Adaptive Teaching

Implementing Adaptive Teaching in Your Classroom a guide for Teachers and TAs

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What is Adaptive Teaching?

Adaptive teaching is an approach that teachers use to meet the learning needs of all students, regardless of their background or learning ability. The goal is to respond to each student's strengths and weaknesses. A key element is to overcome any barriers to learning that may arise. I have seen the benefits of adaptive teaching first-hand, especially in special schools. In this post, I will discuss the principles of adaptive teaching and how it can be delivered in a special school setting. This recent post by the EEF highlighted the effectiveness of this.

Adaptive teaching is based on the idea that every student is different and that their learning needs vary. Teachers who practice adaptive teaching understand this and work to create a learning environment that is tailored to the individual needs of each student. To do this, teachers need to be aware of the different factors that can inhibit a student's ability to learn and develop approaches that enable students to learn effectively.

Understanding The Needs of Your Students

Adaptive teaching requires teachers to have a deep understanding of the developmental stages of their students. They must also have a clear understanding of the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and those with English as an additional language. Teachers must be able to use a wide toolkit of teaching approaches to engage and support students.

One of the most important aspects of adaptive teaching builds on, or can be seen as an evolution of differentiation. Adaptive teaching seeks to address some of the concerns around the use of differentiation. The danger of permanent in-class groupings is that it may result in lower expectations. Labeling a group as "the bottom group" and giving them a different task without considering their specific needs and abilities can be detrimental to their learning. It is also not helpful to provide overly elaborate approaches that do not support the majority of pupils. Providing multiple levels of tasks with different worksheets for every lesson is not suitable.
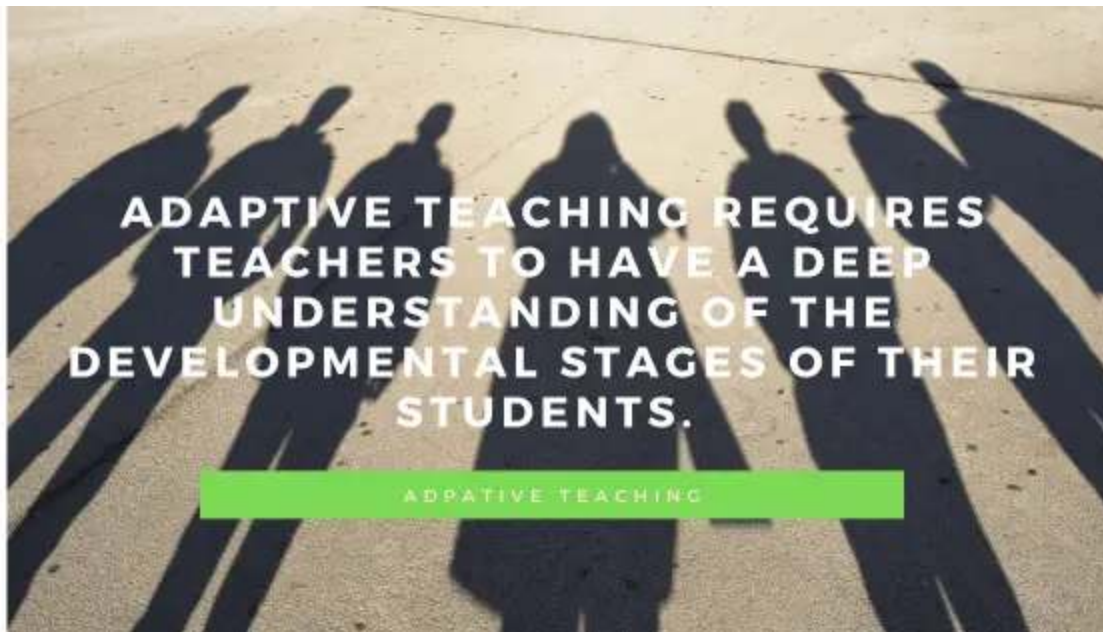
Adaptive teaching means that teachers create tasks and activities that are tailored to the individual needs of each student. For example, if a student has difficulty with reading, the teacher may provide additional support. This may be providing audio recordings of texts or breaking down complex language into simpler terms. Maybe even a reading pen. The teacher is able to ensure that each student is learning and progressing at a pace that is appropriate for them. In a special school effective use of teaching assistants is an essential part of making adaptive teaching work. They may adapt resources, create specialist AAC communication boards or pre-teach key concepts or vocabulary.

An Example of a Reading Pen

In special schools, adaptive teaching is even more important. Students in special schools have a range of complex needs that require careful attention and support. Autistic students may struggle with social interaction and communication, while students with ADHD may struggle with impulsivity and attention span. Teachers in special schools must be able to recognise the nuances in student's diagnoses and develop teaching approaches that meet that need.

The role of Multi-Sensory Learning in Adaptive Teaching.

One approach that is often used in special schools, and I am a great fan of is multi-sensory learning. have a look at my multi-sensory stories here. This approach uses different senses to help students learn, such as touch, sound, and sight. For example, a teacher may use visuals, tactile resources and manipulatives to help students understand complex concepts. They may also use sensory materials, such as feathers or sand, to help students explore and learn in a hands-on way.

Another approach is task analysis. This approach breaks down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps. Also known as chunking information. This is a key element of sequential planning. If a student struggles with reading, the teacher may break down the task into smaller steps, such as recognising letters, sounding out words, and understanding sentence structure using tools such as the SCERTS model. By doing this, the student is able to learn and progress at a pace that is appropriate for them. By reducing the pressure to keep up with their other peers the student may be more engaged in their learning.

Creating a Positive Environment

One of the key principles of adaptive teaching in special schools is to create a positive and supportive learning environment and relationships between students and their supporting adults. Students in special schools may have experienced difficulties and setbacks in their learning, and it is important for teachers to create an environment that is safe and welcoming. This means creating clear expectations, providing positive reinforcement, and building positive relationships with students.

Examples of Adaptations During the Lesson

Teachers and TA's will often assess how well individual students are responding to, or engaging with the lesson. They can then make adaptations based on these assessments. Here are some examples based on the Education South West Adaptive Teaching Resource.

- Reduce their language to make it more accessible to students
- Provide step-by-step instructions to assist with understanding, this may be a mini-schedule or task breakdown
- Model an example so students have a clear understanding of expectations
- Highlight 1 or 2 key concepts that the student needs to know to access future learning.
- Elicit responses via questions to promote critical thinking
- Allocate a TA to a dynamic group to address misconceptions or keep pupils on track
- Set intermediate goals to break down larger tasks into manageable parts
- Provide prompts to help students get started on a task
- Structure a group attempt before an individual attempt to build confidence
- Improve accessibility, for example, by sitting closer to the speaker, increasing visibility of the whiteboard or reading text to students with visual impairments.

What is Adaptive Teaching? An In-Depth Guide

The Basics of Adaptive Teaching

At its core, adaptive teaching involves:

- Flexibly grouping students
- Continually checking for student understanding
- Modifying instructional methods and materials
- Providing individual feedback and scaffolds
- Designing enriching extension activities
- Ongoing assessment and data analysis

The teacher aims to create a student-centered classroom that addresses each learner as an individual with unique background knowledge, skills, interests, and learning preferences.

Adaptive teaching is driven by frequent formative assessment. The teacher gathers real-time data on student learning through strategies like questioning, observations, discussions, and short low-stakes quizzes. This data allows the teacher to gain insight into precisely who needs support, specific misconceptions to address, and signs of student mastery.

Armed with this information, the teacher can make quick in-the-moment adjustments, as well as longer-term curriculum modifications. For example, they may re-explain a concept using a different analogy, modify a group project expectation for a struggling student, or plan more challenging extension activities for advanced learners.

Adaptive teaching requires flexibility, responsiveness, and a growth mindset from teachers. They must be comfortable with uncertainty, willing to relinquish some control, and able to pivot strategies based on continuous evidence of student learning needs. It is not a pre-packaged program, but an approach embedded into all aspects of instruction.

Why Adaptive Teaching Matters

Traditional teaching follows a one-size-fits-all model, delivering the same lecture, activity, and pace of instruction to all students. However, each class contains students with diverse backgrounds, readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Adaptive teaching acknowledges and responds to these variations so all students can achieve success.

Here are some key benefits of adaptive teaching:

- **Increases engagement and motivation:** When instruction better aligns with their zone of proximal development, students are more engaged and motivated to learn.
- **Builds self-efficacy:** Students gain confidence when given achievable challenges matched to their ability and provided necessary supports.
- **Improves academic outcomes:** Personalized learning enables higher levels of student mastery and content retention.
- **Promotes inclusion:** Students with learning differences are ensured equal access to curricula when adaptations remove barriers.
- **Develops independent learning skills:** The gradual release of responsibility builds capacity for self-directed learning.
- **Allows accelerated progress:** Advanced students can move at an individualized swift pace when adaptations provide enrichment.
- **Enables differentiated instruction:** Teachers can better reach the needs of all learners rather than just teaching to the "middle."
- **Reduces problematic behaviors:** Customizing instruction minimizes frustration, confusion, boredom and off-task behaviors.
- **Informs teaching practices:** The ongoing assessment in adaptive teaching provides teachers with valuable data to adjust curriculum and strategies.

In sum, adaptive teaching maximizes learning for every student. When implemented effectively, it transforms classrooms into supportive communities where learners take ownership over their growth.

The Difference Between Adaptive Teaching and Differentiated Instruction

Adaptive teaching is sometimes conflated with differentiated instruction, however they have distinct approaches:

Differentiated Instruction

- Identifies student differences in advance
- Grouping and lesson planning occurs before teaching
- Prepares specific materials and activities for student groups
- Student groups often remain static
- Primary focus on accommodating different readiness levels

Adaptive Teaching

- Assesses student needs continually
- Instructional decisions occur during live teaching
- Relies on flexible use of existing materials
- Student groups change dynamically
- Focuses on all learner variables beyond just readiness

Rather than simply serving predefined groups, adaptive teaching responds to the students in front of you each day, meeting them where they are. While differentiation is often viewed as something teachers do *to* students, adaptive teaching happens *with* active student partnership.

Adaptive teachers certainly understand their learners' baseline abilities but then take ongoing action to gather data on changing student needs. Their instruction remains nimble to address emerging gaps in real-time.

Both approaches aim to improve student outcomes through personalized learning. However, adaptive teaching emphasizes adaptability and direct responsiveness over pre-planned differentiation. The following strategies help enable this student-centered responsive environment.

Adaptive Teaching Strategies

Examples of Continual Assessment

- **Ask probing questions:** Use formative assessment techniques like hinge questions to quickly gather data on student understanding.
- **Circulate and observe:** Move around the room while students work to listen, look at their progress, and identify any points of confusion.
- **Conduct quick checks:** Do occasional pulse checks through thumbs up/down, short quizzes, or exit tickets.
- **Review student work:** Spot-check written work, projects, and problem sets to identify areas students are excelling in or struggling with.
- **Make assessments transparent:** Share assignment rubrics, and exemplars and clearly explain assessment criteria.
- **Gather student feedback:** Check in with students frequently – what is making sense? What do they need to be clarified?

Flexible Grouping and Instruction

- **Use small temporary groups:** Form targeted mini-groups based on needs shown by assessment data, which can change daily.
- **Pair students strategically:** Match students who excel in one area with those who are stronger in another area for peer tutoring.
- **Vary grouping methods:** Have students work independently, in partners, triads, or as a whole class based on the goal of the activity.
- **Have students lead:** Appoint students to lead groups, with teacher guidance, to take ownership of their learning.
- **Modify content strategically:** Compact, supplement or enhance the curriculum for individuals or groups according to their needs without lowering rigour.

Scaffolding and Support

- **Make goals transparent:** Post learning goals, explained in student-friendly language, so students can track their own progress.
- **Model expectations:** Demonstrate what successful performance looks like, including thinking aloud the process.
- **Give targeted feedback:** Provide specific praise and constructive suggestions immediately during work time rather than waiting until the end.
- **Ask leading questions:** Use prompts to focus student thinking and support them in answering independently.
- **Break content into chunks:** Present manageable amounts of information using guided notes or slides to prevent cognitive overload.

Enrichment and Extension

- **Encourage goal setting:** Have students set individual learning goals and provide differentiated support to reach them.
- **Offer project choices:** Allow students to select extended projects that align with their interests and learning preferences.
- **Provide enrichment options:** Include a menu of more complex optional learning activities students can self-select.
- **Foster student leadership:** Develop peer coaching and leadership roles for students who want more responsibility.
- **Remove unnecessary practice:** Allow students with rapid mastery to move on to higher-order activities rather than repetitive practice.
- **Make real-world connections:** Encourage students to apply skills to real scenarios like creating informational flyers or podcasts.

Examples of Reflective Practice

- **Maintain detailed records:** Keep organized notes on students' development to recognize growth and respond to areas of need.
- **Seek student input:** Regularly ask students for feedback on how well instructional strategies are working for their learning via surveys or discussions.
- **Collaborate with colleagues:** Share successes and challenges to get input on improving your adaptive teaching approach.
- **Continue your own learning:** Read books and articles or take courses to build skills in personalizing instruction.
- **Observe other teachers:** Notice adaptive teaching strategies colleagues use that you could try in your own classroom.
- **Reflect on lessons:** After each lesson, consider ways you could improve your adaptive instruction going forward.

Here are 15 examples of adaptive teaching strategies that you can implement in your classroom now to meet the diverse needs of your students:

1. **Personalisation**: Tailor instruction to address the unique needs of each student. For learners significantly behind age-related expectations (ARE) or with complex needs, consider a more personalized approach.

2. **Differentiation**: Use a variety of instructional methods and materials to accommodate diverse student needs. Start from where the student is, rather than where ARE outcomes dictate they should be.

3. **Flexibility**: Be responsive to changing student needs. Don't hesitate to adjust your lesson plan if it isn't meeting learners' requirements.

4. **Ongoing Assessment**: Continuously assess student progress to inform your teaching and make necessary adjustments. Involve learning support assistants in this process.

5. **Collaboration**: Work collaboratively with students, parents, and colleagues to support student learning. Consider student perspectives and involve them in decision-making

6. **Self-Directed Learning**: Encourage students to take an active role in their own learning. Help them set goals and monitor their progress.

7. **Early Check-Ins**: Start lessons with brief individual or group check-ins to gauge student understanding and address any concerns.

8. **Targeted Questioning**: Pose questions that boost student confidence and encourage participation. Adjust the level of challenge based on individual needs.

9. **Peer Support**: Facilitate peer interactions and collaborative learning. Pair students with different abilities to learn from each other.

10. **Pre-Teaching Vocabulary**: Introduce key vocabulary before a lesson to enhance comprehension and engagement, especially for pupils with DLD.

11. **Rephrasing Content or Questions**: Adapt language to help all learners grasp concepts. Simplify or elaborate as needed

12. **Use of WAGOLLs (What a Good One Looks Like)**: Show examples of high-quality work and explicitly deconstruct them to guide students toward achieving similar outcomes.

13. **Seating Plans**: Strategically arrange seating to support student focus, interaction, and individual needs.

14. **Audio Summaries or Lesson Introductions**: Provide audio resources to prepare students for upcoming lessons or reinforce key points.

15. **Extension Activities**: Offer additional challenges or enrichment opportunities for students who need them

Adaptive teaching strategies are about meeting students where they are and ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

Overcoming Challenges of Adaptive Teaching

Implementing adaptive teaching effectively does pose some challenges:

- Requires flexibility and relinquishing some teacher control
- Can create more prep work compared to traditional instruction
- Dependent on strong formative assessment skills
- Necessitates understanding each student's needs intimately
- Calls for balancing whole class dynamics with personalized learning
- Can be difficult with very large class sizes
- Needs student willingness and skills for self-directed learning
- Assumes access to diverse classroom resources

However, the benefits make it a rewarding investment. With practice and the right supports, adaptive teaching techniques can transform into natural teaching habits over time.

School Leaders: Support Your Teachers To Implement Adaptive Teaching.

School leaders have an important role to play in nurturing adaptive instruction. This may include:

- Providing quality professional development
- Allocating collaborative planning time
- Limiting class sizes when possible
- Coaching teachers with non-evaluative feedback
- Creating policies that allow flexibility
- Developing schedules conducive to student grouping
- Maintaining shared platforms to track student data

Strategies for managing an adaptive classroom environment:

Establish Routines and Procedures

- Set clear expectations and routines for things like transitions, discussions, and independent work time. Consistent structures allow more flexibility during instruction.
- Teach procedures for learning stations, centers, or menus so students can access choices and resources independently.
- Develop protocols for peer collaboration and group work norms so students can effectively work together.

Organise the Physical Layout

- Create flexible seating arrangements for both whole group and small group configurations. Desks on wheels or movable tables allow quick reorganisation.
- Set up "zones" in the classroom for different types of activities, like quiet reading areas or spaces for collaborative projects.
- Ensure needed resources and materials are easily accessible for self-directed student learning.

Use Cooperative Learning Structures

- Train students to take on roles like facilitator, reporter, materials manager etc. to share responsibility.
- Assign student experts or mentors to assist peers and guide groups while you work with individuals.
- Use random grouping strategies to keep groups fresh and foster a team culture.

Assess Frequently

- Check understanding informally and often through classroom discussions, short quizzes, learning logs, or exit tickets.
- Use data immediately to form temporary small groups for re-teaching or extension activities based on student needs.
- Have students track and share their own progress data to build ownership over learning.

The core of managing an adaptive classroom is creating student independence and shared responsibility. Routines, role assignments, and consistent structures are key to allowing teachers the flexibility to personalise supports amidst classroom activities. With practice over time, adaptive classrooms develop into well-oiled responsive learning communities.

Teaching and Learning

ADAPTIVE TEACHING: IMPLEMENTATION IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Inclusive Teach

Examples and Strategies of Adaptive Teaching

Put here a summary or a recap of the contents.