

Article originally published in *Educators' Spotlight Digest*: Volume 2, Issue 3 (Fall 2007)

## **Meeting the Learning and Information Needs of All Students: Universal Design for School Libraries**

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Over 5 million students aged 6 to 21 received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) during the 2000–2001 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

In partial response to this growing population of diverse learners, the relatively recent and highly controversial No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has served as a catalyst between special educators and other professionals in educational organizations (WestEd, 2004). Under NCLB, the federal government holds individual schools and school districts accountable for the achievement of all students, including those with disabilities. Students with disabilities represent a special subgroup of students whose student achievement data is now disaggregated from their peers and closely followed to ensure that adequate yearly progress is being made.

This shift in accountability from special educators and parents of children with disabilities to schools and school districts represents an important change that holds great potential for school libraries. Greater diversity of learners in a culture of increased accountability challenges all educators, including school library media specialists, to empower every student to achieve the same high standards (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Provision of school library media services to students with disabilities is a topic not often addressed in the professional literature (Murray, 2002). However, as active members of the school community charged with analyzing and meeting the learning and information needs of all students, the author of this article is certain that most school library media specialists would agree that increased attention is needed in the area of serving students with disabilities in the school library media center (American Association of School Librarians, 1998; Wesson & Keefe, 1995).

This article outlines several strategies for creating inclusive school library programs that benefits all students, including those with disabilities.

### **Overview**

Though many school library media specialists have received little or no explicit training on meeting the needs of students with disabilities, they can begin to help these students feel welcome in the school library through a few no-cost changes (Wojahn, 2006). Maintaining a positive, proactive approach toward students with disabilities is essential to creating an inclusive school library program. School library media specialists may need to review the varying

learning needs and abilities of all of their students as they plan instruction and choose information resources.

A second key step school library media specialists can take toward creating a more accessible school library program involves furthering their own education (Wojahn, 2006). In addition to using their expertise to locate quality information resources on meeting the learning and information needs of students with disabilities, school library media specialists can also collaborate with special educators to learn more about designing positive learning experiences for students with disabilities (Hopkins, 2005). Besides offering general information about accommodation and inclusion, special educators can also provide school library media specialists with more specific information about the needs and abilities of individual students.

In order to create a more inclusive school library, school library media specialists can also share their knowledge with the library staff (Wojahn, 2006). Any adult interactions (aides, volunteers, etc.) with students in the school library have the potential to impact positive change.

In addition to a proactive approach, additional education, and shared knowledge, school library programs can be made more inclusive by simply following the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

### **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**

Universal design, a phrase coined by Ron Mace, refers to an architectural movement calling for the design “of all products, buildings, and exterior spaces to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible” (Mace, Hardie, & Place, 1996). Universal design does not focus specifically on people with disabilities; the goal of universal design is to make the world better for everyone by eliminating environmental barriers.

Curb cuts and close-captioned television are often cited as examples of universal design. While curb cuts and close-captioned television were originally intended to help those with disabilities (the physically impaired and the deaf, respectively), both resulted in increased usability for all; curb cuts made travel easier for those pushing shopping carts or riding bicycles and close-captioning proved useful in noisy environments such as gyms and cafes (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Rooted in the architectural movement, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a pedagogical approach that endeavors to meet the unique educational needs of all students by minimizing learning barriers while maximizing learning opportunities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The framework of UDL is based on three principles:

Principle 1: To support recognition learning, provide multiple, flexible methods of presentation (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Principle 2: To support strategic learning, provide multiple, flexible methods of expression and apprenticeship (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Principle 3: To support affective learning, provide multiple, flexible options for engagement (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Like the architectural movement, the three principles of UDL share the common goal of reducing barriers for students with disabilities while enhancing opportunities for all students (Rose & Meyer, 2002). This is accomplished by providing students with increased options.

### **Universal Design for School Libraries**

As school library media specialists design and evaluate their school library programs, they must carefully consider the learning and information needs of all members of the school community, including students with disabilities. Specifically, school library media specialists should keep the three principles of Universal Design for Learning in mind as they: provide instruction; collaborate with other educators; provide expertise in locating, using, and evaluating information resources; and define the policies of the school library program (American Association of School Librarians, 1998; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

As instructors, school library media specialists must consider the varying learning needs, abilities, and styles of all students (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). The design and delivery of instruction in the school library should include multiple representations of the same information (Rose & Meyer, 2002). For example, while school library media specialists demonstrate using subscription databases to locate information using an overhead projector to display what is shown on the computer screen, they can also provide a verbal description of the steps that they are taking to accomplish the task. The verbal description has obvious benefits to students who are blind or otherwise visually impaired, but may also help other students in the class that learn best by listening.

As instructional partners, school library media specialists must collaborate with other educators to design authentic learning tasks and assessments (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). As mentioned previously, while school library media specialists may be able to easily locate information resources designed for (or easily adaptable to the needs of) students with disabilities, special educators are “likely to possess more detailed knowledge concerning effective, data-based instructional strategies for students with disabilities” (Downing, 2006). In order to provide students with increased options for acquiring knowledge and demonstrating what they have learned, school library media specialists should collaborate with special educators to plan, conduct, and evaluate learning activities (American Association of School Librarians, 1998; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

As information specialists, school library media specialists provide both intellectual and physical access to information (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). The principles of UDL specify, however, that the goal of the

school library media specialist should not be to simply make information accessible to all students, but rather to make learning accessible (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Although these goals appear to be in conflict with one another, especially given that unlimited access to information can actually overwhelm students (causing information overload) and undermine learning, the opposite is true.

As school library media specialists teach students to become more information literate, the principles of UDL are supported. As students identify and understand information concepts, they begin to recognize patterns. For example, as students examine different information resources (books, websites, etc.), they become familiar with the information concept, “author,” and use this concept to make sense of new information resources, thus becoming a strategy for engaging with information. Also, as students become more information literate, their confidence increases and they become more engaged in learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

As program administrators, school library media specialists guide and direct of the activities of the school library media program, including advocacy and management of resources (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). In this role, school library media specialists are responsible for the both the physical environment and the learning environment. In terms of the physical environment, school library media specialists should keep universal design in mind as they make decisions about the facilities. For example, maintaining an uncluttered environment with wide aisles that are clear of obstructions not only benefits students with mobility impairments, but all students (Burgstahler, 2007; Wojahn, 2006). As school library media specialists design and maintain learning spaces, they should keep in mind the principles of UDL (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Choosing an instructional space away from potential distractions (e.g. the noise of the computer lab) will minimize barriers for all students, including those that are easily distracted and those with hearing impairment (Wojahn, 2006).

The careful consideration of a broad range of student abilities and disabilities, as well as other characteristics that affect learning, is essential to creating inclusive school library programs (Burgstahler, 2007). Universal design and Universal Design for Learning provide school library media specialists with a framework for accomplishing this task in each of the responsibilities described above (American Association of School Librarians, 1998; Rose & Meyer, 2002)

## **Summary**

School library media specialists should strive to meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population by creating inclusive school library programs.

School library media specialists can help students with disabilities feel more comfortable in the school library media center by taking a positive attitude and educating themselves further about meeting the learning and information needs

of this population. They can then share this with others in the school library media center in an effort to foster a culture of inclusion.

School library programs can also be made more inclusive by simply following the principles of universal design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

These principles should be kept in mind as school library media specialists act as instructors, instructional partners, information specialists, and program administrators.

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