



THE EMERGENCE OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL) IN IRISH CURRICULA AS AN APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a relatively new concept in early childhood, primary, and post-primary education in Ireland (Flood and Banks, 2021). Efforts to embed UDL in learning and teaching in further and higher education are more established due to the work of the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the training authority SOLAS in supporting educators develop inclusive practices in response to increasing diverse student populations. The momentum has been slower outside of this arena. However, there is evidence of progress, in particular the work of the NCSE (2019; 2024) in researching UDL in practice internationally as part of a model of full inclusion. This paper explores Ireland's inclusion trajectory and its evolving thinking around UDL through an exploration of UDL's emergence in Irish curriculum.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, inclusion, early-childhood, primary, post-primary, curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

The launch of the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) progress report "Policy Advice for Special Schools and Classes: An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society" (NCSE, 2019) was a watershed moment in Irish education. In this moment, the NCSE highlighted Ireland's educational commitments, and failures, relating to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD, 2006), specifically Article 24 while putting forward an early vision for a model of full inclusion in Ireland. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was recommended as a framework to support this model of full inclusion with the then Minister for Education endorsing this model.

The arrival of Covid-19 in 2020 impacted the publication timeline of the NCSE's subsequent Policy Advice Report and the Pilot School Inclusion Model. However, the Covid-19 pandemic propelled education systems around the world, including Ireland, into new virtual and in-person learning and teaching environments creating the conditions for more in-depth exploration of UDL by educators at all levels (Bray et al, 2020). The arrival of Ukrainian children into Irish education settings created more need for flexibility in our approaches to learning, teaching and assessment to ensure safe, equitable, inclusive and meaningful access and participation in their learning. These two events led to significant changes at government level in how we teach with evidence of UDL applied to the processes and resources being created to support parents, teachers and students. "An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society. Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes" (NCSE, 2024) saw UDL named as the best practice approach to inclusive education with recommendations for embedding it in schools and professional learning programmes.

With this now explicit government focus on UDL, it is important to have an understanding of the evolution of UDL thinking in Ireland. This paper explores this thinking through the lens of curriculum design, primarily examining national curriculum and guidance documents developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) It begins with offering a policy context for the introduction of UDL into Irish education. An overview of UDL and the UDL Guidelines is given before considering UDL as an inclusive pedagogical approach. From here the paper moves to an examination of the use of UDL concepts and language within Irish curricula, signposting its emergence, particularly since the Framework for Junior Cycle (Department of Education, 2015). Following this examination, consideration of the benefits and challenges of Ireland's more active engagement with UDL are discussed.

DEFINING EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Equity, in the context of education and society, remains a multifaceted concept that lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. Diverse viewpoints exist on what equity entails, and in Ireland a single, national definition is not available. The NCSE (2010) underscores the interplay of equity and excellence within a broader discourse on inclusion yet refrains from providing an autonomous definition. UNESCO, however, offers a distinctive perspective by characterising equity as “ensuring that there is a concern with fairness, such that the education of all learners is seen as being of equal importance” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8). This definition explains equity as an ongoing process aimed at identifying and dismantling barriers that engender inequalities in access to resources and means, and the attainment of fair treatment and equal opportunities to thrive in education and society. Ultimately, equity seeks to foster fairness and parity in education and society as a whole, positioning itself as the antithesis of ableism. Thus, equity in education remains fundamentally intertwined with the principles of inclusion and inclusive education, thereby emphasising the inextricable connection between equity, fairness, and social justice.

Like equity, inclusive education is a continually evolving concept at national and international levels. There has been an increasing emphasis in literature, research and policy advice on the need for education to be founded on principles of social justice and equity, granting every individual equal access and equitable participation opportunities - (Chardin and Novak, 2021; Fovet, 2020; NCSE, 2010; 2019). The central objective of inclusive education is to prepare every student for meaningful engagement in life while facilitating them in realising their full potential in accordance with their unique capabilities, needs and learning goals. Of particular note in this evolving concept of inclusive education is that it has transitioned from solely addressing students with Special Education Needs (SEN) and disabilities to encompassing a broader diversity of learners who might face marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement due to various factors, such as disability, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, socio-economic background, and geographic location. This understanding of equity and inclusion as a change in the system to one that values diversity (UNESCO 2020; Ainscow, 2024). It reframes how we think about fairness in terms of access, participation and achievement and therefore what is required to reduce barriers to these for students (Ainscow, 2024; CAST, 2024).

In the context of the Irish education system, inclusion can be defined as a dynamic process of

- “Addressing and responding to the diversity and needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures and communities, and
- Removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.” (NCSE, 2010, p. 39)

These definitions align with the language and intent of the UDL guidelines in that they all focus on the process of inclusion, acknowledging and celebrating diversity, identifying and removing barriers to learning, and presence, participation and achievement for every student. This focus ensures that the principles of fairness and social justice in the education of every student are central to inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practices.

POLICY CONTEXT

Historically, in Ireland, inclusive education has been predominantly viewed through a special education lens, focusing on students with SEN and disabilities. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition that the concept of inclusion needs to be broadened to encompass the rich diversity of students in Irish classrooms today. As with special education, Ireland’s commitment to inclusion in a diverse society reflect the global human rights agenda. The UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) (1948) serves as a foundational document for promoting equality and non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, language, religion, and various other attributes. It provides a guiding framework for creating a just and inclusive society, which is without distinction. Specific to the education global agenda, Goal 4 ‘Education Quality’ (SDG4) of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” eliminating all education discrimination by 2030 (United Nations, 2015, p. 19).

In Ireland, one of the most significant legislative steps towards building a diverse and inclusive society is the Equal Status Acts (Government of Ireland, 2000-2018). These Acts are designed to prevent discrimination in various aspects of society, including education, accommodation, and access to goods and services. The nine protected grounds under these Acts encompass gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, disability, age, and membership of the Traveller community. The core objectives of the Equal Status Acts include promoting equality, prohibiting discrimination (with some limited exemptions), prohibiting harassment and victimisation, requiring reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, and promoting a range of positive action measures. The

Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), predating the Equal Status Acts, emphasises the need for inclusion and equality in education. Section 7 of the Act states that the Minister for Education “must ensure that there is made available to each person resident in the State....., including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person.” In line with legislation, the Irish government has taken steps to align its education policies with the principles of inclusion and equity, with the Department of Education’s “Statement of Strategy 2023-2025” (Department of Education, 2023) goal 2 building on previous actions to “ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential” and develop “an education system that welcomes every child and young person and meets their educational needs irrespective of background or ability” (Department of Education, 2023, p. 12).

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act of 2004 (Government of Ireland) is a key milestone in Ireland’s inclusive education journey. It marked a significant shift from general education legislation that included provisions for children with SEN to a specific legislative framework for students with SEN. The EPSEN Act redefined SEN to encompass any condition that affects a person’s learning. It firmly advocated for inclusive education, stating that children with SEN should be educated in inclusive environments alongside their mainstream peers, unless this is inconsistent with the best interests of the child or their typically developing peers. The EPSEN Act (2004) was considered a coherent framework for legislation and policy on inclusive education for students with SEN (NCSE, 2011a). However, in 2022 the Irish Government set out a review process of EPSEN “to provide assurance that the law that governs the provision of education for children with special educational needs is adequate.” (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 2).

The EPSEN Act also expanded the role of the NCSE, established as an independent statutory body in 2003. This body was tasked with improving the delivery of education services to individuals with SEN, particularly children. As School-Self-Evaluation (SSE) (Department of Education, 2022) became a standard practice in schools, the NCSE aimed to provide resources to enable schools to reflect on their inclusive practices within this framework. In 2005 the General Allocation Model (GAM) was introduced to support the development of inclusive schools. GAM was based on a medical model, allocating additional resources to schools to provide provision for students with different categories of needs as set out in the model. The Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011b aimed to guide schools on best practices for including students with SEN. It emphasised the principles of whole-school community ownership, reflective of pupil diversity, supporting engagement, embedded in ongoing whole-school planning, and evidence and practice-based decision-making. The new Special Education Teacher Allocation model (Department of Education,2017) moved away from a medical model of allocation. This new model gave schools the autonomy to use their allocated resources in a manner that best met the needs of their students and school community, indicating a more flexible student-focused approach to SEN support.

In 2019, the NCSE published an interim report on special classes and special schools in Ireland, highlighting several key points. These include the ideal but challenging goal of educating every student alongside their peers in mainstream classes, the varying views on full inclusion in mainstream classes, the importance of keeping students’ educational placements under regular review, concerns about challenging behaviour, the shortage of therapy supports in mainstream schools impacting the rate of enrolment in special schools and classes, and the need for teachers to have appropriate professional learning opportunities to cater to the diverse needs of their students. This report also outlined the NCSE’s exploration of New Brunswick’s, Canada model for full inclusion based on the principles of UDL and response to intervention. The New Brunswick model takes a broad definition of inclusion that clarifies that “inclusion is not just about students with disabilities; rather, it is about designing to address the variability and diverse needs of every student” (Aucoin, Porter and Baker-Korotkov, 2020, p6). The model is based on three interdependent principles that directly influence professional practice.

1. Public education is universal – The provincial curriculum is delivered equitably to all students within an inclusive, shared learning environment alongside their age-appropriate peers from the local community.
2. Public education is individualised – Each student’s success is influenced by how well their education aligns with their best interests, responding to their unique strengths and needs.
3. Public education is adaptable and responsive to change – ensuring it evolves to meet the diverse and shifting needs of learners (Government of New Brunswick, 2009).

By employing a tiered model of support, similar to Ireland’s Continuum of Support, UDL serves as the foundation for their best practice framework in promoting inclusive education.

“An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes” (NCSE, 2024) built on the 2019 interim report with explicit reference and recommendations regarding UDL as an approach to inclusive education for schools, teacher education programmes, teacher support services and curriculum designers. While the

title implies this policy advice is aimed solely at special schools and classes, on reading this document it becomes clear that this policy advice affects all schools and educators. The NCSE recommends that relevant partners work with NCSE to develop and deliver a cohesive professional learning programme to enhance mainstream and special education teacher, school leaders and Special Needs Assistants (SNA) knowledge, skills and practice to support the education of students with special educational needs in an inclusive system. This programme should be a continuum of professional learning to support staff throughout their career in school (NCSE, 2024). Additionally, NCSE recommends that UDL principles be embedded in teacher professional learning. The policy advice further recommends that the NCSE work with Teacher Education Section and other professional learning organisations

- “to develop a co-ordinated whole-school professional development programme for all teachers and school staff in inclusion, UDL and disability awareness;
- to work with and provide funding in a coordinated manner to NCSE and the other organisations and services that provide TPL and to make available and deliver a programme of professional learning opportunities for school staff based on school need that includes:
 - Professional learning for school leaders in developing, leading and managing inclusive schools, informed by UDL;
 - Continuous TPL in inclusion and UDL to enhance the capacity of teachers to teach all students.” (NCSE, 2024, p. 122)

In addition to this focus on professional learning in inclusion, UDL and disability awareness, this policy advice recommend that the Department of Education and the NCCA “to examine and, if necessary, review curriculum frameworks and content at preschool, primary, and post-primary levels to ensure that curriculums at all three levels are underpinned by a UDL approach” (NCSE, 2024, p. 125).

WHAT IS UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

UDL is a comprehensive approach to education that proactively caters to the diverse identities, skills, learning strengths, and needs of all students, aiming to enhance student engagement and academic success. The overarching goal of UDL is to “support learner agency, the capacity to actively participate in making choices in service of learning goals” (CAST, 2024). The capacity of students to act as effective agents is linked to their learning community and how it is structured and the extent to which all voices, regardless of perceived status, are recognised, valued and can contribute in meaningful ways (Restani, 2021). Creating learning environments that foster this agency involves continuously examining power dynamics, challenging the notion of the educator as the sole authority, and providing space for students to make sense of content through independent and collective engagement and reflection. Moreover, supporting student agency requires acknowledging cultural and identity dimensions and addressing biases that may hinder learners from fully exercising their agency. UDL aims to redesign the environment to remove barriers, ensuring that every learner can engage in rigorous and meaningful learning. Thus, for UDL to be effective, it adopts a student-centred approach, emphasising multi-directional interactions between the student, context, teacher, curriculum, and both cognitive and emotional aspects (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014) with the aim to address the barriers in the learning environment rather than attempting to ‘fix’ the student.

THE UDL GUIDELINES 3.0

The UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) (Figure 1) are a tool to support the enactment of the principles of UDL to meet the learning needs of every student. UDL consists of the three core principles of UDL for providing choice and flexibility in how learning, teaching, and assessment is designed and occurs. Identity is threaded throughout the three principles.

- Multiple means of Engagement: designing multiple ways for students to engage with their learning through creating curiosity for learning, making learning relevant in an environment where students can be their authentic selves, and sustaining students’ efforts and motivation to learn.
- Multiple Means of Representation: designing multiple ways of presenting information to ensure students have equitable access to the content. This involves creating flexible content and materials for students to interact with, ensuring shared understanding, and activating, developing, and generalising knowledge and understanding. It also entails acknowledging and respecting how individuals, cultures, collective and personal identities, viewpoints, and ways of understanding are represented within the content. It is where students should see themselves and see others within the content.
- Multiple Means of Action and Expression: designing multiple ways for students to express and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, values, and skills through varying the methods and tools for students’

communication and construction of work, guiding goal setting and planning, and facilitating students' self-reflection and self-monitoring of their work.

Each principle has three guidelines that provide recommendations for increasing students' access to the learning goal, supporting the learning process, and supporting students executive functioning. Each guideline has associated considerations that offer more detailed suggestions for teachers on how to provide choice and flexibility within each principle. It is important that these considerations are used contextually and as part of a continuum of UDL enactment. They are not intended to be used a linear checklist. The UDL Guidelines 3.0 is intended to provide "a structure for proactively uncovering and addressing these barriers and for intentionally designing learning environments and experiences that more fully honour and value every learner" (CAST, 2024).

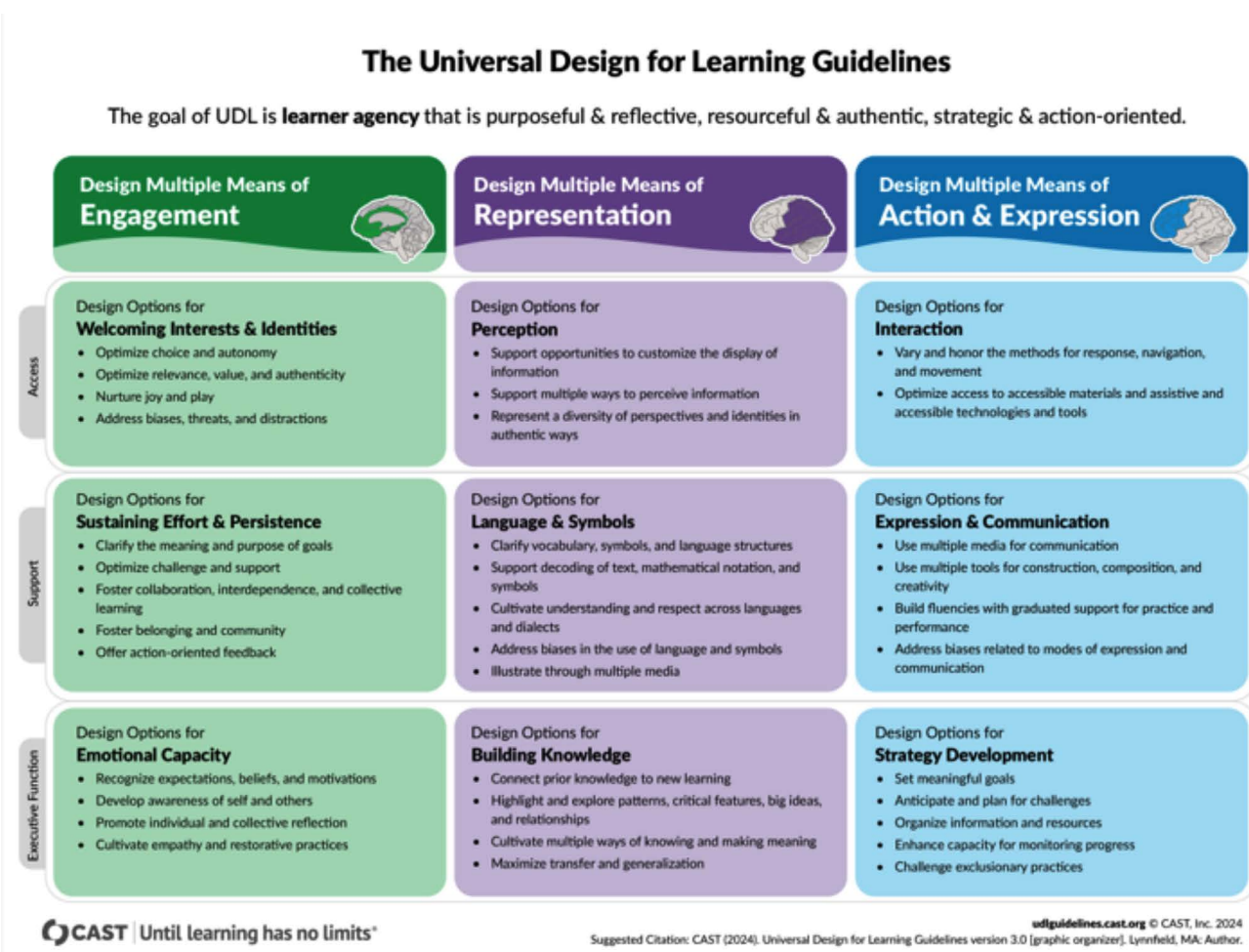


Figure 1. The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines. (CAST, 2024)

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING AS AN INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) exists at the intersection of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), social justice, and accessibility. In a world where systemic and societal barriers prevent individuals from reaching their full potential, it is crucial to scrutinise our teaching methods, tools, and materials. This ensures that our approaches and content minimise biases related to identity, race, culture, language, gender, disability, or class, which can restrict access, participation, engagement, and success. UDL is a strategy specifically created to tackle and diminish these inequities by eliminating barriers for all students (Chardin and Novak, 2021). Based on the concept of neurodiversity, UDL has developed from a framework for the inclusion of students with SEN and disability to one aspires to celebrate and respond to the variability of every student by reducing biases and systemic barriers that that result in inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes.. This is evident in the newest version of the UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) that were designed to address seven key themes of equity (CAST Collaborative notes, 2021) that closely align with Ireland's Equal Status Acts (2000-2018); race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, socio-economic status, language, disability, citizenship and nationality, and identity and stereotypes.

THE EMERGENCE OF UDL IN CURRICULUM DESIGN

UDL is a relatively new concept in early childhood, primary, and post-primary education in Ireland (Flood and Banks, 2021). However, efforts to integrate UDL into further and higher education are more advanced, thanks to the work of the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the training authority SOLAS, which support educators in developing inclusive practices for increasingly diverse student populations. Progress has been slower in other areas, but there are signs of advancement, particularly through the NCSE researching UDL practices internationally as part of a full inclusion model (NCSE, 2019) and making explicit recommendation regarding taking a UDL to inclusion in schools and embedding in professional learning programmes (NCSE, 2024).

Furthermore, as legislation develops around diversity, equity and inclusive education government bodies are tasked with providing advice, guidelines, and directives to educators to achieve inclusive education. Over the past three decades, the Department of Education's statutory body for curriculum design, the NCCA's, approach to inclusive curriculum design has evolved significantly. The NCCA's 1999 paper, "Special Educational Needs: Curriculum Issues," laid the groundwork for future developments in curriculum access for students with SEN (NCCA, 2016). Key terms from this paper, such as 'pathways,' 'individualised programmes,' 'continuum of provision,' and 'whole-school approach,' have become staples in subsequent NCCA and NCSE documents on SEN. The paper highlighted that the principles guiding education for students with SEN and disability are the same as those for all students (NCCA, 2016). These principles continue to be central to the NCCA's curriculum review and design processes. However, the NCCA faces the ongoing challenge of integrating new insights and approaches to inclusion, learning, teaching, and assessment into the Irish education context. This is reflected in the evolving language and methods in NCCA reviews, frameworks, specifications, and guidelines, including "Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics- A Review," (NCCA, 2015), "Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities" (NCCA, 2007), "Guidelines for Exceptionally Able Students" (NCCA, 2007a), "Intercultural Guidelines" (2006), "Guidelines: supporting teaching and learning in care and detention schools" (NCCA, 2023a) and "Traveller culture and history research report" (2023b). Additionally, the NCCA's ongoing work on Wellbeing and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) (2021a) has brought attention to sexual and gender identity within the inclusion dialogue. While global progress of SDG4 is slower than hoped (United Nations, 2024), these strategies indicate that Ireland is addressing educational disparities and working towards providing equal access to education for persons with disabilities, indigenous and minority groups, and vulnerable learners.

In the last decade the NCCA has also embedded UDL principles from previous UDL Guidelines iterations within curriculum designs, emphasising equality, then equity, and inclusion since the launch of the Framework for Junior Cycle (FJC) (Department of Education, 2015). This framework introduced broad and balanced learning outcomes, which have influenced the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (Department of Education 2019), the Primary Mathematics Curriculum (PMC) (Department of Education, 2023c), and the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023d). Learning outcomes are also a feature of recent Senior Cycle specification developments. Additionally, the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009) employs broad learning goals similar to learning outcomes, making all recent curriculum specifications outcome based.

The connection of these learning outcomes to student expectations highlights UDL's role in inclusive curriculum design. These outcomes express the principles, statements, and skills/competencies underpinning various frameworks. Their flexible design allows teachers to adapt and teach content in ways that suit their school's and students' contexts. Flexible pathways within curriculum frameworks further align with UDL principles. The Junior Cycle (Figure 2) provides a variety of options for students and teachers, allowing for a customizable approach to education. This includes subjects, short courses, Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, and Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) for students with moderate to severe learning disabilities. These programmes aim to help most students achieve their learning outcomes within mainstream classrooms, although many L1LP students attend special schools.

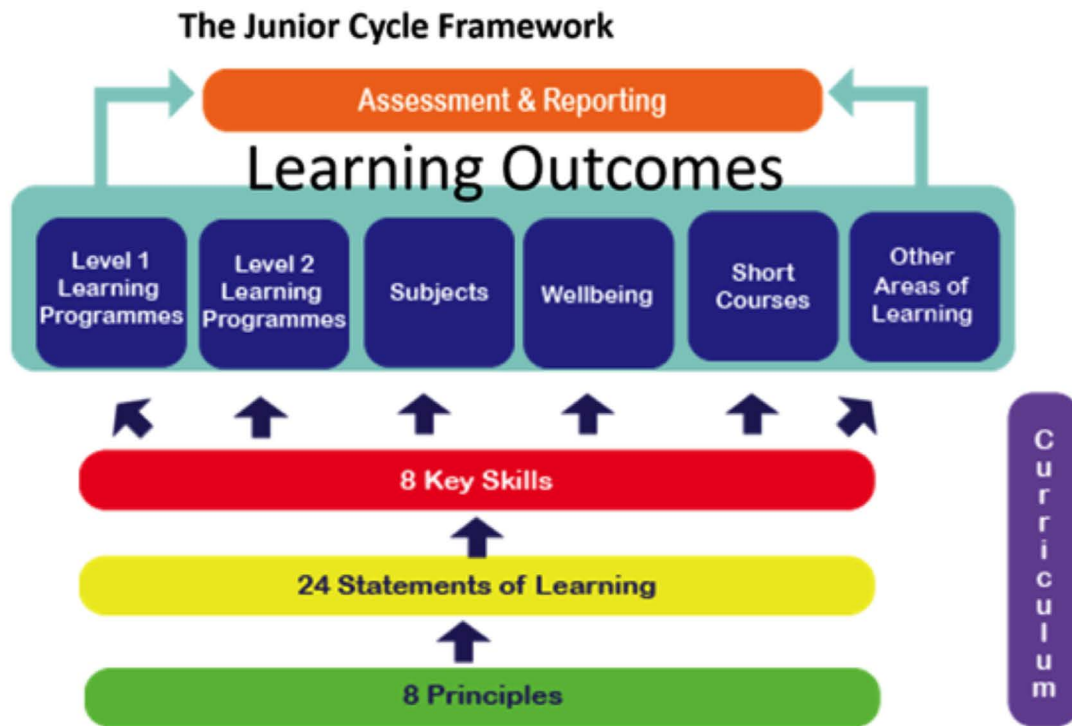


Figure 2: Junior Cycle Framework (Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), 2015)

The PLC and PMC have further advanced this inclusive learning strategy. Instead of offering separate programmes, they ensure all students have access to a common curriculum through the development of their Progression Continua (Figure 3), supporting each student’s progress towards their learning goals.

| Learning Outcomes for Oral Language (L1) | | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| Element | Number and label | Stage 1: Junior and senior infants | Stage 2: First and second classes | Stage 3: Third and fourth classes | Stage 4: Fifth and sixth classes |
| Communicating | 1. Engagement, listening and attention | Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to | Through appropriately engaging learning experiences, children should be able to | Through appropriately engaging learning experiences, children should be able to | Through appropriately engaging learning experiences, children should be able to |
| | | Show interest in, demonstrate joint attention and actively listen and attend for enjoyment and for a particular purpose, and in other languages where appropriate. TF1, C1+2 | Recognise themselves as listeners and speakers, engaging purposefully and empathetically with others. | Express their individuality through their knowledge and use of various languages. | Actively listen and attend for extended periods of time, to include other languages where appropriate, listening for more detail and nuanced meanings. |
| PROGRESSION STEPS ARE FOR ALL CHILDREN ACROSS ALL STAGES | | | | | |
| | | a The child... | b The child... | c The child... | d The child... |
| | | e The child... | f The child... | g The child... | h The child... |
| | | i The child... | j The child... | k The child... | |

Figure 3. Progression Continua PLC. Oral Language example (NCCA, 2019, p6)

UDL is even more evident in the PMC’s support materials of the “Primary Mathematics Curriculum” (NCCA, 2023c) (Figure 4) where the language of UDL is threaded through the support material with the key considerations and practical to support and promote inclusive, teaching and assessing aligned to the three UDL principles and the guidelines and checkpoints of The UDL Guidelines 2.2 (CAST, 2018).

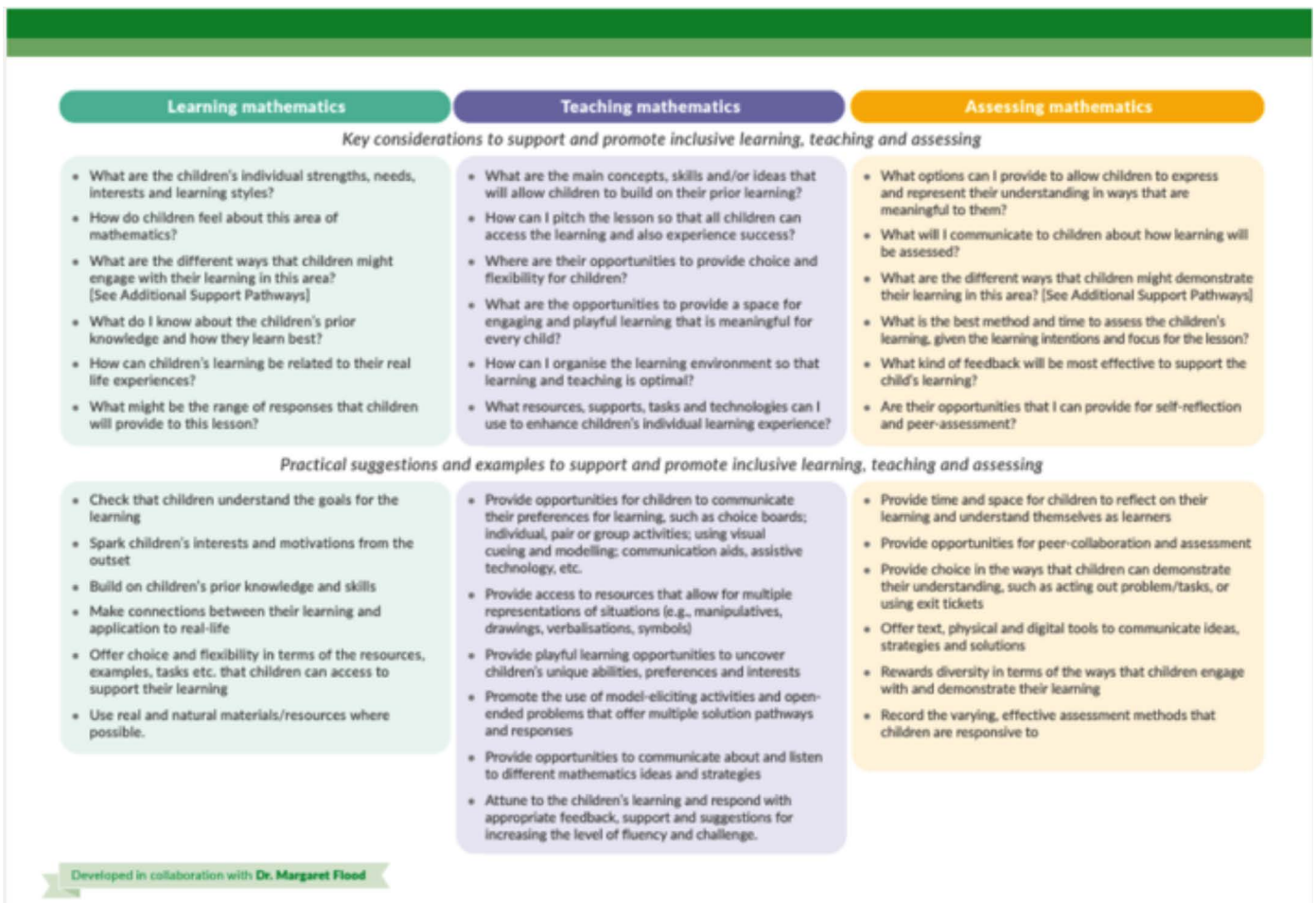


Figure 4. Key considerations and examples to support and promote inclusive learning, teaching and assessing (NCCA, 2023c, p. 2)

The principles of equity, inclusion, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are evident in the ongoing review and redevelopment of programmes and documents. The Advisory Report on the Senior Cycle Review (NCCA, 2021b) emphasises flexibility and choice. A guiding principle of proposed key competencies for senior cycle, inclusive education and diversity, states that “The educational experience in senior cycle is inclusive of every student, valuing and respecting diversity and the contribution each student can make. Every student has enjoyable experiences in and meaningful outcomes from senior cycle education” (NCCA, 2023e p.114). There is however still reference to differentiation in specification documents (NCCA, 2023e) that form part of the senior cycle review and redesign. The updated guidance for teachers of children in care or detention “Guidelines: Supporting teaching and learning in care and detention schools” (NCCA, 2023a) explicitly underscores UDL as an inclusive approach to learning, teaching, and assessment, aiming to prevent educational disadvantage due to a student’s setting.

In tandem with UDL emerging in curriculum design, it also became a consideration for teacher support services, professional learning organisations and initial teacher education providers. JCT, now Oide, incorporated UDL into aspects of their professional learning programmes for schools and teachers (JCT, 2015-2024) and NCSE will be piloting UDL in 45 schools in Ireland, starting September 2025. Furthermore, initial teacher education providers are incorporating UDL into their programmes with universities offering a range of options from micro-credentials in UDL to master’s programmes in UDL.

DISCUSSION

Inclusive education in Ireland has evolved from a predominantly special education-focused approach to a broader perspective that acknowledges the diverse needs of students in a diverse society. The country’s commitment to human

rights, as outlined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in the Equal Status Acts, has played a crucial role in shaping inclusive education policies. The Department of Education's strategies underscore the commitment to fostering inclusion, promoting equity, and ensuring that no student is educationally disadvantaged, while our national curricula continue to be designed to be more equitable and inclusive for every student. These strategies collectively aim to create an educational environment that celebrates diversity and values the identity of all students, thus contributing to the development of an inclusive society in Ireland. Nonetheless, there remain challenges. Differentiation and UDL are used interchangeably at the micro, meso and macro levels and there appears not to be a shared understanding and messaging of UDL, with government bodies already having to correct publications where UDL has been misrepresented. For example, the NSCE has noted on its website that corrections were made on an earlier version of "Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes: An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society" (NCSE, 2024) to address using UDL, Universal Design (UD), and universal interchangeably and in the incorrect context. (NCSE, 2024).

While this paper signposts where the key concepts of UDL are underpinning recent curriculum developments, these may need to be more explicit if teachers are to be clear on their role in teaching UDL in their learning, teaching and assessment. This raises the question of the government agencies such as the NCCA, NCSE, Oide, and the Inspectorate's, application of UDL to their work and how best to support teachers engage with UDL from the curriculum design process to their practice. However, apart from the efforts of support services such as Oide, professional learning for UDL at early childhood, primary and post-primary to this point is ad hoc with Department of Education funded programmes for teachers still focusing on SEN courses for individual special education teachers rather than the broader lens of inclusion, disability and diversity awareness and UDL available to special and mainstream teachers, or at whole-school level.

There is also the concern with the significant focus put on UDL in 2024 that course providers will add UDL as an additional to course design with no context for the learner. Most importantly, is the publication of the new UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) which sees significant changes to the previous iteration. This will have an impact on current and immediate programmes being delivered, such as the NCSE UDL pilot programmes. It is crucial that in such cases, educators and facilitators take the time to ensure they understand the new guidelines and how they apply to the Irish context. Thus, in a time when the concept of inclusive education and how to achieve it is so in flux continued dialogues, research, reflection, and policy evolution to realise the goal of inclusive education for all students in Ireland is imperative.

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