



2 : DIFFERENTIATION

What do we mean by differentiation?

When embarking on any consideration of differentiation in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on a definition.

Differentiation

Differentiation can be defined as an attempt to recognise individual differences among pupils and to find strategies within school that take these into account. 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 would agree that it is an essential aim for any school.

There are opportunities to differentiate at many levels within school. Institutional structures of **pupil grouping** such as setting or streaming, or processes of **acceleration**, are types of differentiation; so, too, are chances to take additional subjects and out-of-school experiences such as extra coaching, clubs, masterclasses, work experience etc. Planned schemes of work, perhaps specifying resources or textbooks and/or including tasks devised or materials specially written for different pupil 'levels', are other instances. These may not have been planned by all 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 it should be remembered, too, that opportunities for effective differentiation can also arise without them having been anticipated or planned for (though such opportunities alone should not be relied on). To be effective, teachers need to learn strategies for taking advantage of these opportunities, i.e. techniques of teacher intervention and questioning.

Enrichment and **extension** are key terms in any consideration of differentiation for the more able.

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.'

This can happen outside the usual timetable (e.g. masterclasses, extra subjects or modules, clubs etc.). It can also occur within the normal classroom, e.g. 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 integrated with the rest of the curriculum, than to appear a variety of one-off, bolt-on activities.

'Extension' is the term for a wide variety of methods of providing stimulation, more challenge and/or more pace for able pupils. 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', 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 homogeneous work as their only likely reward for working hard. Rather, progression must be addressed, i.e. how extension is pitched at an appropriately 'higher' level than existing understanding, skill or knowledge. So, too, must continuity, i.e. how extension relates to general class or cohort provision. If well designed bearing these aspects in mind, masterclasses, clubs and other out-of-school opportunities may also become 'extensions'.

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

In considering differentiation, therefore, it is essential to establish at which level/s (i.e. long-term planning, medium-term planning, classroom planning or classroom teaching), and on which aspect/s (e.g. enrichment, extension, etc.) you should be focusing your attention.

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

- Able children need as much challenge, stimulus and 'stretching' as other pupils. There can be a tendency, unless their needs are addressed, for able pupils to languish in the core National Curriculum and in classrooms, especially in mixed ability classrooms, where teachers may assume that they will 'find their own level'. That this will happen is not borne out by the research.

- Although the DfEE White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997) does not mention enrichment or extension in its suggestions for improving provision for the more able, 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 get actively involved in this debate.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

Consideration of many aspects of differentiation for the highly able should not be undertaken without first pondering how you decide who should do work aimed at more able pupils. This partly means establishing consistent, flexible and effective methods of using and acting on assessment in all contexts, at classroom and whole cohort level. Some methods used to ascertain who could be challenged further in future work, discussed in greater detail in Eyre (1997), are:

- 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, e.g. 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, e.g. to establish future groupings or 'levels' of work within individual classes as a new project, block of work or topic is broached.

A consideration of who should do work aimed at more able pupils should also take into account the importance of encouraging seemingly 'average' pupils to show unexpected ability. Since hidden abilities cannot always be established by assessment, where possible teachers, at least in the classroom context, should offer more challenge:

- 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, in class, 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.

- Consideration of most aspects of differentiation for the highly able should not be undertaken without a consideration of the same aspects for *all* pupils. Any forms of differentiation that are used with the gifted and talented are likely to be beneficial – at least in some contexts or on occasion – with other students. Moreover, planning for the most able as part of general planning is far more manageable than planning for the able in isolation. In addition, it is more likely to lead to planning that addresses 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 others, with their work being perceived as ‘more exciting’ or ‘more interesting’. This may simply be because teacher expectations of others’ skills, knowledge or understanding were set too low in the first place. Understandably, teachers can 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, perhaps one solution is that more pupils should do what was previously regarded as ‘challenging’ work as a matter of course. Alternatively, perhaps attention should be devoted 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, and demands that they should take risks. Research shows that many feel they need guidance on what their short-term learning targets and their longer-term goals should be. Explaining the criteria for their assessment openly, and even negotiating the criteria, helps provide further structure and guidance. In addition, timely interventions and challenges from an adult will prevent some able pupils’ tendency to ‘coast’ or to get overwhelmed by meticulous detail in their thinking.
- One important aspect of differentiation at the classroom level is the influence on pupil achievement of effective verbal interaction: of differentiated questioning and probing questions, of effective teacher-pupil discussion and collaborative discussion between pupils, and of the timing and quality of teacher interventions. 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 of differentiation is differentiation by outcome. Historically it 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, and with little or no differentiated teaching input, it will fail to offer extension opportunities for the more able. Colleagues should be alerted to this danger. However, it could be defined as setting tasks for pupils to undertake ‘at their own level’. By this definition, 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 pupils, differentiation by outcome can be very effective with highly able pupils. Eyre (1997) lists four generalised ways in which, for almost any task, teachers might express their expectations of and to ‘more able’ students:
 - ‘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 considering differentiating by outcome.

In practice, using the second definition above, most methods of differentiation will include an element of differentiation by outcome.

- There is more information on the subjects of **enrichment** and **extension** under the launch pads with those titles. However, it should be stated here 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 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, that 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, e.g. 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 extending success with tasks that demand higher-order thinking skills, add more challenge or encourage risk-taking? Have we never considered e.g. enrichment opportunities outside the classroom, or acceleration options, as forms of differentiation?

- In department meetings, suggest that individual teachers bring along individual 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'.
- Might further staff training on differentiated task design, question-setting and/or teacher intervention be valuable at this stage of our development? Discuss this.
- 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. However, having considered these in turn, choose one main focus or priority, e.g. grouping, and follow this through before considering another.
- Don't consider aspects of differentiation in isolation. Even if consideration is at team or departmental level, ensure that all affected staff are included, e.g. SEN staff, assistants where possible. Equally, plan out a cycle or sequence of discussions, not one-off meetings, with scope for concentration on one or more foci, trialling of new ideas, follow-up, review and evaluation, decision-making etc.

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