

Creative approaches to teaching and to differentiation

How do we create effective learning opportunities for children with Down syndrome?

The four feature articles in this issue have a common theme – how do we create effective learning opportunities for children with Down syndrome? Three of the articles are concerned with teaching number and mathematical concepts to children while the first provides a detailed guide to the use of computer software in the classroom across all areas of the curriculum and in preschool years. The last article is more theoretical, the first three are more practical but all include ways of approaching differentiation.

Differentiation – is it really difficult?

This word, differentiation, has become a BIG word in teacher's vocabularies – at least this is my experience when running teacher training days for the inclusion of children into mainstream schools. For those not familiar with this word, it means adapting teaching methods and the content of the curriculum to allow individual pupils to learn effectively.

Adapting teaching methods requires teachers to take account of the child's specific learning needs – for example, taking account of hearing loss, motor skill delays, speech and language delays and verbal short-term memory delays.

Adapting the curriculum means simplifying the content and selecting learning targets from the class lesson that are meaningful for the child with learning difficulties.

At the risk of being controversial and receiving some cross letters – I have to say that I sometimes feel that teachers and schools are often making too much fuss about the work involved in differentiation for individual children. We are sometimes involved in battles between schools and LEAs where schools are arguing for considerable extra teacher time to be funded to allow them to differentiate the curriculum for a particular child. In these situations, teachers seem to feel that differentiation is going to be a very large and time-con-

suming task when, in fact, it is often quite simple and straightforward.

Using ICT for differentiation

One very powerful tool to help teachers and assistants to plan differentiated lessons is ICT. In the first article, Mandy Wood explains the way in which ICT can help to adapt teaching and learning methods to take account of the learning strengths and weaknesses of children with Down syndrome – the first part of the differentiation task. She then goes on to illustrate the ways in which a wide range of available software can be used directly by children to learn at home and at school – the software already simplifying the learning – and also how many programmes can help teachers and assistants to prepare worksheets, to find pictures for topics and to support the learning of key objectives – the second part of the differentiation task.

There are training implications for schools, as teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) need to have some computer skills but this should surely be a requirement for all staff in our schools in the 21st century.

Creative, practical approaches

The next two articles, written by Emma Saunders, an LSA, and Wendy Uttley, a parent and maths lecturer, share their practical experiences of teaching number to individual children with Down syndrome. Both articles give clear examples of creative ideas thought up by Emma and Wendy, which led to them making simple but effective teaching materials and activities. Emma's article provides a number of ideas for developing an understanding of number, and money and time. Although her pupil is in primary school, many of the ideas could be adapted for older children still working on time, money and number in secondary education. Wendy's article highlights the need for clear materials, small steps and much practice to consolidate learning at each stage – again a

message which applies to children across the age range.

Not rocket science

I hope that reading these articles will allay the fears of some teachers and show them that differentiation is not difficult or complicated. It does require some forward planning – LSAs often do the practical work in preparing materials but they need to know lesson topics in advance and teachers should choose the simplified learning objectives for the child. It also requires time for LSAs to make materials and access to card, laminator and computer. However, many LSAs also become quite confident at simplifying the teacher's messages as the lesson progresses and card and pens should always be at the ready in lessons in order to do this.

An essential teacher skill

Many children in all schools (some 20-30%) need the curriculum differentiated. There are children who learn more slowly in every class and many are let down by the school system at present. They also need individually planned lessons and more support – often they could be doing small group work with an LSA and a child with Down syndrome included in the group. The UK government has recently published 'Removing barriers to achievement' and this document makes 'personalised learning' an expectation for all children. This means that schools will need to build in time for training and for planning. We hope that some of the examples of differentiation we include in this and other issues of DSNU may allay some of their anxieties.

Editor

Removing Barriers to Achievement is available from The Department of Education and Skills, Tel: 0845 6022260, Fax: 0845 6033360, Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com. It can also be downloaded online at www.teachernet.gov.uk/sen-strategy