

# How can teachers adapt to changing classrooms?



HEDCO Institute

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The COVID-19 pandemic upended public education, and the impacts have been lasting. In a national survey of K–12 educators, teachers reported their students' continued struggles with mental health, as well as changing classroom environments and instructional practices.<sup>1</sup>

Education leaders face the challenge of helping teachers recognize and respond to these ever-changing classroom conditions. Student needs, cultural contexts, and classroom dynamics constantly evolve, and strategies that once worked well may become less effective as those conditions change.

**How can early childhood leaders help educators step back from immediate problems, examine their underlying causes, and adapt their practices?**

Two related capacities - **making sense** of what's happening and **adapting** practices - are particularly important for helping teachers respond effectively to changing conditions. Together, they enable continuous improvement in response to changing classroom needs.



How teachers **make sense** of what's happening in their classrooms.

*"What's happening in my classroom and why?"*



How teachers **adapt** their practices in response to what's happening in their classrooms.

*"What should I do next?"*

## How do teachers **make sense** of their changing classrooms?

Teachers continuously observe their classrooms, and they interpret what they see through a lens of existing beliefs, experiences, and knowledge.<sup>2,3</sup>

### Notice

What is  
happening in my  
classroom?



### Interpret

Why is this  
happening &  
what does it  
mean?

When classroom conditions change, teachers notice the change, ask what it means, and answer that question using what they already believe and know. Teachers interpretations of the changing conditions shape their responses.<sup>4</sup>

**Simply naming this process for teachers may help them begin to self-reflect and re-shape internal processes.**

## How can leaders help teachers with sense-making?

Leaders can improve teachers' ability to think and reason about what they are noticing in their classrooms through supports such as collaborative interpretation,<sup>5</sup> professional communities,<sup>6,7</sup> and classroom-specific data.<sup>8</sup>

### Collaborative interpretation

Teachers make better sense of change when they interpret new information themselves rather than receiving a summary or a solution already interpreted by leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Leaders can:

- Involve teachers early in improvement efforts.
- Create opportunities for dialogue and discussion.
- Treat teachers as partners in identifying problems and solutions.

### Professional Communities

Professional communities can support teachers as they try to make sense of changing classroom conditions.<sup>6,7</sup>

Leaders can:

- Help teachers access new ideas
- Facilitate discussion
- Create conditions for learning and reflection.

### Classroom specific data

Teachers are more responsive to data they perceive as relevant to their own students and instructional challenges than to data they see as unrelated to their classrooms.<sup>8</sup>

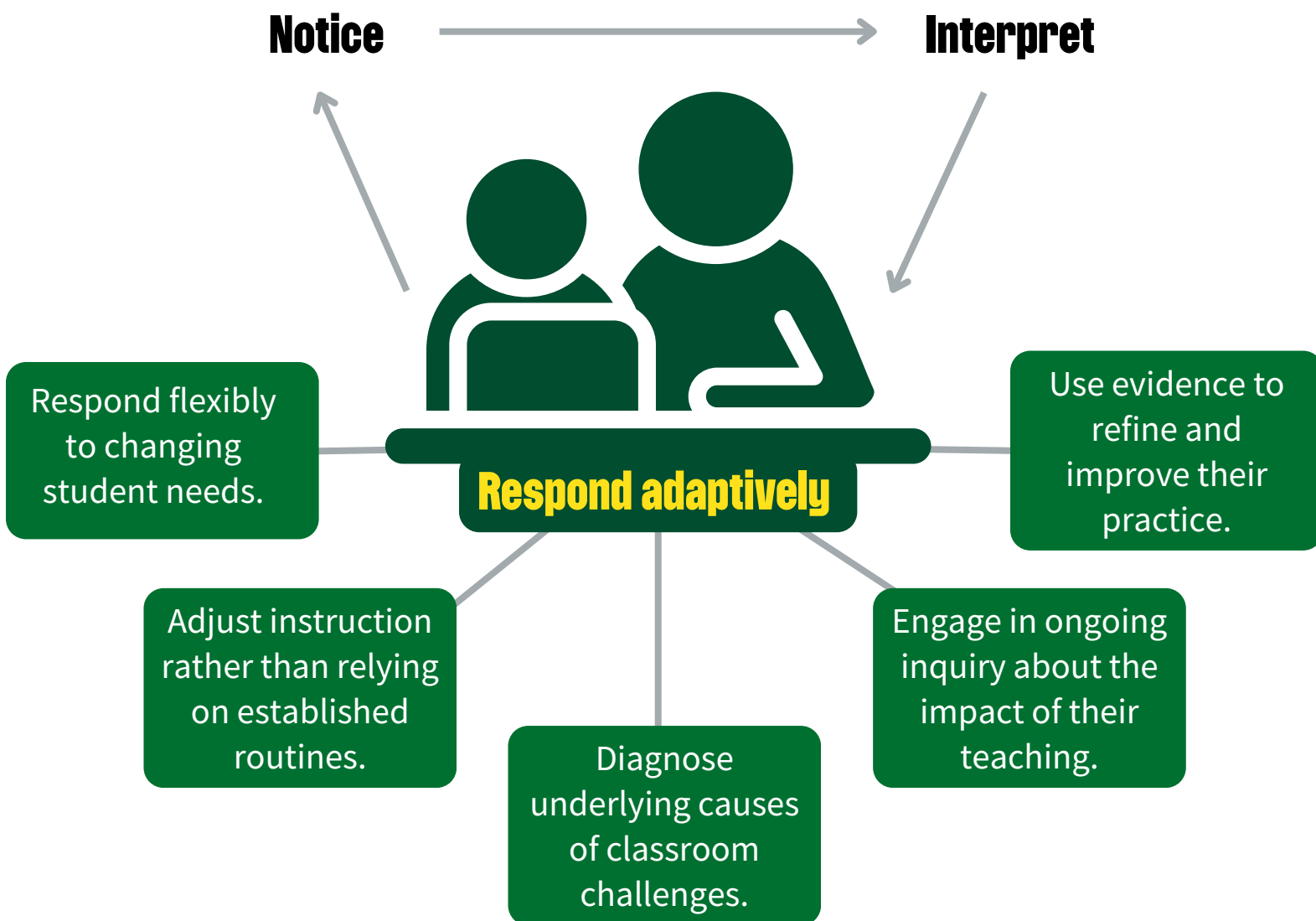
Leaders can:

- Use classroom-based evidence whenever possible.
- Ground professional learning in relevant data.
- Support teachers in analyzing their own classroom data.

## How can teachers effectively **adapt** instruction in response to change?

Teachers can draw on their ability to adjust their professional knowledge and practice when situations change<sup>9,10</sup>

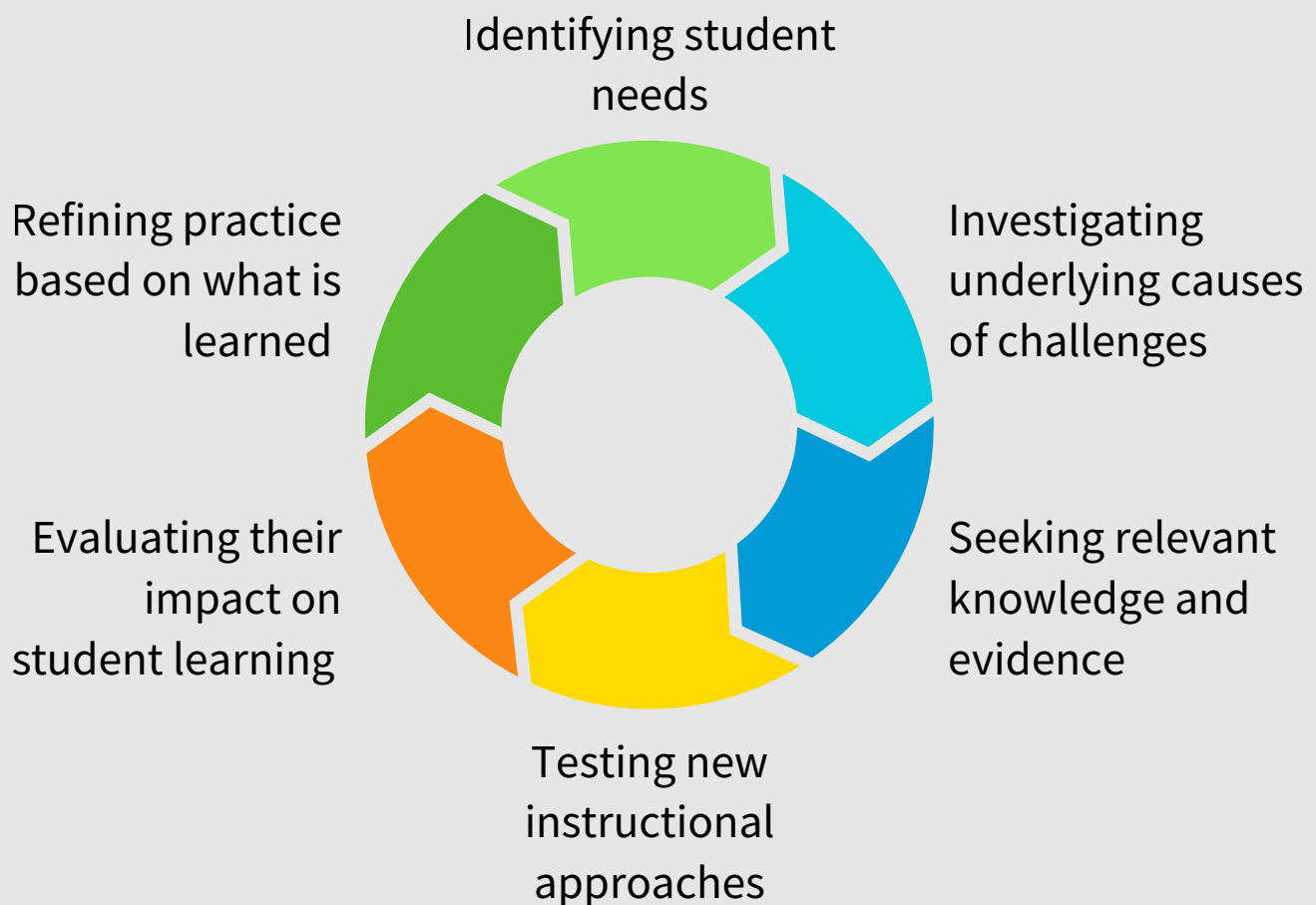
**Adaptive experts** treat teaching as continual learning rather than the repeated application of fixed techniques.<sup>11</sup>



## How can leaders help teachers be adaptive?

**1. Inquiry Cycles** support the development of adaptive expertise by helping teachers continually learn from evidence and adapt their practice based on student needs.<sup>13,15,17-21</sup>

### Inquiry Cycles Support Adaptability



**2. Practice-Based Professional Learning** supports the development of adaptive expertise more effectively than transmission-oriented professional development.<sup>12-16</sup>

Effective approaches can include:

- Teaching rehearsals
- Practice-based assignments connected to authentic instructional work
- Analysis of authentic classroom problems
- Opportunities to test and refine practice

**3. Reflection** (Structured reflection) helps teachers examine assumptions, connect theory and practice, and revise their understandings of teaching and learning. Adaptive expertise develops as teachers continuously revise their personal theories of practice.<sup>19</sup>

**4. Coaching** provides opportunities for teachers to analyze classroom evidence, challenge existing assumptions, and test new approaches which can strengthen teachers' ability to adapt instruction to learner needs.<sup>16,22</sup>

## The bottom line:

**School leaders can help teachers become more adaptive by:**

- Bringing awareness to sense-making (e.g., helping teachers explicitly reflect on the lens through which they view their classrooms)
- Facilitating collaborative interpretation of challenging classroom conditions
  - Helping teachers investigate the root causes of classroom challenges
  - Embedding inquiry cycles into professional learning
- Providing ongoing coaching and mentoring
  - Using classroom-based evidence to support professional conversations
  - Prioritizing practice-based learning opportunities
  - Encouraging experimentation, reflection, and continuous improvement

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