

Developing inclusive practice

MANAGING LEARNING IN MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

Effective differentiation: Any measure that allows a struggling learner to succeed, or an underachieving one to perform better.

No two learners have exactly the same learning needs, so 'mixed ability' issues apply to any class that contains two or more learners.

In order to be available to meet individual needs within a class, teachers have to find ways to reduce in frequency those aspects of teaching that limit their freedom to respond to needs as they arise. This means finding ways of managing the classroom (learners, resources, tasks, relationships, responsibilities, etc.) that create opportunities for working closely with individuals or small groups of learners.

In essence, this means finding ways to counteract dependency. In freeing learners from teacher-talk-dependency, the teacher gains freedom to interact with individuals and groups on a more personal and therefore more targeted basis.

Some strategies that help to create those conditions:

The teacher gains time for interaction with individuals and groups by...

... sharing with learners some of the responsibility for lesson planning and learning (a 'partnership' approach)

... helping learners to develop and use independent, collaborative and problem-solving skills

... organising tasks and activities in ways that are compatible with the partnership approach

... developing and organising resources in ways that facilitate the partnership approach

... devising monitoring strategies for ensuring: regular feedback **to** learners; feedback **from** learners; assessing and recording, etc.

MAKING CHANGES

Teachers are understandably afraid of 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater'. How can you know if any change you make is going to work any better than what you were doing before? Here are some ways of reducing the risk:

Take small steps

Neither you nor the pupils will be comfortable with whole-scale change. Take one step at a time, and prepare the pupils well, so that they are not upset by unexpected changes to usual practice. They need to know if your expectations have changed, and if so, why. Explain that small changes can often make a big difference to how well pupils learn, and involve them in evaluating the effectiveness of the new procedures. If they need to learn new skills (e.g. how to work in groups, engage in self- or peer- assessment, etc.) make sure that these skills are explicitly taught.

Add breadth and enrichment

Maintain the existing regime for the time being, but experiment with additions and/or alterations to one or two activities with a view to widening their sensory scope, to introducing more choice and more independent or collaborative or active learning, etc., thereby accommodating the needs of more learners.

Offer choices

First, try a range of approaches with your pupils so that you, and they, can find out which method works best for different individuals. Then, begin to offer choices, allowing pupils to choose whichever way seems to work best for them. Again, this begins to involve pupils in thinking about learning and encourages them to take on some of the responsibility. Vocabulary learning is often chosen as a vehicle for early experimentation, since it is relatively easy to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches.

Start with one unit

One tried and tested strategy is to pick out for your experiment a theme or unit of work which seems to be particularly difficult to teach successfully, and to develop just that part of your programme in line with the new ideas that you want to try. Since you selected something which was working unsatisfactorily anyway, you have nothing to lose. Also, if it works, you know that success is due to the change in approach, and that will give you the confidence to experiment further.