



2:DIFFERENTIATION

What do we mean by differentiation?

**When considering differentiation in your school,
first ensure that colleagues are agreed on a
definition.**

This launch pad includes sections on:-

- ◆ Definitions
- ◆ Why differentiation is an important focus in the context of the education of gifted and talented pupils
- ◆ The key issues to consider
- ◆ What you might do at school level
- ◆ Recommended reading.

You may wish to read the text selectively.

DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation can be defined as an attempt to recognise individual differences among pupils and to find ways of taking these into account in the process of teaching and learning. As an aim, it must always remain to some extent an unfulfilled aspiration, as all pupils are unique, and their needs change over time and in different contexts; however, most people would agree that it is an essential aim for any school.

There are opportunities to differentiate at many levels within school. Examples are structures of **pupil grouping**, such as setting or streaming, or processes of **acceleration**. There may also be chances for pupils to take additional subjects and out-of-school experiences such as extra coaching, clubs, masterclasses, and work experience. Other examples are planned schemes of work, perhaps specifying resources or textbooks and/or including tasks devised or materials specially written for different pupil 'levels'. These may have been planned not by all the teachers involved, but by individuals or small teams. However, teachers should also be aiming to increase

or improve differentiation in any class, whether mixed ability or setted. At classroom level, opportunities for differentiation can also arise without their having been anticipated or planned for, though it is wise not to rely upon such opportunities. Teachers need to learn how best to take advantage of all the opportunities outlined above, for examples in techniques of intervention and questioning.

Enrichment and **extension** are key terms when differentiation for the more able is being considered.

Enrichment, as Teare (1997) points out, has been variously described as

- 'A higher quality of work than the norm for the age group
- Work covered in more depth
- A broadening of the learning experience
- Promoting a higher level of thinking
- The inclusion of additional subject areas and/or activities
- The use of supplementary materials beyond the normal range of resources.'

Enrichment can happen outside the usual timetable, e.g. masterclasses, extra subjects or modules, and clubs. It can also occur within the normal classroom. For example, while most history pupils might study the Blitz and its effects, those who already know a good deal about the Blitz might research, and compare with it, the reasons for and the effects of the British bombing of Dresden. '**Enrichment**' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'extension', or taken to include some forms of acceleration. The terms enrichment and extension do often seem to merge. A useful working definition of enrichment might be that it offers experiences and opportunities outside the 'standard' curriculum. It should, however, be better planned, and more closely integrated with the rest of the curriculum, rather than appear in the form of a variety of one-off, bolt-on activities.

'**Extension**' is the term for a wide variety of methods of offering able pupils stimulation, more challenge, and/or more pace. As such, it can be said to include the process of acceleration. It is not the same as 'follow-up work', which is often a requirement to do 'more of the same', to continue using the same resources, e.g. the next textbook in a scheme, or to show more of the same evidence of knowledge, skills or concepts. 'More of the same' is likely to demotivate pupils, who may come to dread being given more work of the same kind as their only likely reward for working hard. Progression should be in the forefront, with the extension pitched at an appropriately 'higher' level than existing understanding, skill or knowledge. So, too, must continuity, in terms of how extension relates to provision for the general class or the cohort. Masterclasses, clubs, and other out-of-school opportunities may also become 'extensions', if they are well designed and keep these aspects in mind,

Differentiation by outcome, if inadequately planned and administered (see below), can seem to fall outside the concept of extension.

For differentiation to be effective, therefore, a school needs to decide at which level and on which aspects it should be focusing its attention, for example enrichment, extension, etc, and long-term planning, medium-term planning, classroom planning, or classroom teaching.

WHY IS DIFFERENTIATION AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- Able children need as much challenge, stimulus and 'stretching' as other pupils. Unless their needs are addressed, there can be a tendency for able pupils to be confined to the core National Curriculum and to languish in classrooms, especially in mixed ability classrooms, where teachers may assume that they will 'find their own level'. Research findings do not suggest that this will happen.
- The DfEE White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997) does not mention enrichment or extension in its suggestions for improving provision for the more able, but the Education and Employment Committee (1999) did consider differentiation. Witnesses to the committee were agreed on the value of good differentiation in class teaching.
- There is an ongoing debate about the comparative merits of the various types of differentiation. This will have an inevitable impact on schools considering their provision for the highly able. Such schools would do well to become actively involved in this debate.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

If differentiation for the more able is to work, a school needs to establish consistent, flexible and effective methods of acting on the results of assessment in all contexts, at the levels of the classroom and of the whole cohort. Eyre (1997) discusses methods of ascertaining which pupils could be challenged further:

- Pre-test or other formal assessment.
- Classroom questioning.
- Brainstorming.
- Setting an open task.
- Concept mapping.
- Using a quiz.
- Building on existing evidence.

Some of these are practicable at the 'macro' level. They can be used before a cohort or year group moves on to new units of work, as long as schemes of work are appropriately modular so that shifts between groups or sets are possible. Some methods may be more suited to use at 'micro' classroom level. For example, they can establish future groupings or 'levels' of work within individual classes when a new project, block of work, or topic is broached.

It is also important to encourage seemingly 'average' pupils to show unexpected ability. Since hidden abilities cannot always be established by assessment, teachers should offer more challenge where possible, at least in the classroom context:

- Sometimes to a whole group
- Sometimes to a targeted group

- Sometimes to those who work at speed
- Sometimes to those who want the challenge.

As long as a real mix of these methods is used, with sensitivity, it should oblige lazy and unmotivated pupils to experience challenge from time to time, while also ensuring that slow workers are not disadvantaged on every occasion. At classroom level, Eyre (1997) advises teachers to plan more challenging activities and tasks first. Only then should they decide which pupils should tackle them, selecting from the list of methods above.

- When differentiation for the highly able is practised, its value should be considered for *all* pupils. Any forms of differentiation used with the gifted and talented are likely to be beneficial – at least in some contexts or on some occasions – with other pupils. Moreover, planning for the most able as part of general planning is far more manageable than planning for the able in isolation. It is also more likely to address progression and continuity effectively. Planned outcomes for able pupils should be connected clearly to the ‘standard’ learning outcomes that have been planned for.
- Some forms of differentiation for the more able may seem to demotivate other pupils, who may perceive the work as ‘more exciting’ or ‘more interesting’ than that which they are experiencing. This may simply be because the teacher’s expectations of the other pupils’ skills, knowledge or understanding were set too low in the first place. Understandably, teachers may worry that they are not covering content specified in the National Curriculum if they do not ensure that all or most pupils cover it, whatever their existing ‘level’ of knowledge or ability. However, one solution might be that more of the pupils should, as a matter of course, do what was previously regarded as ‘challenging’. Alternatively, teachers might devote attention to designing tasks for ‘average’ students in a more stimulating way. In any event, teachers need to examine honestly and to debate openly their expectations of all students and their perceptions of pupils’ potential as individuals. They may also need to study what constitutes effective, stimulating task design.
- It should not be assumed that differentiation for the more able involves offering less structure or guidance in tasks, or less personal support. These features are often, wrongly, confused with such ideas as ‘open-endedness’. Some more able pupils have problems with organising themselves and/or their tasks. ‘Scaffolding’ their learning can help tremendously, and does not displace challenge, or a demand that they should take risks. Research shows that many pupils feel they need guidance on what should be their short-term learning targets and their longer-term goals. Explaining openly the criteria for their assessment, and even negotiating the criteria, helps provide further structure and guidance. In addition, timely interventions and challenges from an adult will reduce the tendency of some able pupils to ‘coast’ or to become overwhelmed by meticulous detail in their thinking.
- One important aspect of differentiation at the classroom level is the influence of good interaction. This includes differentiated questioning and probing questions, discussion between pupil and teacher, collaborative discussion between pupils, and the timing and quality of interventions by the teacher. Teachers should inform themselves as well as they can about these methods, how to plan for them, and how to respond to their effects.
- One controversial method is differentiation by outcome, which has been criticised by some educationalists. Certainly, where this is interpreted by teachers as setting a single task for pupils to undertake in an identical way, after little or no differentiated

teaching, it will fail to offer extension opportunities for the more able. Colleagues should be alerted to this danger. However, differentiation by outcome could be defined as setting tasks for pupils to undertake 'at their own level'. By this definition, it can be very effective with highly able pupils, as long as teachers are clear which pupils they expect to respond 'differently' or 'further' with a task, and where they make those expectations clear to the pupils. Eyre (1997) lists four generalised ways in which, for almost any task, teachers might frame their expectations of 'more able' pupils, and express these to them:

- 'take the concept further
- explore the idea more broadly
- interpret the same task differently
- learn an additional concept'.

This list of choices might prove of particular help to teachers when they are considering differentiating by outcome.

In practice, most methods of differentiation will include an element of differentiation by outcome.

- There is more information on the subjects of **enrichment** and **extension** in the launch pads with those titles. However, it should be recognised that all methods of differentiation have advantages and disadvantages. The reading listed below enumerates these in some detail.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

If you or colleagues have made progress with issues such as the identification of able pupils and the groundwork for an 'able pupil policy', the subject of differentiation makes an excellent focus to take your thinking further. With colleagues, you might very valuably consider:

- Do we understand 'differentiation', and all the options, within differentiation, which are or should be available to us? (See above.)
- As planners and/or administrators of units of work, do we tend to stick to only one or two methods of differentiation. For example, do we rarely if ever vary the groups to which we give more challenging work? Do we differentiate rather too frequently by outcome, and then without making clear enough our expectations to different groups of pupils? Do we tend to give follow-up work ('more of the same') rather than extend success with tasks that demand higher-order thinking skills, add more challenge, or encourage risk-taking? Have we never considered enrichment opportunities outside the classroom, or acceleration options, as forms of differentiation?
- In discussions of differentiation, suggest that individual teachers bring along examples of tasks they have set or lessons they have run. Consider each in turn, and all the ways in which they could have been designed to differentiate between pupils' various abilities and needs. Brainstorm the advantages and disadvantages of each 'design'.

- Discuss whether further staff training on differentiated task design, question-setting, and/or intervention by the teacher might be valuable at this stage of your development?
- You and/or your staff might benefit from using the launch pads on **acceleration, enrichment, extension** and **pupil grouping** as starting-points for further discussion and investigation. Having considered these in turn, choose one main focus or priority, e.g. grouping, and follow this through before taking up another.
- Don't consider aspects of differentiation in isolation. At whatever level the consideration is taking place, ensure that all the staff who are affected are included, e.g. SEN staff, and assistants where possible. Equally, plan out a cycle or sequence of discussions, not one-off meetings, with scope for concentration on one focus or more than one, and for the trialling of new ideas, follow-up, review and evaluation, and decision-making.

RECOMMENDED READING

Barthorpe, T., 1994. *Differentiation: eight ideas for the classroom*. Scunthorpe: Desktop Publications

Education and Employment Committee, 1999. *Third Report: Highly Able Children, Volume 1*. London: The Stationery Office.

Eyre, D., 1997. *Able Children in Ordinary Schools*. London: David Fulton.

Freeman, J., 1998. *Educating the Very Able: Current International Research*. London: OFSTED.

McNamara, S. and Moreton, G., 1997. *Understanding Differentiation: A Teachers Guide*. London: David Fulton.

O'Connell, H., 1996. *Supporting More Able Pupils*. Scunthorpe: Desktop Publications.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *Effective Provision for Able & Talented Children*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Weston, P., Taylor, M., Lewis, G. and MacDonald, A., 1998. *Learning from Differentiation: A review of practice in primary and secondary schools*. Slough: NFER.

SEE ALSO LAUNCHPADS ON

Acceleration

Enrichment

Extension

Pupil grouping