

# in depth

## Treating the same what is different?

### The role of teachers in an inclusive context



by Paulina Bánfalvi Kam



**W**e are all different. We have different tastes, interests, preferences and approaches. We have distinct desires, dreams and expectations, diverse ways of doing, thinking, being, learning. We look at other things and ask additional questions. So do our students.

We, teachers, want to respond to this diversity, be inclusive, and personalise our practice. But we barely manage to give some answers to some students

some of the time. Meanwhile, we fool ourselves into thinking that the rest do not need personalised attention and can be treated as equals. We know their names and are able to judge them individually. Miguel is lazy, Lucia rushes, Maria is absent-minded, Juan is disorganised. We know a lot about their weaknesses but little about their strengths.

We want students to learn at the pace we set, when and where we decide. We plan lessons while expecting students to respond to our programme and needs - ours!

## Inclusive does not mean that adapts to our educational proposal, but rather that we are flexible to respond to their learning profile

We want them to develop their strengths and enjoy learning, yes. Still, we want this to happen due to their ability to adapt to our pace, mode and expectations.

### INCLUDE VS ADAPT

Many teachers work on designing games, projects, tasks, activities, looking for different resources to motivate their students, turning content more friendly and attractive, and making it “come in” better, hoping that this will also mean that it will “come out” better. But the results do not change much: The same people join us and get hooked, or are left behind and still reach secondary school without the required skills to cope with this period. There we continue to offer a “certifying” education. We certify that we have ensured that the pupil “knows” the content they need to know over ten years of compulsory schooling. But to learn what for?

Do we think about why they want to learn that content and look for ways to connect that information to their interests, preferences, expectations, desires, curiosity?

When we plan, do we seek to excite them or ourselves?

When we evaluate our work, do we do it from their perspective or ours? Education must be inclusive. But inclusive does not mean ensuring that everyone adapts and engages with our educational proposal, but rather that we are flexible enough to respond to their learning profile. The question is, how?

We cannot design 25 learning programmes. Therefore, any efforts for inclusion made on the premise that we direct and plan to learn are complex and futile. As long as we affirm that our role is to decide what, how, and at what pace to work on a given content or competence in the classroom in each session of every course, there is no room for inclusion, only adaptation.

Pupils, developing children, have to adapt and respond to the expectations of each of their teachers because we assume that we, as adults and education professionals, cannot adapt to them. Doesn't that look a contradiction?

Before thinking about methods, models or activities, we must change our teaching role to be inclusive. From directing learning to stimulating it, from planning and


working so that students adapt to make learners adapt to knowing our students and responding and adapting to their profile. We must stop looking for “the innovative method” that solves everything and combine different educational proposals, like a cook mixing other techniques to make his dishes tastier.

### FROM DISHING UP TO LETTING THEM CHOOSE

Our inclusive proposals are like a cook serving a ranch. We serve the same dish for everyone with the same portion and quantity of each ingredient, except for Elena, who can't eat gluten: I change the pasta for rice. As Gerardo is bigger, I always give him a bit more. Carlos is smaller and leaves half of the plate, so I do my best to make him eat it all: I may say: “Come on Carlitos, you can do it”-; I make him the little plane to distract him or cut the meat into smaller pieces to reduce the effort, I even draw faces or warn him that if he doesn't eat it all, he won't be able to go out to the playground to play. Carlitos doesn't respond, and I have to continue serving the ranch to the others, so I ask for an assistant to attend to Carlitos.

Those in the East are ahead of us: their philosophy of serving the dishes in the centre, separating the ingredients, combining them in various ways, and presenting them in such an attractive way that they encourage us to try them. They serve them in the centre, without defined portions, so I can try here and there, defining and expanding my tastes, and in a group. But not in groups with assigned roles: “you will be the one who eats the chicken, and you Gerardo, who eats faster, will be the one who serves the others, and you Carlitos, as you eat little, will watch how Gerardo serves”. Because once again, this would be “dishing up”, i.e. a context in which the teacher decides, and the pupil obeys and follows a known familiar path.

Old and young, Older pupils eat with younger ones those who like spicy food and those who don't, those who eat everything and those who don't. Everyone chooses what, how much to eat, how little to eat, and how to combine it. Everyone chooses what to eat, how much to eat and how to combine it. The little ones, at first, only dare to eat rice and chicken. Still, they observe how the older ones enjoy spicy food, seaweed, or entrails, and little by little, they have the courage to dare to take on more complex challenges and try them. Sometimes they like it from the start. Sometimes they will have to wait a little longer. They may never get to like it, but it doesn't matter because the table offers other options to ingest the nutrients they need in different ways. How much we eat depends not only on our size or appetite but also on the attractiveness of the dishes, the pleasantness of the company, and the stimulus of the context that encourages us to try and take risks as long as that context is open and flexible so that



## They need us to bring them content and to grow as learners, thinkers and transformers

the more daring, the hungrier, can “open up” and broaden their horizons. If we don’t allow some to eat spicy food because others are not ready, then we must wait. If we do not let some to dare to try more “exotic” dishes, because it is not the right thing to do this year or this term, if we limit them to wait and hold the spoon of their less hungry companions, we cancel out the stimulus that their impulse offers to the rest. Capacity is not shared distributed, but enthusiasm is contagious.

Hunger is not constant. Sometimes we eat without hunger just because the dish is tasty. We almost always overeat when the company and surroundings are pleasant. That is why it is impossible to get it right when we try to decide what they should eat.

### **THE ESSENCE OF LEARNING**

Our ingredients are the curricular contents observed from the broad and general approach of the regulations and not from the particular, narrow and extensive approach proposed by the textbooks. They are ingredients that we have to combine and cook using different techniques and present them in a variety of attractive and tasty ways for our students, and in the centre of the table, like an open menu from which each one chooses how much, how and at what pace, stimulated by their more avid companions

who are allowed to eat as much as they want and as fast as their appetite demands, and by a teacher who guides and teaches him to handle the chopsticks, but who also allows him to eat with cutlery, who encourages him to try spicy food mixed with white rice, because it is less spicy and gets his palate used to it, who encourages him to try new things, and who brings him a napkin to spit out when he does not like it, eliminating the punishment that comes with taking risks. The teacher can then guide and stimulate Carlitos to eat because he no longer needs to continue plating to eat on their own. And she can bring Carlitos, Julia and Hugo together, focus on their needs, help them break down their barriers, and bring the centre’s plates closer to them because they have not yet reached. And while the students eat, the teacher learns about their learning processes and profile. The tutor notices which dishes are more successful and which ones need a different seasoning if there is a nutrient leftover or missing, adapting and responding to the profile and needs of all her students. He observes that Isabel sometimes chokes; she needs a guideline to chew. Antonio serves so many things on his plate that he can’t distinguish the flavours afterwards; he offers her a guideline to eating step by step. He suggests that Rosa accompanies the meat with some rice and vegetables to complete the experience. In this way, the teacher stops being the one who serves the food and becomes the one who teaches how to eat.

The important thing about food is not to eat 100g of chicken and 200g of vegetables, but to get the nutrients we need to grow healthy and robust, to our full potential. Chicken, pork or tofu provide them. So, in education, it is



not vital that they know that much mathematics, language or geography, but that they draw from that content what they need to develop their personal and cognitive strengths to their fullest potential. And so, they grow up with positive self-esteem, a critical and curious attitude, with the courage to face challenges, make decisions, defend their ideas, solve problems, take an interest, participate and contribute beyond what is expected, pursuing their dreams and their passions and being ready for the commitment, sacrifice and perseverance that this implies, enjoying not only the achievements but also the process. Our students will not be at a disadvantage for not knowing a list of cities at 16 because if education focuses on working on their appetite for learning, they will know where to look for it if they ever need it. They don't need us to bring them content but to grow as learners, thinkers and transformers.

We have approached inclusion by appealing to our sense of fairness to leave no one behind. Leaving no one behind implies that we have set a bar for everyone to reach and that we work to ensure that all our students leave with a certification that equalises and standardises them. A model in which we see ourselves as issuers of content that we consider sacred, valuable and necessary for everyone, whatever their personal or professional future may be. We see ourselves as guarantors of a society that shares common knowledge. We feel that this has some implicit goodness.

30% of graduates do not find a job within four years of graduation. 37% work in professions below their academic

qualifications. 87% of millennials - the most significant workforce today - feel that their learning experience was boring and not relevant. Generation Z does not believe that their education is helpful for their future. Will we be in time to respond to our Generation Alpha students?

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