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Every Learner Is Different: Rethinking Education for a Better Future

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Each student has a unique story shaped by distinct experiences, abilities, confidence levels, learning motivations, and challenges. One student may be ready to speak, while another is still developing confidence. Some students learn independently, whereas others require guidance. One student may view a challenge as an opportunity, while another may perceive it as a barrier. Despite this diversity, traditional education often expects students to learn in remarkably similar ways.

In light of this, can a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to education genuinely prepare every student for what lies ahead? Perhaps a better future begins when we shift from asking students to adapt to the education system to considering how the system can better accommodate each learner.

The Limits of a 'One-Size-Fits-All' Education

For a long time, education has largely been organised around a common structure: the same curriculum, the same lessons, the same learning materials, and often the same expectations for everyone. This approach is practical. It provides structure, consistency and a shared learning experience. But consistency does not always mean effectiveness.

When students enter a classroom with different levels of prior knowledge, motivation, confidence, interests, and learning needs, the same learning experience may leave some behind while others are ready to move forward. The OECD (2021) highlights that a standardised "one-size-fits-all" approach may not sufficiently account for these differences.

Think about it this way: if every student is given the same pair of shoes, will every student walk comfortably? Education can work in much the same way. The issue is not that a common curriculum is wrong. Rather, the challenge lies in assuming that the same pathway will work equally well for everyone. A student who already understands a concept may need greater challenges. Another who is struggling with the fundamentals may need additional explanation and support. Someone else may understand the content but lack the confidence to participate. These differences matter. Research on personalised education defines personalisation as systematically adapting instruction to individual learners, rather than providing the same learning experience to everyone (Tetzlaff et al., 2021).



A mark can show whether a student has achieved an expected outcome, but it may not reveal the learning journey behind that mark. Two students can receive the same grade while needing completely different forms of support. This is why the future of education requires us to look beyond standardisation and begin thinking more seriously about personalisation.

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From One-Size-Fits-All to Personalised Learning

If every learner is different, the next step may not be to teach less but to teach differently. Personalised education begins with a simple idea: understand the learner before deciding what support they need. It does not mean preparing a completely different lesson for every student or allowing everyone to learn without structure. Instead, it means making learning more responsive to differences in students' abilities, interests, motivation, confidence, and pace of learning. In other words, the destination may be shared, but the journey does not always have to be the same.

Personalised education has long been seen as a way to adapt instruction to individual learners while maintaining meaningful educational goals (Tetzlaff et al., 2021). Systematic reviews of technology-enhanced personalised learning have similarly identified learner characteristics, learning support and learning outcomes as important dimensions of personalised and adaptive learning (Xie et al., 2019).

Imagine two students working towards the same learning outcome. One may need additional practice to strengthen understanding. Another may be ready for a more challenging task. A third may understand the content but lack the confidence to participate. Treating all three students the same way may be procedurally equal but not equally helpful. Personalised education seeks to close this gap by adapting learning to the learner. Research describes it as the systematic adaptation of instruction to individual learners, while the OECD (2021) highlights the potential of personalised approaches to respond to differences in students' needs, skills, interests and learning pace.

This shift requires us to look beyond a student's final grade. Instead of asking only, “How did the student perform?”, educators can also ask, "What does this learner need in order to progress?” The latter question changes everything. It encourages educators to see learning as a process, not just an outcome. It also opens opportunities for more targeted feedback, flexible learning activities, differentiated support, and greater student choice.

Technology can play an important role in this process. Digital learning platforms, learning analytics, and artificial intelligence can help educators identify patterns, monitor progress, and understand learners' needs. Ifenthaler and Yau (2020) found that learning analytics can support student success by providing information about student learning and enabling more informed educational interventions, although the evidence base and implementation challenges still require careful consideration.

Importantly, however, technology should remain a partner in education, not a replacement for the educator. The OECD (2021) highlights the potential of hybrid human-AI approaches in which technology supports personalisation while teachers retain an essential role in interpreting information and making pedagogical decisions.

Ultimately, personalised education is not about making learning easier. It is about making learning more purposeful. When students understand their strengths, recognise areas for improvement, and receive support that meets their actual needs, they are better positioned to take ownership of their learning.

From Marks to Meaning: Understanding the Learner

A grade is important. It tells us something about achievement. But does a grade tell us everything we need to know about a learner?

A student who earns 60 marks may have understood most of the concepts but lacked confidence. Another student with the same score may be highly motivated but have gaps in prior knowledge. A third may perform better but struggle to manage time, regulate their learning, or maintain focus. The score is the same; the learner is not.

This is why the future of education requires us to look beyond marks and begin asking better questions. *'What does the student already understand?' 'Where is the difficulty?' 'What is preventing progress?' 'What kind of support would make the greatest difference?'*

Rather than waiting until the end of a course to discover that a student is struggling, educators can gather information throughout the learning process. Formative assessment helps teachers identify students' current understanding, provide meaningful feedback, and adapt teaching to their needs. Using assessment and feedback as part of an ongoing learning process is central to effective formative assessment, especially when teachers use assessment information to modify teaching and learning rather than simply record achievement (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Feedback matters because students need to know not only how they performed but also how they can improve. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback can help learners understand the gap between their current performance and the desired learning goal and identify possible ways forward.

Importantly, diagnosis does not have to focus only on academic knowledge. Learning depends on a broader set of factors. A student may know *what* to do but lack the confidence to do it. Another may have the ability but struggle to regulate their learning independently. Motivation, self-regulation and emotional factors can also shape how students engage with learning. The OECD (2021) specifically identifies motivation, self-regulation and emotion as important learner characteristics that future personalised learning technologies may need to consider.

Research by Heikkinen et al. (2023) also suggests that technology can identify aspects of students' self-regulated learning and provide interventions to support planning, performance, and reflection. However, the evidence is not uniformly positive, underscoring the need for careful pedagogical design rather than assuming technology alone will improve learning.

This changes the role of assessment. Assessment is no longer simply the finish line where students receive a grade. It can become a starting point for better support. Imagine a lecturer who knows that a group of students is struggling not because they lack ability, but because they lack confidence in applying what they have learned. The response would be very different from simply giving them more exercises. They may need encouragement, guided practice, safe opportunities to participate, and feedback that helps them recognise their own progress.

Education for a Better Future

Every learner brings different abilities, experiences, motivations, confidence, and aspirations. Recognising these differences does not mean lowering expectations or creating a separate pathway for every student. It means creating an education system that is flexible enough to respond to learners while maintaining high expectations for all.

Personalised education offers one possible way forward. It shifts our focus from simply delivering the same learning experience to everyone towards understanding what different learners need to progress. Technology can strengthen this process by helping educators identify learning patterns and provide more responsive support. At the same time, learning analytics research cautions against focusing only on data and performance indicators while overlooking the complexity of teaching and learning (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). The human connection between educator and learner must therefore remain at the centre of educational personalisation.

Perhaps the future we should strive for is not a classroom where every student learns in exactly the same way, but one where every student is seen, understood, supported and empowered to succeed. Because when we recognise that every learner is different, we begin to create an education system where every learner matters. That may be the first step toward a better future through education.

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