



differentiation and diversity

in the primary school

edited by

eve bearne



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Ros Smith has taught science in both primary and secondary schools. At present she is involved in research with the Open University into gendered discourse in science education. She is particularly interested in how collaborative talk can enhance children's scientific understanding.

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Introduction

While there is currently much emphasis on differentiation in schools, there is no clear consensus about what the term means or implies. It is linked in many teachers' minds with 'mixed ability teaching' but there is nevertheless considerable debate about just what differentiation might look like in the classroom. So – what is differentiation? And how is it done? The term was confirmed in the National Curriculum through the Education Reform Act of 1988 which formally welcomed the idea of differentiation. This Act legislated for every pupil's entitlement to a curriculum which is broad, balanced, relevant and 'subtly' differentiated. Many teachers who for some time had been striving to provide equal opportunities for a range of learners in their classrooms might have been forgiven for thinking that politicians who make decisions about the curriculum had come to understand something of the value and importance of diversity in the experiences, knowledge, languages and cultures which children bring to school. After all, the National Curriculum Council defined differentiation as a process where curriculum objectives, teaching methods, resources and learning activities are planned to cater for the needs of individual pupils (NCC 1991).

All well and good, but what are the assumptions underlying the apparently welcome concept of differentiation as outlined in government documents? And what criteria might be used to make decisions about differentiation in schools? If 'differentiation' means 'seeking to find differences between pupils' then the curriculum will be managed in a way which will make it easy to assess those differences. If, on the other hand, differentiation means looking at classroom approaches to learning and trying to provide access, then the success criteria will include considering the effectiveness of the learning experience and the provision of a varied and flexible environment for learning. It will also include the teacher's capacity to allow for the success of the class as a whole as well as looking at individual achievement. Does differentiation imply an attempt to identify and widen differences between

2 Introduction

individual pupils or does it carry with it the notion of welcoming difference while providing equitable access to education for all?

Some clues might be found in the inclusion of 'differentiation' in the key terms and concepts of one of the early documents sent out to all teachers. It was defined as:

Planning of pupils' work to take account of differences in the abilities, aptitudes and needs of individual pupils. Also used in the context of assessment where differentiation by task and outcome are used to assess what pupils know, understand and can do.

(NCC 1992: 67)

There were no guidelines about how this might be carried out, however, and this gap is evident in much of the statutory and non-statutory material which has been produced by the National Curriculum Council and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

The review of the National Curriculum (1994), otherwise known as the Dearing Report, confirmed the lack of clarity of the concept, reporting that:

many teachers were unclear about how the proposed end of key stage statements should be used in art, music and physical education, particularly to help differentiate pupils' attainment.

(SCAA 1994: 10)

Where differentiation is used explicitly in the revised National Curriculum documents it is in relation to 'exceptional performance'. The use of differentiation in official government documentation seems to be in terms of assessing individual performance. The OFSTED guidelines for inspection of schools, however, refer to the need for teachers to 'match' work to pupils' attainments and abilities. The guidelines note that:

it is a central part of the inspection process to come to the difficult judgement of whether the standards achieved are as high as can reasonably be expected, taking into account the capabilities, circumstances and previous attainments of pupils.

(OFSTED 1993: part 4, para 3.1B)

In terms of Department of Education thinking, then, there seems to be no explicit – or even agreed – definition of differentiation. Where some parts of the National Curriculum documentation seem to suggest that teachers should be differentiating *pupils*, other sections – and inspection documentation – seem equally clear that teachers should be differentiating curriculum *content*. Of course, this is not as confused as it appears; if you sort the sheep from the goats the implication is, perhaps, that you also give them a different daily diet and keep them

in different environments; while the pasturage might look similar, there are significant differences in its nutritive content. You also consider one category as more valuable than the other.

So it is perhaps the implications of a requirement for differentiation which need to be examined carefully, particularly in terms of entitlement and access to a full curriculum. That is why the link between differentiation and diversity is critical and why it is the title of this book. Using both terms together captures the sense that while pupils may have differing abilities, aptitudes and interests, the pupils themselves are, nevertheless, of equal value. The book examines some of the critical issues related to the complex matter of differentiation. It is not geared towards a how-to-do-it view of differentiation, although it is rich in examples of how teachers have managed to provide for diversity in offering a differentiated approach to learning. A variety of perspectives is reflected in the different chapters; the book itself is diverse in the kinds of views represented and in the ways in which the contributors write about either principles of diversity or practices for differentiation. There are no easy answers here, rather a textured set of contributions towards an important area of educational debate. This is a book which can be approached in different ways. The five parts are arranged to cover some general areas of the debate surrounding differentiation; within each part there are reflective overviews as well as accounts of classroom practice and the final part offers a framework for review of school and classroom practice.

Any attempt to unpick the notion of differentiation immediately stumbles into a set of contradictions and tensions. The general areas for debate seem to settle round issues of equal opportunities and access and the related concerns of holding a view of provision for individual learning which can be articulated within wider curriculum considerations. Accompanying these areas of debate are the tricky matters of achievement and ability. There would be no disagreement amongst those concerned with education about providing a curriculum and learning environment which will encourage the most satisfying achievements for all pupils. Nor would there be any significant dispute about the usefulness of monitoring progress. The ways in which monitoring may be carried out, however, is an area for some debate. That it is possible to achieve fully informative monitoring through differentiated assessments (like the restricted access of Key Stage 3 test papers) seems ludicrous, yet the practice is all too real and damaging. Expediency and 'cost-effectiveness' seem to have tinged the debate about how best to describe and assess progress in learning.

The whole area of assessing progression and describing 'ability' deserves a hard critical examination in the context of what differentiation seems to mean for some and what it might come to mean. Issues

of principle are matched by equally pressing matters of school and classroom management. Professionalism becomes an issue when teachers are faced with tensions between preparing their pupils for assessments which are predicated on partial and divisive methods and their embedded desire to promote the learning of all pupils as effectively as possible. A critical approach to the whole area of differentiation and an explicit link with principles of welcoming and working with diversity might help resolve some of the tensions both in principle and in practice. There is certainly room for discussion and debate in order to clarify some of the key issues. Part I, 'Definitions and scope of differentiation', opens up the debate and leads into an account of research which deliberately sets out to capture the voices of teachers as they outline and reflect on the assumptions they hold about what differentiation means and implies. It then goes on to consider the principles underpinning decisions made about a curriculum for diversity.

In general, recognised sites for differentiation are seen in terms of the management of learning: by input, task, content, resources, grouping, support, response and outcome. This book does not simply attach chapters to areas like these but addresses some of the underlying issues, for example just what teachers might mean when they identify learners as 'struggling', 'special needs children' or 'high fliers'. Any analysis of the implications of differentiation uncovers some complex – and even muddled – assumptions about the notion of ability. These assumptions are represented by some of the easy, everyday vocabularies of education, describing children in general terms as 'less able' or 'more able'. Such descriptions may mask other kinds of judgements, but one of the most commonly held views about ability seems to be that literacy (or sometimes numeracy) is equated with general learning ability. While it is true that any pupil's confidence or insecurity with literacy is bound to have an impact on learning and equally true that literacy is undoubtedly of critical importance, it is essential to be clear about what is intended by any description of ability. It is also important to attempt to disentangle the strands of assumptions which lead to classroom practices which hamper the intellectual development of children who are perfectly capable of complex concept formation, but who lack fluency or experience in literacy. Part II, 'Differentiation and literacy', looks in detail at some of the issues related to definitions of literacy ability and pushes the debate further by considering a wider view of literacy and what this might offer to a curriculum geared towards diversity.

Many of the contributors to this book point out that too ready an acceptance of blanket definitions of ability can result in restrictive and exclusive practices. Exclusion through differentiation seems to have been tackled most thoroughly by those who are involved in education for children who are defined as having special educational needs. Analysis

and critique on the exclusive potential of certain conceptions of differentiation owes much to the work done by educators in this field. (e.g. Ainscow; Booth *et al.*) This book, however, is intended to consider differentiation within mainstream education – specifically in the primary school. Recent OFSTED reports have given attention to the importance of challenging pupils who are already achieving well, particularly at Key Stage 2 and the introduction to Part III ‘The range of learners’, addresses the debate about ‘high achievers’, opening up discussions about what might constitute ‘the range’. It is easy to concentrate on those children whose learning needs most obviously claim our attention as teachers and to neglect others. Many of the chapters in this book deal with the complexities of providing for – and extending the learning of – the whole range of learners and this part examines the factors involved in providing a curriculum and classroom experiences for inclusion rather than exclusion. It tackles some of the tricky matters of classroom organisation and examines the cultural implications involved in catering for diversity.

Management of the curriculum is a central area for considering differentiation; at the same time, differentiation is very much a classroom issue. Several chapters in the book examine the principles which might feed whole-school decisions, while others describe management arrangements for making classrooms hospitable to diversity. Part IV ‘Issues of assessment’, traces the whole process of planning for and assessing learning to take account of diversity. Part V takes this further by offering a framework for ‘Constructing a policy for differentiation’ – a model for establishing or reviewing whole-school policy and practice for differentiation and diversity. It explores four key questions: How do we identify the needs of a diverse range of learners? How do we provide differentiated contexts for learning? How do we provide differentiated approaches to learning? How do we assess differentiated learning? Readers who are looking for practicality and suggestions for monitoring the operation of differentiation might want to start with this final section before reading about some of the more critical issues.

One of the threads running throughout this book is the assumption that diversity and difference are welcome in classrooms. Another related thread is the view that a curriculum which addresses equal opportunities and entitlement is necessarily one which allows for differentiation in provision for a range of learners. Rather than seeing differentiation as a means of grading pupils, different chapters propose the view that this is necessarily restrictive and more likely to lead to depressed attainment than improvement in standards. Managing a differentiated curriculum is seen as the positive means of promoting the progress of all learners. Each chapter represents a strand in the complex weave of arguments about diversity and differentiation, describing and

analysing a range of ways designed to ensure entitlement to as full a curriculum as possible for the full range of pupils. The curriculum has to satisfy two requirements which can create tensions – it has to reflect those broad educational aims which are good for all children, whatever their capabilities, whilst allowing for differences in the abilities, aptitudes and needs of those children. The contributors to this book hope to enlarge the debate about how best to cope with these competing demands. Since diversity is a central concern, the chapters themselves represent a diversity of approach. The book not only reflects different subject areas, age groups of children, types of school and points of view, but also provides a balance between analysis and reflective description of classroom practice. Some of the material outlines approaches which teachers have developed to respond to the demands of their pupils' diversity and which attempt to provide for different but equal access to the curriculum whilst meeting government requirements. Other contributions deal with wider, less classroom-focused issues. The variation in approach is intended to signal that this is an attempt to put into practice for readers some of the points made in the chapters themselves. If in classrooms we need to cater for a range of ways in to learning, then as far as possible a book about diversity ought to offer similar variety. Although the chapters represent different perspectives, however, all offer thoughtful approaches to the whole matter of how best to provide for mixed ability and differentiation in schools.

One of the teachers who was interviewed in the research for Chapter 1, commented: 'we seem to be looking for a global definition of differentiation; I don't think we can have one.' Neither do we. While offering no hard and fast definition of terms, the contributors to this book hope that the varying chapters will reflect their principles of inclusion and difference and offer readers diverse opportunities to think critically about differentiation.

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Part I

Definitions and scope of differentiation

Introduction to Part I

Some of the most egregious sins against equity of access are committed in the name of providing for individual differences.

(Coombs 1994: 3)

The jargon smooths over the messiness of real classroom life.

(Thomas 1993: 14)

These two comments suggest the complexity of attempting to get to grips with the implications of differentiation – let alone trying to define the term. In taking a critical view, the oppositions and tensions surrounding differentiation become even more tricky. While for some the emphasis is on the difficulties of supporting individual learning needs, for others the constraints are most obvious when trying to make ideals into everyday classroom reality. There seem to be tensions between attempts to provide both for individual and communal educational entitlements. There are also obvious dangers in trying to pin down a necessarily complex and unstable concept with a few slick words. Trying to find a definition for differentiation runs the risk of either being so general as to be meaningless, or sacrificing detail and richness for the sake of a smart answer.

This section will try to avoid both of these pitfalls by first of all suggesting in this introduction a range of characteristics which might be included in a description of what differentiation involves and implies. The first chapter examines how teachers describe what they would include as elements of differentiation. Finally, these observations are related to the values and principles which might underpin views of differentiation. In this way the contributors hope to offer detail, precision and clarity without sacrificing complexity.

Opinions and definitions of differentiation vary considerably in emphasis, but one recurrent feature identified by commentators is a contrast in viewpoint between those who highlight differentiation between groups and those who focus on differentiation between individuals (Stradling and Saunders 1991). Crudely put, this might be

seen as a distinction between a sorting exercise where all the 'high fliers' or 'low attainers' are put into (apparently) homogeneous groups, or a view which attempts to diagnose individual strengths – or more likely weaknesses – in order to provide for progression. Each of these perspectives tends towards seeing the *learner* as pivotal, rather than looking at the curriculum. This emphasis on the pupil as a central focus for differentiation has led on the one hand towards ways of encouraging greater pupil participation in learning (group work and collaboration between pupils of like abilities) and the evaluation of learning (setting targets for learning), and on the other hand towards a formulation which all too easily topples into a deficit view of the pupil. Either of these views of differentiation can lead to labelling the individual as 'failing' rather than identifying gaps in curriculum planning or the organisation of work as contributory factors to low attainment. A related feature of both views is that they almost inevitably veer towards looking at failure and low attainment rather than opportunities for satisfaction and success in learning.

There are grounds for criticism of too inflexible an approach to 'ability' grouping. While acknowledging, of course, that grouping pupils is a perfectly acceptable classroom practice to promote learning, it is important to recognise that even if learners can be grouped according to common qualities, they are nevertheless not likely to form genuinely homogeneous groups. As outlined in the Introduction, it is by no means a simple matter to group according to 'ability'. Such groupings beg the question: 'ability in what?' Every teacher is aware that pupils who show a high level of confidence and competence in one area of the curriculum may well experience difficulties in another area. Also, while some pupils do indeed fail in their schooling, a view of differentiation which focuses mainly on individual performance can lead to an exclusive approach to teaching and learning. Rather than open up opportunities, it can close them down. It is all too easy to blame the learner than to look critically at the arrangements for learning.

In order to redress the balance there needs to be some coherent view of the curriculum and the learning environment in relation to the diversity of what each individual brings to the classroom. If education is to be inclusive rather than exclusive, 'pupils and teachers will need a wide range of strategies and flexibility of timing and approach if they are to achieve the common goals set out in the National Curriculum targets' (Weston 1992). Recognition of diversity will also allow both teachers and pupils to go beyond those common targets!

Differentiation which genuinely allows for diversity of learning style or approach may need to take the following factors into account:

- variations in fluency of English, which may not be the first language;
- those who read visual, iconic or numerical material more readily than verbal texts;
- gender differences;
- physical differences;
- those who learn better by ear than by eye;
- those who learn through practical experience;
- the range of previous experiences brought to the classroom;

as well as the fact that any learner might use a range of approaches to learning according to the task, the context, the time of day, the learner's perceived needs, etc. This implies the need to plan for a variety of ways in to learning, flexibility in grouping arrangements as well as a clear idea of how, when, why and by whom learning is going to be evaluated and assessed. In other words, differentiation needs to be perceived in terms of entitlement to as full and flexible a curriculum as possible and to be thought of in terms of how the curriculum might cater for and build on diversity.

Teachers themselves can provide a fruitful resource for examining just how this might be achieved. Chapter 1 'Thinking and talking about differentiation', begins by identifying the ways in which teachers perceive and reflect on what they do about differentiation – and what they see as workable classroom approaches. As their comments reveal, the external demands made by the National Curriculum and OFSTED are not necessarily in conflict with most teachers' everyday practice. In the same way that pupils do not represent homogenous groups of thinkers, neither do teachers, and it is as well to take this into account when examining their views of the scope and implications of differentiation. Added to the personal and diverse experiences which teachers represent, is the fact that sometimes professional ways of speaking can obscure rather than clarify ideas. Ruth Kershner and Sheila Miles used an inventive method for probing just what might lie behind and beneath teachers' descriptions of what differentiation meant to them and so were able to examine the 'competing imperatives' which teachers feel themselves subject to.

In many of the discussions about differentiation, teachers appeared to be using an organising principle based on their perceptions of the differences between activities and subject areas, as well as their perceptions of the differences between children. One headteacher aptly summarised the position, identifying differentiation as a slippery concept: 'you try and grasp it and suddenly it shoots out of your hand.' In opening up the area for debate, the writers of Chapter 1 point out:

What appears to be most significant is the variation of ways in which teachers understand the meaning of differentiation, and the breadth and depth with which they employ it.

They go on to stress the importance of finding out what teachers think in order to 'engage with them and develop ideas together'. This chimes well with one of the central elements of the book as a whole: theoretical issues about the curriculum relate to methods of teaching and learning and about management and policy as they are reflected through descriptions of teachers' and pupils' personal and classroom experience.

Chapter 2 'Grounds for differentiation', picks up the theme of 'competing imperatives' by considering some of the values and principles of the primary curriculum and their relationships to the development of both personal and communal knowledge. This chapter examines, first, the notion that differentiation for development of knowledge involves at one and the same time a view of the individual as a learner and a theory of 'common structures of content' within the curriculum on offer. It is not just a matter of providing an appropriate curriculum in terms of content, however, since views of what is seen as 'publicly agreed knowledge' can be characterised in different ways and give rise to differing practices according to the values and priorities of those who define the curriculum and its content.

In arguing for a flexible view of the curriculum, Christine Doddington points out that 'the urge to reduce human understanding to the "fixed" and "agreed" is strong within educational debate.' Rather than settling for a definition of differentiation which favours either an individual formulation or a sense of the implications of commonly agreed knowledge, she relates these to classroom practice. Careful analysis of just what a curriculum for diversity implies and involves leads to precise location of these ideas in a classroom example which shows that 'thinking and genuine understanding can only occur through active engagement and processes of interpretation'. The chapter, and Part I, ends with the suggestion that 'differentiation might help set out a description of classroom activity which illustrates how a teacher values both communal and personal knowledge'. This goes some way towards meeting the competing demands implied by the need to provide an accessible curriculum for a diversity of learners. It also enlarges the scope of possible definitions of what differentiation might involve.

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Chapter 1

Thinking and talking about differentiation

‘It’s like a bar of soap . . . you try and grasp it and suddenly it shoots out of your hand’

Ruth Kershner and Sheila Miles

A deputy headteacher of a primary school is discussing the staff’s recently written policy on differentiation:

. . . we do now have the statement [on differentiation] which will need to be reviewed. I don’t believe things are finished just because it’s now on a piece of paper. . . . I think during the next year we will need to plan a staff meeting where we discuss how we’ve moved forward and how we feel about it now.

Interviewer: Can you think of any resistances in the school or difficulties which might occur?

I don’t think so . . . our staff are much too caring for that . . . they all see it as very important . . . there really wasn’t a great deal of dissent when we were discussing it. The only slight concern from a management point of view is whether some of the staff have really fully understood what we were talking about. I don’t think there would be resistance, but clarity of understanding may be the problem. I think you have to differentiate with the teachers too.

This conversation illustrates some of the complex issues associated with differentiation in primary schools. The deputy headteacher suggests that a school policy on differentiation needs as much thought and discussion after the writing of it as before. She implies that teachers who care about children are likely to want to differentiate effectively. Yet problems may arise when individual teachers construe the meaning of differentiation in their own terms. As she hints above, there may not be a common understanding within a staff team; teachers, like the pupils in their classes, respond in many different ways, and good school management will have to take account of these differences in trying to establish a common set of principles and practices.

This chapter is concerned not only with what teachers think about differentiation in the current educational climate, but also with how to find out about their knowledge, beliefs and feelings. We recently

explored this topic in interviews with teachers and headteachers in three primary schools. Unsurprisingly, this research confirmed that teachers have their individual views about the policy and practice of differentiation and that they express their ideas in diverse ways. Before reporting some of our findings and considering the significance of what individual teachers said to us, we will discuss in more general terms why it is important to take account of what teachers think about their roles in relation both to educational policies and to the children to whom the policies apply.

It has been a feature of recent years that teachers have been faced with numerous changes in educational policy, not least the continuing development of the National Curriculum since the late 1980s. Fullan (1982) points out that we need to understand the 'meaning of change' for all the people involved if policy developments at any level are not to fail. This understanding of the significance of teachers' thinking has informed recent debates about how to help teachers to implement the educational changes that have been imposed throughout the last two decades in Britain. For example, in their discussion of the impact on teachers' practice and thinking of recent changes in policy for children with special educational needs, Brown and Riddell (1994: 222) observe that

the preaching of well-meaning policy-makers or educational theorists is unlikely to bring about change in teachers' thinking unless it takes as its *starting* point the ways in which teachers already perceive and think about what they do . . . and what they see as practical in their own classrooms.

Initiatives in in-service training, staff development and support systems for teachers have shown that there are a number of ways to tap into teachers' professional knowledge and expertise, using carefully planned methods of collaboration and consultation in relation to actual, current experience in school (Upton 1991). These initiatives assume that it matters what teachers think, and that it is important to find ways to draw on teachers' understanding and experience in order to implement educational changes effectively.

As becomes clear in the chapter, the external demands on schools regarding differentiation are not fundamentally opposed to most teachers' current practice, but there are significant differences in the way that individual teachers interpret their day-to-day responsibilities in this area. Teachers' views and opinions can sometimes be taken for granted as representative of a 'group mind'. However, teachers are not all the same; they have different levels of knowledge and experience, and they work in different settings. Like everyone else, they have personal and individual ways of thinking about children and education, and they have

their private language and images as well as the more public and shared communications that are developed in the informal and formal dialogues of training, teamwork and appraisal in schools.

Teachers' private thoughts and feelings are particularly salient in their work with individual children and their families which can sometimes be frustrating and troubling (Greenhalgh 1994). Anyone familiar with primary classrooms will know that individual children can make their needs and feelings evident in many ways. It can be demanding and stressful for teachers to attempt to respond to the immediate concerns of all of their pupils in an open-minded, flexible and fair way. As Pollard (1987) discusses, both teachers and pupils have to develop coping strategies in the classroom setting, and the final 'working consensus' may unexpectedly serve to crystallize classroom processes and expectations in a way that limits the opportunities for certain pupils to learn.

In any discussion of differentiation it is important to remember that children are sensitive to the implications of teachers' actions in the classroom, and a high proportion of children respond to their perceptions of what the teacher seems to expect of them. There has been a long tradition of research into 'teacher expectations' about children and the concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', much of which has seemed to confirm the view that teachers' views about children are highly significant and influential on the children's learning (Dusek 1985). Many researchers have focused on mediating factors like classroom communication, organisation and curriculum planning, and some, like Pollard above, have paid particular attention to children's active involvement in the social processes through which teachers' views may have their effect on pupils' behaviour and attainments in school. The process of expectancy is not simple, however, not least because peers, families and social influences beyond the classroom have their effects on children, as do the children's own beliefs about why they are successful or not (Rogers 1992). There are also, of course, differences between teachers in what they expect of children, and Brophy (1991: 357) comments that reviews of the research indicate that

self-fulfilling prophecy effects of teachers' expectations are minor or non-existent in most teachers' classrooms, but play a significant role in the classrooms of the minority of teachers whose expectations are both inaccurate and rigidly held, and who thus do a poor job of meeting the needs of many of their students.

This distinction may be particularly important in relation to teachers who hold strongly to the view that the causes of children's lack of progress tend to lie 'within the child' (e.g. 'low intelligence', 'lack of effort' or 'problems at home') rather than in school factors and processes, and there has indeed been evidence in recent years that many teachers

who are faced with the challenge of teaching children with learning difficulties will tend to identify the cause of the problem in that way (e.g. Croll and Moses 1985; Weedon 1994).

Teachers' professional decisions are likely to be influenced not only by their perceptions of educational policies and of the children in their classes, but also by other beliefs about what 'good practice' involves. Alexander (1992: 186) discusses the 'competing imperatives' that must be reconciled in teaching. There are matters of values, of political expediency, of knowledge, understanding and perceived practicality. All of these must be balanced by professional judgement, although as Alexander notes, teachers may believe as a matter of principle that some considerations should take precedence over others.

The preceding discussion suggests that teachers' reasons for implementing a policy of differentiation may relate not only to imperatives like 'ought to', 'have to' or 'want to', but also to the knowledge that they 'already do' differentiate in some way between pupils. This is an inevitable human response as well as a matter of professional judgement. Questions remain about how individual teachers understand differentiation, and how they respond in practice to the perceived challenges of this aspect of teaching.

PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENTIATION

The term 'differentiation' can have many layers of meaning for different people, and it is currently underpinned for many teachers by the frustration and occasional cynicism often associated with terms that are in vogue. It is not easy to make any one meaning explicit in a way that indicates its central role in teaching and also succeeds in separating it from other aspects of teaching. As one headteacher said to us:

I think that's one of the problems with jargon and with the profession as a whole. . . . We seem to be looking for a global definition of differentiation. I don't think we can have one. I think it's a term that, I suppose like a bar of soap really, you try and grasp it and suddenly it shoots out of your hand.

In her editorial introduction to the 1992 *British Journal of Special Education* special issue on the topic of differentiation, Margaret Peter says that the shared assumption of the range of contributors to the issue is that 'differentiation is about meeting every child's learning needs so that each can share in the same curriculum, usually in the same schools' (Peter 1992). She goes on to point out that there can, however, be different principles and values underlying the promotion of differentiation as a worthwhile aim in education. For some, the ideology of equal opportunities takes precedence, while others may be more concerned

with the incorporation of differentiation into the repertoire of professional teaching skills and 'good practice' in education. Some people may see differentiation as a cost-effective means of avoiding 'wastage' of pupils' talents, while others may focus entirely on pragmatic political expediency in carrying out a policy that has been imposed on teachers and schools by the National Curriculum and OFSTED (see Editor's introduction). Teachers, of course, may find competing views of this type between colleagues in their staff team, and even within their own individual, multi-faceted sets of beliefs about the meaning of differentiation in the current educational context.

THE RESEARCH

At the time of our research study, January 1995, the primary teachers we interviewed had barely had time to absorb the changes, the new slimmed-down version of the National Curriculum Orders having just landed in their post-boxes after the Christmas break. We decided that this would be a good time to find out how teachers describe differentiation and the part it plays in their professional decision making. We were interested to explore teachers' understandings about it, to tap their 'knowledge-base' to find out whether they were able to make explicit the foundations of their professional practice. One way of doing this would be to analyse the language used and the images they construct when discussing differentiation.

Research was conducted in three large primary schools. One is a school in Cambridgeshire fed by a 1960s housing estate built as a London over-spill. It is an area of high unemployment and the headteacher described it as having one of the highest crime rates in the county. The second school is a primary school in inner-city London with a large ethnic minority population. Again, it is an area of high unemployment with very few amenities. The third school is in a New Town which has recently experienced increased unemployment. The closure of many of the large firms was having a 'knock-on' effect on small businesses. This school and the Cambridgeshire school had both recently carried out staff development work on the topic of differentiation.

The research was prompted by the responses of the postgraduate student teachers we work with who were trying to apply the concept of differentiation in their school placements. Differentiation appeared to mean so many different things to them. There were at one extreme the rather bland statements in official documentation (see Editor's introduction) and at the other, the lengthy debates in the special needs literature (e.g. Hart 1992). In the Autumn term of 1994, primary postgraduate students were asked to produce diagrammatic and written descriptions to show some of their responses to the concept of