

Reimagining adaptive teaching: Creating a supportive environment for all learners



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In-service teachers, due to time constraints, often have little time to thoroughly reflect upon their pedagogy, and as such it becomes increasingly difficult for innovative and inclusive practices to emerge within the classroom, particularly those that could support the needs of all learners and promote inclusivity. The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant challenges, as well as opportunities for expanding practice, as the attainment gap appears to have widened and schools are having to focus more acutely on the needs of specific learners. Indeed, the Department for Education (2021b) estimated that by the end of the spring term 2020–21, ‘primary-aged pupils had experienced a learning loss in reading equivalent to 2.0 months of progress’ and in mathematics ‘a much greater learning loss of 3.1 months’ (p. 9). This could just be the tip of the iceberg and creates not only an opportunity but also the perfect climate in which to prioritise the urgency of meeting the needs of all learners.

As teacher-educators working in ITT/E, we are in a privileged position from which to witness and celebrate the plethora of pedagogical approaches that are on offer. We are driving forward government policy, including the introduction of the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019a) and the Early Career Teacher Framework (DfE, 2019b), and we recognise that pre- and in-service teachers need greater opportunities to reflect on how we meet such needs. Often, teachers attempt to meet the needs of all learners and create an inclusive learning environment through traditional differentiation practices. For example, differentiating through content offers teachers a way of targeting the needs of learners through different activities or resources. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that traditional concepts of differentiation, which involve grouping students in terms of ability and providing them with differentiated work, are not only ineffective in achieving outcomes for learners but may also restrict progress, damage self-esteem and stifle opportunity. Over 20 years ago, Boaler et al. (2000) published a significant piece of research that suggested that differentiation not only was ineffective in securing educational outcomes but may also limit potential. Boaler et al. (2000) witnessed how mixed-ability differentiation was a significant factor in learners constructing themselves as failures. Many students in the paper commented that they were poor at mathematics and had low expectations for themselves. In reality, teacher expectations, determined by different ability groupings, often result in a fixed mindset, explored by Dweck (2006).

Papert (1980) (who will be discussed in greater depth later) offers some interesting contemplations that might be revitalised for contemporary educational theory and practice. He suggests that our models of inclusivity often produce the opposite of the intended desired effect, presenting learners as ‘bundles of aptitudes and ineptitudes’ (p. 8), thus designating learners with a specific learning identity or, more commonly, a deficit learning identity.

Thus we argue that differentiation, as it is commonly practised, often results in segregation rather than inclusivity, and is increasingly becoming an obsolete tool in the teacher’s repertoire. Differentiation is quickly becoming, utilising Papert’s (1980) concept, ‘an anachronism’: an educational practice that has ‘no rational basis beyond [its] historical roots in an earlier period of technological and theoretical development’ (p. 33). It is, simply put, archaic. We argue for a change of hearts and minds, a shift in culture that moves beyond simplistic and convenient adaptations to provide truly inclusive environments. This paper does not explore specific pedagogies or practices but explores deeper issues, systemic issues that still remain ingrained in many educational settings.

The future of the inclusive practitioner?

The Department for Education (2019a, 2019b, 2021a) has released a selection of key policy documents that aim to set out the future of teacher education and the practices that constitute their work. The Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a) states that teachers learn that:

Adaptive teaching is less likely to be valuable if it causes the teacher to artificially create distinct tasks for different groups of pupils or to set lower expectations for particular pupils... Flexibly grouping pupils within a class to provide more tailored support can be effective, but care should be taken to monitor its impact on engagement and motivation, particularly for low attaining pupils.

Instead of asking children to find number bonds to 10, a simple LTHC task might involve asking learners to find different ways to make 10; these could include fractions, decimals, etc. Thus, there is great scope for this approach to be applied to other areas of the curriculum. Simply, beginners can access the learning (we use this term deliberately instead of activity) and more advanced learners can progress without being limited. What is important to note is that all learners engage with the same learning activity, making it a truly inclusive task. For example, a teacher may give learners a bank of physical words with which to construct sentences. All learners can access and construct simple sentences, while advanced learners would be able to produce more complex structures, perhaps with extended clauses, varying punctuation or more intricate literary devices. All learners access the same task but there is a wealth of learning opportunities at different levels of understanding.

Moving forward

As Wiliam (2013) states, as teachers we want to 'know "what works" in education, but the simple truth is that everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere' (William, 2013, p. 19). In the end, 'classrooms are far too complex for any prescription to be possible, and variations in context make what is an effective course of action in one situation disastrous in another' – and this is why research, absorbed en masse, 'can never tell teachers what to do' (p. 19). Instead, research might 'highlight for teachers what kinds of avenues are worth exploring and which are likely to be dead ends' (p. 19). Papert (1980) states that we 'must be an anthropologist', who must 'work to understand which cultural materials are relevant to intellectual development' in their classroom. 'Then, he or she needs to understand which trends are taking place in the culture. Meaningful intervention must take the form of working with these trends.' (p. 32) We argue that settings need systemic changes of practice, a cultural shift in teaching and learning that results in truly inclusive practices and in inclusive environments for all learners. As teachers, we should consider what we aspire to create in terms of our model of inclusivity and how we can foster this in our classrooms. In the end, we should never lose sight of our ethical responsibility for our learners.

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