

UDL in 15 Minutes  
With Alaa Zaza

[A logo with UDL in 15 Minutes within a circle followed by a screen shot of a digital article titled, COVID-19 and Conflict: Keeping Syrian Children Learning Between Crises]

LOUI: Hi everyone. This is Loui Lord Nelson and I am excited to share that there will be a photo montage included with this podcast. As you will hear during the podcast and at the very end, on the recording day we did not think we would be able to create a photo montage due to safety issues. But it turns out we were able to and I hope you're able to take the time to go over into the YouTube area and look at all of those photos. Thanks so much. Hope you enjoy the podcast.

LOUI: Welcome to UDL in 15 minutes where educators discuss their experiences with UDL, I'm Loui Lord Nelson UDL author and leader. Today I'm talking with Alla Zaza who is a Programme Lead for the Manahel-Syria Education Programme. Today, Zaza is going to share how UDL has helped Syrian teachers, experience a shift in their mindset and design for the barrier students are experiencing. Hi Zaza, how are you?

ZAZA: I'm doing great. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be with you.

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome. You're so welcome. So, for today's podcast I want to offer listeners some context about education in Syria right now, and more specifically what are children and teachers facing and how has the war affected education?

ZAZA: This month marks the 10th year of the Syrian tragedy. So, for the majority of the children we work with, they know nothing but war. As a matter of fact, half of them have lost a family member or a teacher or, unfortunately, a close friend. And most of them were forcefully displaced, sometimes up to seven or eight times. One out of three of their schools were was attacked or destroyed so you can imagine how that had a great impact on the ability to learn, but also a greater impact on children disability.

LOUI: To that's a lot is a, it's an understatement. That amount of conflict can create a paralysis in learning and in learning systems, but the work of Manahel-Syria Education Programme set out to change that, so can you offer an overview of this really tremendous project? [A screen shot of an article titled, "Improving early learning outcomes in opposition-held Syria"]

ZAZA: Sure, so the word *Manahel* means fountains, it's like fountains of knowledge, and we would like to believe that what our program is bringing to the northwest of Syria is opportunities for inclusive and quality learning opportunities for children in Syria. So, Manahel is a three year education program funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and the program provides access to safe and learning opportunities for almost half a million children in northwest Syria.

LOUI: Wow. That's...that is big. So, for anyone who's interested in reading more about the project, I'm going to put a link to an article in my associated blog. So, one last step before we move into the story that you're going to share. Could you share a little bit about your background in education and what brought you to the role that you have? [A librarian supports students during a psychosocial support session.]

ZAZA: My background is in special education and school social work. I was always passionate about giving children equitable opportunity for the future, but in Syria we had a very rigid and centralized system with no role for really change. And prior to the war, even simple acts related to awareness raising for the rights of children with disability were restricted and sometimes deemed unlawful. So the system, when it comes to children with disability, was more of a, had two boxes within the system where children with disability were completely isolated. And, and that's not an, you know, an overstatement because you would spend all your life as a student, typically developing, without ever meeting a child with disability in your classroom, and the blame was always on the child and not on the system. So, this is what motivated me to focus on children rights, particularly those with disability.

LOUI: Wonderful. So, let's start with the why of this work. As you describe there are tremendous barriers in education in Syria right now, but you and others focused on what you've called those two boxes within the system and how you set out to create that single box. So could you talk about that effort?

ZAZA: I mean, despite all the horrors that Syria witnessed in the last 10 years, teachers kept coming to schools volunteering, parents kept holding for a better future for the children, and the children kept coming to school. I think they kept hoping. And what is growing now in Syria is not just fear and hatred, I mean, the way it's reflected in the news, but there's also a call for justice and more tolerance. We saw that with how teachers and the community were more empathetic, and we've seen an increase in empathy toward children with disability which lowered initial barriers related to attitudes. Our role mainly was to build on that, and support teachers, and build their confidence that they can provide equitable opportunities for children with disability. I think the biggest challenge was the belief that teachers had that those children need to be educated somewhere else. [Students participate in a psychosocial support session revolving around expressing emotions.] And they want them to be, to enjoy the experiences to enjoy their childhood and learning in their schools, but they had fear that they couldn't. And slowly with our support, they, they gradually build that confidence that they can actually do certain adaptations, simple accommodations, with the idea of universal design for learning. What can we change as teachers in our classroom, in the classroom environment, in the way we teach, the way we do assessment that would welcome children with different needs? And this is where we started. But for teachers, they also needed continuous support they also needed that feeling that if they come across a child that needs more than that support is provided. And the approach we followed was to integrate child-friendly spaces or resource rooms into the schools. So, if the student needs to be pulled out for additional support that is available within the same school. And if the child requires even additional support that is beyond the capacity of the school, then we established what we call the different pathways, meaning that there is a link between the school and available services in the community. Now not all the services are available, but that was a good first step to

identify the gap. For example, if a child needs a hearing aid or a child needs speech therapy, then there is a way of seeking that support from outside the school while ensuring that most of the child's time is spent in the school.

LOUI: I'm hearing so many things that definitely tie back to Universal Design for Learning. One of the things that I heard early on when you were sharing is that, you know, helping the teachers and everyone shift from the problem is not in the child, the problem is in the system, and that you all have used Universal Design for Learning, which is built on that premise, to create these environments for these students to be included as much as possible. And also, are teachers thinking about UDL for all of their students? Are they using these practices and strategies that they're learning for everyone? [Students introduce themselves to a new teacher.]

ZAZA: Yes, and this is where we started. We thought that the teachers are the agents of change, because when you go at the top of the system, they also blame teachers they say, "We wanted change in the policies and practices but teachers don't," which is not the case in northwest Syria. So, focusing on the teachers help helped us to have more advocates for the change. And for teachers, the way they saw UDL was that it helps all children because in Syria today there are many reasons of why children cannot go to school. And there are many barriers, not just disability. All children face different, different challenges, and, and having that paradigm shift, but also that system of thinking about "what can we change so what we do is, is suitable for a wider range of needs?" was crucial in the way we did things. Because you might have a child who is displaced, coming from a different area, speaks a different accent, that's a reason for the child to be excluded. And then those simple accommodations or adaptations in the classroom done by the teacher, not only help the teacher to build confidence that they can do more, but also help the child to feel more welcome. So, we kept building on, on that thinking process and, and with the way we provide support and learning for teachers is through supervision and coaching, which is an ongoing process. It's not a standalone training. So, whenever they come to us with, "We have these new

challenges,” we’re, we’re there for them to say, how about we think of this or that, so we can improve the child's experience in, in the classroom. I think what's crucial about the process is for teachers to feel supported and to troubleshoot or problem solving on the way. This is how they felt like even if they face a complex situation, they know what to seek the support from, and they start by themselves. What can I do in my classroom to help others? [A group of girls draw images about their school and home life as part of a psychosocial support exercise.] And that also took the form of slowly. We didn't want to complicate, you know, the use of tools. But once we had simple processes in the classroom, we moved to lesson planning, then we move to curriculum, then we move to assessment. And we built on each success gradually. So we didn't come with like a full, you know, complicated plan we just took it step by step, and each success brought to us another. And then later we like those practices to the policy level. So we started from bottom, small practices small changes, then the teachers themselves became advocate, yes we can do this, we can do that. And then we open up the discussion about eligibility criteria, who are the students who should receive individual support? What are the accommodations for assessment? For example, can we add more time for certain children can we have a teacher supporting a child while doing the assessment? This sounds simple, but it's a big thing. It is a big shift, because there's one way of doing assessments in Syria, prior to the war. And it's really rigid. And any attempt to change anything is was perceived as cheating system, or, you know changing a big, big part of the system. [A mobile psychosocial support team, known as the mobile library, visits students in a remote area of Syria to deliver play-based exercises.] So when they felt like, yes we can do that at different levels, the teacher level, then their local authority level, seeing that this is not coming from an external entity like us, it's coming from teachers coming from parents and other actors in the community, that paved the way for a change that we believe now is more sustainable because it's reflected in a policy not just practices at school level.

LOUI: Where I am in my head right now is the similarities, and then of course the, the differences in context. But there are so many places that want to adopt Universal Design for Learning and the practices that align, and face so many of the same barriers

you're talking about, but I'm going to pull one thing out, that you described so well, that essentially you scaffolded. You and your colleagues scaffolded this entire process for the teachers. You, you looked at it and you, you chunked information, put it into small pieces so it was approachable, and you truly empowered the teachers by doing that, which is tremendous. So many people ask, "How do we get started with UDL?" And it's so contextualized, it has to fit your context, and it has to be done in a way that everybody feels okay with it, at least to get started. We just have a couple of minutes left, but I'm wondering if there were any situations where you felt that maybe teachers needed even a little bit more support than you anticipated, and maybe what that support was. [A girl evaluates a school-based activity]

ZAZA: Yes. I mean we've anticipated that there will be situations where teachers will be overwhelmed, and that would undermine the whole process of behavior change. So, one of the things we first introduced in terms of training and nurturing teachers' skills was for teachers to be able to identify what, when they need support. So it's more like a safe identification and, and training is just to help them to differentiate between a situation where they're confident to act and a situation where they need to seek support. And we used vulnerability criteria because we didn't want the teachers' intervention to add harm to children because doing no harm is a core principle we follow, But there continue to be a situation, it wasn't as, you know it's easier said, there were situations, there's there's, differences on how different communities because we work in a relatively large area in the northwest Syria on how the response was from different teachers and different community members. And I think having an agent of change, what we call a coach in the school, from the school really did the trick for us, in the sense that if a teacher is not sure, or a teacher is not confident, or the teacher is the feels that they need support, there someone in the school, someone from the same community, they can go to. And that person is linked to us, becomes overtime very resourceful in terms of understanding, you know, what can be done and how can we do it. [A child receives a literacy class in a special education centre followed by Screen captures of the website, theudlapproach.com and the podcast logo] So, the model of resource room changed into a place where, you know, different educators could meet

and troubleshoot a complex situation or a complex scenario, because a lot of the children that we deal with, it's not just the barrier, it's not just education, it's also protection. It's they've, they've seen a lot, and, and it requires a multi sectoral kind of response to address their needs and create a pathway for them back to, to learning. And that's why I think the second key message other than having an agent of change in the school is to always integrate your education work with your psychosocial support and child protection interventions, because you will need those in a crisis context and they're not separate kinds of services, they're integrated. Because of the complexity of the needs of the children, you need a holistic approach.

LOUI: Absolutely. Oh Zaza, I could talk with you for hours, I can tell. But we, we have reached our 15 minutes so I want to thank you so, so very much for being a guest on this podcast. It's amazing to do a recording with someone who is, it's, it's, you're in a totally different place, but we have such similar stories just when it comes to that, you know, overarching way of thinking about UDL, why we're using it, and, and how we need to help teachers start using it. So thank you so much for sharing your story.

ZAZA: Thank you. Thank you. And keep doing the great work you're doing, it's really helping a lot around the world.

LOUI: Oh my gosh, thank you so much. Thank you.

For those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website [www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts](http://www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts). Finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 Minutes, you can contact me through [www.theUDLApproach.com](http://www.theUDLApproach.com). And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.

So before I close this podcast, I want listeners to know that due to the continued conflict in Syria and the need to protect educators and students, there will not be an image montage associated with this particular podcast. You will, though, find a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, which is [www.theUDLapproach.com/podcast](http://www.theUDLapproach.com/podcast). And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes, you can contact me through [www.theUDLapproach.com](http://www.theUDLapproach.com). And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.