

How to stretch the more able: go off-piste, define differentiation and avoid time- wasting marking

Conference chair Ian Warwick addresses some of the questions posed by delegates at the 'Stretch and Challenge the More Able' event.



Like a GPS, teachers are prone to denying students responsibility for their own path-finding.

We're told the curriculum is about mastering all learning at a child's own level and not working beyond their own age group. Where do we stand with Ofsted if we go off-piste?

I've had several conversations with Ofsted on this issue. Most inspectors are extremely pleased when they see teachers going beyond the particular learning objectives for that year.

While I'm not a major fan of acceleration, I don't see a problem with, for example, using A level assessment objectives at GCSE. You're looking at how a piece of work can be assessed or judged, using criteria which are more stretching and challenging. That isn't accelerating into next year's work: it's simply using some of the criteria that these students will need to address in a year or two's time.

If students have already mastered the assessment objectives for their own year or level, there isn't much point in continuing to use them. For many students, the only way they can get a better understanding of where they're going next, and the route map that will take them there, is by using objectives from the year above. Mastery isn't an excuse for holding people back.

Is 'more able' an acceptable term to define the demographic we are discussing? If not, what would be better?

My honest response is that I don't think it matters a huge amount. The term you use will depend on the context of the school, perhaps the parent group, and what is seen as an acceptable term.

I wouldn't use 'gifted' because it has associations with a God-given talent, and suggests that students don't need to use their own effort or task commitment. It can actually have a damaging impact. Ofsted seem to be using 'most able' now, but of course, 'most' will depend on what the rest of your cohort looks like. What matters is that in your school, you can locate your more able students, look at their progress as a group, improve their progress, see what interventions are being put into place, and understand how effective those interventions may be. To me, that seems far more significant than what you actually call the group.

Earlier today you talked about the importance of using pupil premium funding to support disadvantaged more able students. Do you have any examples of good practice in regards to this?

I think the key issue here, at both primary and secondary, is why more able students from

disadvantaged backgrounds are not making the progress that they ought to be making. Many of these students are missing out on two key things:

- cultural capital
- academic language.

In terms of cultural capital, many schools are now putting interventions in place. For example, bringing in experts to talk about their subject area or recent book, or governors to talk about their career. Enrichment activities such as theatre and cinema trips are also valuable.

In terms of academic language, I've seen far less effective work being done. Where I've seen it being addressed explicitly, the school has taken on subject-specific language as an initiative that teachers pursue in the classroom.

It's not about posters on the wall. It's about teachers modelling the kind of academic language that a biologist, geographer or historian would use, and making sure that students become fluent in it. Because many of those students will not be hearing those words at home or in the playground.

What do you mean when you talk about the language of differentiation? Can you provide some examples?

The most important thing is that a school sees differentiation as the key means by which it enables high challenge and stretch to happen in classroom situations – which is the only time it really matters. Make sure that the language all teachers use, whatever subject they're teaching, is a common one, and is understood by teachers as differentiation.

Thankfully some ideas about differentiation are now dead, such as differentiation by outcome, which meant nothing other than you and your students bothered to turn up; or differentiation by giving some students more work, which meant nothing but differentiation by punishment.

I would talk about differentiation through:

- task
- pupil grouping
- assessment
- pace
- resources
- extension
- the degree of freedom students are given e.g. to research.

There are probably 10 or 15 ways differentiation can be talked about; it just needs to be a common agreement, across the school. So that whether it's a maths, English or history teacher talking about differentiation through assessment, they mean the same thing.

What can be done to encourage more independence from students?

I like to use the analogy of using GPS for a journey. There's a risk that we become highly reliant on our phone to take us from one place to another, because the feedback the phone gives us is so accurate and precise. We give over responsibility for our own path-finding to the phone (which can lead to mishaps). As teachers, we sometimes give feedback which is too detailed, too explicit. We steal the struggle away from our students. They need to struggle: it's part of the learning process. It should be difficult to achieve scholarship.

Students need to focus on improving their own work, rather than using us as proof-readers. We need to make sure that the work we get handed in is the very best the student can achieve. Because unless it is the best, then we are marking non-liminal work and there's no point.

Don't waste time marking second-best work that students themselves could change and improve. We need to concentrate on student misconceptions and the mistakes they make: that's where we can make the most difference.

Push back and make students take responsibility for their own work. Yes, feedback does need to be given at the point it's needed. But don't waste time marking

second-best work that students themselves could change and improve. Teach students how to peer review and feedback to each other effectively.

Marking is often done far too late, it's far too specific, and it's not taken on board by the students. Unless you give them direct time to improve on their work, then frankly, we're wasting huge amounts of our time and theirs.

What's next?

- Check out Ian's latest books, *World Class: Tackling the Ten Biggest Challenges Facing Schools Today*
- [Learning with Leonardo: Unfinished Perfection - What does Da Vinci tell us about making children cleverer?](#)

