



## The Think Inclusive Podcast

### Season 8, Episode 4

#### Katie Novak | Common Misconceptions About UDL

##### Katie Novak (00:07):

If you are an educator today, you should be able to predict, you know, if your classroom is inclusive, that you're going to have some students who are struggling with trauma. You'll have some students who are not reading at grade level. You'll have students who are language learners who have, you know, mild to moderate to severe challenges. And if we know that, why are we still designing one size fits all lessons, and then burying ourselves in accommodations? Which is really actually in many ways affecting the integrity and the opportunities that students have.

##### Tim Villegas (00:38):

Hello, and welcome to season eight, episode four of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I'm your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do go to [thinkinclusive.us](http://thinkinclusive.us), the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Today on the podcast, we have a conversation with Katie Novak, Universal Design for Learning expert, about some common misconceptions of UDL, how UDL works with students with more significant disabilities, and what it was like for her to lead her school district to implement inclusive education. So stick around. After the break, our conversation with Katie Novak.

##### Nadia (01:55):

Hey there, I invite you to check out Expression Quest, a new podcast hosted by me, Nadia, an artist and designer with complex trauma and autism who's also a person of color. It features inspiring discussions about creativity and conversations with a variety of artists and creators. We discover how they think about and approach their work, what it means to them, and how it fits into their lives and personal growth journeys. Just search for Expression Quest on your favorite podcast player, or go to [anchor.fm/expressionquest](http://anchor.fm/expressionquest) to listen and subscribe.

##### Tim Villegas (02:47):

I'd like to welcome to the Think Inclusive podcast, Katie Novak. She is a internationally renowned education consultant, a practicing leader in education, and a graduate instructor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. She's the author of a number of books, including "UDL Now," "Innovate Inside the Box," and "Equity by Design." Katie designs and presents workshops, both nationally and internationally, focusing on the implementation of universal design for learning, which is UDL, MTSS, inclusive practices, and a number of things. Welcome to the Think Inclusive podcast, Katie.

**Katie Novak (03:27):**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm very happy to be here.

**Tim Villegas (03:30):**

Katie, it's a pleasure talking with you and you know, everyone that I work with at the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education is so jealous I have a chance to talk with you and a number of other people in districts that we work with. So thank you for your time. So you are known as being a UDL expert, right. You know that there's like 30 years of research around UDL. Right. But still people don't really know what it is. Like, when you say UDL, you know, you kind of have an idea that it's this buzzword. So what are some, you know, what is it, what are some common myths and misconceptions about what UDL is?

**Katie Novak (04:18):**

Yeah, sure. So what I like to start off with is "what is universal design" before we get into "what is universal design for learning?" So universal design is a concept in architecture and, you know, back in the 1960s, when we were really focused on making all buildings accessible to everybody, there was an architect named Ron Mace who was hired essentially to create more accessibility in these buildings and the buildings just weren't built for that. So, you know, he's having to like take down like these staircases to put up ramps, you know, you have to go inside and you have to like take out, you know, spiral staircases and this really historic parts of the building to put in, you know, elevators or lifts. And he said, "this is so, so silly because like everyone, when they're building a building, even hundreds of years ago can predict that there's going to be some variability, you know, the people who need to get in. And so from this point forward, we should universally design all buildings so that anyone can access them. Like we shouldn't have to be making accommodations to all of these buildings all the time."

**Katie Novak (05:24):**

And that's essentially the same idea in universal design for learning. Why are we designing lessons where not all students in inclusive and equitable classrooms can learn? And when they don't, we essentially, you know, what I like to say is almost like we bastardize the lesson by creating all these accommodations that really affect the integrity of the lesson or the rigor of the lesson. When in fact we can predict this amazing variability of students.

**Katie Novak (05:50):**

If you are an educator today, you should be able to predict, you know, if your classroom is inclusive, that you're going to have some students who are struggling with trauma, you'll have some students who are not reading at grade level. You'll have students who are language learners who have, you know, mild to moderate to severe challenges. And if we know that, why are we still designing one size fits all lessons and then burying ourselves in accommodations? Which is really actually in many ways affecting the integrity and the opportunities that students have. And so if we want to ensure equal opportunities to learn, we have to design equitable pathways for students to, you know, decide what are the best approaches for them to learn, what materials do they need to be supported and challenged, and how can they share with us what we know? So the idea of universal design for learning is how do we design a lesson that's flexible enough to support and challenge all students equally by essentially allowing all of them to make decisions about how they learn best.

**Katie Novak (06:53):**

And, you know, people hear that and they're like, "Oh, so it's like differentiated instruction." And then a part of my soul dies a little and it's not that differentiated instruction is not brilliant. It's just, they're not the same. So universal design for learning is much more about embracing the beautiful variability and diversity of every student who we serve. And we want to make sure that they have equal opportunities to learn because the opportunity gap is real and it is pervasive. And in many ways it results in what people will call achievement gaps. But if you're not given the same opportunities to access instruction, we can't anticipate, you know, similar outcomes. So the real power here is how do we create a multi-tiered system of which universal design for learning is the core where all students have opportunities to make choices, access grade level rigor and become expert learners. But then also how do I create that culture where I can pull individuals or small groups to provide them with mastery oriented feedback, to help them reflect and to get to know them a little bit better because this work is about relationships.

**Tim Villegas (08:05):**

You know, I think that for a lot of educators, you know, even if they're not familiar with this concept, that they kind of get it. Theoretically they also get it for people with, you know, maybe mild disabilities. But not necessarily for students with more significant disabilities, like intellectual disabilities or emotional behavior disorders or autism, or, you know, you know, pick which one you'd like. Do you see this also working with those this framework with also students with more significant disabilities?

**Katie Novak (08:45):**

Yes, absolutely. Because just, that's a part of the variability that we can predict. We know that we'll have learners who have moderate to severe disabilities or challenges. But I think that what's really important is in many ways, as educators, we have been taught that those labels meant something for learning. And they don't. So even if you take a bunch of students who have autism, they don't all need the same thing. You know, you can take a group of learners who have, you know, a developmental disability, they don't need the same thing. So within any group there's variability. And I think that what we really need to reject is this one size fits all thinking across the board.

**Katie Novak (09:22):**

So my thinking is if, regardless of who I have, if I embrace this concept of variability -- that we all have different strengths and weaknesses, and they're ever-changing based on context -- if I know that, then I also know that I can never have things that are one size fits all. So since I'm going to be providing a lot of flexibility and a lot of different pathways anyway, then why wouldn't I work in partnership with service providers and special educators to ensure that the pathways that are absolutely necessary for students with more challenges and support needs are provided as access and entry points for all students? Because the real challenge sometimes is, "well, I can't, you know, provide this other option because we're all reading the same text." But in a universally designed class, the question is not about the text, it's about the goal. What's the firm goal. And if the firm goal is that everyone needs to understand characterization, I might have like a short mentor text that students could listen to, or they could read in a small group, or they could read it in a more traditional sense, or they can translate it. But then I would want them to pair that with a text that they were passionate about. And that would mean that, you know, we take time and we take students to explore what we have in eBooks and explore what we have in the library and choose something that's best for you.

**Katie Novak (10:42):**

And so, you know, what is necessary for some students are provided to all students, but there's no ceiling and floor in a universal design classroom. And when not all students are doing the same thing at the same time, there is no reason not to welcome students who have significant needs for acceleration, as well as students who have significant needs for support.

**Tim Villegas (11:02):**

Hmm. You know, one of the biggest barriers that we, that we're looking at as far as in the United States is standardized assessments and standardized testing and accountability measures that, you know, really tie the hands of educators. Is that something that you see, especially when you were assistant superintendent educators saying, "well, you know, I really would like to do this. It does sound great, but you know, I'm accountable, you know, because, it is reflected in my evaluation or, you know, my school scores, the scores that are sent to the state. And I just, I'm not sure if I can teach this way." Is that a barrier that you've come across?

**Katie Novak (11:55):**

I've come across it. But I think that it's a barrier that is ripe for being challenged. What we're doing right now is incredibly ineffective. We have less than 40% of students in this country who are meeting grade level standards when you're looking at these like national assessments of education progress. So the traditional way is incredibly ineffective at increasing traditional outcomes. That is a fact. And so that's the first part. The second part is, is that these assessments should be universally designed. The Every Student Succeeds Act is very clear that state standardized assessments should be universally designed. They are not there yet, but I am hopeful that we will be making more changes in the future so that what we're measuring aligns much more to the same resources and supports that we would have in college and careers.

**Katie Novak (12:49):**

And the last piece is, you know, as an educator, the tests in many ways are inaccessible. I will not ever argue with that. I think that the tests are incredibly inaccessible for some learners. I think that they're also very focused, a lot of the time on, you know, literature that aligns to dominant culture. So not only are they inaccessible, they're culturally not responsive in many ways. But that being said, I have a choice as an educator, as a school, as an administrator: I can choose to continue to teach in a really inaccessible way to prepare students for an inaccessible test, or I can choose to make sure that I'm teaching in a really incredibly accessible and trauma-informed and engaging and linguistically appropriate and culturally sustaining way. And I can make sure that the students have all of the knowledge and the skills that they need to have, and then I'm going to have them take an inaccessible test.

**Katie Novak (13:46):**

Certainly I would advocate for much more flexible means of measuring that information. I think that we are way too far into this universe and technology to not provide opportunities to listen to text, to not provide the opportunities to voice to text because everyone will always have that available. So it feels a little bit to me like a game of "gotcha!" And not necessarily what students need to be college and career ready. So long story short, I do not think that we are killing it so well on these tests that it gives us any reason to say "I can't do something different." You know, Beverly Daniel Tatum says "the work is not about intent, the work is about impact." Our impact right now is heartbreaking considering how hard people are working. We have to do something differently.

**Tim Villegas (14:36):**

There was something I heard you say I forget it was in one of your videos that you said "when we value impact over intentions, all of us have equal opportunity to succeed." Could you expound on that a little bit? I thought that was great.

**Katie Novak (14:52):**

Yeah, I just think in many ways in education, we're focused more on our input as opposed to our output. So learning is alterable. All students can be successful given the right environment, given the right instruction, you know, given conditions of nurture. And we have to recognize that certainly there are things that we cannot alter, but there's a heck of a lot more that we can. And when we see that outcomes are not great, it's really easy to say that the kid's not doing their part and say "well, I did this, I covered it, I offered extra help sessions, I did this." And if the student is still not learning, then we have to work together to design something differently.

**Katie Novak (15:40):**

And John Dewey wrote an essay called "On Teaching" in 1910. And he said "to say that you have taught something when no one has learned it is like saying you sold something that no one bought." Like it's transactional. You know, you didn't teach it if students didn't learn it. But in many ways that hurts like my heart and my soul, because people go into this work because it's emotional work, because they love teaching and they love kids. And it's heartbreaking to be doing the best you can with what you have and recognizing that you don't have the impact that you want to have, but that requires collaboration, that requires, you know, unlearning, it requires learning. And most importantly, it requires being evidence-informed enough where we're saying, "when I do this, does it make a difference? When I do this, does this make a difference?" So it's much more iterative than like traditional education was. Like, we can't design the lesson and then be like, "yeah, just going to follow it and see how it goes." Like, what are you going to do if kids aren't learning?

**Tim Villegas (16:42):**

Right. Right. And it's not enough to just say, well, you did the best you can.

**Katie Novak (16:46):**

Yeah. Moving on to chapter seven.

**Tim Villegas (16:49):**

Right. Right. But believe me, and I know that you've heard those conversations as well. Like that's what happens is, "Oh, we'll get them next time or we'll get them next year."

**Katie Novak (16:59):**

Right. Yeah. And again, I think that I really honestly believe the intention is good. I think that people are breaking their backs trying to do this, but we're not using strategies that are truly responsive to students because in many ways we're doing things in one way. And the problem is, is any strategy that you use will likely work for some students. And they provide like a false narrative that what you're doing is really effective. Because if you don't truly embrace variability, and I say, okay, I'm going to provide you with this direct instruction. And then I'm going to give you a quiz. And some kids do well. It's like, see, they're

paying attention. And it's like, but they're not the same. You know, we have very different, you know, cognitive skills and strengths and weaknesses and funds of knowledge and background knowledge.

**Katie Novak (17:51):**

But it also starts getting into things like, you know, your mood can very significantly impact your ability to learn. And so, you know, even with, you know, the right background knowledge and the right ability to, you know, process auditory information, you know, if I'm in high school and I just went through a really bad breakup, my mind is not on your lecture. And so that is why we have to think about the barriers as not only being academic, but again, really thinking about how do we create opportunities for students to self-regulate, to find balance, to be able to understand and work through their emotions, because, you know, students will experience trauma. Many students will really struggle with, you know, being really angry or really sad and for really good reason.

**Tim Villegas (18:33):**

Hmm. That's powerful. That's powerful. I like this. I want to get back to the definition, a definition, or maybe your definition of inclusive education. I know that you talk about it a lot and you use it as part of your language. So do you have a working definition or do you have an idea of like, if someone asked you "Katie, what do you mean by, you know, inclusive ed? What does that mean?"

**Katie Novak (18:57):**

So what I mean by inclusive ed is inclusive placement. I want every student in the classroom together. If you are in second grade, you get a seat in a general education classroom. You know, if you are in 10th grade, you get a seat in a 10th grade classroom. So first of all, you cannot have inclusive practice without inclusive, you know, proportionally scheduled placements. So, you know, all classrooms with really rich variability, that being said, I would say that a classroom that is inclusive provides equal opportunities for students to access information, use materials, and share what they know. And to do that, I think that right now it has to be, it has to be accessible, it has to be engaging, it has to be linguistically and culturally appropriate or sustaining, it has to be trauma-informed and it has to be anti-racist. And as our society continues to evolve, we might need to be aware of barriers that weren't on our radar as much before, but right now we need to make sure that, you know, that, that ableism and that racism and that, you know, all of this, this heaviness that's in our society does not prevent students from learning in our classrooms.

**Tim Villegas (20:09):**

Right. Right. Exactly. So let's talk a little bit about your time in school administration. And I don't actually, I don't really currently know how you're connected right now, if you were only consulting or if you're working, you know, with the district or not. But I think I heard you say in one of the talks I listened to about percentages of LRE and somewhere around 90% or more for, and, and something now, you know, now that I'm in this position and can see some of data from the districts that, you know, MCIE has worked with over the years, that 90% seems pretty consistent for districts who are implementing, you know, inclusive practices with fidelity and have been doing it for years. You know, what was your, what's your experience with getting to that? I know it's not just a number, but you know, what was your experience in leading a school district toward inclusion? What was that like? And I guess what was that like for you as far as being, you know, a leader in the school district?

**Katie Novak (21:27):**

So for the past six years, I was the assistant superintendent of schools. I am no longer working full time in that district. I am still working as a facilitator of professional learning part-time, but I'm not like in a, in a district level administration role. But when I was in that role, I think that one of the things that we wanted to make sure was that we were supplementing and not supplanting. And that, like, if I could have a t-shirt, that's what the t-shirt is going to say, "supplement not supplant." Because, you know, I think that what happens is, is every student is a general education student. And some of those general education students need special education services.

**Katie Novak (22:04):**

I hate the term special education students. Like we have students with disabilities. Yes. But you see, like, they're not special education students. They are general education students who have disabilities. That's a beautiful part of their identity, and they also receive special education. But like that, for me, when I hear special ed students or don't even get, I can't even say the other thing, the, you know, S-P-E-D students, right. Cause I'm a mom of a daughter with a complex, you know, very complex needs. And my daughter is a general education student first. She is, you know, very proud to have ADHD. And, you know, she has a language-based learning disability as well as a mood disorder, but that's just like a beautiful part of who she is. But like, I see her as like this fierce light, and I don't want paperwork to say like, "Oh, that's just a special ed student." Right. So you know, I think that the students who need special education services need to get them in addition to what is rightfully theirs and being a general education student. All the work that we have seen on the least restrictive environment is essentially every student needs to be placed in the least restrictive environment available to them.

**Katie Novak (23:09):**

And when you're looking at a continuum of services, the least restrictive environment is always a general education classroom. Okay. That's the least restrictive environment. And only when we cannot make that classroom more inclusive, can we add that additional continuum of support where you start looking at, you know, paraeducators supported, maybe co-taught, maybe small group, maybe, you know, completely sub separate, and then you start moving into, you know, out of just for placement and residential and things.

**Katie Novak (23:37):**

Okay. So you can find me at [novakeducation.com](http://novakeducation.com), it's N-O-V-A-K education.com. That's my website, lots of blogs and things there. And there's also information about all of the books. And as you shared, my two most recent books were both awesome partnerships with brilliant people. "Equity By Design" was co-written with a dear friend of mine, Mirko Chardin. He is absolutely brilliant. I loved writing it with him. And we essentially kind of juxtapose both of our educations, me as a white woman who was raised middle-class and him as a black man. And just kind of talk about how the system was really designed in many ways for my family, for me. And just how much that was exclusionary to Mirko. He talks about himself specifically. But like how we grew up a half hour from each other, and just how we led such different lives in many ways, because of the color of our skin. And so that's a great one. Mirko did so great. He did the bulk of work on that, but it was brilliant. And then I wrote "Unlearning" with Allison Posey, which was very much about how in professional learning we're usually trying to add more on and learn more. And in many ways we have to forget and get rid of a lot of the practices that are taking up some of that mental space.

**Tim Villegas (24:55):**

Fantastic. Well, Katie Novak, it was a pleasure to have you on the Think Inclusive podcast. Thank you for your time.

**Katie Novak (25:02):**

Thank you. I had a blast.

**Tim Villegas (25:09):**

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive podcast. If you would like to hear the entire unedited 38-minute conversation with Katie Novak, go to [patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast](https://patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast) to become a patron today. Help us with our goal to reach 50 patrons, and we will produce one additional podcast per month only for our patrons. Your contribution helps us with cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the Think Inclusive podcast. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or on the Anchor app. Then, while you're there, give us a review so more people can find us.

**Tim Villegas (26:00):**

Have a question or comment? Email us at [podcast@thinkinclusive.us](mailto:podcast@thinkinclusive.us). We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons: Pamela P, Tori D, Veronica E, Kathleen T, and Mark C for their continued support of the podcast. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at [mcie.org](https://mcie.org). We will be back in March with our guests, Alfie Kohn, author of the book, "Punished by Rewards," as well as many others. We will discuss whether there's a difference between bribing and positive reinforcement and what are some alternatives to rewards in education. Thanks for your time and attention. See you next time.

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