

ABILITY TO DIFFERENTIATE: Dealing with differences large and small

Anna finds it difficult to meet the demands made on her in the course of group work, especially when she is supposed to research and process new information. Often she disturbs ongoing group processes by “being silly”. When the class is asked to form groups by themselves, she therefore is among the last to be chosen. If the groups are formed randomly or by the teacher, the pupils who have to cooperate with Anna protest strongly. When looking for a possible solution to this problem, the teacher remembers the fact that Anna is talented in drawing, which he heard at one of the latest teacher conferences. In the course of the next group assignment, therefore, he asks the groups to illustrate their results with drawings.

Each day teachers are faced with the challenges that result from their pupils’ different learning needs. What some already can do at the beginning of the school year, others must yet make great effort to learn. What some find interesting, others finding boring. Tasks that pose no problem for the group, as in the example above, can seem an insurmountable hurdle for a single member. Teachers experience more than just a discrepancy. Should they demand the pupil(s) to adjust or respond to the individual, should they foster differences and try to balance them out? Should they work on the children’s deficits or focus on strengths, like Anna’s teacher who decided in the concrete situation to use the available potential in order to strengthen Anna’s positive self-concept, which is essential for further learning processes, and foster acceptance of her in the group?

Diversity in learning groups makes it possible to learn from one another, to clash with one another, to resolve conflicts, to develop together but also to consciously set boundaries. Much of this happens without any active contribution from the teacher during breaks, in the school yard or on the way to school; some situations require a referee, others a pedagogical intervention, especially if the work in class is affected. Such “facilitation of heterogeneity”, however, is institutionally restricted in schools: through age groups, rigid schedules, curricula etc. As a consequence the great number of possibilities beyond institutional boundaries can be obliterated from view. Solutions occur only if a teacher is able to perceive what is different as *difference*. Teachers who are able to differentiate do not base their perceptions on their own image of an ideal pupil or average pupil but rather strive to develop specific individual learning strategies based on “*case interpretation*”. They trust and believe that *all* children and adolescents are able and willing to learn, and they plan and design their syllabus with this diversity in mind. It is often small measures which have impact: writing the new letter in the right margin for the left-handed beginner, having a pupil explain her own approach to a calculation to understand her learning problem, or promoting individual learning processes by dropping useful hints.

The ability to differentiate requires *knowledge* of how to deal with different learning, communication and integration difficulties, as well as the skill – wherever appropriate and necessary – to offer individualised and differentiated instructional measures and to initiate self-organised learning processes in order to enable individual paths of learning or to focus content. *Observation and empathy* are essential prerequisites for dealing with

differences, which is also reflected in the ability to accept differences as they are and recognise when pupils should not be handled differently or when too much differentiation in light of the group would be counterproductive. Therefore, the ability to differentiate means that a teacher makes use of the opportunities inherent in a heterogeneous group of learners, embraces the challenge, accepts the limitations upon the desired or ideal goal and recognises the limits of possibility. To be able to deal with this area of tension constructively, teachers need to have knowledge of the institutional framework and their own potentials and limitations as teachers in addition to clear understanding of the group of learners and its individuals.

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