

A critical analysis of how differentiation can promote the full inclusion of three gifted and talented students in a mixed-ability, Year 9 class studying *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT: In this article I seek to explore the ways in which different forms of differentiation can promote the inclusion of gifted and talented students in the classroom. Macbeth, the text being studied by this particular class, was the set text for the Standard Attainment Tests (SATs). This article discusses briefly the inherent problems involved in identifying gifted students and the difficulties they encounter in the classroom, before considering the forms of differentiation which might be employed in a lesson. The research attempted to promote the inclusion of the gifted girls, firstly by differentiating “by task” and then “by outcome”, utilising drama as a novel activity with which to stimulate interest and engagement with the task. The girls involved in the study were asked to complete questionnaires which evaluated the enjoyment, interest and the degree of challenge encountered for each task. They also completed a questionnaire about their general attitude to English and participated in a semi-structure interview, based on their answers to these questions. The outcomes of this research highlight the layers of differentiation which become apparent through classroom practices, but which are not necessarily definable for the purposes of a lesson plan. It also draws attention to some of the ways these can be used, potentially to ensure gifted students are actively and emotionally involved and included in lessons.

KEYWORD: Gifted, talented, differentiation, inclusion, Macbeth.

The foreword of the *National Curriculum for English* (QCA, 1999), states that “An entitlement to learning must be an entitlement to all pupils.” In order to support the delivery of an entitlement-based curriculum, the National Curriculum also sets out three principles of inclusion. A curriculum is deemed to be inclusive when “suitable learning challenges” or opportunities are set; when teachers respond to “pupil’s diverse learning needs” and when “potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils are overcome” (p. 42). This, combined with the governmental drive to “raise standards”, means that teachers have become increasingly challenged to adapt, or differentiate, their teaching methods and lesson content in an attempt to accommodate the range of ability and aptitude to be found in any one classroom. Thus, the onus of creating “effective learning environments” and securing “motivation and concentration” (p. 43) for all students has inevitably fallen on teachers.

Those students, who might be called “gifted and talented” come at the top end of that spectrum – and almost nothing about teaching them is straightforward. Even deciding on appropriate terminology is fraught with difficulty. Should they be referred to as “able”, “highly able” or “exceptionally able”? Would “gifted and talented” be more

apt? How (and where) does one draw the distinction between all or any of these terms? More difficult still is actually identifying a student who might reasonably deserve to be in that category. Over the years, many methods have been used in an effort to accurately identify students who might be described as “able” or “gifted”. The use of IQ tests, with their assumption that “intelligence” levels are relatively fixed and therefore measurable, have been increasingly attacked in recent years. Kerschner (2003) states that

It is impossible to assess general intellectual power on ‘pure’ cognitive abilities such as memory without the influence of factors like reading, previous knowledge and cultural knowledge (p. 45).

More recent theories are more flexible than IQ tests, taking into account combinations of factors believed to influence “ability” and recognising that true “all-rounders” are exceptionally few and far between. For Joseph Renzulli, above-average ability was not enough to determine someone as “gifted”. He posited that “task commitment” and “creativity” were also necessary for giftedness to emerge. These three areas were visualised as a set of interlocking abilities, which gave rise to the “three-ring model of giftedness” (1977, cited in Hymer, 2002, pp. 12-13). Similarly, Howard Gardner’s theory of “multiple intelligences”, acknowledges the fact that people have strengths and weaknesses in different areas (Gardner, 1993, cited in Kerschner, 2003, p. 48). Even the *Key Stage 3 Framework for English* (2003) points out that “Not all able pupils will demonstrate equal capabilities in all aspects of English” (p. 70), recognising that ability, even within one subject area may be limited to only one or two of the key skills.

THE STUDY

As a teacher trainee on a “professional placement”, I was in the position to work closely with the class teacher. It is an accepted part of the course that trainees observe classes which they are likely to teach, partly to gain a feel for the class, and partly to observe different teachers and their techniques. It also gives the trainee the opportunity to build a close working relationship with experienced teachers. Following discussions with the class teacher, the three students who were asked to participate in this study were nominated from a small group of students who were predicted as able to achieve SATs results of Level 7. The rest of the class averaged around Level 6. Their teacher described all three girls as in need of “stretching” and one in particular was also described as under-confident and requiring “encouragement” (Student A).

For the purposes of the study, the girls were asked to complete short questionnaires to evaluate two different tasks in terms of the enjoyment, interest and the degree of challenge encountered. These factors are surely imperative to “securing motivation and concentration”, yet their necessity is scarcely acknowledged within the rhetoric of the National Curriculum. They were also asked to complete a more general questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards English and the teaching they received. The results of this questionnaire and the evaluations were then discussed during a taped, semi-structured group interview, which focused on their thoughts and feelings

about the tasks I had set them, “ordinary” lessons with their usual teacher, and the opportunities available to them to choose their tasks or evaluate their work.

As the English classes at my second Professional Placement school are of mixed ability until Year 10, effective differentiation is vital to promoting the inclusion of all students present. However, assessing the inclusion of any given student is difficult because it is not easy to quantify the level to which they are actually “included” in the lesson or task. Teachers inevitably make a value judgement based on observation of behaviour during lessons and the quality and accuracy of the work produced; if the students seem to be engaged with their tasks and complete them without too much difficulty, then we assume they are, or feel, included. Rarely, if ever, are students asked for their responses to a particular lesson or unit of work. The assessment of any given lesson rightly focuses on the achievement of appropriate learning objectives; but assessing how valuable and stimulating the students found the task itself, is at best, a secondary and cursory exercise.

It is important to draw a distinction between the level of engagement with a task displayed by a student and the actual degree of “inclusion” experienced as a result. It is possible for a student to be apparently happily occupied by a task which is thought to be above or below her ability, provided they find it stimulating in some capacity. Whether or not the task in question can be labelled a “suitable learning opportunity”, and therefore be clearly “inclusive” as defined in the National Curriculum in England, is debatable.

“Mixed ability” poses certain problems to the teacher, because the learning needs of a mixed ability class are particularly difficult to cater for. As Fleming and Stevens wryly comment:

No matter what explanations might be offered for the different levels of achievement... teachers are still faced with the reality of finding strategies to cope in the classroom” (1998, p. 111).

“Mixed ability” is often regarded as the fairest system of grouping students, ostensibly because it implicitly encourages students to work together and value each others’ skills and abilities, whilst at the same time removing the stigma of being relegated to the lowest set. Nevertheless, teachers are still left with the massive problem of providing work of an adequate level for the vast majority of the class while still meeting the needs of the students at either end of the ability range. While the persistent obligation to “raise standards” has meant that more time and attention is being spent in the support of students with special educational needs, a similar degree of care does not appear to have been so consistently applied to the needs of gifted and talented students.

...poor, mixed ability teaching is deadly for able pupils. They are demotivated by a slow pace and inhibited from doing well by adverse comments from other pupils. Teachers often rely on their most able to get on alone so that they have time to deal with others. Able pupils get very little teacher time in poorly taught, mixed ability lessons and underachievement often occurs (Eyre, 1997, p. 106).

Eyre goes on to say that “planned differentiation for the most able is not a regular feature of lessons in many schools” (p. 106). This is, perhaps especially true of English lessons, where the primary method of differentiation is “by outcome” and the presence of the tiered worksheet is comparatively rare. “Differentiation by outcome” is, in itself, a curiously unhelpful term. It merely recognises that all students will do the same work, but with varying results. Thus the teacher relies on the potential scope of the task alone to meet the range of learning needs present. It is salutary to realise that

Differentiation by outcome is, after all, what happens when no teacher is present!
(Daw, 1995, p. 126).

Tied in with this is the question of assessment. The method of assessment employed is, to a certain extent, affected by the chosen form of differentiation. If a lesson is differentiated “by outcome”, then the teacher must build into the lesson appropriate means of checking that all students are on track, insofar as their abilities allow. This can include actively moving round the classroom and helping or recalling students where necessary, frequent feedback sessions, and the marking of an end-product, normally written work in exercise books.

However, one of the benefits of “differentiation by outcome” is that it gives the teacher the flexibility to take advantage of any naturally occurring, yet valuable detour from the planned lesson. Furthermore, this form of differentiation implicitly acknowledges that the students are individuals, as they are not pigeonholed by “ability”. Although, having said this, it follows that the task set should have the potential to be simplified or made more challenging as necessary.

If the task is not sufficiently stimulating and challenging for able students, boredom, underachievement and disillusionment are the least of the ill effects that can be expected. Students who exhibit these signs are clearly not fully included in the lesson, as they have not been provided with the stimulating learning opportunities they need. They are, effectively, excluding themselves in protest. Such undesirable outcomes may further develop into disruptive behaviour and complete disengagement from the class and any teaching occurring within it. More worrying, perhaps, are those able students who underachieve because they quietly get on with the set tasks without bothering the teacher and without ever displaying (or having the opportunities to display) their abilities.

Differentiation by text (i.e. a complete novel or play rather than a worksheet) is also possible, but again, comparatively rare. Although a scheme or unit of work may cover several texts, it is unusual to find more than one text being studied simultaneously in any one lesson. Pragmatically, it is easier to study one text as a class (and attempt to differentiate in an appropriate manner) than attempting to keep tabs on two or three sets of texts and the progress of the corresponding tasks. This makes it all the more important that teachers make an effort to find “something for everyone” within the text. Unfortunately, the study of *Macbeth* (or at least, the study of the set scenes, required for the SATs examination), with its emphasis on “knowing” the scenes was not proving to be particularly beneficial to the gifted and talented girls involved in the case study.

Jane Coles (2003) questions the educational value of the tests and their emphasis on close textual analysis of two set scenes at the expense of the play as a whole. She describes the teacher's task and, incidentally, the chief method of teaching the class experienced:

...what is required is essentially a line-by-line analysis of two chunks of Shakespeare where character and language are privileged far above "issues" and "directing" scenes (p. 106).

This is true in that SATs questions require answers to be full of appropriate quotations, which can only be acquired through close textual study. However, unless the task in question is to actually decipher the text (regardless of the means through which this is achieved), the completion of almost any text-related task is premised on an in-depth knowledge of textual minutiae. Even tackling "issues" and the "directing" of scenes requires the students to be aware of the details on which their arguments or directions are premised.

Therefore, inclusively studying a text such as *Macbeth* means that the greatest challenge for a teacher lies in making the initial reading of what is essentially a partially recognised and understood language fun and exciting for all of the students. Arguably, this could be achieved (to some extent) through the judicious use of videos to illustrate certain parts of the text and provide some much needed visual stimuli. However, it had transpired that this particular class were uncomfortable with the bloody imagery usually associated with any production of *Macbeth*. It was also felt that showing videos negated any activity which required the girls to think about acting, costumes and staging. For example, much of the work done on Act 1 Scene 3 had focused on describing the various entrances of the Weird Sisters and their appearance from a directorial point of view.

The accuracy of Eyre's comments, (above) regarding "demotivation by slow pace" were demonstrated to a certain extent by the girls during the interview. They agreed that they found the slow pace and frequent repetition of key points tedious and frustrating. When asked, "Is it fair to say that you dislike things that are boring?" the answer was a resounding "Yes". Student C expanded on this when asked, "Why did you find them boring?", commenting that she didn't like reading through texts as she felt that she wasn't involved. Student A remarked that while discussions helped understanding, she tended to "switch off" if it continued for the entire lesson. The answers in the general questionnaire they had completed beforehand were more emphatic on this point. In answer to "Which activities do you enjoy the least?" two students had written:

When we have class discussion all lesson I don't enjoy that! I prefer to be writing!!!
(Student A).

Analysing, and reading through text, then summarising, as we don't get very involved with the actual play and sometimes get bored (Student C).

They freely admitted that when faced with English tasks they disliked doing, or found boring, they didn't try as hard as they could do and stopped paying attention. Such attitudes may be unsurprising, but the disillusionment of these students with

conventional methods of studying *Macbeth* amply demonstrates Daw's (1995) assertion that

...a class text cannot, by definition, be strong in differentiation in itself. It is unlikely to be suited to individual interests and tastes of more than a minority of pupils...It is...impossible for it to be well matched in terms of reading level to all pupils in a mixed ability or a broad-banded class (p. 131).

Clearly, these girls did not feel fully included within the lessons. However, they were aware of the constraints on the teacher as a result of being in a mixed-ability class. When asked in the interview, "Do you think you could or should be challenged more?", they replied as follows.

We could probably be, like, challenged a bit more individually, but because we are sort of a mixed group it makes it harder for the teacher to do that (Student B, transcription).

You can't have one rule for one person and one rule for another so you have to do the task that everyone can do (Student A, transcription).

Thus, in the students' eye, challenging them as individuals appears to be at least part of the answer. The class teacher tried to do this with their written work by incorporating "targets" into her feedback¹. The effective provision of formative feedback was also being assessed and taken forward in Year 8, where an extended scheme with record sheets to log progress was being piloted. The advantage of such a scheme is that it encourages the development of all students. Although early results were promising, certain problems had arisen: there was difficulty in embedding the scheme within the classroom consciousness, as merely remembering to write the new target at the top of a new piece of work was proving to be a challenge. This was not helped by the issue of continuity in some cases, as the next task would not always be appropriate for the development of the latest target.

With regard to the more able students, however, the issues were more subtle and consequently more frustrating. How do you set a writing target for a child who is, to all intents and purposes, writing well and is achieving as high a level as can be reasonably expected? "Maintain this standard of work" cannot be used indefinitely. Often, the only areas which could be developed were those which relied on factors such as age and (emotional) maturity, rather than the conscious application of technique or knowledge.

While the use of targets is a good way of providing individual focus in specific areas, they are unlikely to promote interest or engagement with a task. Furthermore, targets such as these can only generally be met in relatively isolated circumstances, such as written homework, assignments, or formally assessed pieces of work. (The scheme had not, in this instance, been extended to include "Speaking and Listening" or

¹ The term "target" is used here to denote specific areas in a student's work which need attention, e.g. "Include five interesting adjectives in your next piece of writing", or "Remember to use a dictionary to check spellings you are unsure of." Student and teacher should mutually agree that a target has been met before progressing to the next one.

“Reading” targets) Targets do not, by themselves, promote active mental engagement or inclusion within lessons.

An alternative could be to target specific students or groups with focused questions and allowing time to find answers. These could then be used efficiently to support and maintain interest and therefore inclusion within the lesson. “Questioning” can serve the dual purposes of differentiation and assessment. Used effectively, it can greatly influence lesson outcomes. It also encourages students to work independently of the teacher, thus helping to dispel the impression that a teacher is solely a dispenser of information (Wallace, 2000). Yet questions presented to an entire class will not be successful when there are a lot of passengers. The girls in this particular Year 9 class had cultivated a “dumb” attitude that was proving exceptionally difficult (not to mention frustrating) to change. In essence, they wanted to be spoon-fed the necessary information. Asking a pertinent question would often result in a long silence until either one of the brighter students tentatively raised a hand or the teacher gave in and supplied the answer. Low-level questioning may enable the less able students to contribute, but persistent use will inevitably alienate and discourage those of higher cognitive ability.

Similarly, the degree of support offered to students is another subtle method of differentiation, which is often used unthinkingly. The demands of low-ability and disruptive students on precious teacher time means that high achievers often miss out on valuable teaching and learning opportunities. Providing the element of individual challenge, which Student B highlighted, is one way of simultaneously stretching the abilities of gifted and talented students (and therefore promoting inclusion) whilst ensuring that they receive their fair share of teacher attention.

The intervention

In tackling this problem of ensuring that the gifted girls felt fully included in their English lessons, I attempted to provide an element of individual challenge in two ways. Firstly, Act III Scene i of *Macbeth* was approached through differentiation by task (and therefore questioning), in an effort to extend the writing and thinking skills of the girls involved. We initially read through the scene as a class and discussed the action therein. Most of the next lesson was spent discussing and clarifying the tiered task which the class were to complete for homework: As no one knows Banquo’s destination when he leaves Macbeth’s castle, it was suggested that he might spend this time writing either a personal diary or a letter to a friend recounting recent events. This latter task was made substantially more challenging, as the letter could only hint at Banquo’s suspicions, because he would be accused of treason if the letter were intercepted. Successful completion of this letter required careful, yet imaginative use of language, detailed knowledge of events and the ability to reflect Banquo’s character and values through empathising with his situation. Furthermore, it had the advantage of producing a discrete piece of work which could be easily assessed in respect of developing skills and attainment levels. The girls involved in this study were asked to undertake this task, and the rest of the class were allowed to choose. Predictably, most students opted for the easier diary task.

The work produced by the gifted and talented students varied somewhat in quality. Student A, who had been described as “lacking in confidence”, produced a letter which was characteristic of a rather naive and unobservant Banquo. Student B’s letter was more detailed and began to question the extent of Macbeth’s ambition and the speed with which the witches predictions were fulfilled. Student C’s Banquo was “curious as to who was responsible for [the death of Duncan] and why?” and linked this event to the witches’ predictions. Outwardly, this Banquo was concerned for the health of his friend and king, but he also recognised the potential threat to himself and Fleance, stating that they “have left for some time”.

The feedback evaluations for this task were encouraging. Students B and C found the challenge of writing from someone else’s point of view interesting and enjoyable – Student B went so far as to say that she found the task “quite interesting – more than any other task I have done before this year”. However, Student A was less comfortable. Given the choice, she would have preferred the easier diary task. She directly equated ease of completion with level of enjoyment, but admitted that it had been interesting, as she had never had the opportunity to write in the character of somebody else before. All three girls agreed that they had had to think differently in order to accomplish the task and that this had been difficult. They specifically identified empathising with Banquo’s thoughts and feelings and the need to be suggestive without directly accusing Macbeth of anything untoward as the areas which required most thought. In their eyes, the level of difficulty, along with the corresponding length of time it took to complete the task, appeared to be the major drawbacks to attempting such a task.

In this instance, differentiation by task seemed to provide an effective learning opportunity, which in turn produced good work and had apparently stretched the abilities of the students. However, it is doubtful how much it contributed to the inclusion and involvement of the girls within the lessons themselves. Adequate completion of the task depended on all of the students understanding the implications of the scene’s action. The lessons used to “set up” the task had not been anything out of the ordinary – although in an attempt to whet the class’ appetite, I had advised all of the students that they would be doing a different type of task associated with this scene. In the second lesson, a lot of time was spent repeating information and clarifying expected outcomes to the class as a whole as well as to individual students. Although this state of affairs was expected and probably unavoidable, it also created the kind of situation identified by the able students themselves as the most off-putting: lessons that were tedious, monotonous and repetitive.

The second task relied on the collaborative and physically active nature of a drama exercise to encourage the inclusion of the gifted students within the actual lesson. As before, the class covered the necessary text (Act III, Scene iv) during the previous lesson, this time with their usual teacher. The task involved the girls dramatising the ghost of Banquo’s first entrance in Act III, Scene iv (Lines 39-73). The supremely open-ended nature of the task, and the fact that the girls were randomly assigned to groups, meant that the only appropriate differentiation designation was by outcome.

However, this task had been designed with the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy in mind (1956, cited in Koshy and Casey, 1997). The lower cognitive levels of acquiring “knowledge” and “comprehension” had been previously dealt with, which

meant that the higher levels of “application”, “synthesis” and “evaluation” could be employed. The girls were required to apply their knowledge of the characters in order to create powerful performances. They needed to think about staging, speech delivery and the possibility of editing some of the lines. One person in each group also had to take on additional responsibility as a “director” and therefore had the final say in any decision-making. The director’s responsibilities extended to answering questions and meeting comments from the audience after the performance of their group. (In this instance, the gifted and talented students did not have to be directors.) A small worksheet outlined these task details and the related homework. Other than that, relatively little guidance was given with regard to expected performance outcomes. Assessment focused on the quality of performance, directorial justification of choices and the evaluative homework.

As the girls had not been briefed beforehand, it is fair to say that the element of surprise, together with the relatively unusual nature of the task and the additional space of the assembly hall, contributed significantly to the overall success of this lesson. There were some excellent performances, with some innovative staging arrangements and several requests for “extra lords” from the audience to add to Macbeth’s banquet. An additional bonus (from a teaching perspective at least) was that the groups appeared to be fully engaged with the task, which allowed me to circulate and spend a considerable amount of time with each group, either discussing ideas or observing their rehearsals. The time spent with each group could genuinely be called “quality” time, as comparatively few interruptions from other areas meant that I could give each group my undivided attention.

The evaluation questionnaires completed by the gifted girls were interesting and surprising. Student A’s extremely strong and confident portrayal of Macbeth had startled me, but her evaluation (along with her general questionnaire answers and the later taped discussion) revealed that she really enjoyed drama, something that had been hitherto unapparent. As before, she linked the degree of challenge to her levels of enjoyment – this time saying, “I found the challenge quite easy as it is something I enjoy... it was fun and interesting.” By contrast, Student B hated drama and for her, the task was challenging, because she had to perform in front of a lot of people. Disappointingly, if predictably, she stated that she did not find the task interesting and did not have to think in any new ways. Student C fell between these two extremes. She was the only one of the three girls who had chosen to be a director, and this alone was identified as providing a small amount of challenge. Having said that, she also played Lady Macbeth and commented that she had to think like her and show the differences between her private and public personalities. A major component of her enjoyment came from the extraordinary nature of the task: “We don’t normally get to do drama and it was fun to play the roles with acting.”

When this task was later discussed in the interview, the issue of working in groups arose. Although they had enjoyed this opportunity to work collaboratively, some doubts were expressed regarding the way in which I had randomly divided the class. The girls speculated (without any rancour) that the task may have worked better in “friendship” groups. Similarly, with regard to the first task, they felt that the whole point of offering a choice of task was that they should be allowed to choose for themselves. Guidance was appreciated, but the ultimate decision should be left to the students. Such self-sufficiency should be encouraged – the provision of a certain

amount of “choice” throughout the course of the academic year would be an excellent way of fostering a culture of independent learning.

Nevertheless, as the decisions regarding task allocation and grouping are a teacher’s prerogative, it is important to recognise the influence they have on a lesson. Classroom dynamics and therefore the lesson outcomes are inevitably manipulated by the ways in which a class is handled. Thus in the same way that I deliberately chose to set the able girls the harder writing task, I also chose to split friendship groups. Another time, the decision might be different and the girls might be allowed to work at their own perceived level or with their friends. However, this would almost certainly affect the learning outcomes of the task in question, although it is hard to say whether this would be for better or worse. Therefore, such decisions act as a subtle method of differentiation within the larger parameters of “differentiation by outcome/task”. In this respect, they are similar to the idea of targeted “questioning” discussed above. Consequently, if these are effectively (and sparingly?) exploited, it can be an excellent method of providing the desired element of “individual challenge” which the gifted girls wanted. For example, different groups could consider alternative angles; and individual students can be discreetly encouraged to think in new ways and at higher levels.

The self-evaluations completed for homework (in itself a task which requires meta-cognition) were also enlightening, as they illustrated some of the answers the girls had given in the evaluation-questionnaires. It could be said that Student C stayed in her role as a director, as she focused on the overall performance of her group and issues (such as staging) which would need to be addressed in a subsequent performance. Student A’s evaluation reflected her cautious attitude as she outlined future goals: trying out different characters and taking on a directorial role. This is indicative of a student who needs to test the water and be certain of her ability to competently complete a task, rather than somebody who is willing to take risks and “have a go”, regardless of success or failure

Yet within a classroom context, a one-off evaluation exercise is of limited use to all concerned. When questioned, the girls stated that they had very few opportunities to evaluate their work themselves and they relied on the teacher to do it for them. Self-evaluation or reflection needs to be embedded firmly in the culture and practices of the classroom, if it is to be of use in identifying potential areas for future development.

Arguably, the drama task was much more successful than the tiered task at effectively including the gifted and talented students (and, indeed, the entire class) within the body of the lesson. However, as already discussed, this almost certainly owed a lot to the very nature of the lesson rather than the type of differentiation employed. On the other hand, it is harder to assess in concrete terms how valuable the learning opportunities and outcomes were. The task may not have ostensibly developed “thinking skills”, but it did give the class the chance to take both individual and group responsibility for their performances, without the benefit of a lot of teacher input. In other words, all of the students were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, which can only be beneficial in the long term.

CONCLUSION

The feedback from this task highlights the acute need for awareness of individual preferences, as well as the National Curriculum “Standards” and “Objectives”, to inform lesson planning. By occasionally playing to the strengths of the students in the provision of a varied curriculum, we can also encourage development in other areas and the effective transference of skills. For example, Student A should be encouraged to extend her dramatic activities, perhaps in an extra-curricular capacity, with a view to increasing her confidence and helping her overcome her overall shyness. This in turn would hopefully have a positive affect on her self-esteem, and consequently her attitude towards new and different challenges in the classroom.

Unsurprisingly, then, the difficulty of successfully combining the reading and comprehension abilities of the lower and average ability students with those of the more gifted students appeared to be the biggest stumbling block to inclusive teaching in general and *Macbeth* in particular. The examination constraints of having to “know” the set scenes dictated that the needs of the majority were met, consequently leaving the gifted and talented students frustrated by the slow pace to which they were held. Inevitably, a vicious circle had arisen as the insistence on “knowledge”, normally disseminated through a “whole-class” method of teaching, does not allow much opportunity for any of the students to explore or puzzle out the text for themselves. Reading fresh sections of the text (and possibly differentiating through grouping) was risky because the “spoon-feed” mentality of the majority of the students meant that there was no guarantee that all members of the class would apply themselves to such a task. The only way in which the teacher could be reasonably certain that the passage in question had been understood was through lengthy and painstaking feedback sessions of the kind which the able students found tedious. Yet regrettably, it appeared that the more stimulating and inclusive activities could only be embarked upon once this hurdle of understanding (with its risk of alienating the gifted students) was cleared.

Thus the broad method of differentiation as noted on a lesson plan is not the only factor in promoting the full inclusion of gifted and talented students. As we have seen, the delivery of a successful lesson, where learning outcomes are met and higher cognitive skills are stimulated, relies on more than just the presentation of a suitable task to a class of students. Delineating differentiation by outcome, task, or more rarely, text, should be seen as the first stage of a succession of more subtle forms of differentiation which are embedded into the fabric of the lesson itself. Encouraging inclusion within a lesson and engagement with a task is, perhaps, achieved more effectively and discreetly through gambits which normally come under the heading of “classroom management” techniques. Although full inclusion should, ideally, be experienced through involvement with a suitable task within the framework of a lesson, it is inevitable that the two will occasionally become dissociated. This does not invalidate the learning experience imbued in the task itself, but care must be taken that the content of the lesson concerned does not alienate the more talented students.

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