



DIFFERENTIATION
and the
SECONDARY
CURRICULUM

debates and
dilemmas



ROUTLEDGE

edited by

SUSAN HART

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Differentiation and the secondary curriculum

Differentiation and the secondary curriculum: debates and dilemmas

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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the term 'differentiation' has increasingly entered the everyday usage of teachers and become a priority issue on many school development plans. Yet in the summer of 1994, when most of the co-authors of this book met together on an in-service education (INSET) course at the Institute of Education in Cambridge, a library research revealed only three books and a small collection of articles with 'differentiation' in their title. Of these, none provided any actual examples of practice and none asked the sorts of questions about differentiation that this group of teachers most wanted to raise.

This seemed a good enough reason for trying to write such a book ourselves. What was needed, we felt, was a book written *by* teachers *for* teachers that would reflect the living, breathing, frustrating, tiring, challenging, rewarding and occasionally inspiring reality of everyday work in schools. We have tried to write the kind of book that we wish had been available to us at the start of the course: one that reads easily but does not patronise, one that not only offers practical examples but also raises theoretical questions, one that recognises the pressures of practice and the need to get the task done, but does not shy away from acknowledging the complexity of the issues involved.

When we came together originally, as a group of professional people, all that united us was a shared interest in learning more about the issue of differentiation and its implications for practice in schools. As we have gradually built up a shared body of knowledge, experience and expertise, however, we have also gradually begun to elaborate some shared questions, concerns and principles relating to differentiation that give a distinctive flavour to the approach adopted in this book.

Perhaps the most important of these is a recognition that the new focus on differentiation in schools can lead not only to positive developments but also to developments that we would not necessarily wish to endorse. One of our main aims in this book, then, is to draw attention to some of these more controversial aspects of 'differentiation' and try to open these up to constructive discussion and debate. We do not pretend to have definitive answers to the questions we raise, or to offer clear solutions to the tensions and complexities that we acknowledge. What we can do is to provide honest accounts of how we have attempted to respond to them so far in the various contexts within which we

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work. All are part of a continuing enquiry: seeking to understand what 'differentiation' means and the part it might play in fostering children's learning.

In many cases, the accounts record the first tentative steps taken as we began to explore ways forward. Most are written by teachers who are describing their work for publication for the first time. We present them because we think that the questions they address are important and because examples of practice will provide food for thought to help readers reflect upon alternative possibilities and establish their own principled basis for choosing particular ways of working.

The overall structure of the book and the organisation of the case study chapters have been designed with this purpose in mind. It is possible to read or dip into the various parts of the book in any order, or use individual chapters as a basis for INSET, depending upon readers' particular needs, interests and purposes. All chapters begin with an editorial introduction which aims to highlight the key issues and questions addressed in each chapter at a general level. This could be used as a starting point for staff discussion, drawing first upon teachers' own experience and resources to reflect upon the questions and issues raised, and then developing the discussion further by engaging with the ideas in the chapter.

PART I: WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATION?

Many teachers on the course felt that a necessary first step for themselves and their colleagues was to demystify the notion of 'differentiation'. They talked to colleagues, observed in lessons, examined their own practices and took photographs round the school in order to clarify their own understandings of the term and the range of practices that might be included within it. They drew on their own existing understandings, plus the limited literature so far available, to begin to analyse and describe the many features of school and classroom practice which contribute to 'differentiation' and examine how these connected up with their own ideas of good practice.

In this first part of the book, we invite readers now to reconsider with us the question 'What is differentiation?' Our experience suggests that there is no simple answer to that question. Indeed, the term has a whole set of meanings and prior associations which are frequently unacknowledged in current debates. Three course participants, including the course tutor, make their own contributions to answering this question, linking it up to their own experience and practice.

Chapter 1 examines the origins of the new emphasis on 'differentiation' and some of the influences which have made 'differentiation' a major priority for development work in many schools. It highlights some of the controversial and problematic issues which the term 'differentiation' raises for the author, and proposes an interpretation of 'differentiation' which links it to equal opportunities issues.

Chapter 2 looks at how the different traditions, philosophies and forms of organisation of primary and secondary schools affect how ‘differentiation’ is interpreted and what kinds of ‘differentiation’ are possible. It considers the implications of these differences for children transferring to secondary school, and what can be done to ease the transition. The chapter takes the form of a dialogue between Brigid Davidson, a primary Year 6 teacher, and Jan Moore, a secondary teacher who is currently engaged in a major initiative to develop differentiation across the curriculum in her own school.

Chapter 3 argues for an interpretation of ‘differentiation’ that will help to ensure that the effort which teachers put into ‘differentiation’ will lead to a genuine improvement in children’s learning. Drawing on her own experience, Sharon Camilletti analyses why the considerable effort that goes into differentiating work does not always achieve the goal of enabling children to learn more successfully and independently. She proposes an interpretation of ‘differentiation’ based upon an understanding of learners’ strengths, and offers a practical illustration of curriculum material which reflects these ideas.

PART II: DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH SMALL GROUP LEARNING

In this second part of the book, we invite readers to consider the impact upon children of different ways of organising teaching and learning in response to the diversity represented within any teaching group, and look in particular at the potential for using small group learning as a means of achieving differentiation.

In **Chapter 4**, Lynda McCall explains her own reasons for wanting to avoid approaches involving the separation of children into ability groups and sets, or the fragmentation of a mixed-ability class into groups working at different levels. She offers an example of a redesigned science lesson in which carefully planned and structured group work is used as a means of providing appropriate and challenging learning experiences for all children, while maintaining a worthwhile educational experience that the whole class can share.

Chapter 5 acknowledges the concerns that many teachers have about group work and considers what steps might need to be taken in order for group work to be effective. Janet Fawthrop describes how she involved the children in her class in setting up ground rules for group work, as a first step towards enabling them to reflect on and monitor their effectiveness in working together. She discovered that even children whom she had expected it would be difficult to include and involve could be successfully integrated with group work activities. A number of useful sources of ideas for supporting teachers in the development of group work are included in an appendix to this chapter.

**PART III:
DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH FLEXIBLE
TEACHING**

The third part of the book draws into the discussion and invites readers to evaluate the usefulness of research on different teaching and learning styles. Much of the emphasis, in current discussions of differentiation, is upon how best to provide for differences in attainment or ability within a group of learners. However, existing differences of attainment are themselves symptomatic of the extent to which other differences (including preferred learning style) have been taken into account in the educational experiences previously provided. In [Chapter 6](#), Michael Fielding examines some of the available research on teaching and learning styles and relates this to his overall understanding of the conditions needed to support learning in any classroom.

In [Chapter 7](#), Kiran Chopra describes how she used this work to support and inform two development initiatives in her school. She shows how a study skills programme was enhanced by incorporating into it an understanding of different learning styles. She elaborates particularly on mind-mapping techniques, showing how these are capable of accommodating a range of learning styles. She also describes how knowledge of different learning styles was incorporated into differentiation strategies used in the planning and implementation of a language awareness project.

In [Chapter 8](#), Nicola Hancock shows how she used this research as a basis for INSET amongst staff. The chapter raises the more general question of how INSET needs to be organised in order to ensure that the time invested is felt by staff to be well spent. The author describes how she contributed to the planning and organisation of the INSET, using the outcomes of her own classroom research on teaching and learning styles, and presents detailed examples of both the activities which teachers undertook and the practical ideas which emerged.

**PART IV:
DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH SUPPORT**

Current discussion on ‘differentiation’ often seems to take for granted that it is a relatively straightforward matter to establish what a child ‘needs’ educationally. Yet our experience suggests that the task is in fact a highly complex one, even when a support teacher is available for some of the time to provide one-to-one help. Though we may be prepared in principle to adjust our teaching in any way necessary to accommodate children’s needs, it may be difficult to know how best we can help a child.

In [Part IV](#), we acknowledge these complexities, and look at some of the tensions and dilemmas surrounding support teachers’ work. [Chapter 9](#) describes the efforts of one support teacher to understand and get to know a little better the ‘needs’ of a 14-year-old girl identified as having ‘emotional and behavioural

difficulties'. Barbara Parry describes how her perception of the ways support might best be used changed as a result of detailed observations of Kelly's participation in lessons.

Chapters 10 and 11 look at issues of support for bilingual children, and examine the case for and against providing support through withdrawal. Since the late 1970s, it has been argued that the best context for learning English is the mainstream classroom. In this setting, children are constantly exposed to the language that they are in the process of acquiring, used in real situations for real communicative purposes. Yet teachers are often concerned, particularly at secondary level, about accepting early stage bilingual students because it does not seem possible to provide for their learning in the context of subject teaching. In Chapter 10, Jean Mayala examines the part that an 'induction' class can play in supporting the transition into mainstream education of newly arrived bilingual pupils. He looks at what can be done in this withdrawal context to prepare pupils to cope more successfully within the mainstream, and raise their own expectations of what they can achieve. He also explains briefly the wider context of his work supporting teachers and learners in mainstream contexts.

In Chapter 11, Neil Parr explores what form support for bilingual learners can take if it is not something added on to existing provision, but developed as an integral part of schools' response to the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students. He explores what makes a learning environment more or less enabling for bilingual learners and puts forward some concrete suggestions to help mainstream teachers develop teaching approaches that are both supportive and inclusive.

PART V: DIFFERENTIATION AT A WHOLE-SCHOOL LEVEL

The final part of the book looks at issues relating to the development of differentiation at the level of overall school policy. Should there be a policy on differentiation? If so, what exactly is its function and what should it contain? How do we organise its development in such a way that it becomes more than just a paper exercise? How does or should it overlap with other policies, say on special needs, behaviour, equal opportunities or language across the curriculum? Chapter 12 describes one school's experience of developing a whole-school policy on differentiation. Susanna Pickstock outlines the processes of consultation that surrounded the development of a draft document, the content of the document eventually produced and the INSET activities used to raise awareness and stimulate further discussion amongst staff.

Chapter 13 looks at where a policy on differentiation fits within schools' wider commitment to providing equal opportunities for all children. Drawing attention to the National Curriculum Council's recommendation that a commitment to equal opportunities should permeate every aspect of the curriculum, Judy Erwin explores different perceptions of the importance of

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equality issues in schools. She draws on her own experience as an advisory teacher for equal opportunities to explain her own developing understanding of these issues, and identifies some approaches and activities to stimulate discussion and help schools develop policy and practice.

The book concludes with an appendix prepared collectively by the teachers participating on the course, reviewing materials for INSET currently available and identifying additional reading material which course members found useful in supporting the development of their own thinking and practice.

Part I

What is differentiation?

Chapter 1

Differentiation and equal opportunities

Susan Hart

Without 'equality' there can be no 'quality' of education
(Runnymede Trust 1993)

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the late 1980s, the notion of 'differentiation' has entered our professional vocabulary and become widely accepted amongst many teachers and other educators as an essential feature of 'good practice'. Any scheme of work or collective learning experience must be 'differentiated', it is claimed, if it is to provide appropriate and challenging learning opportunities for all children.

But what exactly is meant by 'differentiation' and what does it entail in practice? Is it just a new word for what teachers have always done to take account of the diversity of learners in their classes? If so, why do we need a new term for it? Why does it need to be made such a priority issue for discussion and development in schools? If not, how is it different from what we have always done? What else does it imply that we need to do or think about? Where does this imperative come from and why is it important?

These are some of the questions that we set out to examine at the start of the in-service course which led to the idea of this book. Course participants were attempting to clarify their understandings of the term by relating it to their previous experience and to their existing thinking and practice. As course tutor, my aim was to encourage debate, rather than impose my own interpretations. Nevertheless, I felt that it was relevant to share with participants my own difficulties in coming to terms with the new focus on 'differentiation', if only to demonstrate that it was legitimate, within the course, for contrary view points to be voiced and debated in an open, exploratory and constructive way.

This is again the spirit in which this chapter is written. In it, I outline my own understanding of the meaning and origins of the term 'differentiation' and engage in debate with these meanings based on my own previous understandings and experience. I explain why it has been problematic for me to assimilate it into

my own ways of thinking, and make explicit the particular meanings which I need to invest in it in order for it to fit with, and constructively serve, my own aspirations for children's learning. Again, the intention is to encourage discussion and examination of alternative perspectives, rather than to try to impose a particular view or way of interpreting 'differentiation' in practice. I am not speaking on behalf of other contributors to the book. They will elaborate their own perspectives and ideas, and the particular questions which they felt it important to pursue, in their own chapters.

Briefly, I had problems in coming to terms with the emergence of 'differentiation' as a new discourse of 'good practice' because all my thinking about teaching and learning, throughout my professional life, had been developed within a framework which identified 'differentiation' not as a solution to but as a major cause of inequality and underachievement. My ways of conceptualising and responding to 'differences', and my perceptions of the scope available to teachers for enhancing learning and achievement, were informed by, and developed explicitly to counteract, the adverse effects that my training and professional experience had led me to associate with 'differentiation' practices in schools. This concept of 'differentiation' was clearly born of a different era, a different political agenda, a different set of debates. Yet it raised questions and concerns about entitlement and opportunity which seemed to me still to have power and relevance today, and particularly since many of the old tensions between selective and comprehensive principles have emerged afresh in the debates surrounding current legislative reforms.

In this chapter, then, I explain how I have tried to work through these problems and reach a new understanding of 'differentiation': one which not only acknowledges and addresses my original concerns but also extends and enriches my earlier thinking. I hope that exploring these links and tensions between the idea of 'differentiation' and my own previous thinking and practice will provide a stimulus for readers to review their own understandings and join with me in grappling with the more problematic aspects.

ORIGINS OF THE TERM

My research suggests that the new focus on 'differentiation'—as a discourse of 'good practice'—has its origins in a series of reports by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) following surveys carried out in secondary schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Department of Education and Science (DES, 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1984). These reports expressed concern that much of the teaching observed was insufficiently challenging for pupils of all abilities. Teachers' expectations were often too low; teaching approaches were too narrow, exam-focused and overly directive; teaching tended to aim at the middle (however pupils were grouped) rather than seek to accommodate successfully a broad range of attainment and prior experience. The term 'differentiation' was used by HMI to try to pinpoint what it was that was felt to be lacking: namely

that the 'more able' and 'less able' pupils in the group were inadequately catered for; in some cases, even the 'middle' group remained under-challenged because expectations of the notional average underestimated what pupils were really capable of achieving.

Although mixed-ability classes were not the sole target of criticism, the problem was noted to be particularly acute in 'mixed ability' situations because the range of 'ability' was so wide.

It was surprising to find that in a large number of cases mixed ability classes were taught as though they were homogeneous groups. The work was usually pitched at a level thought appropriate for the majority of the class, and inevitably this was unsuitable for pupils at each end of the spectrum. Sometimes, the level aimed at was below what the average pupil could attain, and the result was a slow pace, undemanding work and general underachievement.

(DES 1978a p. 49)

However, 'teaching to the middle' was observed to be a common practice, whatever the mode of grouping. Grouping by ability, *per se*, was not a sufficient basis for ensuring that pupils' abilities were appropriately provided for. A 'gifted' child was not catered for, simply by being placed in a top stream or set (DES 1977), nor were the 'least able' children necessarily appropriately helped by being taught together in a selected group:

They frequently had the advantage of being taught in smaller classes, with the possibility of receiving greater individual attention, but the programmes offered to them were seldom successfully pitched at a level which both retained interest and demanded worthwhile achievement.

(DES 1979 p. 40)

Where explicit steps had been taken to adapt teaching to accommodate differences within a teaching group, these had in many cases succeeded only in catering for a different pace of working. HMI noted, too, that the use of worksheets and individual assignments often had the effect of reducing opportunities for genuine intellectual challenge, for using personal initiative and for engaging in independent thinking:

Even when they were genuinely matched to the abilities of pupils—and this was rare—the assignment sheets had certain disadvantages. They had to be explicit to enable work to proceed without reference to the teacher, and as a result were often over-directive and reduced opportunities for pupils to think for themselves and to use resources. For the same reason, they tended to over-emphasise transfer of information and to encourage intellectual conformity rather than intellectual curiosity and independence

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of thought. By asking for a written response to a written stimulus they reduced opportunities for discussion, with the result not only of limiting progress in oral skills but also of restricting opportunities for the development and understanding of concepts that can arise through talking round a subject.

(DES 1978a p. 54)

In setting their expectations of pupils, teachers needed to bear in mind that 'more able' pupils often disguised their capabilities from teachers, levelling their performance down to the average of the group. The limitations of the teachers' own experience could also lead them to underestimate pupils' potential:

A not inconsiderable number of teachers had no experience of the level and quality of work that can be achieved by able pupils in setted or streamed groups, and found it difficult to appreciate their potential and meet their needs when they encountered them as individuals or as a small minority in a mixed group.

(DES 1978a p. 51)

Equally, it was important to ensure that children perceived as 'less able' were not underestimated and given an impoverished curriculum, either because of their weaknesses in the 'basics' or because it was felt that they could not cope with challenging tasks:

It is not merely a matter of seeing that a range of subjects appears on their timetable but that they, as much as any other children, maintain contact with stimulating experiences.... Academically less able pupils need to have plenty of opportunity to exercise their imagination and reasoning power through a variety of subjects.

(DES 1984 pp. 44–6)

Thus, HMI's concern about 'lack of differentiation' in teaching was in effect a concern about entitlement and opportunity at all points of the notional ability range. What was being proposed did amount to quite a significant departure from teachers' existing practice. It involved a concerted effort to develop practice at two levels. At the level of method, the task was to introduce greater variety and flexibility into teaching approaches in order to cater for differences (here defined in terms of notional 'ability'), and in a way that would genuinely enhance the quality of learning opportunities provided for all children. At the level of expectation, the question was how to ensure that demands made on pupils were sufficiently challenging: neither underestimating their capabilities nor making unrealistic demands that would prevent them from participating fully and gaining a sense of achievement in their work.

In the wake of these surveys, 'differentiation' became a recurring theme in HMI documents during the course of the 1980s. It was seen as a necessary corollary of the simultaneous move towards greater coherence, commonality and continuity in the curriculum provided for all children throughout the years of compulsory schooling:

Enabling all pupils to achieve a comparable quality of education and a comparable quality of adult life is a more subtle and skilled task than taking them all through identical syllabuses or teaching them all by the same methods. It requires careful assessment of children's capabilities and continuing progress, and selection of those experiences and activities that will best enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge they need in common and to develop to the full their potential.

(DES 1980 p. 2)

These concerns and recommendations for enhancing 'differentiation' were clearly influential in the debates about educational standards which preceded and precipitated the governmental drive toward reform. The document *Better schools* (DES and Welsh office 1985a), which presented government's view of what needed to be done to raise standards of achievement generally, includes 'differentiation', alongside 'breadth', 'balance' and 'relevance', as one of four key principles to be reflected in the curriculum offered to every pupil:

there should be careful differentiation: what is taught and how it is taught need to be matched to pupils' abilities and aptitudes. It is of the greatest importance to stimulate and challenge all pupils, including the most and least able: within teaching groups as well as schools the range of ability is often wide.

(ibid., p. 15)

'Choice' and 'diversity', two key themes of 'differentiation', were to be the means of achieving equality of opportunity for all:

I want to ensure that we actively recognise pupils' differing abilities and aptitudes and create the means for this diversity to flourish. That is the way to genuine equality of opportunity

(John Major, speech, 1992)

ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW?

However, HMI's critique of existing practice and recommendations for improving teaching were not themselves without their critics. The report on mixed-ability teaching, for example, was taken to task by Simon (1979) for its

treatment of children ‘as segments of “the whole ability range” [who] must be given an education “appropriate” to their place in this range’ (p. 54).

A leading critic of theories of IQ and intelligence testing, Simon argued that schools (or their teachers) who had made a conscious and deliberate move to non-streaming would be unlikely to think of their pupils in these terms:

Such a move is based on the concept that the child develops in the process of his [*sic*] education, and that it is highly undesirable from an educational point of view to predetermine that development by forming teaching groups based on a judgement (however made) as to the child’s present level at a given moment in time. Groups so formed determine the child’s scope for development by ensuring differentiated environmental stimuli. This is why Douglas, Vernon (and others) found over 20 years ago now that stream placement affected intellectual development, the differences between streams becoming exacerbated over time.

(Simon 1979 p. 54)

The idea that in order to provide appropriate and challenging teaching for all requires that teachers categorise their pupils by ‘ability’ in their minds ‘misses the whole point of unstreaming’, Simon argues, and indeed is ‘in contradiction to its very purpose’:

Certainly there should be scope for the pursuit of individual (or group) interests, and each child encouraged to make his own unique contribution. But that contribution cannot be pre-determined on a rigid classificatory model—the unexpected may occur and should be allowed for; particular children may develop particular interests and enthusiasms. In short, the situation must allow for growth, for developments which cannot be predicted.... This concept differs fundamentally from the structuring of ‘programmes’ for differing levels of ability as the pre-condition for success in the non-streamed situation.

(Simon 1979 p. 54)

The case for differentiation argued in the reports was not, of course, concerned solely with provision for diversity in unstreamed or mixed-ability groups. Nevertheless, Simon’s principle that our ways of formulating and responding to diversity must ‘allow for (unpredictable) growth’ helps clarify and confirm my own sense that we were working with a different conception of ‘differences’ and their significance for teaching and learning, which did not involve comparing and fixing children’s abilities in our minds or ranging them along an imagined continuum, as a strategy for organising and planning ‘appropriate’ teaching.

Working with this conception of ‘differences’ did not mean ignoring differences of attainment, but rather taking them into account in a way that would leave every opportunity open and, hopefully, spur the child on to

transcend existing limits. It meant keeping a resolutely open mind about every child's capabilities and therefore looking for approaches to teaching which would avoid prejudging outcomes in ways which might be limiting. Hargreaves (1972) summed up the principle as follows:

All teachers are committed to the improvement of their children. It seems that improvements can occur, even dramatically and *contrary to the evidence*, if the teacher can go on believing that the potentiality for improvement is always there within the child waiting to be released. And an important part of promoting the release of these potentialities consists in the teacher's communication of his faith in the pupil to the pupil.

(Hargreaves 1972 p. 68, my emphasis)

Indeed, more than just communicating faith, it was about taking active steps to try to engage children's learning powers more fully. One of the challenges of this way of approaching the task, however, was how to ensure that children did in fact take up and pursue all the opportunities which the topic presented rather than being satisfied with a minimum contribution. It could be that what HMI saw and condemned as 'teaching to the middle' was in fact teachers' not-yet-entirely-successful attempts to develop approaches to teaching which deliberately sought to avoid prejudging capability based on existing attainment. The opportunities for more challenge may have been present in the teacher's mind and planning, but not realised in practice because the material did not succeed in engaging learners' interest in sufficient depth for the more challenging aspects of the topic to be opened up. The success of the approach depended upon winning pupils' interest and willingness to take up and pursue as fully as possible the learning opportunities provided.

Thus, if it had been part of HMI's brief to probe teachers' own analyses and agendas for development at the time, it might have been noticed that there were other ways of conceptualising the problem of underachievement and the scope available to teachers for addressing it, based on less problematic assumptions. Certainly, it was not difficult to believe that most children (even those deemed academically successful) were capable of far more than they currently achieved in the context of formal schooling. An enduring experience for me of working with secondary age children was that most engaged only a fraction of their available resources most of the time in the tasks of school learning. In many cases, the energy and emotional investment in school work was minimal. To borrow Mead's (1934) analogy:

It is as if a generator with enough electricity to power an elevator were used to run an electric light bulb.

(Mead 1934)

Many put their best efforts, as Pye (1988) observes, into simply coping with the 'predicament of being in school', finding ways of defending themselves against learning which were directly at odds with teachers' intentions and aspirations. There was clearly enormous scope for enhancing learning and achievement, irrespective of differences between individuals' capabilities, if we could find ways to enlist more of pupils' emotional and intellectual resources in the tasks of school learning.

In my own modern languages field, dreary and inappropriate textbooks, which were all that were available in the early 1970s, were gradually replaced by lively, multimedia materials with an authentic flavour that were able to engage children's interests and facilitate active involvement in a variety of ways. Teachers adapted and developed these materials themselves, continually searching for better ways of engaging learners' interest, imagination and commitment to learning. Similar developments were taking place in subject teaching throughout the school. Maths teachers were experimenting with the development of individualised learning materials suitable for mixed-ability groups, and trying to come to terms with both the management and pedagogical problems which these raised. Humanities and English teachers combined resources to produce an integrated 'world studies' curriculum designed to support and stimulate independent learning, giving pupils more time to become absorbed in tasks and pursue their own personal lines of investigation.

None of us would have claimed that our efforts were entirely successful or that we had even come close to 'cracking' the problem of how to win more of children's emotional and intellectual commitment to the tasks of school learning. Nevertheless, much was learnt during this period of relevance to today's discussions on 'differentiation'. For instance, we discovered the risk of 'death by a thousand worksheets' and the danger of reducing the teacher's role to a mere manager and marker when individualised approaches are used. We discovered the many problems associated with the development of simplified printed materials intended for poor readers within the group: the loss of redundant text which paradoxically makes the text more difficult to read; the isolation of those children from the stimulus of working with peers; the stigma attached to simplified material if made available to just some children; alternatively the problem of preventing those who did not need them choosing the easy option if we made them freely available to all.

We began to think differently about ways of responding to diversity: viewing a class of learners not as thirty independent units but as a learning group capable of benefiting individually and collectively from the enormous variety of personal resources contained within the group as a whole. The question now became how to organise learning in such a way as to bring each child's resources into interaction with those of others, and with the curriculum, so as to support and enhance their own and one another's learning (Hart 1989).

This analysis of the scope and focus for development was endorsed in an important review of secondary education carried out in London schools in the

early 1980s (Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) 1984) with a view to developing a strategy for combating underachievement. Interestingly, this made no use of the term 'differentiation' either in presenting its analysis of the problem (following extensive consultation with pupils and teachers) or its 104 recommendations for improving secondary schools:

Much of the boredom cited by ILEA pupils relates to [the] view that too little effort is made to engage them in active learning, that they are required to spend too much time listening or copying, or completing worksheets.... Boredom leads to resentment and that resentment is expressed either by passive withdrawal of attention or by disruptive behaviour. In the case of the latter a 'double-bind' situation is all too often created: rebellious pupils are seen as too irresponsible to be given opportunities for discussion, working in pairs, or in small groups and are meted out with yet more of the very kind of silent solitary activity that has stimulated their original rebellion. ...Our evidence suggests that pupils wish to be given much more responsibility for their own learning and to have the opportunity to negotiate much more of both its content and its process.

(ILEA 1984 p. 69)

The implication of the overall report was that in order to raise standards of 'achievement', schools needed to open up some fundamental questions about curricula, teaching and learning: about how 'achievement' itself is recognised, defined and valued, about how we conceptualise learners and about the part that learners have to play in their own education. At the heart of the problem, the report suggested, was a passive view of learning and the learner which leads to low-level engagement on the part of most students and disaffection on the part of a significant number, particularly those who do not see themselves as likely to achieve 'success' in conventional terms. To focus on catering more effectively for 'differences', without raising these more fundamental questions, would still leave the most important features of the situation unchanged.

To summarise, then, my training and teaching experience had led to a different way of thinking about 'differences' and a different analysis of the scope available to teachers for enhancing learning and achievement from that presented by HMI. Their recommendations for enhancing 'differentiation' were born of their analysis and ways of thinking about differences, and did not correspond to my own agenda for change and development. Indeed, 'differentiation' suggested to me a separating out process, whereas my experience had brought me to a point where, in my mind, what I was trying to achieve was better thought of as a process of bringing learners together, into purposeful and fruitful interaction with one another, so that the diversity of knowledge, experience, prior skills and interests within a class could provide a resource and stimulus for the whole group. Obviously, this way of formulating the task does also include a need to take account of such differences, since it would not be possible to achieve the

goal of enhancing pupils' active involvement in learning unless they had the means to undertake the tasks, and perceived tasks themselves to be interesting and worthwhile.

ADVERSE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENTIATION?

The ways of thinking about 'differences' and about the scope for enhancing learning that informed my teaching were influenced by a powerful and accumulating body of evidence, generated by research and reinforced through experience, highlighting the inhibiting effects of the ways in which schools have traditionally defined, identified and provided for 'differences' in learners' perceived abilities and needs. Research claimed that these practices had a seriously limiting effect upon many children's long-term development and life-chances both by irrevocably closing off options (either formally through grouping or informally through expectations formed in teachers' minds) and by setting up a complex set of social and psychological reactions which led to lowered expectations, loss of dignity, confidence and motivation, and the progressive alienation of a significant proportion of the school's population. These effects were found to be associated, moreover, not just with situations where children were formally separated into groups on the basis of similar attainment or perceived ability, but also in mixed-ability or unstreamed situations, through well-intentioned steps taken to accommodate 'differences'.

It seemed to me that it was vital to work through these concerns and their implications for differentiation practices today, if developments undertaken in the name of equality and entitlement were genuinely to contribute to that aim. Indeed, a recent study has produced up-to-date evidence to reconfirm and develop some of its main theses (Abraham 1995). Yet it is rare in my experience for this prior history even to be acknowledged let alone given serious theoretical consideration in current debates. Meanwhile, many schools in both primary and secondary sectors, who (under the influence of this research) had previously abandoned differentiated grouping systems, are now in the process of recreating them, in the belief that this will allow the more effective and efficient teaching of the National Curriculum. What grounds are there to reassure ourselves that these groupings will not produce similar effects, undermining the very aims of entitlement and achievement which they are intended to promote?

Of course, the idea that children should receive an education based on ability and aptitude, and *not* on the basis of privilege and social background, was originally intended as a means of promoting equality of opportunity. Justice meant ensuring that children's abilities and needs were accurately identified, so that they could be guided towards the appropriate provision. The practice of sorting children, formally or informally, on the basis of perceived ability therefore began almost immediately upon entry into school. Gradually, however, research began to expose the errors and injustices inherent in these processes.

Jackson (1964) argued that we create 'types' of children by believing that there are 'types' and hence treating them differently. The characteristics of a 'c' stream child come into being through the existence of 'c' streams, not because of common inherent characteristics of children allocated to those categories. Since movement between streams was rare, the process of sorting children by ability meant that decisions that would have irrevocable consequences for children's long-term development and life-chances were being made within a year or two of starting school. The expectations created by the labels, once applied, seemed to become self-fulfilling. Procedures that were intended to promote a fairer distribution of educational opportunities were actually reproducing existing patterns of inequality (Coard 1971; Rist 1971).

Hargreaves (1967) drew attention to the effects of selective grouping upon pupils in a secondary modern school. He showed how the stream to which a pupil was allocated affected their attitudes and expectations and those of teachers towards them. Gradually a polarising effect occurred, with pupils allocated to the lower streams becoming increasingly oppositional and resistant, while those allocated to the top streams remained closely identified with the aims and values of the school. Lacey (1970) found similar processes operating in a grammar school. He used the term 'polarisation' to describe the social processes set in motion by, and bound up with, institutional processes of 'differentiation'. Like Hargreaves, he traced how groups formed a social identity (or subculture), with its own norms and values, that reflected their position in the status hierarchy, leading to the progressive alienation from the school's aims and values of groups assigned to low status positions.

I believe that most teachers will have had at least some experience to call on which corroborates the findings of this research: the damage which can be unintentionally done to learners' confidence, self-image, attitudes and commitment to learning through the impact of labels and more subtle messages conveyed to them through differential treatment. In my own case, on teaching practice in a grammar school, I remember being greeted by pupils in the second 'ability' set out of four with the information that they were 'useless' and I would be better advised to request to teach the top set. I remember, in my own grammar school education, how polarisation began to occur, in attitudes and behaviour, as classes went up the school, with those selected to continue with Latin becoming the elite, and those taking cookery instead becoming disillusioned and occasionally even rebellious as a result of their perceived second-class status. I remember, too, during my teaching career, salutary encounters with 'sink' groups of disaffected youngsters (groups created with the best of intentions to cater for those perceived to be in need of 'extra English') who had long given up any hope of gaining any personal sense of achievement and satisfaction from school learning.

This is not to deny that opting for 'mixed-ability' or undifferentiated approaches to grouping can create its own problems. Research pointed to similar processes operating within comprehensive schools, and even where classes had

been organised on an unstreamed or mixed-ability basis. The problem, it began to emerge, was more to do with particular ways of thinking about learners, and responding to perceived 'differences', rather than specifically with how pupils were grouped. Ball (1981, 1986) studied the shift from a system of banding to mixed-ability grouping in one comprehensive school, and found that the processes and effects were even more marked in mixed-ability settings. He concluded that this was, paradoxically, because of teachers' heightened awareness of differences in this situation, and more concerted effort to make provision to accommodate them. This was, as we have seen, precisely what HMI were recommending as 'good practice' in responding to diversity within a teaching group.

FROM CATEGORIES OF 'ABILITY' TO 'INDIVIDUAL NEEDS'

Nevertheless, a significant change has certainly taken place in the terms in which 'differentiation' is now formulated in National Curriculum documents. Since the original series of HMI reports, the use of broad categories of 'ability' to formulate diversity within a teaching group has given way to a more individualised and diversified interpretation of 'differences', couched in the more descriptive language of 'attainment' and focused upon assessing and meeting 'individual learning needs'.

This shift was already noticeable in an HMI discussion document (DES 1985b) published in the same year as the government document *Better schools*, which introduced the section on 'differentiation' as follows:

A necessary first step in making appropriate provision is the identification of the learning needs of individual pupils by sensitive observation on the part of the teacher.

(DES 1985b p. 47)

The meaning of 'learning needs' was clarified in the following paragraph, emphasising that 'differences' other than those of attainment or ability in a particular area also need to be acknowledged and provided for:

Individual work and assignments can be set to allow for different interests, capabilities and work rates so long as this does not isolate pupils or deprive them of necessary contact with other pupils or the teacher. Finally there should be differentiation in the teaching approaches; some pupils need to proceed slowly, some need a predominantly practical approach and many concrete examples if they are to understand abstractions; some move more quickly and require more demanding work which provides greater intellectual challenge, many have a variety of needs which cannot be neatly categorised.

(ibid p. 47)

This shift towards a more diffuse, individually focused understanding of differentiation, guided by observation and assessment of individual 'needs', was maintained and consolidated in the first pronouncements on differentiation made by the National Curriculum Council (NCC 1990c). A set of documents intended to introduce school staffs and governing bodies to the principles underpinning the National Curriculum linked 'differentiation' to processes of assessment, planning and evaluation, as follows:

The National Curriculum will help teachers to:

- (a) assess what each pupil knows, understands and can do
- (b) use their assessment and the programmes of study to identify the learning needs of individual pupils
- (c) plan programmes of work which take account of their pupils' attainments and allow them to work at different levels
- (d) ensure that all children achieve their maximum potential.

LIMITATIONS OF THE NEW FORMULATION

However, the fragility of this formulation, as a solution to HMI's concerns about underachievement, is highlighted when it is set against the background of the research reviewed earlier. More carefully differentiated assessment and provision to build on existing attainments will reinforce a cycle of low attainment and demoralisation if it is not undertaken as part of a wider endeavour to understand the dynamics of demoralisation and limited achievement and to discover what can be done, within the context of the school, to break into that cycle and influence those dynamics in a positive way.

One major contribution of this research is to illustrate that existing ceilings of achievement are the outcome of complex dynamics in which school experience plays a key determining role. The research on the impact of differentiation processes provides one powerful example of how these dynamics can operate in a way that limits and constrains learning. This happens not only through formal institutional structures, but also through invisible psychological processes: the multi-layered intermeshing of expectations and interactions between teachers and learners, and between learners themselves as they negotiate and respond to the requirements of the formal school curriculum.

In the intervening period, moreover, much other research and development work has been carried out which has opened up awareness of previously unnoticed constraints upon children's full participation and learning in many other areas of school experience. These are not a result of conscious or intentional action on the part of teachers and schools, but arise from ways of

thinking and practices that are so familiar and taken for granted that it has not previously occurred to us to consider what their effect might be upon learning.

We have become increasingly aware, for instance, of the impact of classroom language upon children's learning. This can present a barrier which affects all children to some extent (Barnes 1976; Hull 1985; Wells 1987). However, it affects some children more than others, since for some there is a much greater distance between teacher and learners in terms of the shared knowledge and assumptions upon which communication depends (Edwards and Mercer 1987; Heath 1983; Tizard and Hughes 1985).

We have become aware, too, of the unintended messages that can be conveyed to pupils through the selection of particular curriculum content and by the images presented in reading materials and textbooks. These may reinforce perceptions of who is (and who is not) recognised and valued in the school's scheme of things. We have begun to acknowledge and challenge practices in schools which reinforce gender stereotypes, thus limiting aspirations and motivation towards achievement in school to particular spheres of interest and work associated with masculinity and femininity.

We have become aware of the way that the social world of the school impacts upon children's learning for better or worse, with peer group relationships operating to include or exclude children, generating a dominant pro-school or anti-school ethos which it is difficult for individuals to stand out against. Issues of bullying, racism and sexism and their effects upon children's well-being, upon their attendance at school and their feelings and attitudes towards learning have been the subject of much research, debate and development work in schools.

We have become aware of the ways in which the content and methods of assessment affect children's performance, and ability to reveal the full extent of their existing attainments. We know that the way questions are phrased can significantly affect test outcomes, and that different styles of assessment and examination favour boys and girls differentially. For bilingual learners, the opportunity to use their first language both in learning and for assessment purposes has been raised as an important equal opportunities issue.

It is only by keeping constantly on the alert to such unseen constraints, and working to overcome them as we become aware of them, that we can genuinely claim to be taking steps to be promote 'equality of opportunity' and 'ensuring' that children 'reach their potential'. For to claim to know a child's 'potential' may be to attribute limitations to the child that are in fact limitations of our own understanding of possible factors that might be constraining learning. This, according to Gould (1981), constitutes one of the greatest injustices of all:

We pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within.

(Gould 1981 p. 29)

DIFFERENTIATION AND 'EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES'

If by 'equality of opportunity', we mean a professional concern, commitment and responsibility to ensure that, within the context of formal education, all children have an equal chance to develop their personal resources as fully as possible, then we cannot achieve this goal unless our endeavour to achieve it is informed by all that we know and have learnt over the years (through experience and research) about how the dynamics of schooling can operate in ways that are constraining as well as enabling of children's learning. Despite its limitations, HMI's view of 'differentiation' was indeed presented as a means of overcoming constraints upon children's learning that arose, according to their analysis, from approaches to teaching which paid insufficient attention to differences. While disagreeing with the terms in which their vision of 'good practice' was formulated, I would certainly agree with the spirit in which their concerns were expressed. I now realise that 'differentiation' can be used in the service of a more powerful vision if, informed by all that we know about potential 'limits from without', it is used as a tool for probing the limits of existing provision: helping us to appreciate what in a particular situation might be preventing children from revealing, using and developing their personal resources more fully, and discover what might be done to enable them to use these more fully and effectively in support of their learning.

The pressure which the new focus on differentiation has placed upon my thinking has helped me to appreciate that we need a differentiated as well as a more general analysis of the scope for enhancing learning and achievement. The dynamics which shape children's responses and help to determine the extent and limits of their achievements work themselves through in a way that is unique to each child. What presents a constraint for one may be enabling for another. Teaching needs to acknowledge and take account of such differences, continually adjusting and developing in the light of feedback provided by children's responses in an endeavour to provide for all children an equal opportunity to learn in ways which are most enabling for them.

Understood in this way 'differentiation' would always imply a development beyond existing practice, because its whole function would be bound up with seeking out ways to enhance learning for children individually, within the collective provision made for all. Any steps taken to make learning conditions more enabling do, of course, need continuous and careful monitoring. For what we think may be enabling may turn out to be quite the opposite once it has been filtered through children's experience and been interpreted in their terms. Moreover, what we imagine will be helpful based on the best of our current understandings may, in the light of further experience, be perceived as misconceived. In the 1970s, for example, reading was used less and less for learning (Moy and Raleigh 1985) in order to ensure that poor readers were not denied access to learning across the curriculum. With hindsight, this strategy was revised and alternative approaches to the use of texts in learning began to be

developed in order to try to ensure that those children who most need to use and develop their literacy skills have the opportunity to do so as a regular part of learning activities.

The conclusion that I have reached, then, in my attempts so far to come to terms with 'differentiation' is that, if such development work is genuinely to serve children's interests, our definition needs to be inspired by a refusal to set limits in our minds to the potential for future development of any child. Existing levels of attainment tell us only what a child has been able to achieve given the particular set of learning opportunities to which he or she has already been exposed. They cannot tell us what a child *might* have been able to achieve, if previous learning opportunities had been significantly different, or what a child might *now* be able to achieve if learning opportunities were to be extended or enhanced in ways that would be particularly enabling of the child's learning. Existing limits are determined by complex dynamics that are at least partly within our control. There is always potential, then, for opening up and moving beyond existing limits, if we can reach a better understanding of how those dynamics are operating and features of them that are constraining and enabling of children's learning. Differentiation is *one* of the means by which we can continually probe the dynamics that determine these existing limits and enable children to transcend them. As Jackson (1964) says:

Excellence may have genetic limits, but we may alter circumstance a great deal before the genes finally stop our growth. Meanwhile, our colossal technical resources can serve an imaginative approach to education and rediscover what every great civilisation of the past stumbled on. In favourable circumstances, excellence is not static or severely limited. It multiplies.

(Jackson 1964 p. 143)