

15 Progression, challenge and differentiation

It is important to ensure that pupils are making good progress, and that assigned tasks and activities are not holding anyone back.

Often activities are graded in terms of

- i) technical difficulty (e.g. the complexity of calculations in maths, the use of rare tenses in a foreign language)
- ii) accumulation of more and more detailed factual knowledge
- iii) the avoidance of error
- iv) or even greater speed.

This can miss many aspects of becoming successful learners. Questions about sufficient challenge in classroom activities connect with many of the issues in the earlier sections, for example:

- 1) Are there enough open and higher-order questions which encourage more extended responses?
- 2) Do pupils have enough opportunity for genuine discussion rather than answering questions? Are they encouraged to provide evidence, challenge each other's thinking, and so on?
- 3) Do pupils have genuine activities to design products, rather than slightly modify their teacher's design? Are science experiments a thoughtful activity, including forming hypotheses, evaluating sufficiency of evidence, reflecting on the differences between scientific theory and common sense explanations of phenomena?
- 4) Are pupils given time to grapple with the text, individually or in pairs? Are they encouraged to make a critical reading of appropriate texts?
- 5) Is there sufficient time for more independent learning and decision making? Are pupils motivated and rewarded by working towards a product or presenting to an audience?

Progression involves not only the development of subject-specific knowledge or skills, but the acquisition of key skills in literacy, numeracy, ICT, co-operation, planning, and so on.

The fundamental aims of a curriculum can remind us of the need for a holistic understanding of questions of challenge. To become successful learners involves thinking creatively and independently, motivation and autonomy. Progression needs to be seen in terms of the developing qualities of confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

It is important to ensure that challenge and progression is not hindered unduly by weaknesses in the acquisition of particular skills. There has been a tendency to divert pupils who struggle with literacy into a curriculum which is based on abstract exercises and which do not challenge thinking or engage with young people's lives. This is not only unmotivating, but is also a cul-de-sac, even in terms of the development of the weak literacy skills. It is a subtle but significant form of discrimination and exclusion.

Differentiation

Differentiation can take the form of separation into different classes, being seated at different tables, or being assigned different tasks. It is of course important to consider possible drawbacks in terms of pupils internalizing low expectations and seeing themselves as failures.

All of the points made above in terms of progression and challenge impact on differentiation. Similarly, some of the critical issues discussed in the section about assessment.

Obviously there are differences in any class (even where setting occurs) between different pupils' prior attainment and capacity to tackle different tasks. This should not be over-interpreted as higher and lower 'ability', as if this were something we are born with. Nor should a weakness in one area lead to unwarranted assumptions about others. This misrecognition can become self-fulfilling.

It is therefore important to consider alternatives:

- i) sometimes it is possible to work on the same material and tackle the same task but at different levels of quality, accuracy, complexity and creativity (e.g. in creative writing)
- ii) pupils may be able to carry out the same task but with different degrees of support (e.g. personal help, help from peers, the use of writing frames)
- iii) alternatively, pupils may be given a choice of different media through which to show their understanding
- iv) some pupils may need to return to a clear explanation, whether in a book or computer (e.g. a revision or consolidation powerpoint for solo viewing and perhaps with sound added)

More advanced pupils

A frequent problem is that more advanced learners are slowed down in their progress by ‘teaching to the middle’.

- v) The easiest solution is to allow time for more independent work – easy to arrange, since they are generally more literate and strongly motivated.
- vi) A frequent problem is to provide more challenging questions or tasks but delay these until all the simpler ones have been finished. This should be closely monitored to ensure that the pupils actually have time for them.

Different tasks but without labeling or implying a hierarchy of ability

- vii) Having worked together on a similar topic, pupils can devise their own form of response. Through good formative assessment, pupils can develop a good sense of how they need to improve, and with the teacher’s guidance devise a task which helps them do so. Obviously this awareness takes time to develop.
- viii) A menu of possible tasks can be offered, including a ‘joker card’ i.e. ‘Any other task which you negotiate with your teacher.’ (Initially, a common task could be suggested, but allowing pupils to negotiate alternatives.)

Suggestions for discussion and CPD

- A) Consider and discuss whether too narrow a sense of progression is restricting learning, for example an excessive focus on technical difficulty, accumulation of discrete facts, and accuracy, rather than more challenging concepts and more problematic situations.
- B) Consider what meaning you give to the phrase ‘high expectations’ in the light of page 64-5. Is the phrase also relevant in terms of pupils with reading difficulties, for example, or English as an Additional Language?
- C) Review lesson plans for a sample class over two weeks, to consider which forms of differentiation were used (pp 65-7)
- D) How can progression and differentiation be reconciled with inclusion and achievement for all? How can the most advanced pupils be challenged without demoralizing those who are struggling?