



Highest Ability and Talented

Methods of Differentiation in the Classroom

It's a term that every teacher has heard during their training: differentiation. Differentiation is defined by the Training and Development Agency for Schools as 'the process by which differences between learners are accommodated so that all students in a group have the best possible chance of learning'. In recent decades it has come to be considered a key skill for any teacher, especially those of mixed-ability classes. But what does it really mean?

What is meant by 'differences between learners'?

In a large class, differences between students may on the face of it seem too numerous to be quantified, but differentiation works on 3 key aspects which can be summed up as follows:

- Readiness to learn
- Learning needs
- Interest

These differences may sound rather broad, but by applying effective methods of differentiation, it is possible to cater for quite wide variations between learners. Expert opinion varies when it comes to a definitive list of the methods of differentiation in the classroom, with some holding that it can fall under as many as 7 categories. Let's look at them.

Task

One of the core methods of differentiation, differentiation by task, involves setting different tasks for students of different abilities. One way to achieve this may be to produce different sets of worksheets or exercises depending on students' abilities. However, some teachers are loath to employ this method because of both the social implications and the additional planning it entails. An alternative method is to use a single worksheet comprised of tasks which get progressively harder. The more advanced students will quickly progress to the later questions whilst the less able can concentrate on grasping the essentials.

Grouping

Collaborative learning has many well-documented benefits such as enabling shy students to participate more confidently in class, but it's also a useful differentiation method. Small, mixed-ability groups allow lower achievers to take advantage of peer support whilst higher achievers gain the opportunity to organise and voice their thoughts for the benefit of the whole group (known as peer modelling). Grouping also allows roles to be allocated within the team which cater for each member's skill set and learning needs.

Resources

Differentiation in the classroom - iPads in the classroom. In this method it's important to recognise that some students can work with more advanced resources than others, and that it is possible to use multiple materials in order to approach a topic from different angles. This means that while some may require quite basic texts with illustrations, others are capable of working with more advanced vocabulary and complex ideas. Differentiation of this kind allows a wide spectrum of materials to be used to attain a single learning outcome. It's a method that is greatly assisted by advances in technology, and the use of educational video in the classroom, which is why it is becoming more prevalent.

Pace

In the traditional classroom, activities are completed within a single time frame, irrespective of the level of difficulty for some students. The result is that more advanced learners can be held back to the speed of the less able ones, and at the other end of the scale, some may simply find it impossible to keep up. When differentiation is used in lesson planning, the available time is used flexibly in order to meet all students' needs. Students who quickly grasp core activities need not be held back because their classmates need to spend more time on the fundamentals of a topic. They can instead be allocated more challenging extension tasks in order to develop a more rounded understanding of the subject matter or even to progress through the set course more quickly.

Outcome

Differentiation by outcome is a technique whereby all students undertake the same task but a variety of results is expected and acceptable. For example, the teacher sets a task but instead of working towards a single 'right' answer, the students arrive at a personalised outcome depending on their level of ability. It's a method about which some teachers have reservations as there is a risk that the less able students will fall below an acceptable level of understanding, however that risk can be mitigated somewhat by establishing a clear set of guidelines that apply to all students, and it does offer one clear advantage in that no prior grouping is necessary.

Dialogue and support

Differentiation by dialogue is the most regularly used type of differentiation in the classroom. With this technique, the emphasis is on the role of the teacher, who must facilitate problem solving by identifying which students need detailed explanations in simple language and which students can engage in dialogue at a more sophisticated level. The teacher may also employ targeted questioning to produce a range of responses and to challenge the more able students. Verbal support and encouragement also play a crucial part in this technique.

Assessment

In the differentiated classroom, rather than assessment taking place at the end of learning, students are assessed on an on-going basis so that teaching, and indeed the other methods of differentiation, can be continuously adjusted according to the learners' needs.

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