

Charting New Frontiers: A Study at RMKM's Inclusive Schools Assessing the Role of UDL - Training in Enhancing Inclusion.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the transformative impact of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in promoting inclusive education for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in India, particularly in the context of teacher training and classroom implementation. The study begins by highlighting the significance of creating inclusive learning environments where CWSN feel a sense of belonging, which positively influences their academic and psychological well-being. Through an analysis of India's legislative framework including the Right to Education Act (2009) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), along with programmatic efforts such as the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and the National Education Policy (2020), the paper establishes the state's formal commitment to inclusion. The Universal Design for Learning framework, developed by CAST in the late 1980s, is presented as a research-backed, brain-based model emphasizing flexible teaching strategies through its three principles engagement, representation, and action/expression. Drawing from studies by Meyer and Rose (2000), Ralabate (2011), and Smith et al. (2017), the paper elaborates on UDL's effectiveness in reducing learning barriers for CWSNs. The model is further illustrated with a case study of Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal (RMKM), which has implemented UDL strategies since 2006 in its inclusive schools. These institutions serve as replicable visual models, reinforcing how inclusive pedagogy can be embedded into India's mainstream school system. The paper concludes by advocating for broader adoption of UDL-informed teacher training as a pathway to equity and inclusion.

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Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) transforms the inquiry within educational settings from “How can a select group of students be accommodated?” to “How can instructional practices be adapted to support diverse learner needs?” At its essence, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encourages educators to anticipate variability among learners and to construct lessons that proactively minimize obstacles from the outset. The framework comprises three essential components: multiple means of representation, which pertains to the presentation of content; multiple means of engagement, focusing on the motivation and support of learners; and multiple means of action and expression, which relates to how learners demonstrate their knowledge. This structure provides educators with a clear and practical vocabulary for re-evaluating lesson plans, thereby facilitating broader participation and advancement among a diverse student population (CAST, 2017). The implications are significant. The sense of belonging, acceptance, respect, and the opportunity to contribute significantly enhance children’s motivation, behaviour, and academic outcomes, aspects that standardized assessments may fail to adequately measure. The decisions made by educators regarding lesson organization, activity selections, and assessment methods play a crucial role in influencing the tangible presence of inclusion in educational practice, as opposed to it being a mere aspiration (Smith, Lowrey, & Hudson, 2017; Courey et al., 2017).

India possesses a robust policy framework that supports inclusion. The Right to Education Act (2009) prohibits discrimination in school admissions; the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) broadens entitlements and requires reasonable accommodations and individualized planning; and the National Education Policy (2020) highlights learner-centered pedagogy and the early identification of needs (Government of India, 2009; Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020). Despite advancements in educational policy, a notable discrepancy remains evident in many classrooms, characterized by insufficient pre-service and in-service training focused on inclusive pedagogy, a lack of assistive resources, and the presence of community-level stigma that adversely affects participation. This gap highlights the significance of a practical, design-oriented approach, exemplified by Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Investigations across diverse contexts indicate that UDL demonstrates both adaptability and efficacy. Qualitative research conducted in non-

Western classrooms indicates that educators are capable of adapting UDL principles into culturally relevant practices, thereby influencing lesson planning and student engagement (Almumen, 2020). A systematic review of studies on UDL training revealed consistent enhancements in educators' capacity to create accessible lesson plans and emphasize learner diversity. These improvements were observed in both short workshops and extended training formats; however, certain aspects, such as promoting sustained collaborative practice, necessitate longer-term support (Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). The collective evidence suggests that the fundamental principles of UDL are effectively applicable across various contexts, particularly when training emphasizes specific classroom strategies. However, the learning of educators constitutes merely a segment of the broader narrative. The significance of institutional conditions cannot be overlooked. Extensive research indicates that the availability of sufficient facilities and administrative support is a more significant predictor of the successful implementation of UDL than factors such as school level or geographic location (Wea, Gaol, & Wolomasi, 2025). In summary, the absence of institutional commitment and foundational infrastructure during training significantly constrains the capacity for enduring transformation. In proximity to India's educational settings, both practitioner and empirical studies illustrate the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in routine practices. The synthesis of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within Indian contexts characterizes it as an effective toolkit aimed at eliminating instructional barriers and enhancing learning outcomes by providing diverse pathways for engagement with content and assessment (Priyadharsini & Mary, 2024). Research focused on children with mild intellectual disabilities indicates that classrooms designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, alongside teacher scaffolding and peer support, foster sustainable opportunities for meaningful participation in mainstream lessons (Kapil, Sujathamalini, & Halder, 2024). The significance of these local accounts lies in their ability to transcend theoretical frameworks, providing concrete examples of pedagogical practices. They illustrate the incorporation of visual aids, the integration of audio explanations, the implementation of choice boards, and the acceptance of diverse formats for student responses. Notwithstanding the presence of promising evidence, significant gaps persist. A significant portion of the comprehensive literature originates from short-term pilot studies, well-funded locations, or descriptive syntheses. The documentation regarding the integration of UDL into the daily operations of schools in Tier-2 cities and small towns is notably sparse, particularly in contexts characterized by high teacher turnover, constrained budgets, and

inconsistent community support. It is essential to gather comprehensive information regarding the specific tools utilized by educators, the daily implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and the effectiveness of various low-cost adaptations over time. This research investigates the identified gaps by analysing two inclusive educational institutions managed by the Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal: Minu Mano Vikas Mandir in Ajmer and Sanjay Inclusive School in Beawar. Since 2006, RMKM has engaged in the exploration of practices aligned with Universal Design for Learning, incorporating Individualized Education Programs, affordable assistive technologies, collaborative peer-learning frameworks, and relevant in-service training initiatives. Given the extensive duration of RMKM's initiatives, these educational institutions serve as dynamic research environments: they allow for the observation of both the short-term impacts of training and the ongoing institutional practices that contribute to the sustainability of inclusive teaching over time. This study poses three interrelated inquiries: (1) In what ways does training centered on Universal Design for Learning impact the processes of lesson planning, classroom interaction, and assessment within RMKM schools? What changes in student engagement, participation, and modes of expression can be observed after the implementation of Universal Design for Learning? What systemic enablers and constraints related to leadership, resources, continuity of training, and community engagement influence the scalability of RMKM's model in similar low-resource environments? This paper seeks to make contributions across three distinct areas by addressing the following questions. This study offers classroom-level evidence from a Tier-2 Indian context, which has been notably underrepresented in existing literature. It positions UDL as an essential design principle that aligns with India's equity-focused policies, rather than as an isolated solution. This provides actionable insights for teacher educators and policymakers regarding the practical aspects of training, the effectiveness of low-cost tools, and the areas where administrative focus is essential for sustaining change. Policy establishes the desired objectives, while classroom routines operationalize those objectives in practice. This research examines the various routines: the lesson plan adapted to incorporate multiple entry points, the classroom dynamics that foster peer support, and the simple tactile kit endorsed by a leader, illustrating how incremental, repeatable modifications can transition inclusion from a theoretical concept to practical application. The experience of RMKM provides valuable insights into the relative ease of adopting certain steps compared to those that necessitate more robust systemic support. The approach employed in this study is outlined in detail.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilized an instrumental qualitative case-study approach to examine the impact of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training on pedagogical practices, learner engagement, and institutional processes in two inclusive schools operated by Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal (RMKM). The case-study approach facilitated a thorough and contextually rich exploration of the dynamics of implementation and the interpretations of various actors within authentic educational environments.

Setting and Participants

The research was carried out at two RMKM inclusive institutions, namely Minu Mano Vikas Mandir in Ajmer and Sanjay Inclusive School in Beawar, during the period from June to August 2024. Participants were intentionally selected to guarantee representation from essential stakeholder groups actively engaged in the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The sample included a total of 12 classroom teachers, encompassing both general and special educators, alongside 4 school leaders or administrators. Additionally, the participant pool consisted of 18 parents and 20 students, which represented a mix of children with identified disabilities and their typically developing peers. The inclusion criteria for adult participants mandated a minimum of six months of engagement with RMKM programmes. Additionally, parental consent and child assent were secured for student participation.

Data Collection

The study utilized methodological triangulation by integrating three primary data streams.

1. The analysis of documentary evidence involved a thorough examination of institutional artefacts, which included UDL training curricula, lesson plans, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), teacher monitoring records, and associated implementation materials. The documents underwent a thorough examination to identify explicit alignment with UDL principles and to gather evidence of institutional support.
2. Semi-structured interviews: Individual interviews were carried out with a sample of teachers ($n = 12$), school leaders ($n = 4$), and parents ($n = 18$). The interview protocols focused on examining training experiences, instructional adaptations, the utilization of

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), assessment practices, and the perceived enablers and barriers encountered in the educational context. Interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes were conducted with the participants' consent, utilizing either Hindi or English based on their preference, and were transcribed verbatim.

3. Classroom observations: A total of around 40 lesson sessions were systematically observed employing both non-participant and participant modes to document the routine implementation of UDL strategies, multimodal instruction, and levels of student engagement. Observations were conducted using a structured rubric aligned with UDL principles, complemented by comprehensive field notes. Brief video excerpts were recorded solely with explicit consent to facilitate analytic triangulation.

The data collection instruments included (a) semi-structured interview protocols designed for teachers, leaders, and parents; (b) a structured observation rubric that operationalizes UDL checkpoints into observable indicators categorized under Representation, Engagement, Action & Expression, and Environmental Organization, utilizing an ordinal scoring system ranging from 0 to 3; (c) a document checklist alongside an IEP→UDL mapping matrix; and (d) a composite fidelity index that aggregates evidence from observations, documents, and interviews to produce an implementation score on a scale of 0 to 100, applying predetermined weights (Observations 50%, Documents 30%, Interviews 20%). The development of the instrument involved back-translation procedures aimed at ensuring conceptual equivalence between the Hindi and English versions.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data, which included transcripts, field notes, and document summaries, were systematically managed in NVivo and subjected to analysis through reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis unfolded in a series of iterative stages, including familiarization, inductive open coding, focused coding, theme development, and subsequent refinement. Themes were analysed in a deductive manner, referencing fundamental UDL constructs such as representation, engagement, and action/expression to facilitate theoretical integration. In order to facilitate a systematic comparison across the two schools, cross-case matrices and analytic memos were developed in accordance with the guidance provided by Creswell (2013). The quantitative rubric scores and document ratings were systematically entered into an analytical matrix to enable triangulation and to categorize implementation fidelity as low (<40), moderate (40–70), or high (>70).

Reliability and self-awareness

Comprehensive strategies encompassed methodological triangulation, member checking of emerging interpretations with chosen participants, and regular peer debriefing among the research team. The assessment of inter-rater reliability for rubric scoring involved double-rating 20% of the observation sessions, aiming for a Cohen's κ target of $\geq .70$. Any discrepancies were addressed through consensus coding and subsequent refinement of the rubric. A comprehensive audit trail consisting of coding memos, decision logs, and reflexive journals was systematically maintained to bolster dependability and confirmability.

Ethical Consideration

Approval for ethical clearance was secured from the institutional authority of RMKM. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants and their parents, while assent was acquired from children when deemed appropriate. The protection of confidentiality was ensured by employing pseudonymization techniques for transcripts and by securely storing audio and video files on encrypted media, which is accessible solely to authorized researchers. Participants were made aware of their entitlement to withdraw from the study without facing any repercussions.

Limitation

The application of purposive sampling within an instrumental case study framework, specifically in two RMKM schools, yields contextually rich insights that contribute to theory development, rather than offering statistical generalizability. Possible constraints encompass observer reactivity observed during classroom visits and nuances in translation during transcription. Strategies for mitigation involved extended engagement, triangulation of data sources, and member checking.

DATA ANALYSIS

RESULTS

Thematic and descriptive analysis of data gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews at RMKM's inclusive education centres revealed four major domains. These domains collectively describe how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles were implemented and sustained in practice. The analysis also included fidelity ratings to indicate the degree of adherence to UDL checkpoints during classroom teaching.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Findings from RMKM Inclusive Schools

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Evidence	Interpretive Summary
1. Transformation in Pedagogical Design	Multimodal instructional planning Flexible assessment IEP-UDL alignment	“Now I prepare lessons with pictures and small activities for every learner.” -Teacher 03 “IEP targets guide my lesson plans.” - Teacher 07	Teachers shifted from conventional, teacher-centric practices to inclusive and adaptive designs guided by UDL principles. Lesson plans demonstrated explicit focus on representation, engagement, and expression.
2.Learner Engagement and	Increased classroom interaction Peer collaboration Emotional confidence	“My child answers now and enjoys group tasks.” - Parent 05 Observation: children with disabilities participated actively in most sessions.	Students displayed improved confidence, active participation, and social interaction, indicating enhanced affective and cognitive engagement through UDL strategies.
3.Institutional Mechanisms Supporting Implementation	Mentoring and follow-up Leadership encouragement Documentation and review	“Our coordinator reviews lesson plans weekly.” -Teacher 09 Records showed continuous mentoring and periodic review meetings.	Systematic mentoring and leadership engagement ensured accountability, reflective teaching, and consistency in inclusive practice.
4.Implementation Fidelity and Constraints	Resource limitations Time and workload challenges Variation in classroom fidelity	“We share one audio device for many classes.” Teacher 04 Observation rubric: 25% high, 45% moderate, 30% low fidelity.	Despite overall positive adoption, uneven fidelity was observed due to infrastructural limitations and teacher workload. Creativity and local improvisation partly compensated for these gaps.

Table 2. Observation Fidelity of UDL Implementation

School	Lessons Observed (n)	High Fidelity	Moderate Fidelity	Low Fidelity	Mean Fidelity Score (%)
Minu Mano Vikas Mandir, Ajmer	20	6	10	4	68
Sanjay Inclusive School, Beawar	20	4	8	8	59
Overall	40	10 (25%)	18 (45%)	12 (30%)	63.5%

Fidelity was determined based on composite observation scores aligned with the three UDL principles: multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression.

Thematic analysis

Transformation of educators through Universal Design for Learning training

The training centered on Universal Design for Learning at RMKM had a significant impact on educators' beliefs and their instructional practices within the classroom environment. Educators transitioned from a standardized, uniform approach to instruction towards more adaptable lesson designs that incorporated multimodal presentations and diverse methods for students to demonstrate their understanding. The training provided educators with the necessary skills to design differentiated activities, incorporate assistive technologies such as Braille materials, audio-visual aids, and speech-generating devices, and align Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) checkpoints. The observed changes suggest a transition in pedagogical approaches, moving from traditional content delivery to a focus on facilitating the diverse needs of learners. This underscores the potential for sustained professional development to effectively integrate Universal Design for Learning principles into routine classroom practices. THE EARLY INTERC

Representation, Engagement, and Student Participation

In various educational settings, educators implemented diverse strategies for representation and engagement. The methodologies employed included storytelling, visual charts, tactile tools, group activities, and activity-based work to enhance content accessibility. The data collected from student responses indicated a notable increase in engagement and a heightened willingness to participate. Learners employed various modes of expression, including drawing, oral responses, and dramatization. Furthermore, students with sensory or intellectual disabilities exhibited enhanced access to lessons when provided with assistive tools. The observations presented demonstrate the significance of UDL in mitigating obstacles to learning and facilitating engagement for Children with Special Needs (CWSN).

Action and Expression: Assessment and Individualized Education Programs

RMKM's approach to aligning Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) checkpoints established a

framework for learning objectives that is both organized and adaptable. Educators indicated that individualized education programs (IEPs) that were consistent with universal design for learning (UDL) facilitated personalized objectives and various modalities for showcasing learning outcomes. This approach enhanced dignity and inclusion by allowing learners to demonstrate their competencies through modalities that corresponded with their strengths, thus aligning assessment with the principle of multiple means of action and expression.

Collaborative Learning and Institutional Environment

The approach of RMKM prominently featured peer learning and reverse-inclusion strategies. Organized collaborative initiatives, peer support frameworks, and participation in extracurricular activities promoted empathy and mutual assistance among students with and without disabilities. Educators and administrators have noted significant decreases in stigma and enhancements in social cohesion, indicating that classroom design informed by Universal Design for Learning can transform the school climate from one of separation to one of collective engagement.

Leadership within institutions and the engagement of families

Institutional measures, including the establishment of inclusive monitoring committees, the implementation of regular Individualized Education Program (IEP) reviews, and the facilitation of parent engagement sessions, have significantly enhanced continuity and accountability within the system. Parents indicated a heightened sense of assurance regarding their children's development subsequent to ongoing communication and the exhibition of classroom modifications. The results highlight the necessity of robust school leadership and active collaboration between families and schools for the successful and sustained implementation of UDL at scale, thereby enhancing continuity between home and school environments.

Challenges and Limitations in Implementation

While there have been favourable developments, ongoing limitations have hindered comprehensive implementation. Educators reported experiencing significant pressure related to their workload, the challenges posed by large class sizes, and the substantial time required for effective differentiated planning. Resource constraints limited the availability of certain assistive devices, while the inconsistent provision of UDL training to newly recruited staff resulted in variability in implementation practices. The lack of standardized evaluation tools at the school level for inclusion, along with the structural limitations of current curricula, was also observed. The identified practical barriers correspond with established implementation

gaps in inclusive education, highlighting the necessity for systemic support to effectively institutionalize Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Comprehensive Analysis and Consequences

The RMKM case illustrates the practical adaptability of UDL in resource-constrained environments. It highlights that when educators are provided with contextualized training and when institutional frameworks such as IEPs, parental involvement, and monitoring are in place, there is a notable enhancement in inclusive outcomes. The documented enhancements in engagement, representation, and expression substantiate the efficacy of UDL as a forward-thinking, design-oriented methodology rather than merely a reactive adjustment. Nonetheless, the challenges associated with implementation underscore the inadequacy of relying solely on teacher training; it is essential to achieve policy-level alignment, provide ongoing mentoring, ensure access to assistive technologies, and establish monitoring frameworks to effectively integrate UDL into mainstream practices.

Discussion

The results derived from RMKM's two inclusive educational institutions suggest that training and practices informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can lead to significant changes in classroom pedagogy, learner engagement, and the overall school environment, particularly when bolstered by institutional commitment and active family involvement. The theoretical assertions suggest that anticipatory design effectively reduces obstacles for a variety of learners. The transition by educators from uniform instructional methods to a multimodal and adaptable lesson framework utilizing visual, tactile, and auditory materials while aligning Individualized Education Programs with Universal Design for Learning checkpoints—demonstrates the practicality of integrating UDL principles into standard classroom practices (Meyer & Rose, 2000; CAST, 2017). The observed prevalence of peer learning and reverse-inclusion practices lends support to the notion that inclusion encompasses both relational and structural dimensions (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Furthermore, the documented increases in student engagement and the utilization of alternative modes of expression align with previous research indicating that multimodal representation and choice enhance motivation and accessibility (Courey et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). The RMKM experience illustrates the role of UDL as a design philosophy that fundamentally alters interpersonal dynamics and instructional practices within educational settings, rather than merely serving as a set of accommodations. The findings, however, also underscore persistent structural constraints that hinder the scalability of these advancements. Consistent with the implementation gaps identified

in both Indian and international studies on inclusive education, educators have indicated experiencing pressures related to workload, the challenges posed by large class sizes, disparities in training opportunities for newly appointed personnel, and restricted access to assistive technologies (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013). The absence of standardized evaluation tools within educational institutions for inclusion significantly hinders the systematic assessment of fidelity and outcomes. This indicates that, in the absence of policy-aligned evaluation frameworks and adequate resources, innovations in the classroom are at risk of decline. This implementation highlights the well-documented disconnect between policy and practice in scenarios where supportive national frameworks, such as RTE, RPWD, and NEP 2020, are present. However, there is a notable deficiency in operational supports, sustained funding, pre-service curriculum reform, and effective monitoring instruments (Hall et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2014). The study underscores the significant influence of institutional leadership and the collaboration between families and schools in maintaining inclusive practices. The implementation of monitoring committees, regular IEP reviews, and parent engagement sessions by RMKM has effectively enhanced continuity and reinforced the home–school application of learning strategies. The increased trust and willingness of caregivers to adopt recommended techniques at home highlight the significance of school-led demonstrations and communication in connecting classroom and household environments. This observation aligns with existing literature that underscores the critical role of caregiver involvement as a facilitator of child development in both early and school-age interventions (Hall et al., 2012; Guralnick, 2011). At a broader level, these dynamics indicate that the integration of UDL necessitates interventions across various system levels: Professional development for educators, institutional practices that integrate inclusion (such as IEP cycles and monitoring), coaching for families, and supports at the district or state level that guarantee the availability of resources and mentoring across educational institutions. From a policy perspective, the RMKM case highlights practical avenues for implementing the inclusive objectives of NEP 2020 and RPWD (2016). This includes integrating UDL principles into both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, promoting low-cost assistive technologies, developing UDL-aligned inclusion monitoring tools, and expanding mentor-based support models, such as peer coaches and resource teachers, to alleviate the workloads of frontline educators. Subsequent investigations ought to expand upon this qualitative evidence through multisite, mixed-method evaluations that integrate process data alongside standardized metrics of learning and participation. This approach will facilitate an assessment of the durability and cost-effectiveness of UDL adaptations within various educational

settings in India. In conclusion, the contextual adaptations observed in RMKM illustrate that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can indeed be maintained in environments with limited resources. However, the findings serve as a warning against the presumption of transferability without concurrent investments in teacher education, monitoring systems, and equitable resource distribution. The implementation of inclusion as a design principle necessitates a robust systemic framework in addition to innovative practices within the classroom.

Conclusion

The research indicates that the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within RMKM's inclusive schools in Rajasthan has led to significant pedagogical changes and enhanced learner engagement. Educators transitioned from standardized teaching methods to more adaptable, multimodal, and student-centered strategies, resulting in enhanced confidence and engagement among students with disabilities. The role of institutional mentoring and leadership support was crucial in maintaining these inclusive practices. Nonetheless, obstacles such as constrained resources, elevated workloads, and inconsistent fidelity across educational settings suggest that the process of inclusion necessitates continuous systemic support. The integration of Universal Design for Learning principles into both pre-service and in-service teacher education, coupled with ongoing monitoring and infrastructural support, has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of implementation efforts. The RMKM model illustrates the potential of UDL to actualize India's vision of inclusive education as outlined in NEP 2020, effectively connecting policy with classroom implementation. The ongoing dedication of institutions and the ability to adapt to specific contexts are crucial for transforming inclusion into a lasting and actionable reality.

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