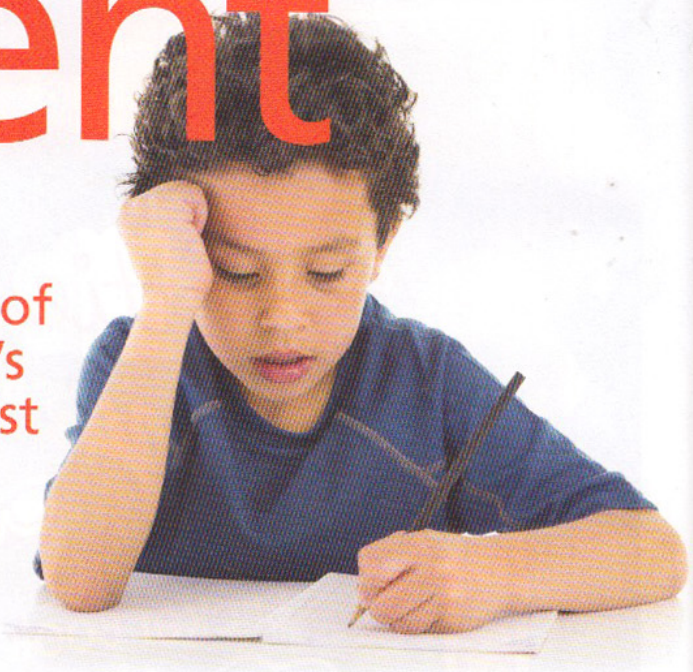
Equal, but different

Your child is your priority, but teachers must meet the needs of every child in the class – and it's a challenge. Education specialist **Robert Watts** reports on how teachers make every child feel like Number One!



The days when children sat in rows, laboriously copying from the blackboard, are long gone. Teachers are aware that children learn at different paces and in different ways, and that the key to success lies in understanding their needs. This is all part of a process educators call differentiation. Rather than assume children learn in similar ways, teachers are trained to recognise individual needs and to differentiate their approach to suit a range of abilities, interests and learning styles.

Avoiding labels

When I was a primary school teacher in the 2000s, the process of differentiation seemed straightforward. I confidently divided my classes into three groups. There was red group, the high fliers, racing ahead with their English and Maths; there was blue group, those children who needed a helping hand from time to time, and then there was green group, the 'slow' learners, who tended to divide their time between staring out of windows and poking pencils in each other's ears.

Back then, my idea of differentiation was to provide each group with a different worksheet – tricky problems for the high fliers, simple stuff for strugglers – and the morning queue for the staff room photocopier suggested others also adopted this approach. But education experts now know more about how young children learn. Many question the practice of placing children firmly in ability groups and argue that teachers who label children as 'slow learners', 'average' or 'high fliers' are over-simplifying a complex picture.

Carrie Winstanley is Professor of Pedagogy at the University of

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Roehampton, London and author of *Too Clever by Half: A Fair Deal for Gifted Children* and *The Ingredients of Challenge*. 'There's no such thing as an average child, and no such thing as a slow learner,' she argues. 'The label implies that they're slow at everything.

'If we think about "slow learners" and "fast learners" we are viewing ability in a one-dimensional way – when actually we know as adults we're quite good at some things but not so good at others. I'm highly able at some things but I'm absolutely rubbish at others! All of us, adults and children, are slow learners, average and higher flyers in different things.'

Carrie's research has focused on the needs of children who, despite being able in some areas, also have learning problems. 'Obviously some children tend to struggle and others are more confident. But most children have a "spikey" profile – they're better at some things than others. Just because they're good at reading doesn't mean they're good at writing.'

All round encouragement

So how should teachers differentiate tasks in ways that will engage all children? 'The best way to group children is not by ability, but by task,' says Carrie. 'Let's imagine a classic Maths lesson activity of adding up tens and units. The teacher can plan activities for those who are only ready to add single numbers, those who are still struggling with numbers up to 20 and those who are ready to add, say, 24 and 58. They can explain to children that they have a choice of tasks by saying: "This is what everybody must do; this is what you should do, and this is what you could do." Children who complete the first task can go on to the second straight away without a problem.'

The beauty of this approach is its flexibility. Some children will choose to re-visit tasks they need to practice, while others can take on new challenges – and what's more, no-one needs to be labelled as a slow learner by being seated at a particular table. Instead, children of all abilities can sit alongside one another, which makes for a more cohesive classroom.

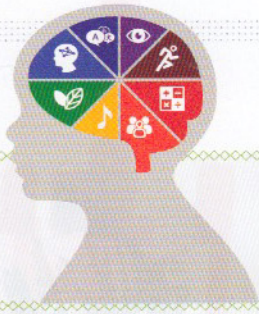
Carrie is convinced that teachers who group pupils in rigid ways risk not only damaging their confidence but also their willingness to learn. 'A good teacher will group children in different ways, depending on what the task is. If they're working individually it doesn't really matter where they sit. But what we should really be clear about is that once a task is finished and children move on, there's every chance they will sit in different places.' ▸

Learning styles

In the past decade, the notion that children have different 'learning styles' has become influential in UK classrooms. Education theorists describe learning styles in various ways. Some describe how children are primarily either visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners, meaning that they learn best either by seeing material on paper or screen, listening to explanations or discussion, or physically handling objects that help them to understand concepts.

Others draw on the theory that, rather than talking about levels of ability, we need to think in terms of 'multiple intelligences' (see right). Advocates of this theory argue that a child who completes a task quickly is not necessarily more 'intelligent' than another who takes more time. It could be that the slower child is approaching the task in a more individual way – that may ultimately help them to gain a firmer understanding of it.

Another theory is that we each have a 'mindset' that determines our view of our own ability. Social psychologist Carol Dweck proposes that, while some of us see intelligence as 'fixed' from an early age, others believe it can be nurtured and developed. She argues that striving to adopt a 'growth mindset' can lead to less stress and more success.



MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

INTELLIGENCE TYPE	YOUR CHILD WILL PREFER TO LEARN THROUGH…
Musical/Rhythmic	Memorising songs, rhymes and beats. Listening to background music.
Mathematical/Logical	Explaining reasons. Logical activities. Looking for patterns. Fitting ideas together.
Interpersonal	Understanding other people's emotions. Communicating with others. Working as part of a team.
Intrapersonal	Being aware of their strengths, weaknesses and targets. Understanding their responses to things. Learning independently.
Verbal/Linguistic	Language – written, read or spoken.
Naturalist	Being in nature, understanding its principles.
Bodily/Kinaesthetic	Practicing physical skills. Learning through movement and touch.
Visual/Spatial Intelligence	Visualising in their head. Learning through images.

Offering challenges

Carrie is quick to spot children who are highly able in some areas, yet find learning difficult in others: 'Last week I was working with a seven-year-old called Sam who is definitely a more able reader – he was reading books aimed at Year 6 children with ease, fluency and understanding', she explains. 'But I quickly realised his writing was still at what we call the "becoming confident" stage.'

Sam is an example of a child whose learning could be hampered by a rigid classroom system that groups high fliers together. 'If his teacher placed him in the "top" reading group he would be expected to read something complex and then write something equally complex,' explains Carrie. 'He could do the reading easily but when it came to the writing he might flounder. He might write a lot but wouldn't be able to read it back – and nobody else would be able to decipher it!' Conversely, if Sam were placed alongside children who were only beginning to write, he could quickly become bored by simple reading tasks.

'The real principle is that all children need challenge,' concludes Carrie. 'I call it equality of challenge. Everybody should be challenged at the level that is right for them, whether they are struggling or achieving. The skill of the teacher is to know the children and to know the appropriate level of challenge for each child.'

How parents can help

It's crucial that parents help children to enjoy the learning process from the word go. As they move into Key Stage 2 (7-11 years) they will have plenty of time to focus on literacy and numeracy – for now, focus on what interests them.

If your child is a budding sports star, or gymnast, get them involved in out-of-school clubs. If they're more inclined to become a master chef, get them to roll up their sleeves and make a fruit salad. Follow up these activities by reading or writing about them, but do avoid valuing academic skills above all else. The message we need to share with children is that there are many ways to succeed, and success can come either inside or outside the classroom.