

Universal Design in K-12 Education

Mickey Rowe

www.mickeyrowe.com

@themickeyrowe on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter

Accessibility: According to the CDC accessibility is when the needs of people with disabilities are specifically considered, and products, services, and experiences or facilities are built or modified so that they can be used by people with Disabilities.

Universal Design: Universal design is the design of buildings, products or environments to make them accessible and understandable to people, regardless of age, disability or other factors. It addresses common barriers to participation by creating things that can be used by the maximum number of people possible.

An environment (or any building, product, or service in that environment) should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it. This is not a special requirement, for the benefit of only a minority of the population. It is a fundamental condition of good design. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits. By considering the diverse needs and abilities of all throughout the design process, universal design creates products, services and environments that meet peoples' needs. Simply put, universal design is good design.

The two models of disability:

Medical Model: The medical model says that a person's disability is the problem. That there is something wrong with the person that needs to be fixed, made whole, or cured.

The Social Model: The social model says that the actual problem is an ableist and inaccessible society that is set up by and for nondisabled people, that it is society that needs to be repaired. Or maybe even, our society needs to be "cured" for not caring about and prioritizing making itself accessible to everyone.

Remember that according to the Census 20% of the population is disabled and according to the CDC 25% of the population is disabled.

Also remember Universal Design helps everyone! And Universal Design isn't limited to just disability. Sending home bilingual or multilingual paperwork and report cards to parents counts as Universal Design.

The Curb Cut Effect means that Universal Design and Accessibility help all of us!

- Captions on videos make all our lives easier. Captions on videos are required for the (d)Deaf and hard of hearing community but help us all. A survey of U.S. consumers found that 92% view videos with the sound off on their mobile devices according to Verizon media.
- Ramps in airports help travelers with rolling luggage.
- Curb Cuts in sidewalks help parents pushing strollers and delivery people rolling dollies.

Universal Design makes all our lives easier whether or not we have disabilities.

Before we go on let's cover some anti-ableist language.

Ableism: Ableism is the discrimination or prejudice against people who have disabilities. Ableism can take the form of ideas and assumptions, stereotypes, attitudes and practices, physical barriers in the environment, or larger scale oppression. It is oftentimes unintentional and most people are completely unaware of the impact of their words, actions, laws, or policies.

Euphemisms:

Watch video: [NOT SPECIAL NEEDS | March 21 – World Down Syndrome Day | #NotSpecialNeeds - YouTube](#)

When we use euphemisms, even though the intention is good, it unintentionally teaches people to have discomfort around disability. It re-enforces the idea that disability is so

uncomfortable and so bad that we should avoid even saying the word disability. It unintentionally projects that disability = bad or wrong or sad or uncomfortable.

“Disabled” and “disability” doesn’t equal bad, broken, or less than. Disability isn’t a bad thing.

#SayTheWord

Don’t say: Special, Handicapable, Differently-abled.

Instead say: Disabled. Disability. Disabled person, or person with a disability.

A few sources:

- 1) [Disabled not 'special needs': Experts explain why we shouldn't say it \(usatoday.com\)](#)
- 2) ['Disabled': Just #SayTheWord NPR](#)
- 2) [Why “Special Needs” is Not Helpful | by Rebecca Cokley | Medium](#)
- 3) [“Special needs” is an ineffective euphemism \(nih.gov\)](#)
- 4) [Why We Say ‘Disability,’ Not ‘Special Needs’ – The Mighty Explains | The Mighty](#)
- 5) [Disability Etiquette | Proper Terminology | CerebralPalsy.orgCerebralPalsy.org](#)
- 6) [Should You Use Special Needs or Disabilities? - Chicago Parent](#)
- 7) [Why we need to stop saying "Special Needs" - AccessNow](#)
- 8) [#SaytheWord: A disability culture commentary on the erasure of “disability”. - PsycNET \(apa.org\)](#)

How do we learn about disability? From disabled adults. The disability community’s motto is “Nothing about us without us.”

Don't say: Wheelchair bound. This has a negative connotation like a wheelchair is a bad thing. Wheelchairs don't limit people's mobility. They do the opposite. They give people freedom.

The person may also be an ambulatory chair user meaning that they are not a fulltime chair user. That they do have the ability to stand up.

Instead say: Person who benefits from using a wheelchair, wheelchair user.

Or if you want to get spicy with it call it a chariot of mobility!

Don't say: What's wrong with you?

Nothing is wrong with me! I have a disability but that isn't a bad thing and certainly doesn't mean anything is "wrong" with me.

Instead say: What kind of accommodations might be helpful for you?

Don't say upon finding out someone has a disability: But you're so pretty!

The problem here is the **but**, making it seem like a disability would make someone less beautiful, fabulous, etc.

Don't say: Normal, healthy, or able-bodied.

This centers non-disabled people as the norm in conversations about disability and makes the disabled person the "other".

Instead say: Non-disabled. This centers disability in conversations about disability.

Things to try to avoid:

Infantilize people with developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Touching others mobility devices without consent. Even if they are not near it and you are trying to move it out of the way for something. Always ask consent or ask if they'd rather move it themselves.

Talk about the student (to their parent or caretaker) as if they aren't there or can't understand you.

Okay, let's get to the universal design part.

What kinds of Disabilities might we need to accommodate?

Blind/Low-Vision

(d)Deaf/Heard of hearing

Autistic/Neurodivergent

Mobility Disabilities

Physical Disabilities

Intellectual Disabilities

Deaf/Blind

Group work: What kind of accommodations could we make for these Individuals?

Discussion.

Asking about accommodations:

Because you, the adult, have more power in a classroom than the students, it can be really scary for a student to ask for an accommodation they might need.

Not every student with a disability will have an IEP or 504 plan, as those often require the parent to advocate. And disabled people are often the first or only disabled person in their immediate family so the parents don't have a shared lived experience of disability.

It can really help if you bring up the conversation with the whole class at the beginning of the year by saying something like "If anyone has a disability, please let me know what accommodations might be helpful. Accommodations we've made in the past include but are not limited to.... (Large print text, etc.)"

Everyone talks a big game about inclusion now adays but that doesn't necessarily mean the person is a safe ally. Listing a few accommodations, you've made in the past really shows the person that you are safe, you are an ally, and you walk the walk.

For Universal Design the goal is integrated (rather than segregated) special education services whenever possible.

How can we plan for accessibility from the start?

- Digital materials such as word documents as an option in addition to printed worksheets should always be available. These allow individuals with dyslexia, who are blind, or who are low vision to change the font, the font size, or use an e-reader to read the worksheet out loud. All this requires is being willing to email out the word document you already created in addition to printing it.
- Have a variety of ways for students to learn material, such as from a textbook, from a video with captions, or a hands-on exercise, etc. Options are key. **When presenting options, it is important that these are truly equal options. One option is not "better" or more preferable for the teacher than any other option. All options allow for equal participation.**
- Allow for students to work together! We are a community, and we work together! Each student shares different strengths and weaknesses. When we appreciate each other, we can work with each other. For example: an autistic student may be able to read content out loud for a blind student. That blind student may be able to help the autistic student make friends. Disabled and non-disabled students can both help each other too!
- This microphone makes this workshop more accessible for hard of hearing folks. While I could just project, my using a microphone helps everyone to hear more clearly.
- Add captions to videos for (d)Deaf and hard of hearing folks.
- Provide multiple options for students to demonstrate their knowledge.
- Provide an option to use pen and paper or a computer.

- Be ready to provide image descriptions for charts or graphs. These can be read out loud or included in the word document for the e-reader to read. For example when going through a slideshow, say out loud, “This is a picture of a Christmas tree decorated with sparkly ornaments.”
- Low tech options exist too! Can you think of any?

Table work.

Discussion

What other ways can you think of to create a more universally designed classroom?

Discussion

Most importantly:

Always ask a disabled person what they need and then believe them when they tell you.

Don't out students' specific disabilities without their permission. But do educate the class in general using books or TV shows without outing any specific students.

You can use videos: [Asperger's syndrome explained for children. Aurthor TV Show - YouTube](#)

Or by adding books about disability to your classroom library!

How else can we create an anti-ableist classroom?

Learn about and teach Disability History!

- Do you know who Ed Roberts is? He is the founding father of the disability rights movement and was the first wheelchair user to attend the University of California. He died in 1995.

- Judy Heumann is the mother of the disability rights movement. She helped to organize the 504-sit ins.
- The 504 act was the first law that said disabled people can't be discriminated against based on their disability. This happened in 1977 and was the longest occupation of a federal building in U.S. history. People were bathing and showering in the sinks. It was only possible because the black panthers lent an assist and delivered food. They didn't leave the building for 26 days.
- The Capital Crawl in 1990 got the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990! And it was an eight-year-old girl who got the law passed by getting out of her wheelchair and crawling up the steps to the capitol building.

Watch video: [Jennifer Keelan Crawls The Capital Steps "I'll take all night if I have to" - YouTube](#)

For continued learning:

Follow disabled content creators on social media to learn from disabled adults! That's the best way to learn! And engage with their content! Social media algorithms have been asked to make content about disability less visible to "prevent cyber bullying". You can help by engaging and teaching the algorithm and social media sites that content made by people with disabilities is positive and we love to see it!

Making An Autism Friendly Classroom

Rule one: Always assume competency.

Make sure that your special ed students get to attend and be heard at their own IEP meetings! That's a great way to teach them that they have agency over their own life. A great way to counter act all the infantilization they probably get. And a great way engage them in their own educational goals!

So what is autism?

- Difficulty in social interactions. Difficulty with non-verbal communication such as eye contact or body language.
- Difficulty developing or maintaining relationships.
- Sensory Processing Disorder: Trouble processing information from the senses, like sight and sound. This includes proprioception.
- Autistic people will often stim. (Flapping, rocking, repetitive tapping or hitting, spinning, etc.)
- Trouble with transitions or when something changes unexpectedly.
- Expectations, Schedules, and Transitions:

Expectations, Schedules, and Transitions:

Create visual schedules for students so that they know what to expect during the day.

Lead up to transitions. We are going to keep doing this for five more minutes and then we are going to transition to [blank].

In one minute, we are going to transition to [blank].



You could create a "social story" for going to an assembly:

- 1) We are going to go to the gymnasium.
- 2) Then we are going to sit down. (It may be loud so we can bring headphones or ear defenders.)

- 3) We are going to listen to someone talk about being autistic.
- 4) We can applaud at the end if we want to.
- 5) We will all walk back to class together.

Or one for a fire drill:



This could look different depending on the age of the student but can always be helpful.

Stimming and Focusing:

Stimming is great! It is actually how autistic people self-regulated. When an autistic person is stimming, they don't wish they could stop. Rather they are soothing themselves and regulating themselves.

Stimming helps students to focus.

You can provide stimming toys or fidget toys.



You can have a carpet with an interesting texture for students to take breaks on. The options are endless.

You can provide seating options that allow for discreet stimming such as this sensory "prickly seat" and this "wobble seat".



Sensory Processing Disorder:

Classrooms are loud!

Allow for students to escape and regulate themselves before they begin to shut down or become dysregulated.

Provide options such as “ear defenders”:



Provide Options:

Give the student agency to decide what they need and when. They know their bodies best. And teaching students how to self-regulate and know their own bodies is an amazing life skill that autistic students need to learn.

My Sensory Tools

I am feeling:

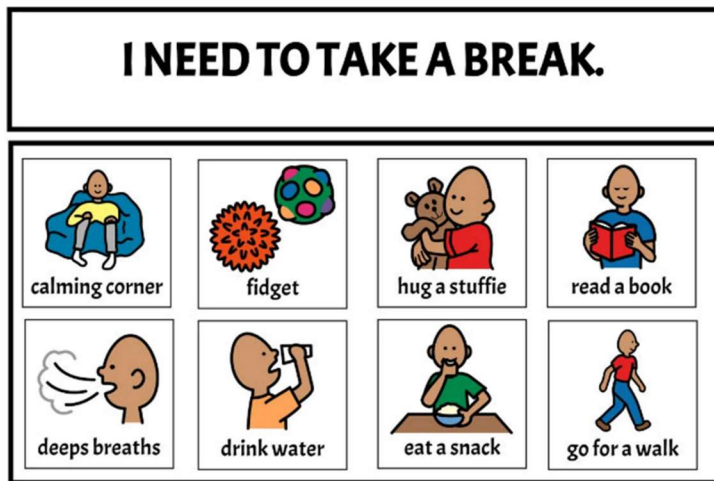


I NEED A TOOL.

A sensory tool can help me calm my body and focus my brain. I have many sensory tool options.

I choose these tools:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



The student may need to escape the classroom to reset and that's okay. You would rather a student take a brief break and then come back to learning than become dysregulated in which case they might not actually be learning or retaining information for the rest of the day.

Posted Lesson Goals:

Autistic students are very quick to check out if they don't see the reasoning or importance of a certain assignment or project.

Post clear learning goals.

And whenever possible privately relate these learning goals back to a student's special interest.

For example, "Emily, I know you really love learning about beetles. This exercise is supposed to teach you algebra which is something that beetle scientists would need to use so often to figure out how many beetles might be in a certain area. Pretty exciting!" This will get any autistic person extremely excited about learning anything or completing any assignment.

Create Quiet Corners

Who here has a quiet corner?

Can you describe it?

But this 'Stimming' is distracting other students!

Provide an option to listen while pacing or stimming in the back of the room so that the autistic person has an option to move, while being behind other students where they won't distract.

And most importantly educate others in the class with this script for the beginning of the year.

"I would like to invite ALL my students to focus in class in ways that are most helpful for them. You might notice classmates using a variety of behaviors such as stimming, echolalia, tics, alternative communication, or the use of supports such as fidgets, headphones or tablets. If you need more space to pace to focus, you can do that in the back of the classroom. If you want need a break, here is a visual choice board of appropriate things we can do to take a quick break in this room. We don't need to worry about our fellow classmates. We are going to trust that they are the experts on their own bodies."