

# Differentiation Strategies – Observations from Mercy Mounthawk Secondary School, 2008-09.



## 1) Differentiation by task

This differentiation method has been used in Technical Graphics. The teacher gave the class a variety of tasks and the students chose which tasks to complete. The teacher found that the "more able" students chose the more difficult tasks.

This method also worked well in English. Here the teacher gave the students a choice of writing three different types of poems of differing levels of difficulty. The "more-able" students as well as many of the very good students who have not been identified as more-able opted for the most difficult type of poem.

## 2) Differentiation by outcome

Again the Technical Graphics teacher found this methodology worked in his lessons. Allowing students to work on more open-ended tasks enabled the students to extend their thinking skills. This approach was also found to work well in History when students were given more searching questions. Possible problems with not having a clear, defined outcome for students is that when working with younger students, they may sometimes not have the skills to push themselves and may need more direction in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year.

## 3) Differentiation by resource

This has been found to work well in English classes, in particular, when the teacher was trying to teach the skills of analysis and evaluation. Here, students were grouped according to ability with the more-able getting more taxing texts to analyse. The questions on the texts were the same so all students "appeared" to be doing the same task.

## 4) Differentiation by dialogue

Teachers in all subjects agree that this is a very effective means of differentiation. Class discussions and questioning plays a huge part in differentiation. Teachers involved in the project have become much more aware of the role of questioning in their lessons.

## 5) Differentiation by choice

Teachers of English have found the Reading Records to be a good means of differentiation by choice. It gives the students freedom to pick books that interest them and to work at their own pace.

Similar approaches were used in Science where students were told to select a newspaper article of their choice which they believed had scientific content. Students responded well to being given the independence to choose articles themselves. Science students were also given the freedom to decide on a suitable Science project for entry into a regional science competition. 8 out of 11 "more-able" students designed projects worthy of entry into the competition.

## 6) Differentiation by support

Teachers are currently looking into mentoring as a means of providing more support for the more-able students in the school.

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## Summary of main learning in terms of contexts through which differentiation was applied.

### Individual Extension Activities

We found that individual extension activities are an excellent way of extending the more-able students. We also noted, however, that these extension tasks needed to be very structured giving the students clear directions on the type of work that was required. Sharing the assessment criteria with the students is a good way of focussing students on the relevant information.

### **Self-directed learning**

Teachers found that self-directed learning worked well with more-able students. However, all teachers agreed that because we were dealing with 1<sup>st</sup> year students that, while we want them to proceed to self-discovery, it is necessary to support them and so "guided discovery" was deemed the most appropriate approach at the 1<sup>st</sup> year level.

### **Groupwork**

Teachers had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of groupwork as an extension methodology. Overall, it was agreed that it can be used to help extend the more able students. However a lot of time needs to be spent structuring and organising the groups. Mixed-ability groups tended to work best in the context of our school. In order for the more able to be extended, teachers felt it was important that everyone in the group needed to be given an assigned role. This also meant that at the same time the more able students were not left carrying the group as a whole.

### **Pairwork**

Pair work was found to be effective by the majority of teachers who used it. More able students were often more challenged when paired with a student of lesser ability particularly when the less-able student had to report back. This organisation of the pairs had benefits from both students in the pair, therefore.

### **Testing**

Teachers encountered problems when it came to setting tests. The main problem encountered was how to embed extensions into the test without making less able students feel discouraged. Teachers offered different solutions for this:

- i) two teachers offered a choice of tasks in the test and the more-able students invariably opted for the most difficult task/question
- ii) in some subjects teachers created tests with open-ended questions and differentiated by outcome
- iii) another teacher gave standard tests that students on first year should be able to complete and chose to extend students through in-class and homework extension tasks and not through testing.