

What are we learning about ...

Developing challenge and differentiation
in and between schools.

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reflect | innovate | transform

Background

Over the past two years School Improvement North Tyneside have led a successful initiative to support schools in focusing and prioritising their core business around Teaching and Learning, to achieve genuine and sustainable school improvement. An extensive programme of high quality CPD, mentoring and coaching as well as collaborative enquiry have all been key features of the work with classroom practitioners, senior leaders and headteachers.

In 2012/13, there was a particular focus on differentiation; to ensure that it was used more effectively by classroom teachers as a process to appropriately challenge all learners, and not merely to push the high attainers, or support the least able. Working with a group of teachers to further develop this area has been an extremely positive experience, one which has facilitated self-reflection, the sharing of great ideas and above all moved forward classroom practice.

Thirty one schools attended a Challenge and Differentiation local authority event led by Leading Learning with a keynote address by Professor Charles Desforges. Of these, twenty five schools signed up to two further network learning sessions intended to support teachers as they develop challenge and differentiation practice in their school. On completion, eight of these opted to do paired reciprocal school visits intended to support developments or enhance understanding of the host's practice while creating a learning opportunity for the visitor. Of the eight signed up, six completed the process. All six were secondary or middle schools. Each visitor wrote up a short report on their visit, the content of which is summarised here.

What are we learning about ... pupil learning?

During each visit a small sample of pupils was interviewed to investigate their views on learning as well as their attitudes and dispositions to challenge and differentiation.

Views on learning

When pupils described learning as both positive and challenging they most frequently identified:

- the opportunity for group work or time to ask questions of their peers
- teaching other pupils a new or challenging concept (though one group said they didn't like being paired with a weaker student or one whose behaviour is poor).

One pupil identified the importance of high quality feedback. He found it 'really helpful' when a teacher told him why an answer was right or wrong (i.e. what the rule was) so that they could apply this knowledge to another question e.g. 'why is something a mammal rather than whether something is a mammal'.

Negative attitudes were associated with:

- lack of purpose e.g. 'long tasks which had no perceived purpose or challenge in them'
- too much teacher talk
- too much writing or drawing/poster work
- repetition of tasks
- lack of enthusiasm from the teacher
- insufficient wait time (pupils in one group explained 'they didn't like being put on the spot').

Views of challenge and differentiation

Pupil interviews and lesson observation were conducted during most visits, while in three schools a small group of staff was interviewed. A range of challenge and differentiation strategies was seen being used during these visits. These included Challenge Cards, Pattern Cards, Help Desk (used in conjunction with a 'class library' and 'internet cafe'), Solo Taxonomy and teacher questioning as well as a range of differentiated tasks matched to groups and individuals, e.g. use of writing frames, wording of questions, number of sources, amount of reading. Higher order skills, such as application, were also used effectively to increase challenge. Pupil discussion elicited the following views.

- In one school younger pupils liked challenge and welcomed more difficult tasks ([pupils said] 'they make mistakes on easier work because they stopped thinking'). Conversely their older counterparts preferred being set the same work as their peers (rather than differentiated work) but valued the opportunity to extend themselves, i.e. 'having a degree of choice and control over the activities they undertook': an interesting paradox.
- Pupils said they found it helpful when a teacher gave them 'a good clue but not the answer'. That same group expressed frustration at teacher comments such as 'think harder', 'think about it more'. In fact, 'students appreciated clues that helped them to think about a problem in a different way'.
- In another school 'students commented that they felt most challenged when they believed tasks were difficult but achievable'. In one school pupils spoke of lessons where they were challenged as their favourite ones. The majority of pupils interviewed like being 'stretched' though words like 'stressful', 'daunting', 'nervous', 'overwhelmed' and 'disheartening' were used to describe their response when work was either too hard or because they perceived they had performed less well because their test was harder than those of their peers.
- One group of pupils described the importance of good teacher/pupil relationships if they were to accept challenge. Words such as 'encouragement' and 'patience' were used by pupils.

What are we learning about ... professional learning?

Leading Learning promoted a collaborative model of professional learning, sustained over time. Most of the schools therefore used existing teaching and learning groups or created small teacher focus groups to develop this practice. Sometimes challenge and differentiation was the sole focus whilst in some schools it was developed alongside an existing teaching and learning focus. Two schools ran a combination of whole-school and voluntary sessions, another used weekly morning briefings to drip-feed strategies to staff while another provided voluntary lunch time drop-in sessions.

In each school staff that had been involved directly or indirectly with the project described having time to try things in their classroom, the opportunity to reflect on and discuss strategies with their colleagues and the chance to observe their peers as particularly helpful. Furthermore teachers in one school valued access to strategies that helped them make small changes to their practice, describing them as 'easier to implement' day-to-day compared to strategies which required more planning and preparation, which were less manageable in the available time. Similarly staff in another school 'appreciated the idea that they were being asked to 'tweak' their professional practice as opposed to make wholesale changes to it'.

Others, however, chose to make more substantive changes to practice, in one case developing challenge and differentiation within an enquiry-based curriculum. In each example, however, making time for both staff and students to develop their skill set is necessary. With time for experimentation and reflection, changes to practice were noted.

Impact on teachers

One school reported that as the year has progressed staff have been more willing to take risks and to admit when an idea or technique had failed or gone wrong. They also found that by meeting regularly it kept their focus on teaching and learning, valuing dialogue with their peers and the opportunity for feedback.

One school found that 'some teachers saw huge challenge in changing their style of delivery and relinquishing their role as "the giver of information"'. In this school it was perceived that teachers were now thinking very carefully about the information they provide for students. 'Anything that can be thought through, interpreted or worked out by the students is not given to them. Time is spent planning activities which encourage students to find information and apply it rather than how they present new facts. This represents a change in the planning process in favour of independent enquiry'.

In another school also developing enquiry, teachers found that 'in order to establish the routines associated with independent enquiry it took time to plan and prepare, however, they found that this extra planning was worthwhile as students made faster progress in more personalised lessons. It was also noted that as classroom routines became more established the planning time was reduced. Students were able to play a more active role in the way lessons were taught'. A similar impact on planning was identified in another of the secondary schools. During this visit staff expressed a view that the increased time resourcing these lessons at the outset reduced quickly as lessons became more student-centred and as students became more skilled.

Impact on learning

In one school the 'CPD had raised awareness of the students' point of view in relation to differentiation and challenge and those ... strategies had enabled there to be openness in the classroom about doing different work and having different needs'. This school also found that being able to offer students an element of choice had generated a positive classroom ethos with students buying in to that way of teaching.

Reports communicated a range of views on pupil impact. Even within one secondary school there is a variety of experience of adopting a differentiated approach. One teacher for instance saw no discernible difference in the way groups responded, while another felt younger pupils were more resilient than their older counterparts but that girls were less resilient than boys. The third teacher felt less able pupils did not respond as well as their more able peers, lacking confidence when an answer could not be found quickly.

Next steps and emerging questions

All schools were asked to describe their next steps or emerging questions in light of the learning from this process.

Each report describes a commitment to providing time for cross-school collaborative professional learning to further develop challenge and differentiation practice. Schools have different strategies for enabling this but all adhere to principles of good professional learning practice.

Next steps

- The integration of iRIS to support collaborative working within and between schools.
- The use of Lesson Study as a mechanism for professional development.
- Action research allowing staff to follow up on areas of personal interest based on educational research.
- Staff to be more closely involved in directing their own professional development, and will be given time in which to reflect on the impact of their learning on the way they teach. This has led to the development of a Teaching & Learning community within CPD provision for the following academic year.
- Encouraging a culture where challenge is received positively and takes time and thus monitoring impact will extend into the next academic year

Emerging questions

- How has challenge in lessons helped pupils make progress?
- What challenge needs to be provided for staff so that their learning has an impact on the teaching and learning in the classroom?
- Would the creation of forums for sharing practice and experience be of benefit to teachers trying to embed differentiation and challenge into their everyday teaching?
- Could a mechanism be introduced for gently reminding teachers what teaching and learning strategies are available?
- Can further work with both staff and students be undertaken to bring a greater element of student choice into teaching and learning? Would this, in turn, have implications for assessment for learning practices?

Leading Learning (Education) Ltd would like to thank:

Allan Holbrook
Jo Suddes

Dawn Charlton
Neil Cottiss
Jo Lamb
Dot Lee
Steph Thewlis
Chris Tueart and Katherine Pritchard

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Valley Gardens Middle School
Monkseaton Middle School
Norham High School
Longbenton Community College
Burnside Business and Enterprise College
Churchill Community College