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Today's classrooms are overflowing with a diverse group of learners who require personalized differentiation in their instruction. It would be unwise to ever enter a classroom under the assumption that all students will be able to learn the same way. Public laws, policies, state standards and benchmarks have all been created in the hopes of giving both students and teachers the tools and resources that they need in order to ensure the success of all students in the classroom. As an educator in the 21st century classroom, I have been exposed to the various sources that can be used to better supply students with various learning needs in the classroom. As a resource to guide each student through the learning process, I will utilize the appropriate tools that have been granted me to ensure the success of all students. These tools include laws and policies which have been implemented to support students teaching a diverse group of learners in the classroom. Furthermore, UDL and RTI are both methods that provide the means for differentiating instruction for various learners. Finally, special accommodations can be put into place during the planning process to suffice the demands of learners of diverse and unique backgrounds. With these tools, every teacher can feel assured that every student will find success in all academic, behavioral and social endeavors.

Our schools today are overflowing with an overwhelming amount of **exceptional children** included in special education programs consisting of ESL students, GT students, At-Risk students, OHI students, LD students, CD students, EDBD students, ADD students, ASD students, and CLD student. According to the NICHCY website, **High incident disabilities** include the areas of Learning Disabilities, Speech and language disabilities and Emotional and Behavioral disabilities. These students should be given special attention in the classroom as their academic and social performance is often affected by the implications their disorders. On the opposite side of the spectrum, **low incident disabilities** include disabilities under OHI such as ADD/ADHD, Autism spectrum disorder and Traumatic Brain injuries. These students, all though there are fewer of them found in the classroom, should also be given special attention in both the general education and special education classroom.

Laws and policies have been instated which grant the support and guidance needed for educators in both the special education and general education classrooms. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or **IDEA**, which was originally enacted by Congress I 1975 and was recently revised in 2004, it states "disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminished the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving education results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities." In other words, this law has ensured that all individuals, despite their special needs or disabilities should be granted the same rights as every other individual in the general population. Another law which reinforces the beliefs of equitable education for all students is the **No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)** which empowers teachers to use "educational programs and practices that have been proven effective through rigorous scientific research." These programs give teachers the tools they need to ensure that each student is given the appropriate instruction for their individual learning styles. Both of these laws recognize the unique skills and abilities that is possessed within each child – re-establishing the theory of **Gardeners multiple intelligences** which states that there is a wide spectrum of students

who specialize in their own unique learning styles and skills. There are eight multiple intelligences included in Gardner's theory which encompasses a colorful continuum of learners in the classroom. Interpersonal learners possess the ability to relate to others and work efficiently with their peers while intrapersonal learners have acquired the ability to self-analyze and reflect. Visual spatial learners have the ability to think in pictures and visualize a future result while musical learners are keen in their ability to make or compose music, sing, and appreciate the arts. Bodily Kinesthetic learners enjoy the use of bodily skills to solve problems, create products or present ideas while logical learners have the ability to reason through their problems. Lastly, linguistic learners possess the ability to read, write and communicate with words while naturalist learners are better at recognizing flora and fauna and making distinctions in the natural world. Each of these learners bring their own unique character and personality to the classroom and, given the right tools and the appropriate laws to support them, educators are become better equipped to deal with the diverse nature of today's classrooms.

UDL and RTI are unique strategies and methods which provide essential tools and resources for teachers to utilize in their diverse classrooms. UDL and RTI both provide the framework within which full inclusion of all students can be effectively accomplished. This means that all students will be given the same privileges and benefits as the next student, despite their special circumstances or distinct needs. Through the **full inclusion** model, students will be able to experience "meaningful participation of students with disabilities and other special needs in the general education classrooms and programs." Through this program, students should also be provided with the least restrictive environment, ensuring that they are placed as close to the general education classroom as possible. It seems the students that will be included in the classroom this year will include ESL students, Gifted and Talented students, students with various disabilities, students who are falling below grade level, and students in special family circumstances. Through the **least restrictive environment** guidelines, proper placement and follow-up instruction for each student will be specific to each student's needs but will also attempt to include these students in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible.

This is where UDL and RTI come into place. **Universal design for learning** is a set of principles that can be used for designing curriculum that provides students with equal opportunities to learn. UDL houses the elements needed to make up successful classroom instruction by targeting the three areas of the brain used by students in the learning process. **The recognition network**, which is located at the back of the brain, provides **multiple means of representation** which determines how students perceive and comprehend the information being presented to them. Teachers can better apply this principle to teaching by approaching content differently. For example, rather than just providing textual representations of content, teachers can also include visual and auditory clues which will assist more students in grasping the overall content that is being conveyed. The **strategic network**, or the "how of learning" which is located at the front of the brain, provides guidelines for educators to **provide multiple means of action and expression**. This means that teachers can take into account the different ways that students can navigate through the learning process and express what they know. An example of this can include making accommodations for students with motor disabilities by providing various ways through which they can approach specific tasks – while some will be able to express themselves through oral speech, others may need to write their responses or signal their answers in other forms. Finally, The **affective network**, or the "why of learning" is located at the center or the core of the brain. This approach allows teachers to provide students with **multiple means of engaging** with content. Educators can make accommodations for students who differ in the ways that they are engaged or motivated in the learning process. While some students will be highly engaged by spontaneous activities, others may encounter the opposite and may signal disengagement. By providing multiple tools with which students will be able to engage with materials in the learning process, teachers will find that students can more effectively find success in all areas of achievement.

Response to Intervention (RTI) goes hand in hand with the UDL model as both models reflect the understanding that strategies must be put into effect in order to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Response to intervention is a three tiered approach which guides in the early identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs. RTI differs from UDL in that, rather than being a teacher-centered approach taking place in the general education classroom, **RTI incorporates an entire team** of specialist who make key decisions for the intervention process. These team members include principals, assistant principals, reading teacher, school psychologist, speech therapist, general education teacher, special education teacher among other members who must be included in the decision-making process. RTI is initiated with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children with learning and behavior needs. In the **first tier** of instruction, students receive instruction in the general education classroom, using UDL practices that ensure instruction maximizes the learning needs of all students. According to research, 80 – 85% of all students in the classroom will respond effectively to instruction in this tier. Those who do not

respond to tier 1 instruction move on to the **second tier** of instruction which includes targeted interventions. At this level, students who show inadequate progress in the regular classroom are provided with intensive instruction that matches their needs. Some of these intensive instructions build upon the interventions used in tier 1 and go further to include such strategies as small groupings, peer teaching, etc. Tier 2 instruction is offered to the 15% of students who did not respond effectively to Tier 1 instruction. Finally, those who don't respond to tier 2 instruction, move on to **Tier 3** when they still lag significantly behind their peers in making academic gains. Tier 3 provides the most intensive interventions where students receive individualized instruction that target the student's skill deficits. Students who still do not achieve the desired level of progress in response to these targeted interventions are then referred for a comprehensive evaluation and considered for eligibility for special education under the IDEA 2004. The **data** that is collected during the Tier 1, 2 and 3 such as work samples, report cards, behavioral logs, informal assessments and standardized tests. Also taken into account during the assessment of student achievement is the **etiology** of the student's condition. This means that the RTI considers the root of the difficulty and disability of the student. In some cases, disabilities can be linked back to family circumstances, such as low SES of the student, or even can go as far back as the prenatal circumstance of the child, such as fetal alcohol syndrome. All of the evidence shown in this data will lead to a comprehensive and complete decision about the placement of the student into special education services. From this point, a student then receives an **Individualized Education Program** which breaks down the specific components and needs of the individual student in his or her academic instruction. In the IEP, special education services are described and the extent to which the student will participate in the general education program is noted. In a collaborative team effort, students are given the appropriate "map" with which the specified tools and resources will guide the student in finding success in their future academic efforts.

Through the tools and resources discussed thus far, teachers can now enter the classroom prepared to establish a successful classroom for all students. Planning is a key tool used by effective teachers to allow for the inclusion of all students in the learning process. **Effective planning** includes key components that embed within it a comprehensive and thorough look into specific accommodations that can be made for each student. Effective UDL lesson plans include six key components which include the anticipatory set, introduction of new knowledge, guided practice, independent practice, final wrap up and assessment. The **anticipatory set**, it can be argued, is the most important part of an entire lesson. The beginning of the lesson creates the framework that will be built throughout the remainder of the lesson. The anticipatory set gives students a decisive direction about where they are going through this lesson and what will need to be accomplished in order to meet the expectations of the teacher. Also included in this part of the lesson is the acquisition of prior knowledge of the students. Next is the step of **introducing new knowledge**. Here, new knowledge is presented and modeled for students and encompasses the majority of content that will be included in the lesson. Following this step is the process of guiding students through a practice of the new knowledge just presented to them. Through **guided practice**, students gain a view of what is expected for them to know and how they can effectively use this knowledge in application problems. Finally, a key step in the learning process is, after having given them the tools that they needed to complete the task, now teachers must allow students to try it out for themselves in the **independent practice** phase. This step is key in the acquisition and retention of new knowledge and skills that will be beneficial for students in the future. Reviewing and reiterating information is the final **wrap-up** of a lesson that provides students with the resources and relevance that they need to apply these concepts to their own lives and knowledge base. Finally, the **assessment** is a crucial stage in allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge. Formative assessments are assessments which are used during the course of the lesson and may include activities such as group discussions and questions while summative assessments are usually given to students as a comprehensive assessment of all materials learned including, but not limited to, quizzes, tests and papers. One such example of an effective assessment includes the use of **metacognition** where students are given an opportunity to reflect on their own achievement. All of these steps wrapped in one constitutes a truly effective lesson. However, within each step it is crucial to intertwine specific behavioral and academic accommodations in order to encourage the success of the students during the course of the lesson. Some **behavioral accommodations** can include utilizing music for musical learners, allowing activities that get students out of their desks for students who are bodily kinesthetic learners. **Academic accommodations** may include the use of worksheets, visual images displayed for the class, powerpoint slides, etc. All of these accommodations can ensure that these students can effectively retain the information presented to them and have easy access to the content, despite any learning, behavioral or social differences that they may have. **Cooperative learning** is always an effective tool to use in encouraging interaction amongst students as many learners learn through their peers rather than receiving information solely through their teacher or textbooks.

Teachers have been given a surplus of resources and tools to effectively support and empower their students. By utilizing each resource we've been given, from the laws and policies which govern our schools, to the models such as Universal Design for Learning and Response to Intervention to the effective planning resources and accommodation resources that teachers are provided with for guidance and direction we as teachers can effectively create a cohesive environment of learning and growing for each one of our diverse students. With expanding learning opportunities and growing minds, the four walls of the classroom may soon not be sufficient to meet the demands for the minds of our exceptional students.