

# The new teaching standards education essay



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Weston, defines differentiation as a means to identify and meet every learners needs, including those of the most and least able. According to Ainscow and Mauncey (1989) this is one of the most difficult tasks for a teacher to accomplish.

There are a number of different types of differentiation. Stradling and Saunders (1993) and Kerry and Kerry (1997) identified the following types of differentiation:

Differentiation by task: Children work on the same content, but to different levels (i. e.: different worksheets for different ability groups).

Differentiation by outcome: Children work on the same tasks, but the teacher expects a different level of completion for different ability pupils (i. e.: children work on the same worksheet which has a series of progressively more challenging questions. The lower ability groups are therefore not expected to complete as many as the higher ability groups).

Differentiation through varying the rate at which children cover the same content.

The National Curriculum Council (NCC) (1993) and Arthur et al (2010) suggest that differentiation involves the following:

Using a range of teaching and learning styles (e. g. using a variety of media types such as paper, audio, Interactive White Boards) to present information;

Matching tasks to children's learning needs including selecting appropriate content to match most children's needs and giving more or less time to complete a task;

Using a range of resources to help all levels of learner;

Linking planning, learning, teaching and assessment cyclically to identify and match tasks to needs;

Recognising individual entitlement and access to the National Curriculum

The new teaching standards, specifically Teaching Standard 1 (Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils) and Teaching Standard 2 (promote good progress and outcomes by pupils), identify pupil attainment, pupil ability and challenging all pupils as key requirements for all teachers. This highlights the Government's view on the importance of meeting the needs and maximising the learning outcomes, of all pupils through differentiation.

The current Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) Framework (OFSTED, 2012) refers to differentiation more than once in its Focus of School Inspections. When inspectors are judging quality of teaching in a school they will consider: The degree to which teaching strategies are matched to pupils' learning needs and engage all pupils to learn; and the level to which teachers achieve positive learning by setting demanding tasks that are matched to pupils' needs. From this it can clearly be seen that OFSTED and the current government place great importance on differentiation as a

means of meeting the needs of all pupils and maximising the learning of all pupils.

The purpose of this report is to review and analyse available research about differentiation and its effects on learning outcomes for all pupils. I have chosen to focus on differentiation for all children, rather than focusing on a particular group of children (Special Educational Needs; Gifted and Talented) since I believe that differentiation for all children, regardless of ability, needs to be considered when planning for teaching. Differentiation is not tied to any one particular teaching theory; behaviourism, constructivism, or social constructivism. Rather, all these teaching theories should be put in to practice to support high quality, successful classroom teaching.

The topic of differentiation appears to be an emotive one, with researchers arguing both for (Weston 1992) and against (Hart et al, 2004) differentiation in primary education. My review of the research will also be compared to my own experiences within three schools – School X (an OFSTED outstanding, small, rural primary school), Y (a large, 3-form entry urban primary school) and Z (a medium sized urban primary school).

OFSTED (1994a) identified five key factors associated with high standards of achievement in pupils including: adequacy of a teacher's subject knowledge; good questioning skills; effective use of instruction and direct teaching; a good balance of grouping strategies; and effective use of ability grouping. Although differentiation is not mentioned directly in this list, the elements identified are all aspects of differentiation and clearly highlights the level of

importance OFSTED places of grouping and grouping strategies for effective teaching.

Dewhurst (1996) and O'Brien et al (2006) identify differentiation as a 'whole school' issue, applying to everyone, not simply something teachers do to accommodate a part of the class with particular learning difficulties.

Dewhurst argues that differentiation should be considered as essential to every teacher's pedagogic repertoire and part of everyday classroom life.

This opinion would seem to be in agreement with OFSTED's view of teaching highlighted above (OFSTED, 1994a). O'Brien et al (2006) argues that successful, high quality teaching and learning is fundamental to applying the principles and practices of differentiation.

As identified above, differentiation can take many forms. However, the most common form differentiation seems to take, in my experience, is differentiation by task (or ability grouping). It appears that ability grouping is seen by schools, as the best, most practical method of targeting the most appropriate level of learning at all pupils whilst challenging and meeting their needs. Weston (1992) and McGarvey (1998), both acknowledge that forming groups may be the most sensible way of meeting the varied needs of all pupils since there will always be inherent differences in pupil's experiences and needs. However, Weston also acknowledges that although learners may vary (in intellect, motivation, from each other, from year to year) the individual needs of the pupil cannot be completely ignored. This would suggest that ability grouping should not be used as the only method of differentiation within the classroom environment.

Corbett (2001) and Alexander et al (1992) highlight that differentiation should not be seen as distinct from education. It is about a child's engagement in the learning process and about them being given the tools and appropriate tasks to become independent learners throughout their life and give the greatest chance of success for all. Corbett (ibid) also highlights that an open approach to learning from others is essential to effective differentiation. It is therefore clear that Corbett believes support from school management and valuable training, are key to ensuring teachers have the basic tools necessary in order to differentiate successfully within their classrooms.

However, it should be noted that King (1990) and McGarvey (1996) highlight the risk of being too narrow with the definition of differentiation and focusing too closely on making provision for only the lower attaining pupils in a class. Differentiation in any form, but especially through grouping, therefore needs to focus an equal amount of attention on the higher, middle and lower attainers if it is to truly meet the needs of all pupils. Corbett (2001) acknowledges that differentiation can be so individualised that creativity and group work is excluded. He identifies that there is a fine balance between ensuring tasks are enjoyable and engaging and making sure they are manageable for all. This is a difficult task for teachers, but one that should be manageable with careful planning.

Through his research, Corbett (ibid) also concluded that traditional forms of differentiation such as setting for maths can be used successfully in schools as one of a repertoire of methods. However, if schools are to cater for a wide range of learning styles in their pupils, and offer any meaningful

opportunities for pupils of differing abilities, a wide range of strategies are needed (Corbett, 2001 and Weston 1992). Corbett and Weston also highlight that the teacher's attitude is key to successful differentiation. Teachers need to adopt a wide range of strategies and be flexible with their approach.

Dewhurst (1996) and Stradling and Saunders (1993) would agree with this approach. Differentiation should not be a 'bolt-on' extra (Dewhurst, 2001). Instead it should be adopted as a whole school approach rather than a single teaching strategy and should take a much broader view than simply streaming, setting or banding (Stradling and Saunders, 1993).

Whichever method of differentiation is adopted, it would appear that many researchers believe that differentiation, when used with a range of other strategies, carefully planned and undertaken enthusiastically, has the ability to improve the learning of every child in the class and increase their educational attainment.

Despite all this, there are a number of researchers who have identified significant issues with the whole concept of differentiation, mainly with the seemingly most common form of differentiation; grouping or setting. Gross (1993), in his survey of school teachers, found that primary teachers have, on the whole, found the process of differentiation very difficult. Even McGarvey et al (1998) acknowledge that differentiation often results in teachers spending more time with lower ability pupils than they do with higher attainers thereby not challenging or extending higher attainer's learning and as a result, not acting to maximise the learning of those individuals.

Quicke (1995) argues that the definition of differentiation leads to the neglect of important educational processes and undermines attempts to relate the curriculum to the individual. As such he argues that the individual needs, so important to the Government and OFSTED, are not actually being met through differentiation. He argues that a pedagogical approach needs to be taken rather than an organisational approach (ability groups). Therefore, a range of strategies for teaching all children need to be adopted by the classroom teacher if children are to benefit from the teaching and maximise their learning.

Research by Hart et al (2004) found that ability labelling actually damaged young people's learning and prevented teachers from fulfilling their professional commitment to making a positive difference to young children's lives. They also state that the view of 'fixed ability' (a young person is born with a given amount of intellectual power which will never change), is a flawed and unjust way of explaining differences in learning and achievement. Children should not be labelled 'higher' or 'lower' ability based on a judgement of their current knowledge by teacher. With the right guidance or assistance all children have the capacity to learn and extend their knowledge beyond that which is deemed within their 'ability' by a teacher or more knowledgeable other.

Many of the researchers who take issue with the more traditional forms of differentiation (ability groups) have these issues because they believe that most schools see these ability groups or streams as fixed, with children being unable to move between the groups as they develop (Hart 2004). This



therefore has the potential to impact negatively on children's learning within school, and limit their educational development.

To support this, research by Terwell (2005) and Hallam (2004) identifies that differentiation by ability grouping has a positive effect on higher ability pupils since they are surrounded by other high ability learners and can therefore benefit from each other's more developed, mature ways of thinking about or considering a particular problem. However they found that ability groups have a detrimental impact upon the learning of middle and lower ability groups since they have no More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) to learn from or a chance to develop their own ideas as a result of listening to the MKO's opinions or ideas. As such, they enter into a continuing cycle where these children do not learn to broaden their mind or method of thinking and thereby do not improve their ability or attainment significantly. Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al, 1956), suggests that all people, at whatever age or level, have the capacity to learn. His first domain, the Cognitive Domain, suggests that people first of all learn knowledge (recall or recognise information). From this, eventually comes comprehension (understanding), application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of that information. People move up and down this hierarchy of learning as they are given and assimilate new information. As such, the learning process is ongoing and ever-changing and therefore, assuming a person's 'ability' is fixed, goes against Bloom's idea of information assimilation. Further, if children are unengaged with a subject or topic, they will be unable to build upon Bloom's second domain – the Affective Domain. This domain details the development of people's attitude to information through receiving, responding, valuing,

organising and internalising attitudes or beliefs. If children become unengaged with learning, they will be unwilling to listen to the teacher or actively engage with a session (receiving). As a result, children will be unwilling to actively engage with discussion (responding), which will therefore limit their ability to process (valuing) and assimilate (organising and internalising) information.

Bearne (2010) also states that differentiation is not as straightforward as simply grouping according to ability, as it raises the question 'ability in what?' She warns against assuming a child is 'less able' simply because they have difficulty with spelling, reading, writing or numeracy. Instead, Bearne (ibid) suggests that a child should be described by their skills, for example, less fluent in reading but accurate in mental mathematics. In doing so, a child is no longer being labelled as a certain 'ability' and this allows for flexibility in grouping of children should the teacher decide to do so for certain activities.

This is supported by Hallam (2004), who argues that structured ability grouping does not necessarily offer a "panacea" for increasing standards of achievement. She states that teachers often use ability grouping to facilitate behaviour management and promote concentration. Hallam argues that a more effective strategy would be to consider forming groups in relation to specific tasks – some which may benefit from a mix of ability and / or skills; and others where ability groups would be more beneficial. As a result, children learn to work with a variety of other individuals and can benefit from listening to a variety of other opinions. This will ultimately result in all children learning more and achieving greater educational attainment.

Research has also found that the highest ability learners within a school are more likely to be taught by the more experienced and better qualified teachers, (Hallam, 2004), which only acts to exacerbate the divide between the highest and lowest ability children in a school. Research by Hallam (ibid) has also identified that teachers who consistently teach lower ability groups often become demoralised over time, this will ultimately have a negative impact upon the children trying to learn since a teacher who is not enthusiastic about what they are teaching, will be unable to garner the children's interest in that subject.

Teaching in a mixed ability class, although less straightforward since a range of needs need to be considered, therefore ensures that all children, regardless of their ability, have the chance to benefit from being taught by more experienced, enthusiastic teachers. Mixed ability teaching has been shown to increase the attainment of all learners, since less able pupils are supported by and can be included in the opinions of higher ability learners, whilst higher ability learners are able to reinforce their existing knowledge through offering peer assistance and explaining their ideas to lower ability learners (Hallam, 2002).

Hart (1992) argues that a shift in pedagogy towards more opportunities for learning through talk and practical experiences and greater emphasis on cooperative work (social constructivist learning theory) would be more beneficial to children than traditional differentiation. This would suggest that use of 'paired talk' or group talk, for example or providing a range of opportunities for different learning styles (visual, kinaesthetic) could do more

to increase an individuals' learning, than simply dividing children into ability groups.

Hart (ibid) also argues that the kind of questions that need to be raised to provide more appropriate teaching for children experiencing difficulties are not, in many cases, specific to the needs of those children in difficulty.

Therefore a shift in pedagogy towards more inclusive methods of teaching which may benefit those children experiencing difficulties would, arguably, benefit all children within that teaching environment. Hence a mixed ability approach to teaching would allow all children to benefit from a range of teaching styles. Hart et al (2004) states that,

“ It is important, in the interests of justice and entitlement, to develop approaches to teaching free from the limits imposed by ability labelling”.

As such she argues for greater use of mixed ability teaching or other teaching techniques.

A range of social as well as educational issue have been found to arise as a result of traditional differentiation through ability grouping. For example, Hallam (2002) identifies issues of alienation as a result of ability grouping. She highlights that children in the highest or lowest ability sets can become the targets of teasing or bullying. In schools where differences between pupil's abilities are highlighted publically through for example, ability groups, whole peer groups can feel alienated, resulting in an anti-school culture developing. Hallam also argues that mixed ability teaching can promote social mixing and enhance social cohesion because pupils help each other out and the more able children can provide encouragement and support to

their less able class mates. In support of this, Devine (1993), found that most primary pupils preferred whole class or individual work because of greater inclusion and reduced feelings of being left out. It would therefore appear that mixed ability teaching offers equality to all students, thereby resulting in less teasing or bullying for being a ' boffin' or ' dumb'. As a result, all children will feel equally valued in the mixed ability classroom, which will encourage enthusiasm for and ultimately maximise learning. This supports Blooms Taxonomy (Bloom et al, 1956), which suggests that people need to be engaged with the session in order to value and assimilate new information.

Expanding on this, Bearne (2010) warns against a manifestation of differentiation in its worst case – represented by three different worksheets. She states that, if those worksheets are created in a way which assumes that certain groups or individuals are only able to process a limited amount of new information at any one time, you run the risk of excluding pupils who might have been able to cope with more ambitious learning objectives. In this instance, differentiating by outcome, as opposed to task, for example, through the use of one worksheet in maths, which gets progressively more difficult, would not act to limit a pupil from achieving more than expected should they be able.

It should be noted here that, although the above researchers argue against differentiation (in its traditional form), teaching in a mixed ability group will not simply negate the need for differentiation. In mixed ability teaching, other methods of differentiation will be needed, such as differentiation by outcome, or differentiation by support. As such, they are not negating the

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need for differentiation per se, they are simply suggesting that other forms of differentiation, over and above the idea of setting or streaming by ability, could be better used to maximise the learning of all pupils, whatever their perceived level of ability.

Having witnessed a variety of methods of differentiation in the schools I have visited I have noticed that all have their pros and cons. At school X (an OFSTED Outstanding school) for example, the Head Teacher was strongly opposed to differentiation through ability grouping. As a result, all classes were taught as a whole, mixed ability group rather than being separated out by ability in a particular subject. This did not mean that, should the need arise, children would not work in smaller ability groups for a particular task (for example, if a handful of children were struggling with a particular mathematical area, whilst the rest of the class were ready to move on). However, these groups were not fixed, rather, they changed and arose as required and did not always contain the same children. Having witnessed the teaching at this school, I would tend to agree that mixed ability teaching successfully allowed all pupils to benefit from the assistance and knowledge of More Knowledgeable Others, whether the teacher or higher ability pupils, whilst those of higher ability are challenged through extension work or reinforcement of their knowledge by acting as 'teacher' to lower ability pupils on occasion. At this school, class teachers 'teach to the top' and scaffold those of lower ability where they need it (differentiation through support). This method means that all children are being challenged and those that need more support can achieve more with that support than they may have achieved if they were working on a 'differentiated by task'

activity. Work is generally differentiated by outcome, therefore children work on the same activity but those of lower ability are expected to complete less, or go into less detail, than those of higher ability. Where some children are struggling with a particular topic, the teacher will plan a small group teaching exercise with them, whilst the rest of the class continue with another activity. This method of mixed ability teaching (teaching to the top and scaffolding those who need it) with some ability group teaching if absolutely necessary appears to work well for this school and all children were actively engaged and enthusiastic about learning. Paired talk was encouraged throughout the school day within all subjects at School X. Since children sit in mixed ability pairs around grouped tables, this paired talk time allows lower ability pupils to benefit from sharing ideas with a higher ability pupil as identified by Terwell (2005) and Hallam (2004). It also acts to encourage all children to think about and share their ideas in a situation where they feel safe (a small group), which thus results in them being much more confident to share those thoughts with the rest of the class during whole class discussion. This can be linked to Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Maslow, 1956), which states that individuals need to feel safe and feel they belong before they can achieve mastery and independence. At School X, all children are encouraged to value their own and other's opinions and work together. This results in children feeling secure in their environment and therefore willing and able to focus on achievement and independence.

I have however also seen children split into ability groups within class at School Y (a large, 3-form entry, urban primary school with high EAL) for numeracy and literacy. Each table within a class had a different ability group

and was given differing tasks around the same subject topic. This allowed all children to work at their own pace and ability. However, it did not allow for any discussion of ideas between ability groups, which meant that whilst higher ability groups came up with a wider range of ideas and opinions, lower ability groups were unable to make use of or share in any of those opinions, which limited their work. In this instance, class discussion of ideas, or mixed ability whole class or pair work, would be of benefit to those middle and lower ability children (as identified by Hallam, 2002), because the lower or middle ability learners would be able to develop their ideas further through interaction with those higher ability learners. It is therefore clear why Stradling and Saunders (1993) and Dewhurst (1996) suggested teachers needed to be able to utilise a range of teaching strategies, above and beyond simply setting or streaming. I also noted whilst observing at School Y that children were very aware of the differences between the groups. On occasion children specifically complained about the fact that they were unable to undertake the task another group was completing. This had a negative impact upon the attitudes of those children to learning (Bloom's Taxonomy, 1956) and their self esteem (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 1956). Tasks for the lowest ability children were also very simplistic – assuming that these children would be unable to achieve more than the very basic tasks provided. This therefore acted to limit the ability of those children to achieve more than the teacher had previously decided they would be able to (Bearne, 2010).

Setting of different abilities in maths at School Z , was done across the whole of Key Stage 2, which enabled very gifted mathematicians in younger classes



to be working at a higher level of maths with children from older classes, whilst lower ability mathematicians could work at their own pace in other sets. This had positive benefits for those gifted, younger mathematicians, increasing their motivation and sense of worth (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 1956) however, those older children in the lower ability sets with younger pupils were not necessarily being challenged as much as they could or should be and therefore the type of information they would take in and the level they would achieve would be restricted by the teacher's preconceived ideas of their ability to assimilate new information. It also begs the question, what happens to those younger, gifted mathematicians when they reach year 5 and 6? How much can you challenge a younger pupil, without making it difficult at a later date to offer any new information? There is the risk that this child will simply have to sit through lessons at a later date, which repeat what they have already learnt unless the class teacher is willing and able to push that child beyond what needs to be known simply to pass tests at the end of Year 6. In this instance, as long as the class teacher is both willing and able to push that child beyond Key Stage 2 mathematics, gifted children like this will simply float through later years at school with no real challenge, which goes against the Government's and OFSTED's idea of challenging all pupils to achieve the best they can and will result in the child being disengaged with that subject and therefore unable to assimilate new information (Bloom's Taxonomy, 1956).

Having researched and discussed a variety of opinions on differentiation and had first-hand experience of a number of ways of differentiating within the classroom environment I am inclined to think that utilising a variety of

methods to differentiate during the school day would be the most effective way of maximising the learning of all children. However, whichever type of differentiation used, it needs to be used effectively. Simply grouping pupils by ability because it is easier will not maximise the learning of any pupil. Careful lesson planning is therefore essential in order to ensure that the pedagogies used in lessons provide the maximum benefit.

Although ability groups have their benefits, I think it is unnecessary to use this method of differentiation all the time, over and above other methods, since it can lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement. I am also inclined to agree that fixed ability groups, which never change, will act to inhibit the achievement of those lower and middle ability children since they are unable to take part in higher level discussions with higher ability children and therefore enhance their own understanding and knowledge of a subject of area. Use of mixed ability teaching where possible, with paired and or group talk encouraged at all times, allows children to have the ability to learn from, and share their skills and understanding with, each other. Not all lessons require differentiation by task. Children are just as likely to achieve well through the use of differentiation by outcome (as long as this outcome isn't too restrictive) or by support. Scaffolding and support to lower and middle ability children where they need it seems to me, a positive use of teacher and Learning Support Staff time since this allows everyone the possibility to achieve above and beyond what they might have achieved on their own. Differentiation of some sort will always be needed if schools are to meet the Government's and OFSTED's requirements for all children to be entitled to learning. As stated previously, differentiation has the potential to

deliver huge improvements to children's learning as long as it is used carefully and effectively.

A number of sources have been cited within this report – many of them from between 1992 to 1997. Although written some time ago, the arguments within these papers remain relevant today and are still cited in other more recent research papers. As such I am confident that the research is still current and relevant to my conclusions.