MULTIDISCIPLINARNI PRISTUPI U EDUKACIJI I REHABILITACIJI
Adapting Educational Programs for Students with Developmental Disabilities, 8(12), 42-54
DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

# Adapting Educational Programs for Students with Developmental Disabilities: A Structured Narrative Review

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## Abstract

Inclusive education requires educational programs to respond to diverse functional profiles rather than treating disability categories as uniform instructional needs. This structured narrative review examines the main domains of educational adaptation described in selected literature and policy documents, and considers their implications for classroom practice. Existing sources assembled for the manuscript were organized into an explicit thematic framework covering instructional individualization, support planning, self-regulation, collaboration, accessibility, and classroom organization. This is a narrative synthesis, not a systematic or scoping review; a reproducible database search and formal appraisal of all eligible studies were not available. The literature and guidance converge on flexible presentation and assessment, functional goal-setting, proactive accessibility, coordinated support, and ongoing progress monitoring. However, conceptual guidance and empirical evidence vary in their capacity to establish effectiveness intervention. Educational adaptation is best conceptualized as an iterative, participation-oriented process that links individual needs with changes in teaching and school environments. More rigorous comparative and implementation research is needed to determine which adaptations work best, for whom, and under what conditions.

**Article history**

Received: 20.9.2026.
Accepted: 27.10.2026.

**Keywords:**
Inclusive education;
Developmental disabilities;
Individualized support;
Narrative review

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DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

## Introduction

Inclusive education is not achieved by physical placement alone. It requires changes in curriculum access, teaching, assessment and the school environment so that learners with different support needs can participate meaningfully. The Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provide an international rights-based foundation for this approach (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). General Comment No. 4 further emphasizes the systemic removal of educational barriers (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

Students described under the broad category of developmental disabilities differ substantially in communication, cognition, sensory and motor functioning, executive skills, and educational experience (Klein & Camargo, 2018). Within this heterogeneous group, the most frequently encountered conditions are intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy, each of which carries its own profile of learning and behavioral characteristics (Sigafoos et al., 2020). However, a diagnostic label alone is insufficient to specify teaching goals or the adaptations needed in a particular classroom (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Inclusive pedagogy instead calls for attention to the interaction between learner characteristics and educational contexts (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Consequently, the instructional decisions made for these learners rely heavily on general principles of inclusive education rather than on evidence drawn from studies of their specific needs, which leaves teachers without clear guidance on how to structure content, pacing, and feedback for students whose cognitive and social profiles differ markedly from those of their typically developing peers (Gorny et al., 2026).

Educational adaptation can refer to changes in how information is presented, how students demonstrate learning, the timing and sequencing of activities, the availability of assistive tools, and, in some circumstances, the content or expected outcomes (Faggela-Luby & Engel, 2020). These are not interchangeable decisions. For example, changing response format while preserving a learning objective differs from reducing the complexity of that objective. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a proactive framework for providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2014). Applied to students with severe developmental disabilities, this framework shifts the burden of adaptation from individual learners to the design of the learning environment, reducing the need for ad hoc modifications after barriers have already emerged (Hazmi & Ahmad, 2018).

The policy context is also relevant. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a multi-level education system, and support arrangements depend on applicable state, entity, cantonal and Brčko District regulations. The Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education and the legislation and inclusive education rulebook of Sarajevo Canton provide examples of this context; legal requirements must be checked against the current official texts before publication (Sarajevo Canton, 2024, 2025/2026). At the global level, these national and local policy frameworks are situated within broader international commitments to inclusive education, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which emphasize the importance of equitable access, meaningful participation, and appropriate educational support for all learners.

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

Although the manuscript's existing sources discuss many practical approaches, their implications have not previously been integrated around a clear analytic question. The aim of this review is therefore to synthesize the principal domains of adaptation represented in the assembled literature, identify their common underlying principles, and critically consider implications and evidence gaps. The guiding question is: What domains of educational adaptation are emphasized in the selected literature on inclusive schooling for students with developmental disabilities, and what do these domains imply for planning and evaluating support?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Review design

A structured narrative review and thematic synthesis of an existing, purposively assembled body of literature was undertaken. The purpose was conceptual integration and practice-oriented interpretation rather than exhaustive identification of all published studies. Accordingly, the work is not presented as a systematic review or a scoping review, and no PRISMA flow diagram or numerical search yield is reported.

### 2.2. Source material and scope

The source material comprised scholarly articles and books on inclusive pedagogy, instructional adaptation and collaboration, alongside international guidance documents and relevant legal/policy texts already cited in the manuscript. Sources span theoretical and conceptual accounts, empirical studies, syntheses, professional guidance and legal documents. These different source types were considered separately when interpreting the strength and purpose of claims. The bibliography reflects the materials available for this manuscript; it is not asserted to be a comprehensive or systematically selected corpus.

### 2.3. Analytic procedure

The manuscript content was reorganized into descriptive thematic domains according to the educational problem addressed and the proposed adaptation mechanism. Recurrent concepts were grouped under: (1) instructional individualization and UDL; (2) assessment and individualized planning; (3) motivation, self-regulation and learner agency; (4) teacher–specialist–family collaboration; (5) accessible materials and environments; and (6) time, routines and classroom organization. The synthesis distinguishes broad normative recommendations from claims of empirically demonstrated effectiveness. Because no prospective search log, study-level extraction sheet, independent coding or formal risk-of-bias assessment was available, these procedures are not claimed to have been performed.

### 2.4. Limits of the approach

The selected literature may overrepresent familiar frameworks and documents, omit relevant recent intervention trials, and combine evidence from different populations and school systems. The findings should therefore be read as a thematic account of the included material, not as estimates of effect size, prevalence or certainty of evidence.

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## 3. RESULTS

Six interconnected domains were identified in the source material. They describe different levels at which barriers to learning and participation may be addressed. Table 1 summarizes their instructional focus and the types of decisions they support.

| Domain | Core adaptation | Practical decision |
|---|---|---|
| **Instructional individualization and UDL** | Multiple forms of representation, participation and response | Which learning objective is retained, and which access route is changed? |
| **Assessment and support planning** | Functional profiles, measurable goals, monitoring | What support is needed and when should it be reviewed? |
| **Motivation and self-regulation** | Feedback, scaffolding, choice and self-monitoring | How can independence increase over time? |
| **Collaboration** | Shared responsibilities across teachers, specialists and families | Who implements and monitors each strategy? |
| **Materials and environment** | Accessible formats, assistive technology, physical and sensory adjustments | Which contextual barriers can be removed? |
| **Time and routines** | Flexible pacing, staged tasks, predictable transitions | How can demands be matched to attention and processing needs? |

### 3.1. Instructional individualization and Universal Design for Learning

The literature consistently frames individualization as adaptation of teaching to the learner's educational and functional profile, not as automatic reduction of academic expectations. Adaptations may involve concise instructions, demonstrations, multimodal materials, flexible response modes or changes in task complexity when justified by the learning objective (Karamatić Brčić, 2012; Mitchell, 2014; Vaughn et al., 2018). UDL extends this logic from reactive accommodation to proactive lesson design, offering multiple ways to engage with content and demonstrate learning (CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2014).

A key analytic distinction is between access adaptations and curriculum modifications. An enlarged print format or text-to-speech tool may improve access to unchanged content, whereas reducing the breadth or difficulty of required outcomes alters what is taught or assessed (Szucs et al., 2024). The choice should be transparent and linked to individual needs rather than disability category alone (Filippou et al., 2025).

### 3.2. Assessment, individualized support planning and monitoring

Assessment is presented as the starting point for setting priorities, drawing on classroom observations, student work, communication with families and relevant professional assessment. Individualized planning translates this information into concrete goals, strategies, responsibilities and review intervals (Biscevic et al., 2017; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014; Friend & Cook, 2017). The

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

source material emphasizes that supports should be reviewed and, where appropriate, gradually faded to promote autonomy.

The implication is that the quality of an individualized education plan depends not simply on its existence but on whether its goals are observable, feasible and linked to decisions about teaching (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013). Effective plans should clearly specify the expected learning outcomes, appropriate instructional strategies, and procedures for monitoring student progress. Furthermore, individualized planning requires continuous collaboration among teachers, special education professionals, and families to ensure that educational goals remain relevant to students' evolving needs (Memisevic & Djordjevic, 2026). Regular evaluation of student performance allows educators to identify ineffective strategies and introduce necessary adjustments. Importantly, individualized education plans should promote meaningful participation in classroom activities rather than merely documenting accommodations or reducing academic expectations.

### 3.3. Motivation, self-regulation and metacognitive support

The reviewed material highlights task relevance, clear feedback, achievable intermediate goals, predictable routines and explicit self-monitoring strategies. Students may benefit from visual schedules, prompts, graphic organizers and opportunities to check their own work. Such approaches are compatible with broader accounts of effective teaching and UDL (Hattie, 2009; CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2014). These strategies may be particularly valuable when students experience difficulties with attention, executive functioning, or organizing learning activities. Breaking complex assignments into manageable steps can reduce cognitive demands and provide opportunities for experiencing success, potentially strengthening motivation and engagement. Similarly, explicit instruction in goal setting, planning, and self-evaluation may support the gradual development of metacognitive awareness. Teachers should also consider individual differences in students' responsiveness to feedback, as well as the influence of classroom expectations and environmental conditions on their ability to regulate learning.

Importantly, scaffolds should not become permanent substitutes for participation. Their instructional value depends on whether they help learners initiate, sustain and increasingly regulate activities independently (Noroozi et al., 2017). Consequently, instructional support should be systematically adjusted as students demonstrate greater competence, with opportunities for independent practice incorporated into everyday classroom activities. Claims about specific effects for particular disability groups require more targeted evidence than is available in this narrative corpus.

### 3.4. Collaboration among teachers, specialists and families

The literature describes inclusive support as distributed across classroom teachers, school support professionals and families. Teachers are responsible for everyday implementation; specialists may contribute assessment, coaching and adaptation; and families provide knowledge of the student's priorities and functioning across contexts (Friend & Cook, 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Professional

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

learning and shared responsibility are also emphasized in European guidance (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

Collaboration should therefore be operationalized through agreed goals, explicit responsibilities and routine feedback rather than invoked only as a general principle (Ibralic et al., 2026). The evidence cited here supports the relevance of collaboration but does not justify a universal claim that every co-teaching arrangement improves outcomes.

### 3.5. Accessible materials, assistive technology and the learning environment

The source material identifies barriers associated with print format, sensory conditions, classroom layout, mobility, communication and access to information. Potential responses range from enlarged text and visual organizers to alternative keyboards, communication aids and text-to-speech technologies (UNESCO, 2020, 2023; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). The appropriateness of a tool depends on the task and learner rather than its technological sophistication.

This domain also highlights an implementation condition: access to a device is not equivalent to effective use. Students and staff may require training, ongoing support and evaluation of whether the aid improves meaningful participation.

3.6. Flexible timing and classroom organizationThe final domain concerns pacing, planned breaks, breaking complex activities into stages, and signaling transitions in advance. Such strategies can reduce avoidable task demands and support predictable participation, especially where attention, processing, or executive functioning difficulties create barriers. Their suitability should be assessed individually, and any accommodation should be evaluated in relation to the intended learning outcome rather than applied uniformly.Evidence from classroom-based interventions suggests that structured activity breaks may improve students' on-task behavior, although findings regarding cognitive functioning and academic achievement remain less consistent (Masini et al., 2020; Reyes-Amigo et al., 2025). These findings highlight the potential value of incorporating brief, planned breaks into instructional routines while recognizing that their effectiveness may depend on students' characteristics and the specific demands of learning activities. Similarly, dividing complex assignments into smaller, clearly defined stages may facilitate task initiation, reduce organizational demands, and create opportunities for monitoring progress. Advance notification of transitions and predictable classroom routines may also help students anticipate changes and manage expectations, particularly when difficulties with cognitive flexibility or self-regulation interfere with classroom participation.Importantly, instructional adjustments should be flexible and responsive to individual progress. Teachers should regularly evaluate whether modified pacing, additional processing time, or structured breaks improve students' engagement and independence without unnecessarily reducing opportunities to achieve meaningful educational goals.

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

## 4. DISCUSSION

The central contribution of this synthesis is to show that educational adaptation is not a single technique but a coordinated set of decisions operating at instructional, interpersonal, and environmental levels. Across domains, three principles recur: adaptation should be guided by functional needs; supports should preserve meaningful participation and expectations wherever possible; and implementation should be monitored and adjusted over time. These principles suggest that the effectiveness of educational adaptations cannot be adequately understood by examining individual strategies in isolation. Rather, their educational value depends on how they interact with curriculum demands, classroom organization, teacher competencies, available resources, and the individual characteristics of students. Consequently, the same adaptation may facilitate learning in one instructional context while providing limited benefits in another.

The findings are consistent with inclusive pedagogy that treats learner diversity as an ordinary feature of classroom design (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). They also align with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which anticipates variability before barriers arise (CAST, 2024). Yet these frameworks should not be treated as interchangeable with evidence that any specific adaptation produces a particular improvement. Policy documents establish duties and principles; conceptual papers offer explanatory frameworks; empirical studies are needed to evaluate outcomes. This distinction is particularly relevant because the literature on inclusive education encompasses different definitions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches, making it difficult to establish universally applicable conclusions (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Accordingly, educational adaptations should be regarded as context-sensitive practices whose effectiveness must be examined in relation to clearly defined student outcomes.

An additional consideration concerns the relationship between universal and individualized approaches to educational adaptation. Although UDL emphasizes proactively designing accessible learning environments for diverse learners, individualized support remains necessary when general classroom adaptations do not sufficiently address particular functional needs. These approaches should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competing models of inclusive practice. Universal strategies may reduce the need for certain individualized accommodations by removing common barriers, whereas individualized interventions provide additional support when students encounter difficulties that cannot be adequately addressed through general instructional flexibility. However, excessive reliance on individualized arrangements may also create unintended separation when students consistently engage in different activities or receive instruction outside the shared classroom experience. The challenge for educators is to maintain an appropriate balance between individualized support and opportunities for participation in common learning activities.

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

A particularly important distinction is between access, participation, and achievement. A student may gain physical or digital access to materials without increased classroom participation, and participation may not necessarily translate into improved academic attainment. Future evaluations should specify which outcome is expected and measure it directly. For example, providing assistive technology may improve access to written information, but its contribution to reading comprehension, independent task completion, or academic achievement requires separate evaluation. Similarly, adaptations that reduce task demands may be justified in some cases but could unintentionally narrow learning opportunities if they become a default response to a disability label. This concern reinforces the importance of distinguishing between adaptations that modify the means through which students engage with curricular content and those that substantially alter the intended learning objectives. Such decisions should be based on individual educational assessments rather than categorical assumptions about students' abilities.

Another important implication concerns the role of teachers and school support professionals in translating educational principles into everyday practice. Even well-designed individualized education plans may have limited practical value when instructional responsibilities are unclear, communication among professionals is inconsistent, or progress monitoring is insufficient. Effective adaptation therefore requires more than the availability of specialist knowledge; it also depends on organizational arrangements that support collaborative planning, shared decision-making, and continuous professional learning. Research on collaborative teaching suggests that cooperation between general and special education professionals can provide opportunities for more responsive instruction, although implementation varies considerably across educational settings (Scruggs et al., 2007). Within this context, special education and rehabilitation professionals may contribute by identifying functional barriers, recommending appropriate adaptations, supporting teachers in their implementation, and evaluating whether the selected strategies produce meaningful educational benefits.

The sustainability of educational adaptations also deserves consideration. Strategies that are effective during periods of intensive professional support may become difficult to maintain when specialist availability decreases, teaching staff change, or students transition between educational levels. For this reason, adaptations should be sufficiently practical to be incorporated into regular classroom routines without creating unnecessary dependence on individual professionals. Moreover, students should progressively be encouraged to participate in identifying helpful strategies, monitoring their progress, and making decisions about their own learning whenever developmentally appropriate. Such involvement is consistent with the emphasis on learner agency within contemporary UDL frameworks (CAST, 2024) and may contribute to greater independence and self-determination.

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

For schools, the synthesis suggests a practical cycle: identify barriers in a specific learning activity; select a proportionate adaptation; define the desired functional or academic outcome; allocate implementation responsibilities; collect progress data; and revise the strategy. Importantly, progress monitoring should not be restricted to academic performance alone. Indicators such as task initiation, engagement, independence, communication, and participation in classroom activities may provide additional information about whether an adaptation is achieving its intended purpose. The selection of indicators should reflect the student's educational priorities and the specific barriers being addressed. This approach may also help teachers distinguish between adaptations that are genuinely beneficial and those that are maintained primarily because they have become established classroom routines.

The proposed cycle is particularly relevant in settings with limited specialist resources, although its feasibility and impact in Bosnia and Herzegovina require empirical examination. The decentralized organization of the education system may create differences in the availability of professional support, implementation procedures, and institutional capacities across administrative jurisdictions. However, the extent and educational consequences of these differences should be established through systematic research rather than assumed. Local legislation provides a framework but does not itself establish implementation quality. Future research in Bosnia and Herzegovina should therefore investigate how educational adaptations are selected, implemented, and evaluated in mainstream schools, including teachers' professional competencies, access to specialist services, and the experiences of students and families.

Finally, several limitations of the present review should be acknowledged. As a structured narrative synthesis, it does not provide the comprehensive search procedures, formal study selection processes, or systematic risk-of-bias assessment associated with systematic or scoping reviews. The reviewed sources also differ substantially in their purposes and evidentiary strength, ranging from international policy documents and conceptual frameworks to empirical research and professional guidance. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an integrative account of key principles and implementation considerations rather than definitive evidence of the comparative effectiveness of particular educational adaptations. Future systematic reviews and intervention studies should examine which strategies are most effective for specific functional needs, educational settings, and learning outcomes, while also considering implementation fidelity, resource requirements, and long-term sustainability.

### 4.1. Limitations and future research

This manuscript has important limitations. The source corpus was not constructed through a reproducible database search, and no systematic eligibility screening, study-quality assessment or quantitative synthesis was undertaken. The themes were organized from an existing manuscript and thus are not independently validated categories. The included sources mix policy, theory, books and empirical studies, and the review cannot establish comparative effectiveness or make causal claims about specific interventions.
A stronger next-stage review should search defined databases (for example, ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science), specify a date range and inclusion criteria, document

DOI: 10.59519/mper8204

screening and exclusions, extract study characteristics and outcomes, and appraise methodological quality. Priority empirical questions include whether specific adaptations improve academic achievement, classroom participation or independence; how effects vary by age and support needs; and which implementation conditions predict sustained use. Recent systematic reviews and controlled studies should be added before submission to strengthen these claims.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The selected literature portrays educational adaptation for students with developmental disabilities as a dynamic process combining individualized instruction, purposeful support planning, learner self-regulation, coordinated collaboration, accessible environments and flexible classroom organization. These domains are most useful when they are tied to clearly defined educational goals and evaluated through observable student outcomes. Because this review is narrative and based on a non-systematically assembled source set, it should not be interpreted as evidence of the comparative effectiveness of particular interventions. More transparent evidence syntheses and context-sensitive empirical studies are needed to guide decisions about which adaptations work best, for whom and under what conditions.

**Conflict of interest**

None.

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