# Using a Highly Rated Classroom Environment to Foster High-Quality Inclusive Practices

***A Dialog from the Field***

**Meridith Karppinen ABD, M.S.**
**Sondra Stegenga Ph.D., M.S., OTR/L**
*The University of Utah*

## ABSTRACT

With the November, 2023 release of the Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, and the continuing work being done to further inclusive education, it is more important than ever to address the factors of a high-quality early childhood program that contribute to authentic inclusion. Although there is research to support inclusion, and many classroom rating scales are validated and backed by research, there is little crossover to address how these factors, together, work to benefit a quality inclusive education for all children. In this dialog from the field article, we address the resources available to easily use the elements of a high-quality early childhood classroom to foster belonging, access, participation, and supports for students with disabilities in Head Start classrooms.

## KEYWORDS

Inclusion, Preschool, Resources,Classroom Environment Rating Scales

In the fall of 2023, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services released a new policy statement emphasizing that "all young children with disabilities should have access to high-quality inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support so they can fully participate alongside their peers without disabilities, meet high expectations, and achieve their full potential" (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, 2023, p. 1). This statement builds upon the joint statement on inclusion from 2015 (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, 2015) and stems from years of legislation and research support for including all children, with and without disabilities, in high-quality early learning settings. Specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 requires

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Contact: Meridith Karppinen @ meridith.karppinen@utah.edu

young children to be served in the least restrictive environment to the "maximum extent appropriate" (§1412(a)(5)). In addition, research indicates that young children with disabilities demonstrate greater cognitive and communication gains as well as significant academic and social gains (Warren et al., 2016) when supported in an inclusive classroom (Nahmias et al., 2014; Noggle & Stites, 2017; Rafferty, 2003). Yet, despite the legal and empirical support, a 2016 study found that almost 25% of early childhood students receiving special education services did not have access to class time with typical peers during any part of their day (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016b). The definition of inclusion as described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Joint Position Statement (2009) spells out the factors of access to the physical classroom and materials, full participation in play and learning activities, and systems-level supports for providers and families. However, the implementation of these practices looks different in every classroom. Variations and interpretations occur due to many factors, including teacher preparation, classroom setup, classroom quality, local and state guidelines, access to specialists, etc. (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2006). Each of these variations has the potential to impact the quality of inclusion for students with disabilities in Head Start classrooms. However, the measurement of inclusion quality is not reported in Head Start metrics, and inclusive practices are not measured in every classroom (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2006; Office of Head Start, 2023).

Assessments that measure overall classroom quality, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms, 2014) assess the classroom as a whole, and studies have shown that classrooms that consistently rate highly on overall rating scales likely have the features that promote quality experiences for students in special education (Barton & Smith, 2015; Spear et al., 2018). This includes factors such as emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Spear et. al, 2018). In contrast to the general classroom assessments, the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP; Soukakou, 2012) assesses classroom adaptations of space and materials, quality of group activities, peer and teacher interactions, and progress monitoring. Although all of these factors are important when looking at the overall quality of early learning environments, these measures were developed separately and do not address how they, together, constitute a quality inclusive education for all children (Love & Horn, 2021).

For children with disabilities, a high-quality inclusive experience depends on being included in already high-quality classrooms (Love & Horn, 2021), but the overlap between overall classroom quality and quality of inclusion is not present in current assessments. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) includes one item that measures the quality of inclusion. Still, it focuses primarily on the structural components of the classroom environment, such as space and furnishings, routines and schedules, and curriculum (Soukakou, 2012). Despite the disconnect between the two types of assessments, there are many factors of overall classroom quality that can be emphasized to increase the quality of inclusive practices, without adding a lot of work or stress. In fact, most of these practices are beneficial for all students in an inclusive classroom.

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Soukakou mentions that the CLASS, which is used in Head Start programs, states explicitly that the scores should reflect the experience of a "typical or average" student (Soukakou, 2012). However, the ICP looks deeply into adult involvement in interactions, both peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult, as well as transitions in the classroom, and feedback provided to children as markers for quality inclusion, but it does not assess any measures of general program quality. Odom et al. (2011) call out the broad categories of curriculum and environment that are assessed in general program quality, but asserted that these categories alone are not indicators of quality environments for students in special education. This sentiment was echoed in Gallagher and

Lambert (2006). Therefore, there is a critical need for in-depth exploration of the factors of classroom quality that are linked to inclusion (what are the key factors), their level of impact on the quality of inclusion, and recommendations for both training and supports in these areas to foster authentic inclusive experiences in Head Start classrooms for all children.

## Factors of Classroom Quality Linked to Inclusion

Recent studies provide insights into potential factors that are linked to higher levels of inclusion, and higher quality inclusive practices where students with disabilities have full access to the physical environment and materials, are able to participate in all aspects of the classroom routine, and supports are in place for teachers and assistants. Specifically, factors include: teacher attitudes, preservice training opportunities that include training relevant to young children with disabilities, such as special education courses as part of an intentional curriculum, and overall feelings of self-efficacy and preparedness for working with children with disabilities (i.e., feeling prepared vs knowing how).

### Teacher Attitudes on Inclusion

Teachers who are currently practicing generally show positive attitudes toward inclusion. Yu (2019) surveyed 41 Head Start teachers. When asked if they believe that inclusion of students with disabilities in general education benefits all children, the mean score on a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) was 4.63, showing that overall the teachers strongly believe in the benefits of inclusive classrooms. The results of a mixed methods study by Kim et al. (2020) were not as strong, but still indicated a general acceptance. While acceptance of inclusion is certainly essential, it is also imperative that teachers feel well-prepared to teach all of the children in their classrooms, including children with disabilities (Chadwell et al., 2019).

### Preservice Training Impact

Even a single course in special education can influence a preservice teacher's attitude and confidence in inclusive practices (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021). There is a direct correlation between the number of courses in special education and the comfort level in implementing interventions (Puliatte et al., 2021). However, as many as 70% of ECSE teachers took only one class in special education during their preparation program (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021). Disability-specific knowledge is critical for teachers to effectively facilitate social and academic skills for children with disabilities. Early childhood teachers need resources and training to accommodate the needs of each individual child in the classroom. In addition, the importance of deep curricular understanding as a means for supporting and fostering high-quality educational experiences for all children has been emphasized in recent literature. In a review of the literature regarding teacher preparation, Pugach et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of general education teachers understanding accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, as well as ensuring that special education teachers fully understand the curriculum and the theories that support it. After all, without an understanding of a framework for equitably and thoughtfully applying this knowledge of disability and strategies for supports for a range of learners and communities, the new knowledge can quickly become lost when translating to practice in real world settings. As stated by Pugach et al. (2019), access to the general education curriculum is insufficient to support quality inclusive practices.

### Feeling Prepared vs. Knowing How

Most early childhood teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusion and feel prepared in their education for understanding the importance of inclusion; however, many lack a fundamental understanding of what is involved in creating a quality inclusive environment (Yu & Cho, 2022). There are struggles noted throughout the research in implementing practices that support students with disabilities (Kim et al., 2020; Yu & Park, 2020). Being included in a general education classroom, without individualized intervention and supports, is insufficient for positive outcomes for students with disabilities (McDonnell et al., 2001). There are

struggles reported among early childhood teams in understanding what effective inclusion looks like, and how to implement these practices in classrooms. This disconnect is highlighted by a 2021 study which found that general education teachers tend to prioritize social inclusion for children with disabilities, whereas special education teachers give more weight to academic outcomes (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021). To achieve an environment of effective inclusion, children with disabilities need to be included both socially and academically at the same level and for the same amount of t Teachers generally believe that all children would benefit from inclusive education, but there are discrepancies in conceptualizing how to make inclusion work. Because of this discrepancy, many teachers feel they would benefit from additional training on strategies for adapting environments and lessons to optimize inclusion (Leatherman, 2007). Hsieh and Hsieh (2012) found that some teachers worked to minimize the differences between students by not acknowledging learning or individual differences, leading to less than optimal scaffolding and supports, while other teachers interpreted the idea of group membership to mean that they should continue to teach as they always had, treating all members of the group equally, and said that students would take whatever they could from the instruction. However, group membership is not just being in a place with other peers. Rather, recent research indicates that group membership includes each member being supported, heard, understood, known, welcomed, and befriended (Carter & Biggs, 2021). Therefore, recent calls have emerged for ensuring all teachers have foundational knowledge in individualizing instruction and universally designing classrooms to support a range of learners (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, 2023). This requires equipping teachers with specific and implementable strategies for optimizing learning in inclusive classrooms.

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**Strategies for Optimizing Inclusion**

Strategies for optimizing inclusion should be targeted to address the key areas linked to optimizing inclusion in high quality classrooms including: strategies for promoting a positive climate around inclusion and supporting a range of diverse learners (i.e., teacher attitudes), strategies for obtaining specialized knowledge for supporting young children with disabilities and their families, strategies to improve the self-efficacy of teachers for individualizing instruction and scaffolding learning as part of a universally designed classroom and curricula.

Promoting a Positive Climate for Inclusion

There is a clear connection between beliefs and practice regarding inclusive education (Jordan et al., 2009), and the belief that one is ill-prepared to implement inclusive practices can lead to less effort for implementation (Dignath et al., 2022). However, studies have also shown that teachers are influenced greatly by those who guide and mentor them (D'Agostino et al., 2020). For teachers who are struggling with attitudes regarding inclusion, which happens frequently due to fear of the additional workload (Dignath et al., 2022), seeking guidance and mentorship from those who are experienced and successful with inclusive practices can be quite impactful. Administrators and experienced teachers who are in mentorship roles can have a significant impact on the success of a new or struggling teacher. First, leadership can regularly message about new research on inclusion and learning, position and policy statements such as the new Policy Statement on Inclusion by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (2023), and how this links to high-quality environments and practices in Head Start settings. Regular messaging and framing issues in light of their importance, such as this, can improve positive feelings about important early childhood initiatives (Kendall-Taylor & Stevens, 2017). Next, supports should be in place in organizations to remove barriers that may impede teachers from being able to optimally implement strategies for inclusion, such as staffing shortages and lack of high-quality materials and resources. Leaders can be thoughtful about planning ahead for staffing changes as well as continuing to advocate for policies that support improved pay and

class numbers for Head Start teachers and professionals. Also, by regularly listening to teachers to understand their individual classroom needs and potential barriers, can mitigate simple issues that teachers might encounter. For example, one teacher might need specific classroom furniture to arrange the room for better participation of a child who uses mobility device, such as a wheelchair. This might simply require problem solving and trading furniture from one classroom to another, putting blocks up under a table so a wheelchair can easily maneuver under and up to the table, or putting a call out to the community for a donation.

**Disability-Specific Knowledge**

Next, it is important for teachers to gain knowledge on disabilities in preservice education (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021; Puliatte et al., 2021). This can be accomplished through taking courses in special education, collaborative coursework across general and special education, and information on scaffolding for a range of abilities and learners throughout the required course sequences. Regarding preservice teacher education programs, Jordan et al. (2009) calls for opportunities for preservice teachers to examine their beliefs about inclusion, and learn how to address the diverse needs of an inclusive classroom. Teacher preparation programs should challenge beliefs about ability, disability, diversity, and the processes of acquiring knowledge through practical experiences, relationships, and quality learning experiences regarding the education of students with disabilities.

For many currently practicing teachers, the knowledge that preservice courses in special education increase efficacy for implementing inclusive practices comes a bit too late. The good news is that increasing education does not have to involve going back to school. Dignath et al. (2022) found that interventions for teachers who are currently in the field, such as professional development, can have positive impacts. Quality professional development that is timely, relevant, and guides inclusive practices can provide the same impact as courses taken through preservice programs. Becoming a member of professional organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) is an important step to ensuring ongoing and up-to-date knowledge and attending professional development. As members, teachers can regularly receive research and policy updates as well as have the opportunity to attend professional conferences and trainings post-graduation. This ensures ongoing access to updated recommendations for practices relevant to inclusion and scaffolding learning. There are also valuable organizations for supporting families that provide valuable and freely accessible information on a range of disabilities and are helpful to teachers and other educational team members. These can be a great source for self-directed learning and professional development. For example, the Center for Parent Information & Resources has a database of information on disabilities, their characteristics, and tips for parents and teachers. The information is in plain language with clearly defined terms where necessary, as well as links to organizations focusing on each specific disability. The database can be accessed at https://www.parentcenterhub.org/specific-disabilities/. In addition, for information regarding any genetic disability, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has a comprehensive collection of almost nine hundred conditions with descriptions of diagnosis and management for each. This resource is free and accessible to anyone at https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20301295/. Although much of the language is very technical, there is good information on each condition, and many terms are hyperlinked to definitions (Adam et al., 1993).

In addition to formal training and education and professional resources relevant supporting to children with disabilities and their families, it is immensely important for teachers to obtain disability-specific information relevant to young learners from their parents and caregivers. Families of children with disabilities have unique knowledge of their children, communities, and families that cannot be obtained from any other source (Swart et al., 2021). Parents will be able to provide information and resources specific to their child's unique abilities and needs, which will allow teachers to reduce the barriers to full inclusion in the classroom. For example, caregivers are able to provide ideas spe-

cific to their child's interests, unique skills and abilities, and nuanced medical information that could impact routines and interactions in the classroom.

Last, the DEC Recommended Practices (DEC, 2014) specify that collaborative teaming is essential for successful inclusion. Working with related service providers and special education teachers as a team allows for each provider to have a complete picture of the abilities of every child and gain new knowledge from their specialized team partners. This practice includes joint planning of lessons and activities, shared responsibility for all children, administrative support, communication, and seeking input and feedback (Steed et al., 2023). Teaming requires time for planning, co-creating lessons, reviewing data, and collecting information from all members. Therefore, administrative support is an essential element when scheduling meeting times. It also bears mentioning that the parents and caregivers are included in this definition of a team, and as such, they should be included as frequently as possible.

Table 1
Resources For Optimizing Inclusion

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Organizations | National Association for the Education of Young Children | https://www.naeyc.org/ |
| | Council for Exceptional Children | https://exceptionalchildren.org/ |
| | Division for Early Childhood | https://www.dec-sped.org/ |
| | Center for Parent Information & Resources | https://www.parentcenterhub.org/ |
| Resources | National Institutes of Health GeneReviews | https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20301295/ |
| | National Association of Home Builders | https://www.nahb.org/other/consumer-resources/what-is-universal-design |
| | CAST | https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl |
| Documents | DEC Recommended Practices | https://www.dec-sped.org/dec-recommended-practices |
| | DEC/NAEYC Joint Position Statement on Inclusion | https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/DEC_NAEYC_ECSummary_A.pdf |
| | TIES Center | https://tiescenter.org/ |

**Strategies for Individualizing Instruction - Universal Design in Early Learning**

To optimally individualize instruction and design classrooms for a range of learners in inclusive environments, it is critical that teachers have a foundational understanding of the principles of universal design (Pugach et al., 2020). Universal design is about creating environments and learning experiences that are inclusive and designed for a range of skills and abilities (Joines, 2009). Within this realm of universal design, there are additional specializations - universal design for living and universal design for learning. Arguably both are critically important to consider when supporting learners in educational settings, such as early childhood education environments.

***Universal Design for Living***

Universal design for living is "the design of all environments to be used by all people, without the need for adaptation, to the greatest extent possible" (National Association of Home Builders, n.d.). Ultimately, when environments do not require adaptations, it naturally allows for more inclusive access and participation. Universal design for living is historically rooted in the fields of architecture and design with the aim of removing physical barriers to access in a range of environments (Joines, 2009). In our U.S. societies, most buildings, playgrounds, homes, and structures are designed for individuals without disabilities; thereby requiring adaptations for any differences from the general population. For example, most homes, and even school buildings, are designed with a step or threshold at the front door, thereby requiring an adaptation through the addition of a ramp for wheelchair users or other mobility devices rather than being designed from the beginning with a zero threshold. This can cause barriers not only for children with disabilities but their caregivers as well. Yet, this is simple and cost-effective if designed this way from the beginning. Hence, universal design for living has seven main principles to consider when designing to maximize use and inclusive access without requiring adaptation by the broadest range of users. This includes: 1) equitable use, 2) flexible use, 3) simple and intuitive use, 4) perceptible information, 5) tolerance for error, 6) low physical effort, and 7) size and space for approach and use (Joins, 2009). These are key principles for teachers to consider when designing an inclusive classroom.

Equitable use means that the environment is able to be used by a range of individuals with diverse abilities without necessitating adaptation. In early childhood environments, this might mean having a playground that is designed for wheelchair access and has hard surfaces that are ramped to allow a range of mobility types to participate. Or, a table that is free from surrounding rugs or barriers so a child walking, in a wheelchair, or using a walker would be able to access it without having to move any barriers. Flexible use means it accommodates a wide range of preferences and abilities. This might look like scissors that accommodate both right and left handed use. Flexible use means that the environment can accommodate a range of preferences for use such as not requiring extreme precision for use, such as a wide paddle light switch or varied seating choices in a classroom. The principle of simple and intuitive use eliminates unnecessary complexity such as planning environmental cues for students in the classroom to assist with transitions or understanding of classroom routines. The principle of perceptible information allows multiple modes of use and communication, such as verbal, visual, physical. It does not assume any one sensory mode is the dominant. For example, if you were to look around many school or community environments, it is quickly evident that a vast majority of signage requires vision and does not account for a range of different abilities. However, an environment built on the principle of perceptible information accounts for a range of sensory abilities by providing information in multiple means. For example, crosswalks and elevator buttons and other types of signage near and throughout a school or early childhood classroom should include auditory, tactile, and visual forms of communication rather than just a written sign or picture. Tolerance for error and low physical effort allow for less accurate motor coordination or strength to be able to access parts of the environment. For example, a lever door handle requires less motor coordination, accuracy, and strength to use than a round door handle. An individual could even use an elbow or other means to open the door latch when it is a lever instead of a traditional round shape. Last, size and space for approach and use are

important because they allow access when an individual may be using a walker, wheelchair or other mode of mobility. It accounts for accessing sinks and other important equipment and tables in a classroom whether a child is seated in a wheelchair, standing, or using a device. Overall, when designed with these principles from the beginning, it allows more access and interaction from all individuals in the classroom, regardless of differing sensory, motor, or cognitive abilities. It also provides an optimized environment for all individuals; a key foundation for authentic inclusion. If we think of how many times we have all experienced health concerns, temporary mobility impairments, or other needs, it helps to provide access amongst many situations that may arise or change in one's abilities. In addition, by having early childhood environments structured in such a way, it also provides more access for a range of caregiver needs; ultimately allowing more flexibility in who is able to engage in and support classroom activities.

**Universal Design for Learning**

"Universal design for learning is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (CAST, n.d.). Universal design for learning has similar principles to universal design for living but focuses more directly on teaching and learning, such as curricular-related considerations. Universal design for learning focuses on three main principles: a) multiple means of engagement, b) multiple means of representation, c) multiple means of expression (CAST, n.d.; Lohmann et al., 2018). Multiple means of engagement focuses on student motivation with the curriculum or planned learning activities. In an early childhood classroom, this includes considering the needs and interests of each child that may motivate, or dissuade them, from wanting to participate in the curriculum or planned activities. It may include providing choices or better individualizing classroom activities so they represent children' s community or cultural preferences or providing peer learning opportunities (Lohman et al., 2018). The principle of multiple means of representation accounts for providing learning opportunities in a range of ways so that children can optimize their learning based on their unique strengths and abilities. It is presenting information in a range of ways to account for differing learning and sensory needs. For example, at story time allowing for auditory, visual, and tactile representation of story concepts and interactions with the materials. The principle of multiple means of expression allows a child to express their answers and interact with other children and curricular materials and classroom activities in a range of ways. This might include a child with speech differences using a communication device or picture exchange system to provide responses in the classroom or interact with peers. Or, it might involve a child being able to point or gaze at an object to communicate their desire for an activity. This also includes ensuring the teacher and peers acknowledge and respond to the range of expressions equally. This might require training and regular teaming to ensure classroom professionals understand and do not miss the range of different modes of expression used by different children in the classroom. Overall, universal design for living and learning, in addition to the other key practices discussed herein this paper that are linked to high quality environments in early childhood settings, are necessary for optimizing inclusive experiences. The research demonstrates that teachers are interested in creating inclusive environments and are willing to create learning experiences that benefit all children (Muccio et al., 2014; Nugyen, 2012; Yu, 2019). However, even when teachers do feel well-prepared and have a positive attitude, they can face significant challenges in creating quality learning experiences for all children (Anderson & Lindeman, 2017). Specifically, understanding the logistics of providing high-quality educational experiences to students with disabilities can be a barrier to optimizing inclusive experiences for students in early education settings (Hwang & Evans, 2011).

***Strategies for Universal Design Relevant to Early Learning***

Understanding and using UDL is a key factor in making classrooms and learning activities accessible for all students. Creating a quality inclusive environment means that children with disabilities are able to engage in all activities at the same level as their peers (McGuire & Meadan, 2022). Luckily, there are sim-

ple actions to optimize inclusive experiences for all children, including young children with disabilities through the foundational principles for UDL (see Table 2).

When examining the accessibility of space and materials in the classroom, the goal is to provide all children the freedom to explore and engage in all areas of the physical space, and all aspects of routines and activities. The basic suggestions include ensuring that walkways are wide enough, and shelves/bins are at an appropriate level so that children can reach the materials without assistance (Stockall et al., 2012). Beyond the basic access considerations, minor changes to activities and planning can assist with engagement and student autonomy. For instance, allowing all students to choose supplies from a limited array not only allows for individual needs to be met, but also meets the requirement of multiple means of engagement. This could be as simple as offering crayons, markers, and colored pencils for an art project, or different sizes or shapes of manipulatives for counting. When planning activities, keep in mind the abilities of all students, and allow for a range of ways to engage meaningfully, regardless of disability.

Coelho et al. (2019) indicated that whole group activities tend to have lower levels of engagement for students with disabilities. They attribute this (in part) to fewer opportunities to participate, and less individual attention. Although it is not always possible to give each child the attention they want in a group activity, there are simple ways that you can help keep them engaged in the activity. When planning a group activity, consider creating errorless

**Table 2**

*UDL Strategies for Inclusion*

| UDL Principle | Strategies for Inclusion |
|---|---|
| Multiple Means of Representation | Provide choices for materials and activities |
| | Represent the range of community and cultural preferences |
| | Allow for differing sensory needs |
| | Use of PECS, AAC, gestural, or eye gaze responses |
| Accessibility | Ensure the ability to explore all spaces and materials within the classroom without assistance |
| | Shelves and bins at an appropriate level for access by all students |
| | Walkways are wide enough for all students to move freely |
| Errorless Engagement | Focus objects relevant to the activity |
| | Participation not contingent on correct response/participation |

engagement opportunities for each child, such as choosing and holding a related object while reading a story and encouraging them to raise it in the air when it is mentioned. For example, simple felt cutouts or small plush items that are meaningfully linked to the activity and culturally relevant to the child can provide each child a focus for the activity.

Children need to be able to exercise their agency over movement around the classroom, use of materials, and also over interactions with peers and adults, even when using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices (Ibrahim et al., 2023). The wide range of communication styles in inclusive classrooms, including students who may speak multiple languages, require added supports for students to become proficient in communication. Therefore, it is critical to foster interactions in natural contexts between both peers and adults (Coelho et al., 2019). Quality interactions do not always come easily, particularly if peers do not understand how to optimally interact with students who use alternate modes of communication, such as Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). In addition, interactions may not come easily if a child has mainly been exposed to interactions from adults that consist of instructions or comments that do not necessitate a response (Chung et al., 2012). Overall, there are many considerations for promoting and optimizing communication and interactions, however it can be approached one step at a time, and ultimately offers children the multiple means of expression that UDL principles require. Although the goal is for students to engage in conversations, a first step to allowing basic communication could be as simple as a yes/no picture card which allows all students to answer simple questions without adult assistance. Another option is to work with the speech and language pathologist to assist all students to engage through the various methods of AAC utilized in each classroom. Friendships and interactions are key elements of quality inclusive practices, and interactions are central to developing friendships and a sense of belonging (Black-Hawkins et al., 2022; Crouch et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Head Start teachers, administrators, and professionals hold the potential to lead forth the highest quality environments that are inclusive for all learners. However, this requires fostering a supportive climate and positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion, considerations for high-quality preservice training and ongoing professional development, and strategies for individualizing and optimizing learning environments through universal design to ensure meaningful social and academic outcomes. By taking one step at a time, for one student at a time, teachers can begin integrating the elements of a high-quality preschool program and UDL principles to create the ultimate environment for learning and accessibility for all students.

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