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## **Understanding the Teachers' Stake in Learners' Individual Differences: How Teachers Manoeuvre to Assist a Poor Reader in the English Language Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

The paper describes the nature of diverse features of learners in school that is usually regarded as individual differences. It explains the importance of the concept in pupils' learning as well as how it can be used to learners' advantage to promote learning especially among pupils who are poor readers. The paper also provides information on the arguments for and against the adoption of mixed ability grouping in the classroom to provide for improved learning among learners.

### **1. Introduction**

The job of a teacher in the classroom has always been to assist the learner acquire knowledge and skills. The teacher gets this done in a number of ways using various strategies. One of the requirements that a teacher may need in achieving his/her teaching objectives is the ability to understand learners' individual differences as well as the skills to put the knowledge to practice. Individual differences reflect manifestation of differential abilities in learners. In the classroom, students are made up of different abilities. These abilities vary from interests, skills, values, habits, self concept among others. A good knowledge of the different abilities of the learners is needed by teachers to function well in the classroom.

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It is usually said that mixed-ability grouping requires teachers to appreciate and understand the differences between the children in their classes and to know their pupils as individuals [6]. It is the believe of [4] that many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able children with a subset of children who have learning problems. There is the suggestion by [3] that teachers need to recognise that a class is mixed ability because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. However, the idea of employing individual differences in constructing and implementing teaching has been with diverse opinions. Some claim on both theoretical and practical grounds that all true education is individual education, that what is valuable to the individual in what the school offers him or her is that which is, or in some way becomes, personalized, and that, as a result, in any educational situation, teachers should be aware of the needs of each individual pupil. While the opinion of these group of individuals is that mixed-ability grouping in which case individual differences are taken cognizance of in planning and delivering lessons, others are of the opinion that classroom grouping that is based on streaming promotes pupils' achievement. According to [2], grouping pupils according to their ability would seem a logical way to allow all pupils to achieve their potential, however it makes very transparent the differences in the academic ability of pupils and is therefore not a very inclusive approach. She further noted that streaming can lead to stigmatization, low self-esteem and disruptive behaviour in pupils in streams regarded as low. She opined that mixed ability class allows for more of a social mix but relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher in helping a wide range of pupils achieve their potential.

The individual approach to education that seems to be implied by the move towards a mixed-ability form of organization can cater for the pupil who has learning difficulties as well as any other pupil and that, far from depriving him/her of the advantages of working in this way, the advantages should be seen as having a particular application to his/her learning difficulties. In particular, the position of the nonreader or the poor reader who would seem to present a teacher with particular problems since he/she lacks the basic skill to handle work-cards and most resources and who may also pose the question of how can he be expected to take on his/her own individual assignments or contribute significantly to the work of a group should be examined.

## **2. Assisting a Poor Reader in a Mixed-ability Group**

Taking a look at the reasoning in the case of pupils with more general learning attention should be paid to the fact that difficulties with reading, like all learning difficulties, can be the result of organic factors, of physical or neurological disabilities, and may also likely be due to environmental and emotional factors, which are elements in the pupil's experience at home or at school which have created blocks to his/her learning, so that even pupils of above-average ability in other areas can be seen experiencing difficulties in learning basic skills such as reading. When considering pupils with learning difficulties in general, it is usually noted that the solution to those difficulties that arise from factors of this kind is not only to make provision for additional instruction, since that, although important, is to attempt to deal only with the symptoms; it is rather to try also to get at the causes of the disability by creating a secure and stable environment in the school and in the classroom in which the pupil can work and through which his/her confidence can be built up and by keeping a particularly close watch on his/her social and emotional development, doing all that can be done to make it as smooth as

possible.

If this is a correct view of the problem and if it is right to claim social and emotional advantages for individual and group assignment work, then it would seem right and desirable that pupils who are experiencing difficulties in mastering the basic skills of reading should be included in such work. For they, perhaps more than any other pupils, need the advantages that such an approach can bring. Such pupils would need to be given intensive remedial help with their reading problems, but this should not be done at the expense of the opportunities that can be offered them for working on what they can do and possibly can do well, since to do this might well have the opposite effect to the one intended - it might merely aggravate the social and emotional factors that may lie behind the reading difficulties. If nothing else, these pupils can be given, via an individual assignment suited to their abilities, a rest from the hounding they sometimes get as poor readers from Monday morning to Friday afternoon in a traditional curriculum. For inability to read and write is a disadvantage that is highlighted in almost every curriculum subject.

Individual assignment work should be seen as a chance to give them a break from this, to play to what strengths they have, as has already been suggested, and to try in this way to attend to their social and emotional development, which is both important in itself and can have the added advantage of making the way easier for their subsequent intellectual development. They also need the advantages that can come from the social relationships that develop through working with others on group projects.

In the first place, there is need to develop resource material carefully packaged in a manner that they can use. In developing such materials, it is vital to think of such resources other than those of books, pamphlets and other written materials. They need other kinds of materials because they are poor readers. Such resources could be tapes for poor readers instead of work-cards and that there should be as many resources that can be used without reading skills as can be obtained or made. The aim of individual and group assignment work should be to make the pupil independent of the teacher and, if the teacher is not to spend an unfair proportion of his/her time with the poor readers and thus neglect those pupils who can read, he/she must be prepared to help them to become independent by taping material him/herself and making provision of such other resource materials as they can use. Furthermore, this can help in the development of their reading skills too, since they can be given a written version of all or some of what is on the tape and can follow it as the tape is played.

The use of printed materials for non-readers cannot be said to be totally foreclosed. Although we sometimes speak of these pupils as nonreaders, they would in fact be backward readers at various stages in the development of their reading skills. What is needed, therefore, is the provision of the same resource material at different levels of complexity to cater for the different levels of reading skill that are found in any mixed-ability class. If this is done successfully, only the complete poor reader would be unable to cope with the written material provided.

Furthermore, such pupils who are poor readers can be employed as illustrators in a group project or can contribute in some other way that does not entail reading or writing. They can also perform a very useful

function, valued by their colleagues and giving them a sense of having something important to contribute, if they are encouraged to take responsibility for the use of some of the hardware the group may need. To operate a film-strip or slide projector, a tape-recorder or a camera requires skill of a different kind and this is the kind of contribution such children can initially be encouraged to make. The attitude of some pupils to school and to teachers can be transformed if they are given this kind of responsibility.

Care must be taken, however, of appearing to suggest that such pupils should be used in group projects as handmaidens or attendants, assisting in the development of the ideas and the work of other, brighter pupils. As has been stressed earlier, the basic educational goals and principles should be the same for all pupils and there must not be any willingly accepted different aims for the teaching of pupils with any sort of learning difficulty. This is one reason why it is necessary to prepare similar resources at different levels of complexity, to ensure that they can be given similar work to do. It may be expedient in many cases to devise useful jobs for them of the kind has just been discussed, in order to secure their acceptance by a group, to build their confidence or even to keep them busy and ensure their good behaviour, but sight must not be lost of the fact that in the end the real should be with their education.

A third major consideration for the teacher, which again applies to all pupils but perhaps particularly to those experiencing difficulties with reading, is the importance of providing opportunities for the development of spoken language. According to [5], inability to speak fluently is a worse handicap than inability to read or write. Personal and social adequacy depend on being articulate. It could also be further claimed that the development of the pupil's skill with spoken language will also lead to an improvement in his/her control over the written word. Children's language skills do not improve merely by the performance of written exercises. They improve as much, and in the early stages of language development considerably more, through opportunities to talk to others about what they have done and about what they are planning to do and how they intend to set about it.

Language will develop by its use in expressing ideas that are important to the learner and will develop, therefore, by being used to describe activities and interests that the pupil is engaged in. It can, therefore, be promoted by the kinds of activity associated with individual and group assignments, if teachers are conscious of its importance and prepared to provide opportunities for it. Formal reporting back to the class of progress made and of future plans has its place here and one should not discourage the poor reader from acting as spokesman for a group if he/she wishes to, but opportunities for informal discussion are probably of more value to all pupils and especially to those with reading problems. It is in this kind of area that the mixed-ability class and the mixed-ability group within the class offers particular advantages, for there can be little possibility for development of language skills if all members of the group are at roughly the same level of linguistic competence and proficiency. It is in a mixed-ability group, where the pupil who can express him/herself more easily must work to communicate with his/her less fluent fellows and they in turn can develop by their contact with those more fluent than themselves, that improvement can be hoped for in every pupil's linguistic ability.

Further ways in which an incentive towards learning to read might be created and a basis provided for some

written and oral work may be found through other creative activities. All of these techniques, however, have values for all pupils and, although their values as starting-points for reading and other learning may be greater for those who have learning problems, one must again be wary of appearing to suggest that these opportunities should be provided only for such pupils.

A final word must be said about the correction of such written work as the poor reader may be encouraged to produce by the teacher's efforts in the individual and group assignment situation. He must not be disheartened and discouraged by having every error indicated. After all, one will have had to work hard to build up his/her confidence and interest to the point where he/she has produced this work; one does not want to destroy the fruits of that by a too unnecessary use of pen to indicate every correct idea. Such work must be seen as a growth point, as an opportunity to lead the pupil on further, and one should, therefore, only draw his/her attention to errors are felt can now be corrected as the next stage of that growth. One should mark to encourage not to discourage and should bear in mind the development of the individual's ability to communicate rather than to spell or punctuate.

### **3. Summary and Conclusion**

Pupils' particular reading problem has been discussed. Reasons for their difficulties with some or all aspects of their learning have also been addressed. It has been suggested that for such pupils, perhaps more than for any others, there are enormous advantages in the mixed-ability class, not least those that derive from the opportunities that working with their brighter peers can give both for their own learning and for the development of that confidence that is essential for any kind of success.

In fact, it has been argued that, although it has often been claimed that such pupils have most to gain from a system of streaming which segregates them from the more successful pupils, the opposite is rather the case. It was further argued that such remedial help as they need should be provided by a system of withdrawals and that this system should be combined with an arrangement to withdraw all pupils for some special purposes at set times in the week. Discussion has also been presented about some of the practical problems that the presence of such pupils, and especially those experiencing difficulties with reading, create for teachers and suggested some of the ways in which these problems might be met.

Pupils with learning difficulties must be seen as an integral part of a mixed-ability class and not as a special case requiring separate treatment. If this is so, all teachers need to be prepared both to understand and to cater for such pupils. All teachers employed in infant and junior schools need to be prepared to teach reading as a basic skill. Too often it is the infant teachers only who can do this and it is forgotten that many pupils still need to be helped in this way in the junior school. At secondary level, however, it is probably wiser to leave the teaching of reading to teachers who have been specially trained to attend to this in the special classes referred to earlier. Not the least important reason for suggesting this is that teaching of such basic skills at this age is essentially remedial teaching, since by definition every child who needs this kind of help at this stage of his schooling is experiencing difficulties of a very special kind with all the possible emotional side-effects we have noted.

This does not mean, however, that secondary teachers in general can continue to ignore the problems of learning to read and leave them to the specialist. An important distinction has to be made between the actual teaching of the basic skills of reading and making due allowance for the nature of reading and language development generally in all the work that is done. Reading, as part of language development, has to be seen as an 'across the curriculum' concern. All teachers, therefore, will need an understanding of the nature of reading and the nature of the reading difficulties children suffer from. Even the subject specialist needs this kind of understanding if he is to provide his pupils with the kind of reading material they can profit from. This will be especially important in his teaching of mixed-ability classes since he must be able to choose a variety of reading materials suited to the needs of different individuals or groups across the whole range of ability.

Furthermore, it is apparent that some pupils experience reading or language difficulties in certain subjects only, sometimes because of the peculiarities of the language that teachers, for the best of reasons, insist should be used in certain subjects or disciplines[1] and this puts an onus on the teacher of a subject to acquire this kind of understanding of the nature of reading and language development generally in order to be able to understand the kinds of problem facing certain of his own pupils in his/her own subject area.

Finally, few teachers would deny that most of the difficulties they have with control of their classes and the behaviour of certain pupils stem from those pupils who are experiencing serious learning difficulties. In a streamed school the latter streams have always been more difficult to handle than the earlier ones. Some of the reasons for this have been mentioned several times already. The move to mixed-ability classes can be seen, therefore, in terms of a philosophy of 'divide and rule'; it should be seen rather as an attempt to get to the roots of this difficulty and cure it by providing these pupils with opportunities to do something valuable and constructive alongside their fellows. If teachers do not succeed in helping them to take advantage of these opportunities, the behavioural problems will continue and the change will have been largely wasted.

## **References**

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