

Secondary Mathematics Teachers' Understandings of Reasonable Adjustments: Is it Inclusive Teaching?

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Teachers are expected to cater for the diverse learning needs of students in their classes including by the provision of reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities that impact their learning. In this paper we problematise the notion of reasonable adjustments for students with intellectual and developmental learning difficulties. Drawing on qualitative survey data, we make the case that with few exceptions the needs of these students can be met using inclusive approaches to teaching that benefit all students. We conclude with concern that restricting teachers' freedom to provide differentiated instruction for students risks breaching legal obligations.

Access to education is recognised globally as a human right. United Nations' declarations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (Article 28), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) have led to legislation enshrining this right in signatory countries around the world including in Australia. Local legislative instruments include the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), Disability Standards for Education (2005), the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.a) structured by year level, and the Human Rights Act (2019). The Disability Discrimination Act includes three key concepts:

1. The right to education on the same basis as other students.
2. Reasonable adjustments are made to ensure that students with disability have opportunities to participate in education and training.
3. Consultation between the school, parents/carers and student takes place prior to adjustments being made.

Teachers are thus legally obliged to implement reasonable adjustments when required but there exists very little guidance as to what it means to participate "on the same basis" or what constitutes a "reasonable" adjustment. Beyond legislative obligation, teachers feel a moral imperative to meet the needs of all their students and allow them to access the joy of learning. Early results of the project upon which this paper draws also suggest that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities very much enjoy experiencing the curriculum appropriate to their year level (Faragher et al., 2019). The specific research question that guided the study reported in this paper was, In what ways do Australian secondary mathematics teachers understand and implement reasonable adjustments for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

Reasonable Adjustments

Consistent with the three concepts that underpin the Disability Discrimination Act, an adjustment is a measure taken to assist a student with a disability to participate in education or training on the same basis as other students. Such an adjustment is reasonable if it accounts for the students' learning needs while balancing the needs of others, including the school staff and other students. Adjustments may not alter the inherent requirements of the task. For example,

(2025). In S. M. Patahuddin, L. Gaunt, D. Harris & K. Tripet (Eds.), *Unlocking minds in mathematics education. Proceedings of the 47th annual conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia* (pp. 61–68). Canberra: MERGA.

on a writing task, adjustments might include a speech to text device, so long as the task is not assessing handwriting. Consultation with parents and the student concerned is an integral part of identifying and making reasonable adjustments.

Common approaches to teaching students who are well behind their peers for any reason include providing them with work from earlier year levels, often based on a belief that it is important to start from where the student is in order to fill in gaps in knowledge, or providing completely different content characterised as functional mathematics or life skills based on beliefs about the capacities of these students to learn and assumptions about their life trajectories. These strategies are often achieved by separating the students concerned from their peers either within a mainstream classroom, through periodic extraction from the classroom, or streaming. These approaches do not meet the definitions of inclusive education or of reasonable adjustments. In addition, Faragher et al. (2016) were unable to identify any research suggesting any categories of learners that needed to be taught separately from their peers.

Differentiated instruction recognises that students learn in different ways (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021). Teachers need to tailor teaching to their students' individual needs and readiness and use flexible groupings, ongoing formative assessment to check progress, and respond to student needs as they arise. Tomlinson (2017) suggested that teachers can vary their teaching approach in four ways to cater for the diversity of students in their classes. These are varying: the content that is taught; the processes by which students learn; the products that students produce as evidence of their learning; and the learning environment with a view to creating a classroom that is safe and welcoming for all students. The latter may include practices such as the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills (Bierman & Sanders, 2021), encouraging collaboration and peer learning (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020), and practicing culturally responsive teaching (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2024; Samuels, 2018). Although most of these elements are consistent with reasonable adjustments, there is a danger in mathematics if varying the content that students are taught is too readily adopted. Learning on the same basis as other students requires beginning with content aligned with students' chronological age or year level. As such, identifying year-level appropriate content needs to be the starting point for planning teaching that will meet all students' needs (ACARA, n.d.b) including in the secondary years where the challenge appears to be greatest (Faragher, 2014).

Inclusive Mathematics Teaching

Inclusion is a broad concept that applies to all learners including gifted, culturally and linguistically diverse, of all genders and from all socio-economic backgrounds, as well as those with learning difficulties or disabilities. In inclusive environments everyone feels welcome and valued and the learning needs of all are supported (Faragher, 2015). Few would argue that such environments are not desirable but achieving inclusive education, including in Australia, has been difficult and is yet to be achieved (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). This is despite evidence of the educational, social, and economic benefits of educating all learners together (Boyle & Anderson, 2020).

Inclusion is different from integration, segregation and exclusion which are key terms with distinct meanings (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, para 11): "*Exclusion* occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form. *Segregation* occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular or various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities. *Integration* is a process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions, as long as the former can adjust to the standardized [sic] requirements of such institutions." Applied to the mathematics classroom, examples of exclusion are when students are prevented from enrolling

in mathematics options, or mathematics altogether. Exclusion of some students from higher levels of mathematics occurs for students without disabilities as well (Forgasz, 2010). Segregation occurs when students are taught different mathematics content from other students, sometimes in the same classroom, but taught separately from peers, and often by another teacher or teacher aide. Integration is in place when students are allowed to enrol in a mathematics course or class but are not supported to be successful. The old adage, "teach to the middle", reflects an integration view – it is the learner's job to make sense of the lessons.

Inclusive mathematics teaching rejects exclusion, segregation and integration. The learning support needs of learners are attended to, and their strengths are capitalised on for the benefit of the class. Beginning with the year level curriculum, teachers plan lessons, anticipating learning support needs from a range of sources. For example, a need for language support might come from developmental language disorder, hearing impairment, or cultural or linguistic diversity. An approach to planning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), works on the premise that if multiple options and approaches are planned into lessons, the need is reduced for adjustments to be made later to suit some learners (Novak, 2022).

The Study

The study reported here is part of a larger study of the ways in which secondary mathematics teachers adjust year-level mathematics curriculum for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It included an online survey and work with mathematics teachers in six partner schools that included professional learning, co-design of adjustments, classroom observations, and interviews. This paper draws on responses to two survey items. The study received ethics approval from the University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee B (2022/HE001550).

Methodological Approach

A survey was distributed electronically to mathematics teachers across Australia by way of the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers and its affiliates in each state and territory, and at conferences for mathematics teachers. It included two open-ended items (shown in Figure 1) asking teachers about their understandings of reasonable adjustments. Responses to these questions for the basis of this paper.

Figure 1

Open-ended Survey Questions.

Question 1.

We wish to know more about teachers' thoughts on reasonable adjustments in secondary mathematics classrooms. Reasonable adjustments are required under Australian law as stated in the Disability Standards for Education 2005. One purpose of the standards is: "to ensure, as far as practicable, that persons with disabilities have the same rights to equality before the law in the area of education and training as the rest of the community".

Please think about this, and using your experience as a secondary mathematics teacher, describe your understanding of what you are required to do in your classrooms to implement reasonable adjustments in mathematics.

Question 2.

If you have applied reasonable adjustments, please give a brief description, including which year levels/ students/ areas of mathematics were involved.

Thirty-four secondary mathematics teachers responded to the two open-ended questions on the large-scale survey. Respondents came from Queensland, Tasmania, New South Wales and Victoria, with some respondents not providing this information.

Responses to the open-ended questions were coded according to the adjustment(s) that were

mentioned. Many responses included several ways of making adjustments for students with disabilities and hence were assigned several codes. The codes were grouped into categories. We analysed the codes in each category in terms of whether they represented a reasonable adjustment or could be considered part of inclusive teaching likely to benefit all students.

Results

Five categories concerning Content delivery/pedagogy, Tasks/content, Tools, Classroom environment/management, and Assessment emerged from the responses to Questions 1 and 2. Most responses mentioned changes to the way in which content was delivered, with smaller, approximately equal numbers of responses falling into the other categories. These are discussed in turn in the sections that follow.

Content Delivery/Pedagogy

There were 33 references in responses to Q1 to modifications of methods of content delivery or presentation. Some respondents wrote that they provide additional scaffolding and others specified means by which this could be achieved. These included colour coding task steps, specifying the steps required to complete a task, using captions on videos, pausing audio-visual presentations, providing additional videos, and writing key points on a whiteboard in simple English. The provision of clear instructions was also emphasised, “Adjust the amount and complexity of spoken and written information/instruction”, along with “jointly deconstructing question prompts”, and “reminding students to use key subject-specific vocabulary”. Individual prompting and instruction were also mentioned, as was providing clear timeframes for the completion of tasks. There were two mentions of slowing the pace of content delivery and one reference to “adjusting workload expectations”.

Examples of practices offered in response to Q2 included providing, “more explanation, more visualisation, more application etc.” Other pedagogical adjustments included “not calling on students to answer publicly (usually after confirming with student support services)”, slowing the quantity of material and the pace of delivery. These were used with students across Years 7 to 12. Other examples included using pre-recorded videos of lesson content for two Grade 10 classes; providing explicit, scaffolded instructions (Year 7); individual instructions (Year 8) along with remote lessons (Years 11 and 12); and presenting information electronically or written so that copying from the board was not needed (Year 8). Chunking material and “actively ensuring I have the student's attention, attempting to use the student's interests as a hook” and making learning available online were strategies employed for a Year 12 student with attentional difficulties. Another teacher also described trying to link the content to an area with which the student was familiar as well as breaking questions into steps to follow and allowing “them to show the answer without full setting out, many students struggle to set work in a particular way but can explain”. Providing more detailed instructions, instructions one by one, and more scaffolding were mentioned by several teachers without specifying a year level.

Tasks/Content

The nine responses to Q1 in this category included the provision of different worksheets, different levels of work, the use of less complex written and oral language, different questions for “practising certain concepts”, “adjusting work requirements for students with learning difficulties”, and modifying “lesson content or expectations for each student in every lesson”. There was a concern that students be able to “engage on their level” and experience success. One mentioned the use of “low-floor, high ceiling tasks where possible”, ensuring that “ALL students can access the initial stage of the work”. Student choice was mentioned in relation to the completion of practice problems; “I allow students to choose their own pathway”, and in relation to “open-ended/research tasks” for which the provision of “structured guidance and

limited choices" were specified.

Modified worksheets were used including those providing more practice of simple familiar questions, repetition, and real-life applications. One response to Q2 described a Year 9 student, "operating at roughly a Year 6 level" studying, "a completely different (Life Skills) curriculum using specifically created resources, physical manipulatives, School Learning Support Officer support etc." This teacher explained that, "owing to the streamed nature of classes in high school mathematics, the curriculum itself is differentiated as a result of the classes being taught and the level of mathematics pursued. Generally, I will make adjustments for lower streamed classes to enable the learning e.g., friendlier numbers...". Two teachers mentioned starting the whole class on the same topic but then providing "alternative work at different year levels on the current topic additional scaffolding of work" or breaking into groups "to continue at their own level". A specific Year 8 adjustment was limiting the number of variables in algebraic expressions to just two. There were several mentions of reducing expectations of the amount of work that students were to complete in class, and one said that they did not require homework.

Tools

The seven references in this category provided in response to Q1 included permitting the use of calculators, along with different representations of concepts via "diagrams, charts and graphs", using larger fonts, and enlisting the help of a scribe. There was mention of using "modified resources", without further explanation.

Similar examples were provided in response to Q2. In addition, the following were used: communication cards for a student in Year 10, described as non-verbal autistic; "a genre guide with explanations and word limits for each stage of the task" along with a checklist and staged completion dates; wheelchair access; copies of notes; Google classrooms revision activities, check-ins in a Year 11 class studying a less demanding mathematics subject; the use of graphical packages; stand-up desks (Year 8); digital and concrete modelling resources for students with intellectual impairments (Year 10); "Digital scaffolded summary documents" (Years 11 and 12); vocabulary lists and word walls; photographs, videos and written examples, tactile resources and addition and multiplication grids; and specific coloured paper for students with dyslexia were also mentioned.

Classroom Environment/Management

Q1 also elicited seven references relating to the classroom environment/management. These included the use of seating plans with one specific reference to allocating "seating for students according to their sensory needs in the physical environment e.g. lighting, furniture, positioning, able to move around from sitting to standing". Relatedly, providing "access to separate learning areas as needed" was also mentioned. Visual timetables, routines, and breaks for movement and rest were also mentioned. One respondent wrote that they provide, "1-1 instruction and modelling of behaviours" and another that they, "Develop listening and speaking skills with mixed ability cooperative learning groups".

In addition to the practices elicited by Q1, responses to Q2 included offering "lots of verbal praise", frequent check-ins, and pre-warning of changes to routine for a non-verbal autistic student in Year 10. Having a Year 10 student with ADHD perform tasks such as wiping the board and handing out books provided opportunities for movement; organising seating to ensure space for wheelchairs; specific attention-focussing activities; opportunities for a Year 8 student with "ASD, anxiety and Sensory Processing Disorder" to participate in all class activities; and retaining a Year 10 student's books and providing equipment were mentioned.

Assessment

Responses to Q1 included overlap in this category with strategies mentioned in relation to

content delivery/pedagogy. These included providing the assistance of scribes, extra time, and rest breaks during exams. Three of the seven references to assessment referred to different or differentiated assessment with one specifying that, “The teacher needs to be very clear on what is expected of a student in the standard of achievement. What does a student really need to demonstrate to pass a subject and be open to students not fitting a mould?”

In response to Q2, one teacher explained, “Year 11/12 students with anxiety had separate assessment routines with small group supervision, rest breaks etc. Efforts were made to reassure them; ensure they were adequately prepared for the test etc.” Another referred to a Year 7 student with dyslexia who had a reader/writer available throughout an assessment.

Discussion

Most of practices that teachers described are arguably beneficial for all students and at least do not impede their studies. Providing clear instructions, videos that can be re-watched, plain language summaries of key points, clear timeframes for tasks, ensuring that students are paying attention, allowing the use of technologies including calculators when their use does not compromise the goal of a lesson, having resources like vocabulary lists and detailed written instructions available as needed, and allowing students appropriate opportunities to rest or move are sensible for all students. All are consistent with UDL, a planning approach that assumes student variability, with multiple approaches to learning activities offered in a lesson to achieve a firm goal (Cast.org). It is important to note that UDL is not an adjustment. Indeed, prior planning with options for learners reduces the need to make adjustments for individuals.

It is noteworthy that the modifications teachers reported making fit within the universal design principle of available for all: there if you need it, and it doesn’t get in the way if you don’t. We are unable to identify in the survey responses any approaches teachers use in mathematics lessons for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities that would not fit UDL. For other disabilities, reasonable adjustments to mathematics are essential. An example is the use of tactile graphics for students who are blind or have low vision (Fanshawe & Cain, 2024). It seems that the group of learners with intellectual or developmental disabilities, often considered challenging for teachers, require good quality teaching with differentiation and learning options, consistent with the principles of UDL. These strategies and approaches are within the expertise of Australian teachers.

The extent to which adjusting the content delivery/pedagogy amounted to changing the nature of the content is unclear. It is possible for the provision of additional scaffolding, such as by providing steps to be followed to complete a task, to alter the inherent requirements of a task and hence the opportunities to learn that it provides. If this is the case, then such an intervention does not constitute a “reasonable adjustment” although consistent with Tomlinson’s (2017) suggested approaches for catering for diverse student learning needs. Certainly, slowing the pace of a lesson necessitates reducing the volume of content that is taught, as does reducing expectation of the amount of work that students with disabilities complete. These students are thus excluded from parts of the curriculum. Such teaching is not inclusive and contravenes the rights of these students (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, para 11). Teachers’ concern for all students to experience success is a further contributor to lowering the cognitive demand of tasks offered to students with learning difficulties and is reinforced by the belief that students who are significantly behind their peers need to start from where they are, guaranteeing that they will not attain year-level curriculum. Although well-meaning, adjustments of this sort are also inconsistent with inclusion. Similarly, offering students experiencing difficulties with learning mathematics more repetitive practice further detracts from time available for engaging with new content.

A response in the survey, deeming a student to be “at year 6 level” though in Year 9, reflects

a wider held view by some teachers and a policy approach in some jurisdictions. There are many problems with this view: it presumes an even profile of learning across subjects and within subjects. This is improbable – consistent performance across all subjects of the curriculum and across domains in mathematics does not account for varying interests, aptitudes or experience. A significant risk of this view of “being” at a lower year level, is the segregation of the learner that must result, even if philosophically. They are deemed to be different from class peers, requiring different teaching approaches. This is contrary to inclusive practice.

Two teachers described approaches that involved all students starting lessons engaging with the same topic, and there was mention of tasks with low floors and high ceilings. These strategies offer the potential for all students to access year level content. Teaching students how to work effectively in heterogenous, cooperative groups is a further strategy that contributes to inclusion (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020).

There were several measures that teachers described that are established elements of effective mathematics teaching but appear to be reserved for students with learning difficulties or “intellectual impairments”. These include the use of manipulatives or tactile materials (Larbi & Mavis, 2016), emphasising applications (Stillman, 2004) and making connections with students’ interests and concepts with which they are likely already familiar (Hatisaru, 2024). All students would benefit from these strategies.

Our data remind us that efforts to achieve inclusive mathematics education are occurring in an environment in which streaming according to prior attainment means that exclusion and segregation occur at the level of class allocation. Despite the fact that streaming is intended to reduce diversity in terms of attainment, there was no evidence in our data that teachers were finding that it had made inclusive mathematics teaching easier or more common.

Most of the practices, as reported in our survey, that mathematics teachers use to support the learning of students with intellectual or developmental disabilities are examples of quality differentiated instruction. Teachers make adjustments to their lessons based on their knowledge of the learners, their knowledge of their mathematics, and their pedagogical expertise. This flexibility is essential to meeting the learning needs of their students, a right afforded to students in Australian law. In recent times in some Australian education systems, a trend is emerging to focus on whole class instruction, without variation, in some cases using scripted lessons. Such policy positions have the potential to constrain the options for teachers to meet the learning needs of students through approaches such as UDL. In such situations, it is likely that there will be a need to provide alternative learning for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities in ways that are not inclusive – either through integration or segregation. This is in contravention to Australia’s laws and our international convention obligations.

Conclusion

Australian mathematics teachers who responded to our survey indicated a range of adjustments they make to support the learning of students with intellectual or developmental disabilities. These approaches are indicative of quality teaching strategies that are beneficial for all learners or at least do not hinder their learning. Teachers, given the pedagogical freedom to plan for learning options, can support the inclusion of all students in mathematics lessons. The benefits of inclusion are well established, for students with disabilities and for those without (Hehir et al., 2016). Limiting teachers’ ability to provide learning adjustments for students risks breaching Australian law and our international convention obligations. It is critical that the expertise of teachers to adjust mathematics lessons to meet their students’ needs is affirmed, encouraged and enhanced to improve the learning experiences and outcomes for all students.

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