

Differentiation in the classroom:

breaking away from ability groups

Liam Coupland considers the holistic learning experience and his reflections on grouping and its impact



Figure 1 Hinge-point questioning using a thumbs-up/thumbs-down response to assess understanding

Ability groups are seen by some as a necessary evil in our profession so we, as practitioners, can show our clear differentiation by segregating children into distinctive groups (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). We often try to mask the process by using alternative names for groups (perhaps different shapes or colours, using different flags or some other literacy- or numeracy- or topic-based words) so as not to 'label' the learners. But are these groups good for us and our pupils? And how quickly do the children actually see through these name facades!

What we often do not immediately see are the effects these groups have on social and personal wellbeing in the classroom.

I did not see this at the beginning of my career; it was only when one child showed such dismay at being moved into another group that I stopped to think about what I was doing. I reflected on this and realised that this had happened before; in fact, this had affected the learning of many children since I made my way into teaching.

I thought I was doing it for the benefit of the child, moving them to work with a group of their peers who better suited their ability. However, the children had already worked out which groups were the higher-ability children and which the less able. As you can imagine, children were not happy with being moved to a lower-ability group. It led to an immediate drop in their self-confidence and could

have led to negative social effects, though thankfully I am not aware of any stigma felt by anyone in my classroom at the time. However, I did nothing about this for several years.

Is science really open to all?

If we, as primary science practitioners, want science to be open and available to all, we need to think about how we make the subject accessible and subsequently differentiate to ensure this happens. However, this should not be at the risk of damaging the wellbeing of those we teach. We need to think about the whole child – all of their strengths and weaknesses. Even the 'more able and talented' child will have their weaknesses, and if we just put them into the higher-ability group for every session, we may not

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adequately address their 'hidden' misconceptions and weaknesses. Also, several researchers have suggested that putting the children into ability groups may in fact have no positive impact on their attainment (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017: 8–10).

This is not new thinking: in 2006 Kutnik *et al.* (2006: 76–77) suggested that mixed-ability groupings produce consistently better levels of attainment, and they also break the trend of low-ability groupings having reduced interactions with their peers, and, worst of all, limited interactions in their tasks. If these findings are true, then for me this is appalling. We should be supporting the 'less able' with efficient scaffolding, not reducing their engagement. In fact, we should be offering a wider range of interactions, especially in the sciences. I am sure this reflects the aspirations of nearly all teachers. With the growth of STEM as a school-wide focus, we have the chance to really engage all the children we teach with a varied, curiosity-driven curriculum that provokes 'awe and wonder' in order to engage and retain an interest in science.

With this in mind, I decided to implement some changes in my classroom groupings when I moved from teaching a key stage 2 class to a mixed reception and year 1 class (ages 4–6). I decided to mix all the children up, so not only would they be in mixed-ability groups but also in mixed-year groups. The result was a real blend of abilities, with children with different strengths and weaknesses who could support and build on each other's talents and skills.

Differentiation the long way around

To support my new approach, I decided to add another dimension to my differentiation: 'hinge-point questioning'. I rediscovered this questioning technique during a training course I attended, which was run through STEM Learning



Figure 2 Children following instructions to make a 'potion'

by Andrea Mapplebeck (www.formativeeducation.co.uk), having first encountered this methodology during my teacher training. A hinge is a point in a lesson when you need to check whether students are ready to move on, and, if yes, in which direction. A hinge-point question is a diagnostic question that you ask your students when you reach the hinge, responses to which give you evidence about what you and your students need to do next.

As I have said, I believe every child has different strengths and weaknesses within each subject. I question whether, by shoe-horning children into one particular ability group, we are really doing what is best for them. Instead, shouldn't we be checking their understanding of each aspect we cover in every lesson? This is an essential part of the new curriculum that is in development in Wales, where every child benefits from personal learning (Donaldson, 2015: 26) as they strive to be confident, ambitious, capable learners, which is at the core of the new Welsh curriculum (Donaldson, 2015: 51). This, alongside the rejuvenated

importance of child-led learning, helps to ensure every child has opportunities to choose the activities and experiences they take part in (Donaldson, 2015: 61).

However, if we had to plan different lesson groupings based on our own knowledge and experience we would be adding more to our workload. This is where I thought hinge-point questioning would be an ideal and simple tool to effectively differentiate on the go. I could plan a two- or three-part differentiation to my lessons, and then use various hinge-point questioning methods to differentiate the class as part of a mini-plenary, before proceeding to the main task.

Trial and error

I started by differentiating in a blended numeracy/science lesson where we followed instructions to create a 'potion' (Figure 2). In previous lessons we had covered verbal descriptions of capacity and introduced standard and non-standard ways to measure. We

started off by recapping capacity through a PowerPoint, before progressing to measurements. We looked at some basic measurements in litres and millilitres (Figure 3).

After this, I proceeded to ask my hinge-point question. This was a clear question designed to split the class into two, with thumbs up and thumbs down: those that got the concept and those who were unsure (Figure 1). Although there are uncertainties about the use of thumbs as an indicator (do they tell the truth?), by setting up the

context and using it over again the children came to see this as a useful tool for their learning.

I got all of the children who fell into my 'thumbs down' bracket to line up at the door (these were a complete mix of children 'ability' wise, some wanting the reassurance of extra help to ensure they understood the concept and others not sure at all, so needing the full recap). These children went off to do a consolidation task to clarify their understanding, after which they would carry on with the main task, or a slightly differentiated task, depending on how the consolidation went. Those that chose thumbs up proceeded to complete their main tasks, with support being added as

required to scaffold their learning.

This worked really well for a first go. As anticipated, we had a real mix of children who needed the consolidation task. But it also gave some of the 'lower ability' children a chance to shine. It might be that they struggle to put their ideas down on paper, but on the more concrete, hands-on tasks built around practical elements and oracy they can really come into their own.

Successes and obstacles

I decided to use this method in every lesson from then on as it proved to be such an effective assessment and differentiation tool. This has proved especially important in my science lessons. In every case where I have used

hinge-point questioning, I have witnessed more engagement in their own learning from all the children in my class. I have been able to extend the understanding

of the more-able children by adding appropriate scaffolds to promote their understanding, while beginning to develop the confidence of the 'less able'. This group in particular has shown more interest, ability and understanding since I gave them more freedom to choose their own level of difficulty.

This child-led focus is important to provide a deeper, more satisfying and relevant educational experience in line with the forthcoming new curriculum in Wales (Donaldson, 2015). I will continue to use hinge-point questioning as my sole differentiation methodology for the rest of the school year, and then reflect, adapt and improve the technique ready for the new school year.

Figure 3 Learning to use standard measurements



References

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Hinge-point questioning:

<https://improvingteaching.co.uk/2013/08/17/do-they-understand-this-well-enough-to-move-on-introducing-hinge-questions>

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