LEARNING IDEAS

Universal Design in Pre-K and Early Elementary Classrooms

What is Universal Design?
Universal design is an approach to designing environments and products so that the greatest number of people can use them. When applied to curriculum, teachers consider the potential barriers inherent in materials and activities, and plan many avenues to learning. This way, the greatest number of children can participate in the content and activities without adaptation.

Why Consider Universal Design in Education?
Children enter classrooms with different experiences, backgrounds, interests, emotional, social, and academic strengths and needs. Planning for this diversity by intentionally creating accessible teaching processes and materials will allow more children to learn successfully.

How Can Universal Design Concepts Benefit Pre-K and Early Elementary Education?
Teachers frequently create adaptations and modifications for students. With a universal design framework, teachers deliberately plan to use a variety of methods and media when presenting content. Educators assume different levels of understanding and interaction within the lesson and plan accordingly. Children at different levels will interact with and gain meaning from the grade level content with less need for special adaptations.

Consider the following when you begin to implement universal design in pre-k and early elementary classrooms:

1. Plan ahead for access to the grade level standards or early childhood learning guidelines:
   - Consider your students’ range of capacities in vision, hearing, communication, movement, attention and comprehension when you design instruction.
   - Review your curriculum for hidden barriers to access; for example, a standard that reads “students will write a one page essay” could be changed to “students will compose a one page essay.” Composing removes the barrier of writing and could be dictated, pointed to on a communication board, or compiled with pictures.
   - Design your instructional assessment cycle using a variety of multi-sensory materials and media.
   - Seek input from parents to provide information about their children’s interest.
2. Provide physical and cognitive access to all aspects of the school day:

- Make sure all indoor and outdoor spaces are fully accessible to children.
- Assess the routines of the day (i.e., carrying a lunch tray in the cafeteria, riding the bus, going from the playground to the classroom) and minimize the obstacles to independence.
- Make certain that multiple representations of print are part of instruction (i.e., picture symbols, photos, and digital text).
- Provide multiple formats for children to demonstrate what they know and can do (i.e., eye gaze, video/audiotape, yes and no to constructed questions, and performance).

3. Utilize technology as an integral part of the everyday life in the classroom to increase access to the activities and routine for all students:

- Options for low-tech support include a triangular pencil grip, a talking calculator, a black cutout card for reading one line at a time, and a voice-activated tape recorder.
- Higher tech options may include word processors, graphic organizer software, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, on-screen keyboards, switches and scanning methods, and digital libraries.

Where to learn more:


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