

HANDLING STUDENT DIFFERENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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Introduction:

Universities are moving away from a medical model paradigm, that focusses on ‘what is the matter with this student?’, towards the social model for education. Central to this model is the mission to support all students’ needs, which requires inclusive strategies, such as:

- *Differentiation with responsive teaching*; proactive planning for a varied approach in the classroom, and anticipating and responding to student needs (Tomlinson, 2014; Figure 1).

However, teachers express concern for the time investment needed for inclusive education (Round et al., 2016). Nonetheless, differentiation is different from offering extra activities or choices, and prevents education becoming individualized (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). The latter could be referred to as *tailoring*, which increases the chances of time-consuming practices and perceived increased workload (Taylor, 2017; Figure 2).

Research question:

What do higher education teachers’ experiences and beliefs in handling differences among students say about chances and barriers for inclusion?

Figure 1

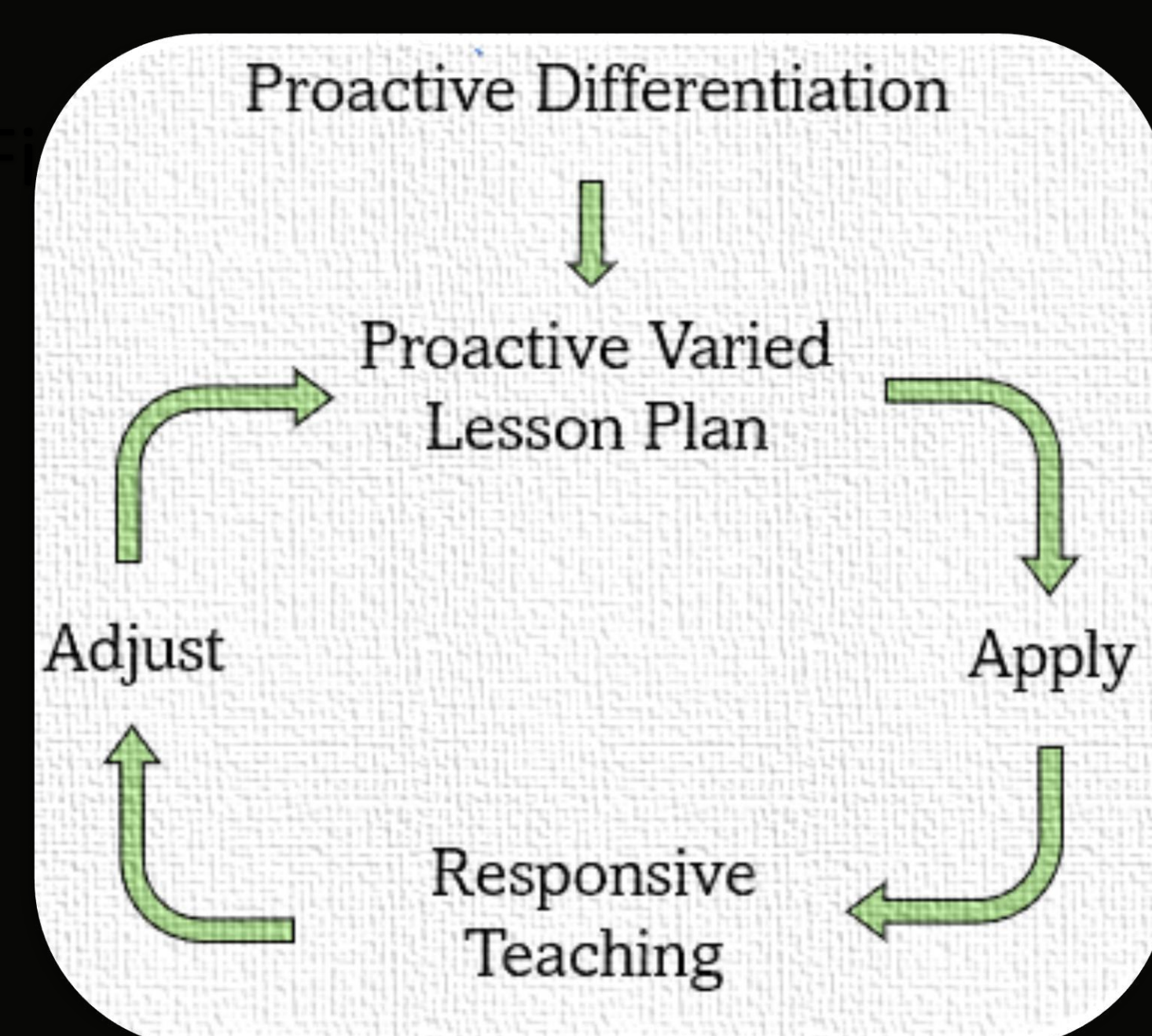
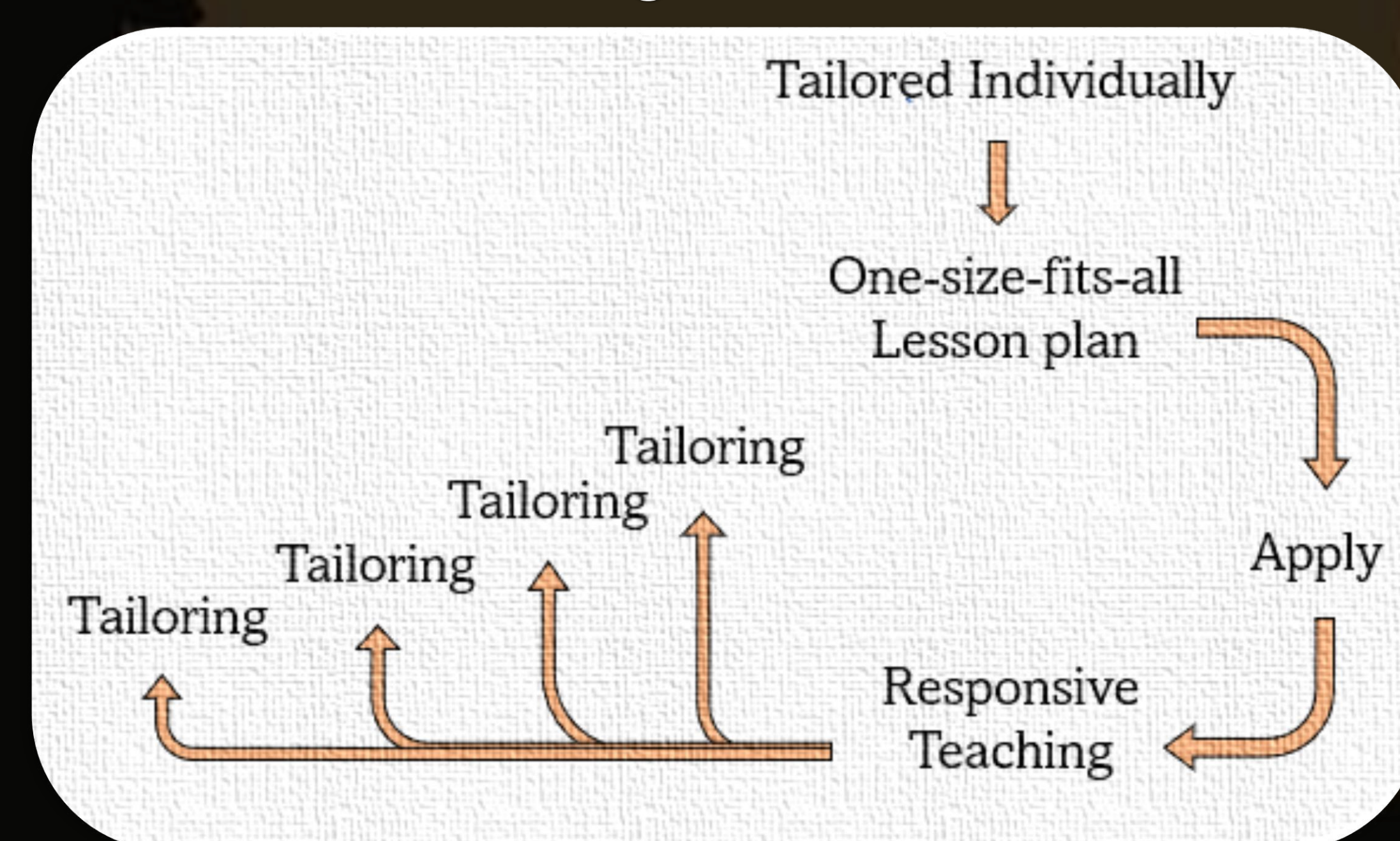


Figure 2



Method:

At a Dutch University of Applied Sciences six teachers were interviewed about how they handle differences among students in class.

Findings:

- Professional background as source for strategies in handling student differences;
- Individual tailoring in class;
- In situations where students seem to not participate in the lesson activity:
 - perceived lack of professional confidence;
 - experienced insecurity about competencies;
 - students are labelled (e.g., unmotivated, daydreamer)
- Role of student coach deployed in handling student differences.

R6: “When I notice that a student is having a hard time understanding lesson material, I will try and offer it differently. But that’s mainly in how I explain something. What I might also do, when someone is having great difficulty with something, I will offer one-on-one lessons outside of class. I will try and help them cover some lesson material in my own spare time.”

Discussion:

- Students are being labeled, but their needs are not always supported;
- Professional background does not lead to a structured didactical approach;
- Despite consciousness of lack of competencies, a sense of urgency for developing expertise in didactics is missing;
- Reactive tailoring on an individual level (Figure 2), instead of proactive differentiation planning (Figure 1);
- Dual role student coach – teacher facilitates handling student differences.

Conclusion:

The lack of professional confidence in these participants gives reasons for concerns about the extent to which teachers in higher education are being trained and prepared for their role as a teacher. The dual role of student coach - teacher momentarily facilitates responsive teaching and planned assessment of needs, while supporting good relationships. Universities might use these findings to reflect on their policies and institutional culture, in realizing an accessible and inclusive learning environment. Specifically, rethinking policies and views on professional expertise of teachers in higher education is important. Continuing the dialogue on the experienced and perceived barriers to inclusion is something that should become self-explanatory in our everyday work life.