
Differentiation, Resistance and Courage: at work in the infant school

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Annabelle Dixon was co-editor of *FORUM* from the summer of 1998 until her untimely death in May 2005. The article we reproduce below is based on an article that first appeared in *FORUM* in 1984, Volume 26, Number 2, with the title 'Divided We Rule'. At that time, she was a practising infant teacher, and deeply concerned about the ways in which the widespread practice of differentiation affected young children's learning. The version printed here has been extended, edited and retitled, drawing on a longer, later version, unpublished as far as we know, which she circulated to friends and colleagues in 1986.

A few years ago, a colleague remarked to me, in words fashionable at the time, that there was both a surface and a deep structure to the infant school that went largely unacknowledged. Those who visit infant schools occasionally, as opposed to actually working in them, will probably recall the experience as a sunny impression of groups of self-motivated children involved in a variety of activities; perhaps they reflected how fortunate children and teacher were to be as yet removed from the pressures of the wider world.

But who decided that those three children should paint, and who decided what they were painting? Why is that particular group of children reading, and why are they reading those particular books? What prompted five children to sit around that table using that maths apparatus? Did they decide to? If they decided to for themselves, are they allowed to make other similar decisions? If it was decided for them, what was the basis of that decision? What is the deep structure that underpins such decisions? Are the processes of differentiation at work here? What effect do they have on children's learning?

It is self-evident that, given a group of very active young children and four walls within which to contain them, certain decisions have to be made fairly rapidly: what happens, where it happens and when seem to be the most

obviously pressing. When and how does differentiation come into play? Is it only when making decisions about grouping the children? My contention is that differentiation *can* and *does* happen at every level in the context of the infant classroom. Some manifestations of this process are designed as a permanent part of the classroom-structure and are explicitly and consciously undertaken; for example: 'My better readers sit at that table'. Others are entirely temporary, for example: 'Those who want to help with planting bulbs, put your coats on'. In between lies an enormous number of decisions about when, what and how the children learn, which, while not necessarily being conscious acts of differentiation, may very well reflect unconscious values and almost certainly reveal basic assumptions about the nature of learning.

'The Robins have measured their handspans' ran a message across the blackboard in an infant classroom recently. In other schools, it is just as likely that 'Squirrels', 'Daisies' and 'Lollipops' have also managed this feat. In a mixed-aged class, such groupings may well reflect age, but, for the present, I shall assume that these groupings are based on 'ability' and/or current achievement in reading. These are by no means uncommon practices, and probably the only person who is fairly certain that a 'Rabbit' is deemed 'superior' to a 'Hamster' is the teacher herself; in fact, the children and parents have no such illusions. So why should the teacher go to such lengths? Partly, I would suggest, due to a residual conscience about grouping the children by 'ability', and partly in order to leave room for manoeuvre. While it is difficult to deny that Group One is, by definition, different from Group Five, the relative seniority of a 'Daisy' to a 'Tulip' is difficult to establish, without being the one who established it in the first place. (All the examples in this article are taken from real classrooms.)

While parents may anxiously watch for the metamorphosis of their 'Badger' into a 'Hare', it is as unlikely in the classroom as it is in nature. However, the power of the teacher is clearly perceived: it is seldom the children who organise themselves into these various groupings. When they do, usually on a friendship basis, children of similar 'intelligence' often come together, a fact not unknown to teachers. Letting children group themselves can sometimes disguise subtle social groupings: children of similar 'race' and neighbourhood often choose to be together, to say nothing of same gender groups. Grouping by alphabetical order or age is not unusual, and at least has the merit of selection on grounds that are not socially divisive. All seven year olds were once five themselves, and can look forward to being seven.

But the question still remains. Why group children at all? One reason might be based on logistics, and the belief that grouping leads to better organised learning experiences, more effective timetabling, and a better chance of children having equal access to resource materials. In practice, in my experience, these beliefs are rarely justified. For example, although 'Hamsters' may get more of the teacher's time – human resource material, if one likes – it is an unusual teacher who groups for this reason, and who would then keep back for them their fair share of beautiful collage materials like velvet or lace, rather than rely on previous experience that 'Hamsters will just smear glue over them,

and call it a house'. Whatever the basis of the grouping, the fact remains that the teacher exerts great control, both socially and intellectually, over the children's lives in the classroom to an extent that can prove inimical to the way in which all young children learn. Fundamentally, I believe that grouping of every kind reflects how the teacher perceives learning, the child as learner, and the child learning how to become a learner.

Looked at in this way, the many differentiation processes that can be observed in the infant classroom, from the self-evident to the subtle, are worthy of our critical attention: many would see in them evidence of the teacher's need to exert control, or of bias in relation to such features as 'intelligence', 'race' and social class. While this analysis may be true, it cannot be the whole picture. To eliminate the most damaging of these practices it would be necessary for teachers to see children's learning in an entirely different light.

On the whole, teachers *are* interested in teaching, and concerned about their children's progress in the acquisition of various skills and information; but my impression is that many teachers do not attend sufficiently to the processes of children's learning. Without an interest in, and knowledge of, a coherent theoretical base, teachers will not feel confident in the children's ability to take a share in managing their own learning; as a result, they will put their energies into maintaining a highly organised day and timetable, in terms of grouping and resources. In other words, the surface structure will look quite pretty and systematic. In a managerial sense, this may indeed be so; but, at the same time, it is very likely militating against the real pace and depth of children's intellectual and social development. The organisation is in fact alarmingly superficial and disguises or positively conceals a deep misunderstanding about the true nature of children's learning.

To take an example: which of these two children is more likely to be engaged in worthwhile learning about time? Paula is in a group that is 'doing' maths, probably from a work card, and she will be so occupied from 9.30 to 10.10. Her subsequent record sheet will state that she has 'Covered Time' because she has filled in the 'o'clocks' and, if she's a 'Rabbit', probably the 'half-pasts' and the 'quarter-tos'. This is certainly useful and necessary knowledge, but something that could probably be covered fairly quickly with the whole class in a couple of sessions. Cliff, in another classroom, has also become interested, at about the same time of day, in a stopwatch. Prompted in the first instance by a teacher who, contrary to popular misconception, has a definite role to play in this kind of informal, spontaneous activity, he tries to find out how long he can walk around the room, balancing various articles on his head. This, in turn, requires him to think of a way to record his achievement. With breaks for sundry occasions such as assembly and school dinner, he works at his project for the rest of the day, totally involved.

It is not hard to see which child would fit some parents' image of 'work', and if the class teacher doesn't really understand how children learn, she will certainly not be able to defend the practice of letting a child wander round a classroom with a cushion on his head for the best part of the day, even though

later tests may very well establish whether Paula or Cliff has learned more about the concept of time.

This example might go some way towards explaining why infant teachers sometimes seem to prefer not to know, or to forget what they know, about the nature of young children's learning. They may prefer to settle for an apparent and approved 'orderliness', than to face the implications of structuring the children's environment to match their learning. It has also to be understood that establishing and running a non-differentiated classroom takes a great deal more organisation, however unlikely this might seem at first glance. Organising time, resources and children into various groups is 'child's play', compared with organising time and resources for real opportunities for 'child's play' – for which read genuine opportunities for scientific and mathematical observation and discovery, opportunities for children to express themselves imaginatively in sand, puppets, clay, paint, writing, dressing up – and so much more. And such authentic, open-ended opportunities can only be provided free from the constraints of any kind of differentiation.

Differentiation in terms of time, for example, not only confines certain learning experiences to specific times of day – one of the most obvious being 'work' in the morning and 'play' in the afternoon – but, by the very division itself, defines those learning experiences that are supposed to happen within it. Thus work and play become strongly differentiated, as do English, maths and topic work – whatever the latter may mean in the context of an infant child's ideas about the world.

Teachers may themselves be harmed by their own parcelling up of time into tidy packages. On occasions, when they would like to extend a particular activity, they may feel constrained by their schedule; indeed, young children themselves can become quite anxious if their timetable is not followed. As a result, both get trapped inside the system: the teacher becomes less flexible or subtle in her response to the children, even when she would like to be both.

The effect of differentiation processes within the classroom upon resources has already been touched on; if children are grouped and time is strictly allocated, children's access to resources is inevitably affected. Certainly, the resources have to be 'shared', but who decides on how the sharing happens? If children are to learn about sharing, taking turns and the proper use of scarce resources, it is they who must make the decisions for themselves and stand by the decisions they make. It should, of course, be acknowledged that opportunities for these kinds of decisions should be appropriate to the children's level of social and moral development. Non-differentiation is sometimes mistakenly thought to mean 'non-intervention' and 'non-structuring', when actually this approach contains a high percentage of both interaction and structure. It's just that some of the traditional, recognisable routines and rituals of the infant classroom have been dispensed with.

So what does a non-differentiated classroom look like? Much like our original visitor's impression of busy children involved in a variety of activities for most of the time; there are some quiet, calm periods, including those times

when some of the children are recording what they've done, or are inventing new worlds to write about. The children regularly work in self-chosen groups that dissolve and take new forms according to different activities. Sometimes, physical constraints determine the number of children at each activity; for example, two clamps on the woodwork table necessarily mean a limit of two children. Although the children might have a certain minimum number of tasks to undertake during the week, the content and duration of these will be largely decided by them, unless the teacher decides it is the moment to introduce new concepts, skills or materials, which might require some directed practice.

In the non-differentiated classroom, a teacher really knows the children as individuals, and every child is valued. Ruth may well use up all the Lego (and all of Wednesday) making an enormous airport, and it will stand in its place to be admired until Friday. This is essentially a well-furnished classroom, and all sorts of alternative – and equally engaging – activities are to be found. The important thing is that Ruth's skills and achievement are recognised. And who knows? It might be someone else's turn to think big next week. 'Taking turns' involves real compromises, not necessarily exact minutes.

So what is the theoretical basis of this approach? Why is learning considered to be more effective and worthwhile in such an environment? For teachers who undertake to organise their classes on such a basis, the most coherent and persuasive explanation of children's development comes from Piaget. Leaving aside quibbles about exact ages and stages, reading Piaget can challenge every teacher to look at children's learning in a radically different manner. Milton Schwebel, writing in the classic text *Piaget in the Classroom*, argues that 'principles of teaching deduced from the knowledge of the child's intellectual development can significantly and qualitatively alter the behaviour of the teacher and the nature of the experiences she arranges for the children' (Schwebel & Raph, 1974).

Some low level skills may well be learnt by association, by imitation and by conditioning, but if children are to know themselves as effective learners, to understand what learning is truly about, then the teacher's responsibility is to provide the kinds of experiences that can logically be derived from Piaget's theories. But differentiation, of any kind, in any classroom, inevitably reduces the range, quality and effectiveness of these experiences, and even the most apparently benign processes of grouping children severely limit the possibility of their learning the values of a harmonious, collaborative community.

Another contributor to *Piaget in the Classroom*, Constance Kamil, writes that:

The role of the teacher in a Piagetian school is an extremely difficult one because she has constantly to engage in diagnosing each child's emotional state, cognitive level and interests by carrying a theoretical framework in her head. She also has to strike a delicate balance between exercising her authority, and encouraging the children to develop their own standards of moral behaviour. She can much more easily simply follow a curriculum guide, put the children through prescribed activities and use old techniques of discipline ... The

teacher in a Piagetian school has to be a highly conscientious and resourceful professional who does not have to have standards that are enforced from the outside. The kind of teacher that Piaget would like to have is the kind of adult that a Piagetian school aspires to produce – one who with strong personal standards continues to be a learner throughout his or her life.

This ‘extremely difficult’ role may seem, for many teachers, to be too great a challenge. But in resisting ‘standards that are enforced from the outside’, aspiring ‘Piagetian teachers’ can perhaps draw on their strong, personal, internal qualities – in particular, courage. We need to find the courage to change things, even if gradually. In doing so, we will find, by exploring the world alongside children, that we too can learn what it is to be a learner, and so pass on our increasing confidence in ourselves by giving increasing opportunities to the children we teach.

Reference

Schwebel, M. & Raph, J. (Eds) (1974) *Piaget in the Classroom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.