

Differentiation – why and how?

Differentiation has had something of a bad press in recent years, particularly since the introduction of the new National Curriculum, ‘mastery teaching’ and a move towards more whole class teaching. It has been argued (incorrectly but nevertheless with impact) that the new curriculum means that we should not differentiate at all, and that every pupil should follow the curriculum for their year group regardless of their learning difficulties. It is time to revisit differentiation and clarify what it is, how it fits in with the new curriculum and mastery teaching, and how you can use it effectively.

What do we mean by differentiation?

Differentiation has a broad meaning, as it includes any way in which you modify the content, presentation, environment or expectations of teaching and learning. It may be something which you have planned carefully, such as a specific activity, and it may also be something spur of the moment, based on a pupil’s response to teaching. Differentiation may be ‘big’ (e.g. using a Teaching Assistant (TA) to support a particular pupil) or ‘small’ (e.g. re-phrasing a question to make it simpler). Differentiation may be used to meet the needs of any pupil, including those with SEND but also including those who may be gifted in the subject area.

The SEND Code of Practice (2015) makes it very clear that differentiation is an expectation: ‘High quality teaching that is differentiated and personalised will meet the individual needs of the majority of children and young people’ (para. 1.24); ‘The UK government is committed to inclusive education of disabled children and young people and the progressive removal of barriers to learning and participation in mainstream education’ (para. 1.26); schools **‘must** use their best endeavours to make sure that a child with SEN gets the support they need – this means doing everything they can to meet children and young people’s SEN’ (para. 6.2); they **‘must** make reasonable adjustments....to prevent them being put at a substantial disadvantage. These duties are anticipatory’ (para. 6.9). All of these quotes imply, or actually state, the need to differentiate as at least the first step in meeting the needs of every pupil that you teach.

The graduated approach, recommended by the SEND Code of Practice, also implies differentiation at least initially, as different teaching approaches are tried out and reviewed. It is when pupils do not respond sufficiently to differentiation through the graduated approach that we identify them as having a special educational need; differentiation should be part of the usual teaching that is available to everyone.

Differentiation is relevant in any teaching situation or setting, whether that is mainstream or special, in mixed ability classes, streams or sets, or is one to one, small group or whole class, at any age. Just because pupils are in a ‘bottom set’ or within a specialist setting, does not mean that the ‘differentiation’ box is ticked; individuals within these groupings will still have different needs and so differentiation will still be required.

It is important to be clear that the use of differentiation does not mean having ‘low expectations’ which is how it has sometimes been interpreted, when differentiation has been misunderstood as only offering easier worksheets or tasks to some ‘low achieving’ pupils. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the opposite to this, in that we expect all pupils to be able to achieve once we provide the means for them to do so; the use of effective differentiation means that we can enable the vast majority of pupils to access teaching and learning.

How does it fit with mastery teaching?

Mastery teaching has become more popular recently, particularly in maths, and it has brought with it a return to more whole class teaching in primary schools. Mastery teaching is that which establishes a level of performance that all student must master before moving on to the next unit. A Guardian headline from 2015 states ‘Differentiation is out. Mastery is the new classroom buzzword’ and the article goes on to discuss this. In fact, the headline is

misleading, because the article goes on to say ‘At the heart of the Chinese classroom is the teacher’s unshakeable belief that all children are capable of learning anything if that learning is presented in the right way.’ This sounds very much like differentiation.

If mastery teaching is being followed to the letter, then it is essential that any pupils having difficulty grasping any concept are identified quickly and provided with additional support (mastery teaching talks about same-day intervention and whilst this would be ideal, it is not always feasible). It is also essential to incorporate skilful questioning within whole class teaching – and this benefits all pupils; accessing deeper understanding is more important than accelerating through the curriculum.

The upshot is, you can and should differentiate in mastery teaching: if we want pupils to progress together then we will have to adjust our teaching to meet the different needs of pupils. As the above quote implies, mastery is an inclusive way of teaching, through differentiation of teaching strategies rather than of lesson content, so that pupils progress together. There should not be a tension between mastery teaching and differentiation; they are not mutually exclusive.

What does research tell us?

The MAST (Making a Statement) study from 2013 (Webster and Blatchford, UCL IoE) did not look at differentiation specifically, but looked at the experiences of pupils with (then) Statements of SEN in Y5. They found a high level of separation from the class and the teacher, with a large proportion of their teaching and interactions being with TAs. TAs also had the main responsibility for differentiation, often without time to discuss with the teacher and prepare.

The SENSE (Special Educational Needs in Secondary Education) study from 2017 (Webster and Blatchford, UCL IoE) looked into the experiences of pupils in Y9 with Statements or Education Health and Care Plans: they felt stigmatised by being in the ‘bottom set’ or ‘bottom group’; the researchers also found that sometimes this practice is deemed to make differentiation unnecessary at task level, as the ‘ability grouping’ is differentiation enough. Differentiation of the task, where it is seen, was often at a group level rather than individual. The use of TAs was often seen as a strategy for differentiation, although how the TA achieves effective differentiation can be unclear and unarticulated.

These studies, based on those pupils with the highest levels of need being educated in mainstream environments, suggest that it is still believed that assigning a TA to support a pupil with SEND will tick the ‘differentiation’ box in itself, without considering how this will work and what impact it will have on pupils. The outcomes from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff study (2009, UCL IoE) tell us that the ineffective use of TAs can have a negative impact on outcomes for pupils with SEND, so we need to be very cautious about feeling that we have differentiation ‘covered’ because we offer TA support.

Most pupils with SEND do not have a Statement or Education, Health and Care Plan of course, they receive SEN Support, and the number of TAs available to support these pupils seems to be decreasing anyway in the current financial climate. We need to be even more confident that if we use TA support to aid differentiation, it is effective. This means TAs receiving appropriate and regular CPD, being given time to liaise with teachers and to prepare any resources or materials, and for teachers to ensure that they are not leaving the teaching of the most challenging pupils to TAs.

High quality teaching for everyone reduces the need for further differentiation

As stated, the SEND Code of Practice (2015) makes it clear that ‘making higher quality teaching normally available to the whole class is likely to mean that fewer pupils will require such [different from or additional to] support. Such improvements in whole-class provision tend to be more cost-effective and sustainable.’ (para. 6.15) and that ‘high quality teaching, differentiated for individual pupils, is the first step to responding to pupils who have or may have

SEN' (para. 6.37). In this context, we (and all the teachers and support staff we work with) need to have an understanding of what high quality teaching looks like, and how it enables us to meet the needs of the majority of children and young people. This will also help teachers to understand when differentiation through high quality teaching may not be enough to meet the needs of a particular pupil, using the graduated approach.

It is impossible to cover every aspect of **high quality teaching** here, but these suggestions would give you a good starting point at least:

- Be explicit: Don't assume knowledge and understanding. Be clear about what the task is. What do you want them to learn? Do you need to teach any vocabulary? Provide an example or model which shows them exactly what it is you need them to do
- Use concrete and visual resources: hands-on and experiential, use symbols, pictures and colour; this is particularly important when introducing a new topic or concept
- Minimise your talking time (be aware of how complex your language is too and aim to simplify it) and optimise pupils' talking time (proper discussion in pairs, groups or even whole class, but not just answering your questions)
- Make links to prior learning: start the lesson with revision, refer to previous work on the same topic, use mind maps etc to show links
- Regular revision and repetition: little and often works better than lots of input in one go which is not returned to for weeks. Think of it as a spiral of learning where you keep returning to a topic, with increasingly long periods in between each return; this is sometimes called 'spaced practice'
- Be predictable: predictability increases security and security means more learning. If, for example, you are teaching a new concept, keep the activity and/or context familiar; be clear on time and provide warnings leading up to that time; provide an example or model
- Break up learning tasks: build in movement from one task to another where possible, change pace, change activity, use breaks; new learning needs time to 'bed in' and breaks can help that process
- Use memory aids: for example, visual stimuli, songs and rhymes, whatever works – pupils can often come up with their own which work for them
- Model the process you are teaching and offer guided practice: use scaffolding and coaching

If teachers use these strategies, they will reduce the need for differentiation at the individual level (though not completely); this will also make it clearer who has more significant needs that are not being met through high quality teaching.

How can we differentiate?

How do we decide *how* to differentiate? Is it helpful to use labelling of need to know what to do? For example, if a pupil has an autistic spectrum condition or dyslexia, does that mean we should do x, y and z? Probably not – labels in themselves do not offer us a complete picture of the pupil and in fact, an individual's needs may be different to the general characteristics of their labelled 'condition' (such as a girl on the autistic spectrum who has lots of friends, for example).

A description and understanding of an individual's '**presenting behaviours**' is much more helpful, and also means that teachers do not feel that they ought to know how to meet the needs of every pupil with dyslexia because they had some CPD on dyslexia last year. Difficulties in areas such as working memory, attention, organisation etc cut across many different 'labels' of need; considering how these needs can be met is more helpful than considering how to meet the needs of a pupil with 'ADHD' for example (particularly as with any diagnosed need, every pupil will have a different profile of strengths and difficulties).

The starting point is to **know your pupils**– what they like, what they can do, what they know, what works for them in

order to engender new learning etc; knowing what does not work is just as important. The SENSE study found a lack of knowledge and understanding of SEND generally and individual pupils' needs in particular, often due to a lack of time for communication between SENCOs, teachers, TAs and parents.

This relates to the **centrality of relationships**. Building up a positive relationship with your pupils, based on trust and a recognition of strengths, makes the business of meeting their more challenging needs much more effective. It is understandably easy, with the pupil who never remembers their homework and talks while you are talking, to focus on these negative behaviours and not notice or recognise the positives that are also going on, such as the fact that they are now talking over you a lot less than they were last term, or that they are really enthusiastic about the local history project. By recognising these positives, it builds the relationship that you will need the next time homework is forgotten. You might also learn which strategies work for this pupil by thinking about the things he does well and why that might be; you could then use this knowledge to support him with the things he finds more difficult.

Having an understanding of **behaviour as a form of communication** can help with this relationship-building; if we can realise that the reason he talks over you in class is because he's struggling to understand your instructions and is too embarrassed to say, it becomes easier to prevent this from happening by simplifying instructions and/or writing them as bullet points on the board.

Know your pupils' barriers – what might hold some pupils back or make it more difficult for them to learn? This may vary depending upon the learning objective, task or environment. Some pupils may perform really well in a quiet classroom when asked to write, but find an unstructured and noisy drama lesson much more challenging – how can you make the drama lesson more accessible for this pupil?

Under the previous Code of Practice, the expectation was that individual needs, targets, strategies and provision would be included in an IEP (Individual Education Plan); **how should we record** differentiation now, or indeed, do we need to? The SEND Code of Practice (2015) tells us that 'all teachers and support staff who work with the pupil should be made aware of their needs, the outcomes sought, the support provided and any teaching strategies or approaches that are required. This should also be recorded on the school's information system' (para. 6.49). That sounds like an IEP, but the Code does not specify how this information should be recorded or communicated. If you are using differentiation as part of high quality teaching, there should not be a need to record this (unless your school specifically demands it, but you could try arguing against it); what should be recorded is the 'different from and additional to' support which an individual may require to meet their needs beyond the usual differentiation. How this is recorded is up to the individual school; remember that it is the classroom practice that will make the difference to a pupil, not the paperwork (although of course, effective paperwork can improve communication and therefore provision). Effective recording is that which contributes to improved outcomes for pupils; anything else should be reviewed.

As well as knowing your pupils and their needs well, it is of course also important to be clear about your **teaching objectives**, as this will make a difference to how you differentiate. For example, if your objective is for everyone to understand the motivation of the Friar in Romeo and Juliet, how can that best be approached? Is reading the play the best way? Or acting it out? Using hot-seating? Paired discussion? Watching part of a film? And so on. Consider whether by restricting activities to reading and writing, for example, you would be precluding some pupils from meeting your learning objective. In the case of the Friar, your objective is about understanding a character's motivation, not whether you can write three correctly spelt and punctuated paragraphs on it (this may need to be covered too, but perhaps after the character has been properly understood). You would probably want to employ a range of strategies; the important point is to create the conditions in which you are offering the maximum chance of learning to every pupil in the class. And this should not be doing anyone a disservice, as by approaching a topic in a range of ways offers the pupils who already understand it the opportunity to deepen their understanding still further.

Teachers have a heavy workload and it would not be surprising if the thought of having to prepare additional work for groups of or individual pupils seems too much. However, preparing additional or different work is only one way

of differentiating and is often not the most appropriate or effective. Some differentiation does of course require planning and preparation but much doesn't; knowing your pupils, an awareness of their needs and an understanding of how to adjust teaching in the moment, i.e. 'reflexive teaching', is just as effective.

Differentiation strategies

There is a range of ways to differentiate, which could be employed whatever the need of an individual pupil, dependent upon what you are trying to achieve. None of these is set in stone and all should be approached and applied with flexibility and creativity. Types of differentiation include:

- **Outcome:** have different expectations of the output you want someone to achieve. This could refer to quality or quantity of work produced. Sometimes used as the 'default' position, this is not always very effective, but can be appropriate on occasion. Use with caution
- **Support:** the expectations of output may be the same but you provide more support/different support for some people. This may be through adult support or the use of resources and displays. Consider in particular how you are using TAs – just putting a TA with a pupil with SEND is not going to meet their needs if the TA is not clear about what they need to do. We need to provide the optimum level of support, which particularly means not too much; in other words, if a pupil has TA support, then the support should be focused on developing their learning and independence rather than task completion, and the TA should not sit with them all the time (unless there is a very clear reason for doing this). It is the teacher's responsibility to direct the TA, and the teacher should also ensure that they spend time teaching all pupils including, or especially, those with SEND
- **Task:** sometimes it is appropriate to provide different tasks to suit different people's needs. This could include different worksheets and these could be different in various ways, such as more use of visuals, less text, fewer questions etc; be careful of making some tasks easier or less challenging as there is a danger that this means lower expectations (although this may sometimes be appropriate). If any sheets you prepare are accessible to all in the first place then you would have much less need to prepare anything additional for particular pupils. Be wary of pre-prepared worksheets as they may not actually meet the need you are trying to address
- **Resource/presentation:** the task is the same, but different resources are provided or it is presented in a different way. This relates to 'support' above. For example, your pupils are doing a piece of extended writing and some pupils are able to do it using a laptop whereas others may hand write and use a spellchecker, and because of the use of these resources, you are expecting the same quality of work. Regarding presentation, this could mean for example some pupils listening to a poem being read on a tablet whereas others are reading it themselves, or it could be that material is enlarged or printed on coloured paper. It could also include teacher language, so that you simplify your language to make it more accessible whilst retaining the teaching objective
- **Time:** the task and expectations for outcomes are the same, but some people have longer to complete it, and/or the task is broken down into shorter 'chunks'. Increasing the time could apply to homework, where you could offer different deadlines. Chunking of tasks is a very useful strategy for many pupils and could be used as a general rule rather than as an exception
- **Feedback:** this is something that teachers tend to do automatically (offer different feedback to different pupils, both written and verbal) and so may not think of it as differentiation but it is. Specific praise targeted at individual needs tends to be effective, focusing on the positives

- **Grouping:** this is very common, as schools 'stream' or 'set' but it is not enough on its own to make a positive difference to learning (research suggests in fact that ability grouping can have a negative impact on pupils with SEND), so it should be approached with caution. It is only helpful if the groupings and the teaching are appropriate to the learning and the pupils

These ways to differentiate could be applied to any category of need, but there are some **specific strategies** that could be used to support particular needs:

Type of need	Possible differentiation strategies (this list is not exhaustive but gives some ideas; all will depend upon the individual pupil and their strengths and needs)
Reading difficulties, including dyslexia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the amount of reading required – this could be done by summarising, or by using text to speech software, or using diagrams etc instead of text • Simplify any reading – use bullet points instead of paragraphs, shorten sentences, use simple vocabulary • Make reading material easier to read – use a larger font, use a different font, use colour to highlight or categorise; avoid italics, use bold instead
Writing difficulties, including dyslexia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the amount of writing required – ask for oral presentations, or use of pictures/diagrams/video etc • Use IT packages such as mind mapping, speech to text, planning tools etc • Review any written work for its content rather than accuracy • Offer support for spell-checking, grammar checking etc
Speech and language difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that this could include speech sound production, understanding of language, the ability to express yourself in language and the social use of language • With a speech production difficulty – don't speak for the person, listen to the message rather than the presentation • With understanding – simplify the language you use, try to avoid metaphors, sarcasm etc • With expressive language – provide time to prepare and practise, listen to the message content • Understand the issues that some pupils have with using language appropriately in a social context and make allowances
Autistic spectrum conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare pupils in advance for new things or people or changes to routine • Be aware that their social preferences may be different e.g. they are happier on their own whilst also wishing to make friends, but are not sure how to build and maintain friendships • Provide software and resources that support the way they work • Be aware that higher level language skills may be challenging e.g. metaphor, idiom etc; avoid sarcasm as it may be taken literally • Give very clear and precise directions/instructions
Memory and attention difficulties, including ADHD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide written notes as well as giving instructions etc verbally • Present information in different ways e.g. using pictures, diagrams etc

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build in regular short breaks • Provide clear structure for the pupil's tasks and offer regular support
Organisational difficulties, including dyslexia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide written notes as well as giving instructions etc verbally • Present information in different ways e.g. using pictures, diagrams etc • Provide clear structure for the person's tasks and offer regular support • Offer software/resources that help with organisation e.g. alarms, reminders etc

A 'buddy' system can work well for lots of pupils i.e. where they have a peer or friend to support them, for example, to remind them about homework, or help them to join in with social groups. This buddy should be carefully chosen and agreed with the pupil and you will need to monitor how successfully this is working for all concerned. When it works well, this strategy can be of benefit to both the pupil being supported and the one doing the supporting, as long as everyone understands what they are doing and why.

Improved outcomes?

When classroom teaching is of high quality and is accessible, with differentiation built in, then the needs of most pupils should be successfully met and outcomes should be positive. Consider outcomes in their broadest sense, to include academic (progress, attainment) but also pupil wellbeing (including mental health), exclusion data (a reduction in exclusions would be a very positive outcome), pupil and parent satisfaction, referrals to the SENCO (these could increase or decrease, either of which could be a positive, as an increase could indicate improved skills in identifying needs accurately, and a decrease could indicate teachers managing needs more effectively without further support – make sure you know which it is!) and so on. It may be the case that more inclusive teaching contributes to improved outcomes for all pupils, not just those who are identified with SEND.

A useful document is currently available on the SEND Gateway, provided by Malcom Arnold Academy:
<http://www.sendgateway.org.uk/resources.differentiation-help-sheets-delivered-through-central-hub-system.html>