yeah, so UDL is a framework that someone would apply to their teaching and learning practices. And within that framework, it's all built around accessibility and flexibility. And so I'm going to, if I'm teaching with a UDL in mind, I am setting a goal. I'm defining what the non-negotiables are for that goal. So how I would know that that goal is being met. And then from there I'm going to provide a series of options with how learners might engage with that goal. And I'm trying to think in culturally responsive ways in ways that students would be interested in that goal I'm actually asking question, like how do we get kids to care about this goal from where they stand and sit and log in? And then I'm also thinking through representation. So how do I represent that goal in as many ways as possible?

Is there a way for me to represent that goal of physically? Can students hold representation to that goal? Can they read about representations hear about representations? And then lastly, I'm giving students options that still meet the non-negotiables of the goal, but that allow for them to have choice and agency within a learning environment. So if the goals non-negotiables don't require something like writing, then I'm going to let students use their voice, or I'm going to let students create something visual in order to show their understanding and meet those non-negotiables. And then where it does require something like writing or where the non-negotiables of the goal, I'm still going to find those options where students can use text-to-speech or students can hand-write or students can use some fancy app that's all the rage with the kids these days. So I would give it options whenever and wherever possible. And then that maximizes accessibility. That maximizes who's able to learn, who's able to be a part of the class and belong. And it's been a really helpful tool, especially when thinking about students with disabilities. So that's where a lot of my work is.

Annie Sharp (05:30):

So, I have a General Ed background, right? I hear words like accessibility, flexibility, culturally responsive, options. That sounds a bit overwhelming to me when I'm planning for 30 kids or whatever, what are some practical things that as a general Ed teacher might help me feel a little bit less overwhelmed when I hear those words, when I'm thinking about providing these opportunities for all of my students.

Zach Smith (05:55):

A way to answer that, that folks don't always jump to is really defining what you're trying to teach and really defining how you know that that is learned within your environment. That's step one, because oftentimes if anyone's familiar with PLC questions is PLC question went into, what do we want all students to know? And then how will we know that they know it? So first it's asking yourself those questions and I would argue, we're not asking those questions enough, just full stop, end of sentence, period. We need to ask those questions more of ourselves. But then from there, it's not providing all the options, but thinking about your students and thinking about who they are and what they bring into a classroom and providing those engagement connections, and those representations, a series of options to them in a way that works for you as well as a learner.

So if I'm coaching a teacher and they've never tried UDL, then we're going to start from a problem of practice, an area where they're struggling to connect with their learners, something they're struggling to teach with. And we're going to use that to be the place where they start, or maybe they start focused on expression, and they're just going to work on embedding choices into their learning environment. Or maybe they're going to start with thinking about representation and how they're making content more accessible for students.

So as the teacher, we really would coach the teacher to see themselves as a learner and to design a path that works for them over time and really embrace this idea that it's a marathon and not a sprint to your design. It usually takes five to six years to really feel like it's something that you do is like you're always in forever practice that you're always thinking through. And so it's been nice just to give folks grace to say like, "Hey, you get to be the author of your learning plan." And really my first challenge to you would be thinking about like, what is it you're trying to teach? And how would you know that students are learning that thing?

Jana Rosborough (07:58):

We've talked quite a bit about the teacher's role in UDL and thinking through sort of how they would approach lessons and sort of their framework or context for entering this conversation. What's the pitch to leaders at both the LEA and SEA level to become involved with, to support universal design for learning?

Zach Smith (08:20):

That's one of those questions that keeps me up at night right now. So the pitch right now, I think is around equity and belonging. We are confronted now so more

than ever with just the outcomes that show a picture of an equity within educational spaces, we have whether you want to call it an opportunity gap or performance gap, we have all sorts of different populations of students that aren't thriving within learning environments. And we're seeing this at scale to every space within the sector. And oftentimes we don't think intuitively about how we're structuring those students supports. We are more often than not trying to intervene or trying to move kids through a system where we push them out of classrooms before we ever asked the question of how can we make this classroom more supportive in general? And how do we create a really robust set of first best instructional values and rhythms and routines and practices that are going to capture the widest breadth of learner. So that those students who actually do need interventions, aren't an impacted schedules where we're not over intervening.

And so, at the LEA level, we're going to talk about how who are the students not thriving within your environments and what can you learn from those students and how does your current instructional model embrace those learners and find ways to take lessons from them? And then at the state level, we're going to talk about, well what's the broad scale look, what does your state look like? And how impacted are your interventions? And do you even have so any sort of intervention cycles or a tiered system support that students have options to, or that even your districts have options to who might need support from you?

And if we see that there's not really a great first best offering, then things like universal design for learning, coupled with culturally responsive mindset, really, really can support creating that inclusive space and address these equity issues head on. Especially when we think about bias in the classroom, especially when we think about students that don't have any sort of agency within their day, UDL becomes really, really relevant to that conversation.

Annie Sharp (10:46):

Zach, I've heard you twice now mentioned this idea of having a culturally responsive classroom. Can you talk a little bit more about that, what that means and how that plays a role in the same conversation?

Zach Smith (10:57):

Yeah. So when we're thinking about engagement and UDL is built around this concept of engagement, it's our affective filter in our brains. It's the part of our brains that are constantly asking, "Hey, why does this thing that I'm experiencing matter to me?" And if it doesn't matter what I'm going to, what am I going to do to figure out something else to think about or focus on that does matter. So we are not, as we think of engagement, really doing enough to connect engagement to those things that students care about. And what do students care about? What do we care about? We care about our motivating factors. We care about our cultures. We care about our personal identities. We care about seeing ourselves within curriculum and content. We care that the teacher knows us well enough to ask when something's not relevant or when we're not engaged, as opposed to be punitive and try to punish us.

And so when we're about a universally designed model and we're starting with engagement, we can't engage students if we don't have connection points to their culture. And if we don't value who they are before they come walk or roll into our classrooms, before we ever hope to teach them, I think that that is something that we have missed for far too long as educators. And in UDL language we connected a lot to engagement. That's probably the lens where you'd see the cultural conversations jump in that then informs how we represent and how we provide options and action and expression. It really starts from a standpoint of knowing our students, knowing ourselves and bringing our students in and connecting content to their worldview and perspective.

Annie Sharp (12:38):

The engagement has been something that we've been talking about for years and years and years. So I don't think that that's new for anybody, but it's hard. It's hard to do it right. And so I think if I'm, again thinking back to when I was a high school math teacher and I had an engaging classroom, my classroom was engaging. My students were up and moving and talking and in groups and things like that. In my mind, I'm engaging. What makes us a little bit different? You said earlier, it takes five to six years to make this really you're always on forever practice. So what makes this different? How would you approach maybe a high school math teacher who says I haven't engaged in classroom. My kids are in groups. My kids are, are, are learning. My kids are talking, my kids are engaged. How might you approach them to think with this UDL lens a little bit differently?

Zach Smith (13:31):

I think that's, well, one when we're talking about engagement and we're talking about the strategies you just described, those are beautiful strategies. Those are wonderful engagement practices. So thinking through how you're increasing collaboration, you're increasing a sense of community within the classroom. You're giving students options and how they get up and navigate that classroom environment. And so one, it's not to discount those practices, it's actually to celebrate them. But when we're talking also about engagement, we also need to think about how students are engaging with the concepts themselves. So I can get kids to talk about something and get up and move in a classroom. And that's something that has no connection to their life, right? I can think of some math classes, sorry Annie where that has been-

Annie Sharp (14:19):

I Won't take it personal. Don't worry it's okay.

Zach Smith (14:21):

But it doesn't have to talk. We don't have to apply to math, we can apply it anywhere. We can apply it to any sort of concept. If we're not thinking about how we make this concept relevant to our students, then I would argue, we don't know their worldview. We don't know their values. We don't know what they care about, what they daydream about, what keeps them up at night or what their cultural norms are. And so I actually want kids to be so engaged with learning that they're

willing to persevere a few classrooms, that don't have a group format, that don't have the ability to get kids up and moving, but they're like, but I got to learn this content because this content is going to connect to something I really care about, something that I really value or something that I want to do in life.

And so they're able to persevere even through that unengaging environment, because they're so engaged with learning and ultimately that's what we're after with UDL. So if we don't start and end with that as a conversation point, connecting content to the worldview of our students. And then move to those other strategies related to communication or collaboration and community, then we might be missing some pieces of engagement.

Jana Rosborough (15:33):

There's so much to unpack here. Zack, if we were looking for a best first, next step and maybe all levels of the system, what can a teacher do? What can an individual at an LEA do at the sort of the district level and what can someone at the state do as like the first best opportunity to really lean in to UDL and cultivate those opportunities for not only students with disabilities, but for all students to do exactly what you've lined out that we're all hoping to do with education at the end of the day. But what would be a first best next step?

Zach Smith (16:12):

Yeah, no, it's a super important question. I mean, it's also a kind of a contextualized question. So if we're thinking about UDL and we're assuming variability, we're assuming that different folks are going to be at different places and have different needs, then it might be auditing where you are as an SEA or LEA or as a principal or a teacher. So where are you? Where are the pain points that you're experiencing currently within your system, within your classroom? Who are the students that you might not be reaching yet? And what are the narratives that you carry around why those students aren't thriving. And if those narratives are connected to things within the student, like their language needs or their background, or their ability level, or their cultural background or cultural norms, then you're actually not thinking in a universally designed way.

So, one it's just like auditing, where are you? Where are the pain points that you're experiencing? And then from those pain points, think about where your natural starting places are, both for yourself and what you're most excited about. So if you're most excited about jumping in with engagement and then awesome, if you're most excited about providing supports for teachers to understand what their goals and non-negotiables are, I'm thinking at an SEA level here. That's really helpful because that's a lot of work that if we can do that type of work for teachers, then they're freed up to apply the full scope of creativity to engagement, representation and action expression.

So thinking about both, where are you most excited as a learner and as an organization yourself, and then also, who are those stakeholders that you're most supporting and what barriers are most salient to them that if you were to remove would provide you opportunities for quick wins. So to be able to experience

success, to be able to see how students are starting to be included and belong at quicker rates. So I don't know, Jana and that might be a kind of fluffy answer, but it's really is a diagnostic, a contextual conversation that I would encourage folks to have within themselves or within their spheres of influence and communities.

Jana Rosborough (18:29):

Zach can you talk a little bit more about that self-audit? So what would you be looking for in terms of your practices, if you were potentially a district administrator or even a state person, what would you be looking at in terms of your own practices to be able to make some adjustments?

Zach Smith (18:49):

So we can start at the teacher level and then move our way up and see if this resonates. But at the teacher level, I'm thinking about who's not thriving currently within my environments, and I'm actually going to try to learn from those students. So I'm going to try to ask some questions of them that ask them, do they care about what I'm trying to teach? What's connecting and not connecting related to their understanding and representation and what options do they see within the environment that are available to them and what options do they wish were available. I'm also going to look at my own practices and make sure our goals clear within my learning environment. Am I clearly communicating the non-negotiables of those goals to my students so they know what they need to do in order to meet that expectation?

So I'm just going to look at my practices and then based on how I see those practices, that'll give me some starting points for the marathon. Now, when we move into the administrative level. So if we're talking about district and site administrators, one, I'm going to look at my intervention cycles. I'm going to see who's being pushed out of my classrooms and who they represent in terms of demographics. I'm also going to see what size of the population they represent. I want to determine the extent with which my first and best instructional efforts are actually first and best. Are they actually inclusive? Are they actually supporting the widest breadth of my populations? And if we're leaning... I'm stealing this from a friend, but we can't intervention our way out of these challenges. We really have to start with an inclusive first best instruction.

And so it's going to be diagnostics is to that end. I'm also going to ask questions of my community and say, "Hey, do you enjoy coming to school? Do you see yourself making progress within your own individualized student or family learning goals that you care about?" I'm going to look at those students in special education with disabilities, because they oftentimes are a marker to the overall health of the system. If I'm disproportionately pushing them out or segregating them to different segments of my community and not taking time to learn from them through like an SST process, then that should give me pause. And I should be going back to evaluate both the practices and values that I have and whether or not those values are being enacted with the work I do. Then if we're looking at the state level, I'm going to apply that same metric throughout the system.

So one, I'm going to think about how am I working with schools? How am I providing different tiered levels of support for schools who need extra coaching? What's my base level messaging. What's my base level trainings that I provide or that I sponsor related to what global instructional practice looks like within the state. I'm also going to be paying really close attention to performance and opportunity gaps, and not only paying attention to those for myself, but I'm also going to try to give my LEAs as many tools as I can, so they can see those opportunity gaps and those performance gaps and giving them then the tools that's relevant to that specific challenge that they're able to see.

So I think California is a nice example of how they do their data dashboards out. Now as a school, I can see explicitly, as a whole community, I can see explicitly who's doing well and who's not doing well. And then I can do either universal interventions or trainings related to those needs where I can do targeted trainings to those needs. But making it clear is really, really important. And again, creating systems of support rather than blame systems of shame systems that localize the problem as somewhere else than the system are, then the system can never grow and learn. So that was a long-winded one Jana.

Annie Sharp (23:06):

That's all right, Zack. There is so much that we have packed in to this half-hour here with you, and there's so much more to learn about UDL and about really, I mean learning about my students, trying to figure out what each student needs, what will engage each student with the concepts, like you said, I love that it's not about just engaging with each other, but it's engaging with what they're learning and getting kids to be excited about their learning. Really, to me what I heard you say over and over again is that we want each student to thrive and to feel a sense of belonging in their classroom and in their learning. And we do that through this framework that provides accessible and flexible options for our students. Sound super simple, but I know it is not easy, especially when Jana asked that last question, do you like, where do we start with our first next step? And there are lots of first next steps that need to be done here in order for each of our students to feel that sense of belonging and to start thriving. So Zach, thank you so much. We are so grateful for the time that you spent here with us. Jana I'm going to pass it to you for any last words that you might have.

Jana Rosborough (24:16):

This could be three hours long, and then I think we would have just scratched the surface. So thank you for being with us today and diving into this. So lucky to get to work with you on the regular and realizing sort of the building blocks that this is in terms of really changing and thinking about how education looks in our schools. So thank you for being here today. Thank you, Annie. And thank you all for listening to the Schools On The Move podcast. Please be on the lookout for our next podcast, but we will be going to Kansas, my home state for your new conversation with the school improving outcomes for students with disabilities. So thank you all for being with us today. We look forward to the next time.



Transforming State Systems to Improve Outcomes
for Children with Disabilities

Matt Navo (24:59):

Thank you for listening to Schools On The Move. This production is brought to you by the National Center for Systemic Improvement and funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the US Department of Education. Special thanks to all the production team. And we'll see you next time on Schools On The Move.