



## **2. Education**

### **2.6 DIFFERENTIATION IN THE CURRICULUM**

Our children have a wide ability and age range and occasionally English is their second language.

Differentiation is the process at Rose Hill Westonbirt School whereby teachers attempt to help children of different ability to fulfil their potential. Although teachers have always been concerned with differentiation, it has been given increased importance through the National Curriculum requirements for assessment and testing.

A curriculum that is differentiated for every child will:

- build on past achievements;
- present challenges to allow for more achievements;
- provide opportunities for success; and
- remove barriers to participation.

In general there are two forms of differentiation - that within the work of a single child and that between children as they progress through the school. Children learn at different rates, have different areas of interest and different levels of motivation. It is unlikely that all children in the same class will be at the same level in particular attainment targets. Similarly, it is unlikely that any one child will be at the same level in all parts of a programme of study.

All classes will require an element of differentiation if the children are to meet all the learning outcomes. Please treat the following as a guide to best practices in the classroom, and do not hesitate to ask for advice from other teachers or share ideas and strategies that have produced results.

#### **Differentiating the Curriculum**

Over the last decade, the term 'differentiating the curriculum' has become commonplace in schools. With the Code of Practice, all teachers should show evidence of differentiation. How often is differentiation merely a nebulous terminology and not a reality? All too often children are expected to 'fit in' with a curriculum developed and presented by individual teachers with inflexible ideas.

In a world populated by individuals, with differences in looks, characteristics, preferences and so on, it is hardly surprising to discover that there are differences in the ways in which individuals actually learn. Recognising these differences makes it possible to devise differentiated activities to enable children to learn at different speeds and to different levels. To achieve this, it is necessary to employ a range of strategies, methods and resources providing various learning opportunities to meet the many individual learning styles.

Perhaps confusion exists with the terms differentiation and individualised programmes of work. Differentiating work is about making the tasks accessible to the whole range of children within a class.

### **Differences in learning styles**

The differences in learning styles are often linked with personality and emotional factors. A child who shows a particular style of learning in one situation may well adopt another style in another situation. Indeed, most people combine several learning styles. As a rule though, we are able to categorise children according to certain patterns of learning. There are generally two broad categories:

- 1) The convergent or focused learner who will achieve well within the school system. They tend to be analytical, reasonably content to use constrained forms of thinking and will accept one solution to a problem.
- 2) Those who show much more divergent learning strategies, going off along different directions to find solutions and reach conclusions. Children within this category are less likely to be so highly valued within the school system. They tend to be lateral and creative thinkers, not willing to take explanations at face value.

Teachers should be aware of this wealth of individual differences within their teaching groups. Cognitive styles are quite varied, although many children will use several styles in combination:

- some children scan information to formulate a hypothesis quickly, whilst others take time to focus on information before making decisions;
- some children analyse and recall details, others prefer to read the whole situation and often will be influenced by others;
- children may be reflective or impulsive, abstract or concrete; and
- some children work most productively on their own, whilst others gain more from working in a group.

In addition to such a range of learning styles, are the children with quite specific needs, i.e. specific learning difficulties, dyslexia, speech and language disorders, such as aphasia and dyspraxia, dyscalculia sensory impairments, very weak literacy or/and numeracy. Many of these children are now catered for within mainstream schools. Indeed, very able children, who so often do not receive differentiated tasks, should also be considered as having 'special needs'.

To differentiate effectively, teachers must recognise the differences in learners and create learning opportunities for all these children. This requires activities in which children can learn at different rates, to different levels and employ a range of strategies.

There are obvious ways in which the curriculum does need differentiation for some individuals. Children with visual impairment will require enlarged texts in addition to the presentation of the lesson through a variety of media. Hearing impaired children will need to sit in the best possible position to make use of residual hearing and see the teacher in order to lip-read.

Differentiation can be tackled from several standpoints, for example by presenting and setting tasks at various levels of complexity. It can also be addressed by the way in which the children are expected to carry out tasks, the groupings, resources, and mechanisms for feedback by teachers and children. The outcome and results of the learning should be considered, along with the assessment, recording and presentation of any given task.

### **Whole school policy**

In order to achieve effective differentiation, planning needs to be at a whole school level as well as at a classroom level. There are plenty of reasons why differentiation can be difficult, including:

- constantly changing curricula reduce time for planning and preparing resources; and
- limited funding can restrict the numbers of computers and audio-visual equipment.

**Among the ways to differentiate for learning activities are differentiation by task and differentiation by outcome.**

**Differentiation by task**

This method allows different children or homogenous groups to be involved in different and suitably challenging tasks. This requires the teacher to plan specific objectives for the class activity and then specify which tasks will help individual children achieve these.

Examples of the factors that determine the difficulty of the task include:

- the familiarity of the task, apparatus and materials,
- the degree of familiarity with the concepts and the language involved,
- the extent to which children are required to take initiative for the activity.

**Differentiation by outcome**

Often differentiation is practised through outcome, which is shown in the way in which different children with different abilities and learning styles interpret the same assignment. At a whole school level, effective differentiation can occur if groups have been thoughtfully planned. This involves setting a common task for the whole class that is designed so that each child uses their individual knowledge and understanding to achieve different levels of success.

The task is graduated so that each child is challenged at some point, with different children achieving different parts of the task and some reaching further through the task requirements than the others. Some children will be expected to:

- plan and conduct more complex investigations,
- be comfortable with more difficult concepts,
- complete more stages in the task/investigation,
- record results more precisely, expressing their findings in more sophisticated language.

Mixed ability grouping is sometimes an ideological mistake. As a general rule, if everyone benefits by the grouping, then it is for the good. However, if only a few benefit and for many it is detrimental, the grouping needs changing. This is especially true where grouping is crucial for selection of relevant curricular, examinations and course work. The class size and admission policy at RHW, for the most part, leads to mixed ability grouping. The need for effective differentiation is essential.

Expecting individual teachers to differentiate can only become achievable if their task of differentiation is realistic. A child with a reading age of seven (or below) in a mixed ability group of thirteen year olds, will pose enormous problems for the subject teacher who has to teach a play by Shakespeare. This is not to say that such a child cannot be catered for within the mainstream system, but he or she will need a highly differentiated curriculum for predominantly literacy dependent subjects. Such children are not alone within the system. Thus, for certain subjects, grouping together of children with similar literacy difficulties should not be seen as inexpedient. The work for such a group of children will still need differentiation with short varied tasks and presentation by the teacher and children via multi-media. The texts can be suitably differentiated with key words highlighted, not too much text on a page and with the addition of helpful illustrations.

### **Flexibility and planning**

A key term for effective differentiation is flexibility. Teachers need to be flexible in order to engage all the children in the lesson, thus providing a range of resources and activities which will enable children of varying abilities to work at different speeds and to different levels.

Lessons should be sufficiently differentiated to extend the most able children and be within the capacity of the least able children. A range of resources should be employed, especially multi-media. Presentation of the lesson should be varied, giving ample opportunity for children to learn through discourse, asking questions of the teacher, as well as *vice versa*. Research by, amongst others, Vygotsky and Bruner highlighted the importance of children learning through talking.

Tasks should be broken down into sub-tasks, preferably to be worked on in different ways. Such lessons require a high degree of planning, but keeping in sight the need for flexibility according to the responses and reactions of the children. If the lesson has been well planned with clear aims, the outcomes to be achieved should become apparent. Planning and evaluation are crucial factors in developing worthwhile and meaningful lessons.

Highlighting key words and terms is not only essential for poor readers, it can act as a focus for all children.

Historically, teaching may have been based on 'chalk and talk'. Research has shown that we remember much more when all our senses are involved in the learning process. As a general rule, we remember about 20% of what we read and 30% of what we hear, more of what we see displayed, and even more of what we say or explain to other people. With the combination of reading, hearing, seeing, saying and doing, we remember 90%. Based on this, it seems imperative that children have opportunities to read, listen and discuss their work. A way forward may be with the structure of the lessons. Listening times can be minimised, children can be shown the sequence of the lesson so they know from the onset that there will be a variety of short tasks interspersed with times for discussing and reflecting on work covered. Each sub-task can be reasonably open-ended to allow the less able to complete it, whilst the more able children can further amplify it.

### **Multi-sensory experiences**

Multi-sensory experiences are important and should be included to create a learning environment where all children are likely to achieve. Children will learn and remember more from practical, hands on tasks. Certain subjects are practical by nature, whilst others require some adaptation. In primary schools, a cookery lesson can offer learning opportunities in English, maths, design, as well as food technology. This is also true in senior schools, but the overlapping of subject areas is not always recognised.

English and history lessons can be brought to life by displaying artefacts and showing videos. Videos have an important role in differentiation, provided they are used in a highly planned way. Computers also have a significant role to offer in differentiation. Disaffected children will become motivated if part of the lesson involves the use of computers. But, as with videos, the use and purpose must be clearly planned with specific aims.

### **Language considerations**

It can be misleading to assume that the language used by a teacher will be understood by all the children. Some children have very weak linguistic abilities with both receptive and expressive language problems. They may miscomprehend simple commands and appear to be lazy or stubborn, when in reality they just don't understand the instructions. Bearing this in mind, the teacher needs to differentiate the language used, keeping it simple, again highlighting key words, and ask the children to repeat the instructions of a given task in their own words. In secondary schools, children are exposed to new and often difficult vocabulary.

### **Good teaching practices**

Good teaching practice involves use of a range of teaching styles and strategies to encourage children to support each other in their learning. It also involves listening to the ideas and explanations of children to assess their level of understanding and any misconceptions which they may have.

Adjusting the level of language when talking to individuals or groups can be very effective. Teachers should ask open questions and ask more able children for further oral contributions e.g. 'Why do you think this is so?'. Teachers should also know when to provide an appropriate prompt to an individual or small group, and when to ask a more challenging question or to set an additional task.

Teachers should get to know the children well, becoming aware of any factors which may affect their learning, e.g. minor hearing problems. Moving around the class will let children feel they have had the teacher's individual attention. An ethos should be established whereby a contribution from the children is valued, with all achievements being celebrated and children being encouraged to become involved and to take risks with the articulation of ideas and suggestions.

The work should be planned thoroughly, carefully selecting from resources and materials. The time allowed for the completion of tasks should be varied to maintain an appropriate challenge, knowing how much autonomy and choice to allow children and when more direction is necessary.

Constructive feedback should be given to children orally and in the marking of their work. Records of assessment, which indicate what each child has already achieved and their individual levels of understanding, are useful tools.

### **Useful strategies**

1. Place children into different working groups within the class depending on the task to be undertaken, e.g. group on basis of ability and mixed ability, gender, friendship etc. For investigations it will sometimes be appropriate to group children into teams which include children with different personal attributes grouped together to make the overall team more effective.
2. Produce a list of teaching styles and use this as a checklist for existing practice.
3. Plan different types of homework tasks with different levels of challenge.
4. Consider the use of language:
  - a) to simplify and make the subject more accessible for less able children,
  - b) to extend and challenge more able children.
5. Include some units of work which require self study. This involves:
  - a) providing children with guidance notes and targets for undertaking individual work,
  - b) supporting children with tutorial sessions.
6. Ensure that you have a detailed scheme of work which is reviewed regularly for appropriate pace and sequence.

7. Include support and reinforcement strategies and extension work when schemes of work are written and reviewed.
8. Change rooms or move furniture around to match the learning which is planned, e.g. positioning a class in a circle for a discussion.
9. Plan lessons in three parts:
  - a) the minimum that every child must learn,
  - b) that which an average child in the group should attain,
  - c) material that could be included to challenge more able children.
10. Plan units of work that have different routes to completion for children with different interests and abilities. Allow flexible deadlines for the completion of some tasks.
11. Develop processes and records to enable the monitoring of each child's progress and the success of the lesson

**Summary**

Differentiation is not designing individualised teaching plans. Many children can be grouped together and gain from a differentiated curriculum, provided it allows for the less able as well as the most able to achieve their potential.

At times setting or streaming is beneficial, not least to the teacher who is able to provide a highly differentiated curriculum to meet the needs of a large number of children with similar learning abilities. Even within 'similar' groupings there will be a wide range of learning styles, and the lesson structures require breaking down into various sub-tasks which are multi-sensory and clearly defined. Teachers need to know what their aims are, and assess whether these have been reached.

Signed.....

Date.....

To be reviewed by .....