Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Because early learning populations are diverse, there is a need for preschool professionals to be well informed in approaches and foundations that meet the unique needs and diversity of all students and families. Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can help to comprehensively promote all children’s development and sense of belonging. All children have the right to quality care and learning environments—and the right to belong.

Inclusion

Inclusion in early education means that all children will be given the opportunity to reach their full potential: children who are typically developing; children with identified disabilities, learning and/or behavior challenges; and children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) in 2009 developed the Early Childhood Inclusion joint position statement on inclusion that states:

“Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential.” (NAEYC 2009)

Inclusion is often focused on the developmental disability and special needs of children. However, inclusion can also be used in a broader context relative to opportunities and access for children from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. It is now acknowledged that culture has a profound influence on early development and learning, and that early care and education environments and practices must reflect this influence.

The law requires that children have access to supports in their learning environments. Early intervention is the first place to start when there is a concern that help may be needed. Early intervention is a network of services and supports put in place for an individual child with an identified developmental delay or special need or who may be considered “at-risk” for developing a delay.

“Inclusion … is important, not just educationally, but socially. You make friends and you get to know people and you learn how to navigate through life by being with your peers in your community… Disability is part of our natural diversity…” – Dan Habib
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal design (UD) is a concept that can be used to support access to environments in many different types of settings through the removal of physical and structural barriers. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) reflects practices that provide multiple and varied formats for instruction and learning. UDL principles and practices help to ensure that every young child has access to learning environments, to typical home or educational routines and activities, and to the general education curriculum.

All children need to be active and engaged in the environment. Not only do providers need to plan for varying age groups, but also within those groups they need to plan for varying abilities and cultures. To do this, they need to plan curriculum, materials, and environments so that all children can learn and grow by minimizing barriers. For example, ramps and wide doorways can minimize barriers for children in wheelchairs. This same idea is applied to goals for learning.

References