Adapting the Curriculum to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners
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As a teacher, each day you enter your classroom or other instructional setting and face the challenge of how to best facilitate learning for all the children in your class: boys and girls of all races, religions, colors, national origins—AND talents, personalities, learning styles, and skills. Teachers agree that every class represents an incredibly diverse group of learners, each of whom has a wide range of strengths and needs; nearly every class includes one or more children who have an individualized education program (IEP).

At first glance, you might try to begin to meet the instructional challenge described above by asking, "What kinds of adaptations to the curriculum should I make for the learners who have IEPs?" By asking the question with this narrow focus, and limiting it to a form of special education support, you would likely be embarking on a course that would add just one more "thing" to the myriad teaching responsibilities you already face every day. Viewing the notion of curriculum adaptations through the broader lens of the framework of general education, however, allows the possibility of having not "another thing to do," but rather, a "different way of doing".

Adapting the curriculum involves differentiating instruction to provide learners with a variety of ways to process information and demonstrate what they have learned, in order to "match" the way in which each learner learns most effectively. Viewed in this manner, providing curriculum adaptations is a way in which to operationalize Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Adapting the curriculum only for learners who have IEPs isn't enough; the curriculum needs to be differentiated (adapted) in order to meet the needs of ALL.

> *"There is no one best way to educate all children. Indeed, the biggest mistake of past centuries has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual and thus to feel justified in teaching them the same subjects in the same ways."*
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> (Howard Gardner, cited in Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1994, p. 563)
> *Phi Delta Kappan*

Making sense of the language…"ACCOMMODATIONS," "MODIFICATIONS," "ADAPTATIONS"

Are these the same? Are they different? How so? Since federal law mandates that schools make the "reasonable accommodations" that are specified in learners' IEPs, this would seem the prudent place to begin. An ACCOMMODATION is a change made to *assist a learner in gaining access* to the physical classroom and / or the curriculum. Accommodations include, but are not limited to, the use of assistive technology to provide supplementary support for a learner's sensory or motor needs—for example: a ramp, communication device, talking software, or tape recorder. An accommodation might also consist of additional adult or peer support for a learner, extended or unlimited time for completion of a task, or something as simple as an adjustment made in the environment of the classroom (e.g., preferential seating, enhanced lighting). Regardless of its specific nature, an accommodation does NOT involve substantive changes to the curriculum itself, or to the requirements of a learning task.

Generally speaking, although not with 100% consistency, the term MODIFICATION is used to refer to adaptations made with instructional materials--layout of, and directions on: tests, study guides, worksheets, and assignments. In this sense, materials modifications would constitute one subset of the larger category of curriculum adaptations.

Any *substantial adjustment* to the instructional strategies, materials, content, and / or performance criteria *of a learning task* would more appropriately be described as an ADAPTATION. Adapting the curriculum brings the teaching to the learner's level and style. For a learner who has a special education IEP, adaptations should help to facilitate a match between a learner's individualized program and the general education curriculum. Adapting the general curriculum in no way implies the creation of a separate, parallel, or alternative curriculum. Rather, curriculum adaptations suggest the implementation of a program characterized by instructional variety that will allow learners with a wide range of cognitive and behavioral styles and abilities to show progress within the general education curriculum.

> *Curricular adaptations allow a learner to use her current skill repertoire and participate, at least partially, in a general education instructional activity, while promoting the acquisition of new skills.*

Understanding what's involved in ADAPTING the CURRICULUM…

Effective curriculum adaptations may be described in four primary categories:
- instructional strategies
- instructional materials
- curricular content
- assessment practices.

Each of these types of adaptations will be defined and illustrated below.

Adapting Instructional Strategies

This first category of curriculum adaptations refers to a change in the way a teacher teaches—that is, in the methodologies she uses to provide information TO a learner(s) in her class. These involve a change in the learner's instructional input.

Adapting the instructional process can be accomplished through myriad techniques: incorporating the use of demonstrations or role play; utilizing teacher presentation cues (e.g., gestural, visual, or verbal) to emphasize key points; scaffolding key concepts to be learned; and getting learners more actively involved in the learning process through the implementation of every pupil response techniques (e.g., response cards, thumbs up / thumbs down) or the incorporation of manipulatives for learners' use. Included in this category, also, is the practice of diversifying the selection of groupings for instruction so as to not rely solely on large group / whole class instruction and independent seatwork arrangements. Varying instructional design, to include a variety of small group and cooperative learning activities, is another very effective practice by which to adapt classroom instruction.

Providing a learner(s) with curriculum content through means other than traditional written text involves providing an alternative to the reading requirements inherently associated with processing printed material. Though the most obvious adaptation to traditional "reading" involves a peer or adult reading aloud to a learner, a number of other possibilities exist, through the adaptation of instructional materials.

Adapting Instructional Materials

Adapting teaching materials involves making changes to the equipment and / or supplies to which a learner(s) has access during the course of instruction. This involves a change in the formats through which information is REPRESENTED to the learner or the learner's ENGAGEMENT with the curriculum during the course of instruction.

In a nutshell, the process of adapting materials entails providing additional, or simply different, materials, in a variety of modalities that the learner(s) might use during the course of instruction. Most materials adaptations fall into one of four groups: adjusting the readability level of written materials, enhancing critical features of the content within the materials themselves, designing materials with features that appeal to sensory modalities other than visual / auditory, and selecting alternate instructional materials for their durability or safety features.

Adaptation of readability level can be made by providing content similar to the unit currently under study through a lower grade level reading book, compressed text, or high interest-low vocabulary reader. In addition, reading demand is adjusted when curriculum content is depicted through graphic, iconic, or pictorial forms; three-dimensional models; or digitized means. Examples include the use of: audiotapes, videotapes, internet-based resources, text-reader software programs, or universally designed textbooks and materials. Enhancing critical features of content involves adapting lesson materials in such a way as to identify for the learner content that is most essential. Advance or post-organizers, presentation of new vocabulary words in boldface, highlighted key words in a reading passage, acronyms, and summaries of main ideas represent a few commonly used adaptations of this sort. Multiple modality materials can be designed that appeal to kinesthetic and tactile sensory systems, in contrast to materials that appeal only to visual or auditory processes. For example, learners physically walking a route of colored tape on the floor to learn the path of blood flow from the heart (as opposed to studying a colored diagram in a book), or rapping with hand gestures as they learn newly introduced language concepts. Finally, alternate instructional materials will sometimes necessarily be selected for their durability or safety features, in consideration of a learner's physical coordination or motor skills. In the science lab, a plastic beaker or petri dish might be utilized instead of their breakable counterparts, or a learner might be provided with a fluffer book, or book with laminated pages, instead of a traditional text.

Adapting Curricular Content

This third category of adaptations involves varying WHAT is taught—that is, the complexity and nature of the content presented during the course of a unit of study. This type of curriculum adaptation results in an adjustment of the cognitive demand of a learning task for a particular learner(s).

Adapting curricular content might involve applications as straightforward as: reducing the number of vocabulary words assigned to an individual child; having a learner complete only the odd-numbered problems on a mathematics assignment; holding a learner responsible for learning three facts about one animal, instead of two facts about each of five different species; or affording learners the choice of taking a spelling pre-test to opt out of spelling for a particular week. Individualized adaptations of content can, also, be achieved by restructured concept-based teaching. Adjustment of the cognitive demand in a lesson typically involves an adaptation to the attention, thinking, and / or memory requirements associated with particular content. In partnership with hierarchical questioning techniques, this approach can result in a larger number of students meaningfully participating in a lesson drawn from the general curriculum.

Adapting Assessment Practices

The final general category of curriculum adaptations refers to alterations in the way in which a teacher gets information FROM a learner(s) in her class (i.e., the way in which the learner responds to the curriculum content presented). These involve a change in the learner's instructional output.

The adaptation of assessment practices is not limited only to the expansion of test-taking parameters (e.g., redistributed time on a power test, use of a scribe for recording purposes). This class of curricular adaptations also encompasses using multiple criteria to assess learner products, providing structured answer frames on worksheets and tests, evaluating processes equally with final products, utilizing ipsative measures (comparing a learner's performance to her own past performance), and offering learners a variety of practice strategies and choices for producing required assignments.

Offering learners the opportunity to respond to instruction in a nontraditional manner, in some way(s) other than through typical oral recitation or written expression, is also encompassed in this final curriculum adaptations category. Alternative learner responses might include: collage, sculpture, pantomime, dramatic portrayal, musical composition, motoric demonstration, photographic presentation, or graphics display.

Effectively designing curriculum adaptations represents one effective approach to teaching that needs *not* require a substantial amount of additional work on a teacher's part, though it certainly represent a *different way* of teaching. Adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners involves differentiating instruction to provide *ALL* learners with a variety of ways to process information and demonstrate what they have learned, in order to "match" the way in which each individual learns most effectively and efficiently. It would serve a teacher well to imagine the children in her classroom saying…

> *"While we are all in the same room, we are not all in the same place…."*

Valued Curriculum Adaptations Resources for Educators:
Armstrong, T. (2000). *Multiple intelligences in the classroom* (2nd ed.)*.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Bauer, A. M., & Shea, T. M. (1999). *Inclusion 101: How to teach all learners.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Block, M. E. (1994). *A teacher's guide to including students with disabilities in regular physical education.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Castagnera, E., Fisher, D., Rodifer, K., & Sax, C. (1998). *Deciding what to teach and how to teach it: Connecting students through curriculum and instruction.* Colorado Springs, CO: PEAK Parent Center.

Chalmers, L. (1992). *Modifying curriculum for the special needs student in the regular classroom.* Moorhead, MN: Practical Press.

Chalmers, L., & Wasson, B. (1993). *Successful inclusion: Assistance for teachers of adolescents with mild disabilities.* Moorhead, MN: Practical Press.

Demchak, M. A. (1997). Teaching students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings. In D. Browder (Ed.), *Innovations* (Vol. 12). Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.

Filbin, J., Rogers-Connolly, T., & Brewer, R. (1996). *Individualized learner outcomes: Infusing student needs into the regular education curriculum.* Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado Department of Education.

Fisher, D., & Ryndak, D. L. (Eds.) (2001). *The foundations of inclusive education: A compendium of articles on effective strategies to achieve inclusive education.* Baltimore: TASH.   (several selections pertain to curriculum adaptations)

Gee, K., Alwell, M., Graham, N., & Goetz, L. (1994). *Inclusive instructional design: Facilitating informed and active learning for individuals who are deaf-blind and in inclusive schools.* San Francisco: California Research Institute, San Francisco State University.

Hoover, J. J., & Patton, J. R. (1997). *Curriculum adaptations for students with learning and behavior problems: Principles and practices* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Janney, R., & Snell, M. E. (2000). *Teachers' guides to inclusive practices: Modifying schoolwork.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Katz, L., Sax, C., & Fisher, D. (1998). *Activities for a diverse classroom: Connecting students.* Colorado Springs, CO: PEAK Parent Center.

Schaffner, C. B., & Buswell, B. E. (1991). *Opening doors: Strategies for including all students in regular education.* Colorado Springs, CO: PEAK Parent Center.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (Eds.) (1996). *Inclusion: A guide for educators.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms* (2nd ed.)*.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Udvari-Solner, A. (1993). *Curricular adaptations: Accommodating the instructional needs of diverse learners in the context of general education.* (Rev.). Topeka, KS: Kansas State Board of Education.

Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.) (1995). *Creating an inclusive school.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Wang, M. C. (1992). *Adaptive education strategies: Building on diversity.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Websites:
www.teachersfirst.com/dped/prof/adapt-strat -- The Teachers First website offers suggestions of techniques for adapting curriculum for learners who have disabilities. It provides a good resource of strategies for effectively teaching diverse learners of all ages.

www.teachervision.com/ -- This website includes a collection of lessons and web resources for teachers, learners, and their families. "Simplifying or Supplementing Existing Materials" details specific ideas for planning adaptations for learners K – 12.

www.mcps.k12.us/curriculum/pep -- The Montgomery County Public Schools' website provides information regarding their preschool education program (PEP) for youngsters 3 – 5 years of age. It includes a number of teaching ideas, as well as links to articles regarding early childhood special education.

www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ --This website, sponsored by the US Department of Education, provides short reports (1,000 – 1,500 words) regarding state-of-the-art research on current general and special education topics, including curriculum adaptation. It is updated quarterly.

www.pacificnet.net/~mandel/ -- The Teachers Helping Teachers website, which focuses on grades Pre-K through 7, offers ideas regarding instructional materials and teaching strategies. This site is updated weekly during the academic year, and offers free ideas suggested by teachers, for their peers.

www.cast.org/ncac/ --   The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) website includes information regarding the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum. This site provides a variety of tools, resources, activities, and examples (including curriculum adaptations) teachers can access to improve their teaching practice. This website, also, provides links to additional resources regarding universal curriculum design.

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Susan M. Bashinski is a Research Assistant Professor at the Beach Center on Disability and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Special Education at The University of Kansas. Until joining the Beach Center staff in the Summer of 2001, Dr. Bashinski was the Curriculum Adaptations Support Specialist with the Lawrence, Kansas Public Schools, where she worked with general education teachers to secure access to the general curriculum for learners who have disabilities. Dr. Bashinski's work regarding

access has been supplemented by her extensive involvement in the Kansas State Department of Education's development of alternate assessment procedures and extended curriculum standards. She writes in the areas of nonsymbolic and augmentative communication— and learns more about the development of language skills, every day, from her son.