Towards a Better Understanding of the Needs of Pupils who have Difficulties in Accessing Learning

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I think differences make the world go round, kids need to know that. They need to learn that more than 'the rotation of the earth' in science! I think schools must teach differences and celebrate them. At the moment schools do the opposite, trying to make everybody normal.

Kate (a secondary pupil from London) in Burke and Grosvenor (2003)

All teachers are invariably confronted in their classes by pupils who display a wide range of needs and abilities. As a teacher you are responsible for ensuring that you provide each pupil with an opportunity to learn and, where possible, to maximise their potential. Whilst this maxim would find the support of most teachers, there are few who would pretend that this ideal is easily achieved, and the majority would suggest that there are many pupils who require approaches and teaching strategies which extend the repertoire of even the most experienced.

As a teacher, you can learn to deploy teaching approaches which enables all pupils to gain greater access to learning. However, as the quotation from a secondary school pupil at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, the perception that not all teachers are able to empathise with those who find learning to be a struggle is not uncommon in our schools. Many teachers have dedicated large parts of their lives to developing innovative approaches that enable pupils from marginalised groups, or those with special educational needs, to become more effective learners. This has resulted in considerable progress towards a better understanding of how all pupils may be enabled to access the curriculum and learning. However, even these committed teachers admit to not always succeeding in their efforts to reach all learners. Such committed teachers also ensure that they have a good understanding
of those cultural and social influences which may influence expectations in relation to pupils from specific groups. For example, the government intention to increase access to higher education requires that young people and their families from communities where there has been no previous expectation of progress to education beyond the age of 16 receive support in understanding the opportunities available to them. Underperformance of pupils from some ethnic and socio-economic groups has been a major obstacle in enabling all pupils to reach their potential. As a teacher confronted by a diversity of needs, attitudes and abilities, you will often be frustrated by a seeming inability to enable every pupil to make the progress which you believe they should. It is almost certainly the most conscientious teachers who find themselves worrying about the progress of pupils who, as result of, for example, learning difficulties, language or cultural problems or issues associated with mental health, seem to find learning particularly burdensome. Whilst you should not be surprised when you discover pupils who challenge your established teaching strategies, you should be prepared to adjust your methods in an attempt to gauge how you may more effectively engage with all the pupils in your class.

This chapter provides some guidance related to good practice in addressing the needs of all learners, with an emphasis upon promoting positive attitudes towards learning, and working collaboratively to address the needs of individuals within whole-class situations.

**OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this chapter you should have some idea of:

- ways in which you can plan to ensure that the individual needs of pupils are addressed in your lessons;
- where you can expect to find support for pupils who have difficulties in accessing learning;
- how to make effective use of that support.

**FACTORS THAT MAY IMPEDE LEARNING**

As a teacher you must be aware of the many dangers associated with stereotyping which may exacerbate difficulties in accessing learning. Self-fulfilling prophecies have played a significant part in inhibiting learning in some pupils as a result of teachers having low expectations with regards to their potential. Cooper (1993) has demonstrated the ways in which a particular identity or label attached to a pupil can contribute significantly to the preconceptions and assumptions held by teachers. Pupils who arrive in school with a label which describes them as having a learning difficulty, or behaviour problem, or as a gypsy traveller or refugee are often subjected to a series of expectations which differ considerably from those attached to their peers. Writers from minority communities, including those with disabilities (Rieser, 1992) or from marginalised racial groups (Gurnah, 1989), have described their experiences of education as at times impeding rather than promoting opportunities for learning. Teachers’ attitudes and expectations make a significant contribution to the progress made by all young people. Where expectations are low this can
result in underachievement, negative attitudes to learning and disaffection. Kerry Noble, a disabled writer and consultant, describes her personal experience of schooling in the following terms:

When teachers set me a piece of work I began to realise that certain teachers would praise my work regardless of the amount of effort I had made or the quality of the work produced. As a consequence of this I became lazy and did not make as much effort as I should. I suspect that if I had been able-bodied they would have had a different attitude.

(Noble, 2003: 60)

Teachers can impact positively upon the learning of all of their pupils but can only do so when the first important step of establishing a relationship based upon trust and appreciation has been achieved.

Inevitably some of the pupils in your class will experience factors which impede learning. Many of those described as having special educational needs or for whom English is an additional language require that you take specific measures in order to assist them in becoming effective learners. There is a temptation for a teacher to dwell upon those factors which may impede learning rather than look for the preferred learning style and strengths of the pupil and to adjust teaching accordingly. The match between teaching and learning styles is probably the most significant factor in determining whether a pupil will succeed as a learner and is therefore one to which you need to devote considerable time. Some pupils require additional materials which recognise their strength as visual learners, whilst others prefer increased opportunities to engage in discussion through group activity. Learning styles are closely related to confidence: the pupil who has difficulties with reading may well be able to demonstrate their competence verbally whilst feeling inadequate if given large amounts of written text. As a teacher you need to be aware of the intended learning outcomes and provide opportunities for pupils to demonstrate their ability rather than their limitations, which may result from limited teaching approaches. Multi-sensory approaches to teaching which recognise that different pupils exhibit different strengths in respect of visual or auditory learning often prove most successful. As a teacher you should examine how you can present your reading materials and develop concepts through a range of channels.

Research conducted by Florian and Rouse (2001) identified a number of teaching strategies which had proved successful in enabling pupils with special educational needs to be successfully included in secondary classrooms. These included the promotion of co-operative learning between pupils of all abilities, peer-mediated instruction, the careful management of learning support and well-differentiated planning and delivery of lessons. These are all described as positive actions which may enable pupils with special educational needs to learn but which at the same time bring benefits of participation to all pupils in a class. Robertson (2000, 2001) has identified similar strategies as being critical when addressing the needs of pupils who enter school with limited English language ability. She suggests that teachers need to concentrate more time upon those learning outcomes which, whilst not being measurable, may have a significant impact upon pupil participation. In particular, enhancing self-esteem by identifying the means of communication and learning approaches with which pupils feel most comfortable is likely to reap many rewards. Self-esteem is not promoted in classrooms where pupils feel excluded from their peers or from the lesson content and an emphasis upon strategies to promote their inclusion must therefore be a prime consideration in your classroom.
If attitudes and difficulties in identifying learning styles can prove to be impediments to learning, there are at least some steps which you can take to overcome these. Some steps are discussed later in this chapter, but one which merits mention from the outset, because of its potential impact upon the teacher–pupil relationship, is that of pupil participation. In determining how best to plan and differentiate for learning, teachers are well advised to listen to the pupils for whom they are planning. Pupil participation in setting their own learning targets and identifying their preferred approaches to working can have a significant impact upon learning (Rose, 1999; Fletcher, 2001). Involving pupils in decision making not only provides you with useful insights into their perceptions of their own learning needs, but also enhances your relationship with the pupil and fosters the respect of the individual pupil.

**Reflective task 10.1**

**Using pupil perceptions to support planning and teaching**

Identify a pupil in a class that you teach who has difficulties with learning. This may be as a result of a special educational need or a difficulty with English, or possibly for reasons which are not easily determined. Through discussion with this pupil, identify those aspects of school that he/she enjoys or finds less enjoyable and try to find out the reasons behind these attitudes. See what the pupil can tell you about his or her preferred learning style and what teachers do that either encourage or inhibit learning.

Having gained this information, consider your own teaching approaches and how these might impact upon this pupil’s abilities to access learning.

**SEEKING AND USING SUPPORT IN THE MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING**

When starting out on a teaching career or joining a new school it is possible to feel quite isolated and to be unsure of how to address the specific needs of individual pupils who challenge your teaching approaches. Most schools contain a mixture of well-established and less–experienced teachers and whilst you may feel overwhelmed by having so much to learn, you should normally be able to find someone who is prepared to give you the benefit of their experience and to offer advice. It is, of course, important to identify the roles and responsibilities of specific colleagues within the school, but also to become familiar with the procedures required to access and make effective use of these colleagues.

With regards to pupils with special educational needs, the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) is an obvious first port of call. All schools are required to have a SENCO and in most secondary schools he or she manages a small team of support staff. The school is likely to have set procedures for seeking the support of the SENCO and it is important that you familiarise yourself with these as soon as possible. It is likely that when you take over a class the SENCO will provide you with information related to any pupils with special educational needs with whom you are likely to come in to contact. You should familiarise yourself with the needs of these individual pupils through an examination of their individual education plans (IEPs) and through discussion with the SENCO and other
staff who know them well. An examination of pupil’s work often provides a useful starting point with indicators of how other teachers have adapted or differentiated work to meet their needs. This rule should also be applied to other pupils who have difficulties with accessing learning because of, for example, difficulties with spoken English. Pupils with special educational needs are, in England, managed under the arrangements of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2001) with which you need to be familiar. It is also important that you are well prepared before seeking the advice of the SENCO, who is likely to be a hard-pressed colleague whose time is at a premium. In order to make effective use of the SENCO, before approaching him or her about an individual pupil prepare a list of specific questions. It helps to be able to provide exemplars if you are seeking help with regard to specific behaviours in situations. You will also find the SENCO to be more responsive when you can demonstrate your own thinking about a problem and describe any tactics which you have used in an attempt to solve problems. Be aware that the SENCO may well have limited knowledge of a pupil and that you may see this pupil far more often than the SENCO.

Pupils who have difficulties accessing learning often receive some support from one or more teaching assistants (TA) (note: the term ‘teaching assistant’ has largely subsumed the earlier descriptor of learning support assistant [LSA] which was in common use until recently). The ways in which these colleagues are managed varies from school to school. Often they are attached to a department or faculty, but in some instances they are attached to a specific pupil. It is the responsibility of the teacher to manage TAs and to organise work for pupils. Often the TA who has worked for some time with an individual has knowledge of and information about a pupil which is critical to your ability to be able to plan effectively to meet individual needs. At first it may appear anomalous that you are the teacher but appear dependent upon the TA in order to be able to address the needs of a pupil with special educational needs or other difficulties. It is important to regard all TAs as critical professional colleagues and to develop a team-work approach to working with them. By involving them in planning, discussing assessment and ensuring that their experience and opinions are valued, you not only develop a positive relationship with a colleague who can play a vital role in supporting your lessons, but also are ensuring the most effective support for pupils.

The management of TAs to provide the most effective support is never easy. Research suggests that in too many instances the use of classroom support can create dependency where it is inappropriately managed. Tennant (2001) observed the use of learning support which was seen by some pupils to inhibit rather than promote learning. In the findings of his research he describes examples of approaches to learning support which, whilst being well intentioned and organised, denied pupils access to appropriate learning. He cites, as an example, a pupil with ‘less than perfect English’ who was being provided with one-to-one support which isolated him from access to his fluent language-using peers. He suggests that contact with these peers would have been beneficial both socially and in terms of providing language role models. Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998) have identified the effective use of learning support as an essential feature of inclusive classrooms. However, they identified three major obstacles to the efficient management of TAs, these being:

- Class teachers make invalid assumptions about the preference of the LSA to work solely with the ‘designated individual’.
- They may assume academic expertise held by the LSA which the latter does not in fact possess (particularly in the secondary school).
The LSA may, because the classroom teacher is ‘in charge’, be inhibited from making suggestions about appropriate ways of working.

(Thomas et al., 1998: 29)

Each of these factors seriously impact upon the ability of the pupil to become an independent learner. As Thomas and his colleagues emphasise, this difficulty can only be overcome through a clear commitment to involve the TA in discussion about what is to be taught and how. It is necessary to provide a clear definition of tasks, but also to ensure that the pupil has access not only to the TA but also to you as the class teacher.

Reflective task 10.2
Developing rules for effective in-class support

Meet with a TA with whom you regularly work. Identify a pupil who receives support from this colleague during your lessons. Allow the TA time to describe how they perceive their role in relation to supporting this pupil. Encourage them to talk about the learning strengths and weaknesses of the pupil and consider how these match up to your own perceptions. With the TA, draw up a plan for effective support of the named pupil under the following headings:

1. the needs of the pupil;
2. when support is required;
3. the role of the teacher;
4. the role of the TA;
5. what the pupil sees their need for support to be;
6. how will we know that the support provided has been effective?

Return to this sheet after a period of teaching and see if it needs to be reviewed.

In addition to support from a TA, some of your pupils may receive input from outside agencies. These might for example, include social workers, therapists or a teacher from a local education authority multi-cultural service. Lacey (2001, 2003) has identified potential tensions which can occur in these circumstances. Whilst each professional involved has the interests of a pupil in mind, it is likely that they see the needs of this individual from the perspective of their own disciplinary background. It is essential that pupils receive support through well co-ordinated multi-disciplinary teams based on effective channels of communication and a clear definition of the roles to be played by individual professionals. You will increase the potential for effective team work if you follow a set of procedures which not only benefits the pupil concerned, but also protects your own ability to work in a professional manner. When dealing with colleagues from other agencies maintain a written record of what has been agreed and who will take actions. Share this record with someone in a management position within the school: in the case of a pupil with special educational needs this is likely to be the SENCO, in other cases it may be a deputy head teacher or head of faculty with pastoral responsibility. Ensure that all issues of confidentiality are maintained. Keep a record of the actions which you take in order to support any agreement made between agencies. Where unsure about what to do, or if decisions made are unlikely to be manageable, seek advice.
Working with other agencies is never easy and should not be undertaken by you as a teacher in isolation. Whenever you are unsure of how to proceed you should seek the advice of a colleague who is in a position to make decisions.

TEACHING TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF ALL PUPILS

Amongst the many challenges which face teachers in their everyday practice, that of addressing individual needs in whole-class situations is one of the most challenging. Corbett (2001) conducted research examining successful teaching approaches that enabled pupils of diverse ability and need to be included in mainstream classrooms. Her work, and that of Lewis and Norwich (2000), recognised that there may be a range of pedagogic approaches which enable teachers in mainstream classrooms to meet effectively the needs of all pupils. They suggest that this begins with recognition of individual needs, which they term ‘unique differences’, which may require more intense or explicit teaching in order to be adequately addressed.

The identification of individual learning needs must mean more than simply knowing what a pupil can or cannot do. This is, of course, important, but often the assessment of pupil abilities fails to provide teachers with adequate information related to how deficits in learning may be addressed. As a teacher you are likely to have greater success with pupils who have difficulties in accessing learning if you adopt a more holistic approach to determining learning needs. When planning to address the needs of an individual pupil you should consider:

- the current performance, abilities and deficits of the pupil in relation to your subject and current teaching objectives;
- the pupil’s preferred learning style and opportunities to address this in your planned lesson;
- the principles by which any learning support will be used;
- your criteria for a successful learning outcome for the individual in relation to your subject for a period of teaching;
- the ways in which the organisation of the learning environment may promote effective learning.

Each of these factors is likely to impact upon your ability to successfully address individual needs within whole-class teaching situations.

When considering the current performance of individual pupils it is essential that you attempt to focus upon the positives and emphasise what pupils can do. Most pupils when discussing their own learning needs and abilities will tell you about their difficulties and what they find difficult. Motivation and confidence are essential features of becoming an effective learner and is best achieved if you can demonstrate to pupils some of their successes in the classroom. In so doing you need to be aware of the peer pressures which pupils often experience and ensure that the ways in which you provide support or discuss learning needs enhance rather than inhibit learning. It may help to celebrate the successes of a pupil in front of the class, but if these successes are related to work which is of an easier level than that undertaken by the pupil’s peers it may be better celebrated quietly and with the pupil alone.

Talking to pupils in advance of a course of lessons, explaining what your expectations are and helping the pupil to identify where they may have difficulties, can reap many rewards.
Such a discussion should also enable you to assist the pupil in setting appropriate targets related to your expectations for their individual learning outcomes. Consider the experiences of Kerry Noble quoted earlier in this chapter (p. 141). Had teachers spent more time discussing their expectations and entering into negotiation about required outcomes with her, they would have commanded greater respect and provided motivation for learning. Pupils must know that it is acceptable for them to be working at a level which is different from that expected of others in the class, but they must also be aware of your demands and feel that they are challenged by your expectations.

TAs and the pupils themselves will provide you with many insights into how they learn. All learners have preferred methods of learning and these may well vary according to situation, lesson content or confidence in the subject. Pupils are often able to describe how they like to have work presented which may assist you in differentiating your lessons. They will also provide valuable insights into who they work well with, when they feel they need support and the kind of resources which may make life easier for them. Differentiation must be perceived as being more than simply providing a pupil with a different worksheet or materials. Lewis (1992) has identified 11 types of differentiation which she believes should form part of every teacher’s armoury; these being:

- **Differentiation of content**: e.g. pupils in a group all work towards a single aim, such as reading a novel, but use several different versions of the novel, including simplified texts.
- **Differentiation of interest**: e.g. all pupils are producing graphs, but their graphs represent different data according to personal interest.
- **Differentiation of pace**: all pupils work at the same task, or with the same materials, but the teacher has different expectations of the time required for completion.
- **Differentiation of access**: materials or methods of working are different for individual pupils, e.g. whilst one pupil writes with a pencil another uses a computer and another produces pictorial work.
- **Differentiation of outcome**: e.g. one pupil writes a story, another draws a picture to tell the story and another records the story on audio tape.
- **Differentiation of curricular sequence**: pupils enter the curriculum at different points or take part in the curriculum in a different order from that of their peers.
- **Differentiation of teacher time**: the teacher gives more time to some pupils during specific tasks in order to ensure access.
- **Differentiation of teaching style**: e.g. some pupils may require individual instruction whilst others can work in small groups or pairs.
- **Differentiation of structure**: some pupils work on a step-by-step (task analysed curriculum) whilst others work on ‘chunks’.
- **Differentiation of level**: all pupils work through a similar sequence, in maths for example, but at a variety of levels.
- **Differentiation of grouping**: the teacher groups particular pupils together for specific activities. Pupils act as supporters, or work with peers with whom they are comfortable or confident.

By having an awareness of these forms of differentiation you gain confidence in knowing which is appropriate at a particular time and for an individual pupil. There will be many times when pupils benefit from your use of several forms of differentiation. For example, you may well combine differentiation of grouping with that of interest and outcome in
order to ensure that a pupil can engage with the lesson content. O’Brien and Guiney (2001) have demonstrated that effective differentiation is not simply about singling out a learner with difficulties, but being aware that a differentiated approach to teaching enables all pupils in a class to access learning at a level that is appropriate to their individual needs. It is rare to have the kind of homogeneous group where all pupils learn at the same pace, in the same way and from the same teaching approach. The teacher who has developed a thoughtful approach to differentiation can enable all pupils within a class to feel comfortable with learning. Increasingly, schools are able to provide teachers with data which can be used to gain insights into the learning journey of individual pupils throughout their schooling.

Careful differentiation also enables you to identify intended learning outcomes for individual pupils and to ensure that they are familiar with these. Such information is vital in enabling you to structure your lessons in a way that ensures that pupils are challenged without feeling excluded from the contents. Howley and Kime (2003) have presented case studies which illustrate how two pupils of considerably differing needs were enabled to be included in mainstream classrooms through careful structuring and differentiation. One of these pupils, a boy with dyslexia and behaviour difficulties, benefited from a rearrangement of the classroom environment and the provision of individualised pictorial and written instructions which enabled him to be perpetually reminded of the teacher’s expectations. The second pupil, a girl with autistic spectrum disorders, required the use of a personalised timetable which indicated what would be expected of her at various times during the day and within lessons. Both of these pupils were described as providing particular challenges to their teachers but were able to be successfully managed within classes by having personalised adaptations made which assisted them with feeling comfortable about learning.

SUMMARY

All teachers find having pupils who have difficulties with learning challenging. This applies to experienced teachers as well as those who are starting out in the profession. The effective management of such pupils is dependent upon careful planning, well co-ordinated team work with colleagues both in schools and from other agencies, and a commitment to being flexible with regard to teaching style. Effective planning and teaching for pupils who have difficulties with learning, possibly because of a special educational need or limited understanding of English, is likely to benefit all pupils in a class. A commitment to an inquiry-based approach to teaching (see Chapter 16), where you are continually asking critical questions and reflecting on your practice, is essential. After a lesson discuss with a pupil who has difficulties accessing learning those aspects of the lesson which they found easy or hard. Re-plan the lesson with the pupil and identify how you might have adjusted your practice to make learning more effective for this individual. Consider how any modifications which you might make could benefit other pupils in the class.

Reflective task 10.3
Planning for individual needs

After a lesson discuss with a pupil who has difficulties accessing learning those aspects of the lesson which they found easy or hard. Re-plan the lesson with the pupil and identify how you might have adjusted your practice to make learning more effective for this individual. Consider how any modifications which you might make could benefit other pupils in the class.
questions about the impact of your own practice, is likely to enable you to gain a greater understanding of what works for a wider range of pupils.

**FURTHER READING**

Hall, D., Griffiths, D., Haslam, L. and Wilkin, Y. (2001) *Assessing the Needs of Bilingual Pupils*, 2nd edition. London: David Fulton. This book considers the strategies which teachers may adopt in order to support pupils for whom English may be an additional or new language. It provides practical help through exemplar lesson plans and advice on resources.

Jones, C. and Rutter, J. (1998) *Refugee Education: Mapping the Field*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books. This text provides insights into the challenges faced by refugees when entering the UK education system. It offers sound advice on the ways in which teachers can make life easier for pupils from refugee families.

O’Brien, T. and Guiney, D. (2001) *Differentiation in Teaching and Learning*. London: Continuum. This text not only discusses a wide range of approaches to differentiation, which enables pupils to be well included in learning, but also outlines the principles upon which effective planning should be founded.

Tilstone, C. and Rose, R. (2003) *Strategies to Promote Inclusive Practice*. London: Routledge Falmer. This book examines a range of situations where teachers find it challenging to include pupils in learning. Chapters provide case studies and advice on a wide range of issues including managing learning support, working with other agencies and planning for individual needs.