Adapting Curriculum and Instruction: An achievable goal?

Peter Westwood*
University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Modifying Schoolwork
R. Janney & M. E. Snell (2nd edn), 2004
Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing
US $25.00 (pbk), 119 pp. + index and appendices
ISBN 1-55766-706-3

It is argued by some educators that, to be truly effective, teaching has to accommodate educationally relevant differences among learners (O’Brien & Guiney, 2001; Tomlinson, 1996). It is further argued that if classrooms are to be inclusive of all students regardless of ability or disability, then teaching methods, curricula, and resources need to be modified to match more closely the students’ learning characteristics (Bender, 2002; Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

In the past few years many new texts have appeared that offer teachers advice on how to “differentiate” instruction and thus meet individual needs. Indeed, “differentiation” has become a new orthodoxy in published pedagogy and, rightly or wrongly, it is perceived to be “best practice”. However, despite the rhetoric that exhorts teachers to be adaptable in their planning and teaching approach, studies have indicated that the majority of teachers find this form of teaching extremely difficult to implement, and even more difficult to sustain over time (Chan, Chang, Westwood, & Yuen, 2002; Scott, Vitale, & Masten, 1998). As Rose (2001, p. 147) has remarked, “The teaching methods and practices required for the provision of effective inclusion are easier to identify than they are to implement.”

With this problem in mind I was interested to find out whether one of the latest books on adapting instruction gives realistic advice to an international audience of

*Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pok Fu Lam Road, Hong Kong. Email: sepsw@hkucc.hku.hk
practitioners. This book, *Modifying Schoolwork*, is one of several titles in the series *Teachers’ Guides to Inclusive Practices* published in the United States by Paul Brookes of Baltimore.

When any text appears in second edition soon after the date of first publication it is usually a sign that educators are finding the information useful and the demand for the book is therefore high. *Modifying Schoolwork*, first published in 2000 and now published in second edition in 2004, is a text that falls into this category. Its title is likely to catch the attention of teachers facing the challenge of working with mixed-ability classes. The authors, Rachel Janney (Radford University, Virginia) and Martha Snell (University of Virginia), believe that the key to successful inclusive education lies in developing a methodology that is sensitive to students’ individual needs. The writers indicate that the book has three main aims:

1. to describe flexible and accommodating teaching practices that help students with special educational needs function successfully in inclusive classrooms;
2. to provide a process or model for making decisions about when and how best to modify instructional activities for certain students; and,
3. to present concrete examples of planning formats, instructional materials, and strategies as used by teachers in typical classrooms.

To a reasonable degree the writers have achieved their aims. They point out that the various planning, teaching, and assessment suggestions provided throughout the book represent “ideals” rather than practices that are necessarily quick and easy to implement. They also advise that teachers should not assume that adapting teaching methods and materials is going to be the answer to every problem associated with inclusive education.

Janney and Snell consider that the main pre-requisite for developing an adaptive approach in schools is that there must be close collaboration between mainstream teachers, special education teachers, and other relevant professionals and paraprofessionals. The advice given in the book assumes such a collaborative team-working context. In many countries, however, a team approach has not been established in schools for a variety of reasons, including lack of resources, shortage of adequately trained specialist teachers, or simply a different philosophy concerning student support. In schools where a collaborative climate does not prevail, it will be more difficult for teachers to adopt some of the advice presented in the book.

It is reassuring to find that Janney and Snell recommend that any modifications to curriculum, methods, or resources should be as simple as possible and feasible to implement within a given classroom situation. In addition, modifications should not highlight a student’s differences within the group. This is sound advice, because giving one student totally different tasks can be a major hindrance to that student’s acceptance into the classroom community. It would have been useful here for the writers to say rather more about students’ own reactions to adaptations—since these reactions are often negative. There is a growing literature on this issue (e.g., Hall, 1997; Klinger & Vaughn, 1999; Lo, Morris, & Che, 2000).
The structure of the book is logical and helpful. In Chapter 1 the writers provide a general introductory overview of principles and practices in inclusive education—for example, how to help schools become more inclusive, staffing issues, classroom practices, service delivery, and support systems. Although this chapter does not break any new ground for most readers, it does provide a rationale for most of the later recommendations.

Chapter 2 develops a theme that the first priority in inclusive schools is to ensure that the quality of teaching is excellent for all students. It is implied that teachers who are effective in teaching students without disabilities are also the teachers who are effective in teaching students with disabilities—so we should examine what it is that effective teachers do. The writers explore proven ways of making teaching approaches and curricula more relevant and motivating for a wide range of students. Particular attention is given to integrating topics within the curriculum, providing for active learning, cooperative groupwork, and maximising the use of different sensory modalities in the activities set for students. It is felt that these basic strategies help students of varying abilities participate successfully together.

Teachers faced with a need to modify traditional whole-class methods to accommodate significant differences among students will probably find Chapter 3 of some help. In this chapter Janney and Snell present a process model to help teachers explore possibilities when changes are needed to curriculum, methods, resources and activities, or when supplementary Individualised Education Plan (IEP)-related activities are to be devised for a specific student. However, although the writers devote several pages to discussing “alternative curriculum goals” and supplementary activities for students with more severe disabilities and extensive support needs, this remains one of the most problematic and challenging aspects of inclusive education. For example, how is a teacher to embed within the regular curriculum and timetable the social–behavioural change strategies, together with emphasis on daily living skills and functional academics, needed by perhaps only one student in a large mixed-ability class? The writers give a small recognition to the difficulty facing mainstream teachers who need to plan this type of provision; but, in general, they make this alternative programming for students with severe difficulties sound much easier than it is in reality. They are on much safer ground when describing the more routine ways in which adaptations to methods and resources can be made for students with less severe difficulties.

Chapter 4 sets out a six-step process for gathering information that should guide the planning of individualised adaptations. Each step is explained fully and supported in most cases by examples of forms and tables that will enable all plans and decisions to be recorded. The writers recommend that all teachers and other professionals in a school adopt a standard format for recording and sharing important information. This is essential, given the number of different individuals involved in service delivery to students with high support needs. The forms presented within the chapter have been completed as examples using data related to some hypothetical case study children. Appendix A contains blank copies of the same forms for use by teachers. I must confess I found this chapter to be overkill on the topic of planning and documenting. While the writers do caution that the array of forms
presented in the book may make the process seem more complex than it really is, they did not convince me of that fact. To carry out this degree of collaborative planning and recording is complex and time consuming—and there is always a danger that the process (paperwork) becomes an end in itself, with little relation to what actually happens in the classroom.

Chapter 5 is the most practical chapter in the book, and the advice is generic and widely appropriate. The writers have collated a variety of tried and tested strategies for supporting students’ learning across a number of subject areas, including reading, writing, spelling, and mathematics. Attention is also given briefly to strategies for adapting and modifying assessment procedures.

The good features of *Modifying Schoolwork* include its practical focus, the use of boxed inserts covering “What the research says” (concerning practices related to the theme of adaptive education), figures and tables that summarise and present key points in a user-friendly style, “Voices from the classroom” (mainly providing comments and ideas from practising teachers), and the illustrative vignettes of specific children with special needs.

The main weakness (and for an international audience it is a significant weakness) is that the discourse throughout the text is based entirely on the assumption of an American school context. Amazingly, only one of the 128 references cited in the book comes from a source outside the United States or Canada. Similarly, the four pages of recommended readings in Appendix B contain no titles at all that are published outside the United States. Many other countries have been very actively engaged in inclusive and adaptive education for more than a decade, and the research literature from those countries has much to offer.

Another minor criticism is that the book does not cover adaptations for gifted and talented students, but instead concentrates only on students with disabilities. Current thinking suggests that gifted children are also in need of modifications to curriculum, methods, and materials (Kerry & Kerry, 1997).

So, is adaptive teaching an achievable goal? Well, it is a very difficult goal to achieve—more so than Janney and Snell seem to imply, but their text may certainly help teachers move a little more confidently in that direction.

References


