

# Ways to adapt teaching to all pupils different needs and abilities

Sofia Boo

# The Education Act in Sweden

According to the Education Act in Sweden, all pupils have the right to get all the guidance and encouragement they need in their learning, to develop as far as possible in accordance with the educational goals of the education and on their own merits.

Pupils at risk of not achieving the attainment goals should receive support in the form of additional adjustments in the context of the regular curriculum as soon as possible. If that is not enough, the pupils should be given special assistance. In all these steps, the Education Act emphasizes all pupils' right to achieve the educational goals. This requires various forms of individual adaptation.

# Individualization of the 1990s and 2000s in Sweden

Previous research points out:

- An increase of pupils individual work
- A shift in perspective from the class as a group to the individual pupil
- A reduction in the presence of group assignments
- The teachers' role has become more tutoring
- Pupils devote more time to their own work than listening and talking to the teacher or their classmates
- When problems arise, they are added on the learner as an individual
- The pupils themselves are responsible for their learning.

# What works?

According to Swedish and international research

- The creation of a learning interaction between teachers and pupils
- Pupils are given the opportunity to influence
- Teachers who are competent in several different working methods and skilled to use them at the right time
- Teachers who can create and develop trustful relationships
- Teachers who see both the didactic and the social aspect of teaching.

# Differentiated instruction

Based on the need to meet pupils' different abilities and therefore accordingly adapt the teaching.

- formative assessment
- teacher as an engaging role model through cooperation and communication with pupils
- teacher as a coach who provides feedback and give direction and strategy that will lead to further knowledge.
- manage groups at different levels, easily adapt teaching to pupils' differences
- differentiated tasks enables pupils, who are at different levels of knowledge, to be able to work on the same task.  
(Smit & Humpert, 2012)

Teachers implementing an effective differentiated instruction makes adjustments in the moment to meet the specific needs of the pupils that they discover during the lesson, such as they not expected in planning.

(Parsons, Dodman & Cohen Burrowbridge, 2013)

# My own study

Teachers work with individual adaptation. Strategies and dilemmas in the classroom



# Aim and research questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate, describe and analyze how today's teachers in primary school (grades 1-6) handle individual adaptation in teaching, what strategies they use and what dilemmas that occurs. The study focuses on how work is carried out in practice.



# Method

Inspired by the **ethnographic** tradition of research methodology and approach

## Sample

Five teachers and their classes in grade 1-6 at four different schools

## Data Collection

Part 1 - observations, interviews and document collection  
(all five teachers and their classes)

Part 2 - In-depth study of one of the above teachers

# Results of the study

Teachers implements an adapted instruction through

- planned strategies
- situation managing (makes adjustments in the moment to meet the specific needs of the pupils)

Five aspects of adaptation: relationship-oriented, variation-oriented, commonality-oriented, interaction-oriented, situation-oriented.

The common denominator of all of these five aspects of adaptation is the teachers' ambitions to achieve good results in teaching for all different pupils in the classroom.

- didactic, social and ethical dilemmas in the work

# For pupils' good results

- Prior knowledge, needs and interests as starting point, strategies developed to make them visible
- A common ground, a content that all pupils should get, then...
- Individual variation; adapting the amount of stuff, customize severity of the contents and the teaching materials, as well as adjust the allocation of individual time with the class teacher or other teacher resources
- Thoughtful planning and assessment process, visible for each pupil were he or she is heading
- Dilemmas in external pressure of documentation versus the teachers' ambitions to implement a successful teaching
  - ➔ Survival strategies

# Relationship-oriented adaptations

By gaining knowledge of each student's interests, personality, strengths and weaknesses and build up a relationship of trust, teachers are given the opportunity to adapt the requirements and challenges to the individual. Their ambition is that every student should feel seen and listened to.

*“If I know that someone has difficulties with fine motor skills and has troubles to write letters and so, I demand the variety of the children. One pupil’s E might not look like someone else’s E, the person who has difficulties gets lots of praise when he has done his best. If someone has obviously botched I might ask him to make a bigger effort when he makes the next letter [...] I try to keep track of what I can demand of the children, if I know how far they have come in their reading development, I know what I can require as we read and what difficulty the texts can have.”*

# Commonality-oriented adaptations

During the majority of the lessons observed, teaching was conducted in common in the classroom, all students were expected to participate in a mutual lesson approach. A teaching adapted to the individual doesn't have to mean individual work.

- Important that teachers reflect on what forms of commonality-oriented adaptation that enriches all students in the classroom.

*"This thing with adaptive teaching is allowed to take place in the classroom work when everyone is working together, but we have to work together in different ways so it fits all anyway."*

# Variation-oriented adaptations

The teachers strive to vary teaching to make it fit all individual pupils. For example:

- vary the working methods and practices in the classroom
- vary the way to present, concretize and adapt teaching content
- vary the students' placement in the classroom and the composition of groups and couples.

*"There is more that we work in many different ways to fit all at once. It may be that I talk about anything and we write key words together or we do a mind map together. Or some pupils read in a book to find out something special or have received some questions. And then you know a lot about this and you know a lot about that, let's compare those things, and then we work two and two with discussion questions [...] so I try to think different. "*

# Interaction-oriented adaptations

The teachers create many opportunities for interaction in larger or smaller groups of pupils. It becomes a form of adaptation for the individual pupil as he/she is given the opportunity to learn more in the interaction with the teacher or a friend.

- Communicate knowledge and needs
- Communicative working methods/strategies
- Communicative feedback

*"I hear and I also see, when they sit and work together, that they learn from each other. Sometimes I hear them saying that there should be two and there it should be three, but maybe it's something in between and they learn to work together and see how others think. So I think it is most positive that they work together. "*

*"If an ability is to be able to reason, they must of course have the chance to do it and help each other to do it. If only I reason with myself, then of course just my way of thinking appears, if I talk more with others I get more ideas and can reflect upon them. "*

# Situation-oriented adaptation

- managing a specific situation in the moment
- about things that affect the content of teaching and also about things that affect social interaction and relationships
- to let the unexpected take place but not lose sight of the goal
- difficult adjustments and dilemmas for teachers
- not always visible for the teachers



# Dilemmas in adaptive teaching

A few examples from the study...

- The dilemma between individual concerns and interests in the moment that the teacher wants to take advantage of *versus* the planning and the purpose with the lesson.
- The dilemma when the teacher has a desire of a certain quality of a pupils' performance *versus* the pupils' capacity in the moment.
- The dilemma when the teacher identified what she believes would be the best possible feedback to every individual with the best potential to benefit the individual pupil's learning *versus* the time and labor effort it would mean to her as a teacher to implement it.
- The dilemma among the ideal adaptation that teachers have a vision of, *versus* the time- and efficiency-driven adaptation that is possible to accomplish in the classroom. There is a tension between overall ideal images and teachers' practical everyday reality.

# Worth thinking about...

- the classic dilemma regarding the balance between individual and group is constantly present
- to constantly adapt teaching to each student's abilities, needs, experiences, backgrounds, languages and knowledge is not realistic in practice
- the need of flexible planning, continuous assessments and adjustments in the moment
- lift up dilemmas, be aware and reflect over them to discover different routes and options and the impact they can have.

# Summery

- It's a challenge to adapt teaching to different pupils' needs and abilities
- Individual work is still present but does not dominate the classroom work.
- Teachers adapt teaching by variation and interaction, by working together with tasks, with active relationship-oriented work and through continuous adjustments in the moment
- Teachers face several dilemmas when they adapt teaching in the classroom
- There is a tension between overall ideal images and teachers' practical everyday reality.

<http://www.diva-portal.org/> search Sofia Boo to find the study in full text (Swedish)

Sofia Boo  
sofia.boo@liu.se

[www.liu.se](http://www.liu.se)