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## Practical ideas for effective differentiation

Last month, we discussed the theories and strategies behind good differentiation practice. **Matt Bromley** completes this *Best Practice Focus* with a dissection of some of the most common and effective classroom approaches, including the vital role of high expectations



# Practical classroom strategies for effective differentiation

Last month in *SecEd*, I began my discussion of practical approaches for effective differentiation in the classroom by considering: a four-step teaching sequence to aide differentiation, how we must use Bloom’s Taxonomy and mastery learning approaches, and how we can create the right classroom environments for learning (*Best Practice Focus 01, SecEd*, April 2019).

This month, I continue these discussions with a look at the strategies of “exit tickets” and “hinge questions” in order to set the right level of challenge and locate pupils’ “struggle zones” – the point just beyond their current capability but within their reach, something they cannot yet do but will be able to with time, effort and support.

I will also come back to the importance of high expectations and what these look like, I will consider eight of the most common forms of differentiation in use today and analyse their advantages and

disadvantages, and I will look at the role that teaching assistants can play.

## Find the sweet spot

Rather than differentiate by task, we should teach to the top and ensure our classroom provides challenge for all. Of course, some pupils fear challenge and so we need to eliminate – or at least mitigate – their feelings of fear and hesitation by creating a classroom environment which encourages the making of mistakes as an integral part of the learning process, and a pedagogical culture which explicitly communicates (through our choice of language, our modelling and thinking aloud, and through the routines in which we engage) that there is nothing to fear by trying your best and pushing yourself to do hard work.

To promote challenge in the classroom, therefore, we need to reduce the threat level – we need to ensure no one feels humiliated if

they fall short of a challenge. Rather, they need to know that they will learn from the experience and perform better next time.

But finding the right level of challenge for our pupils – work that is hard but achievable with time, effort and support – is not easy. So how can we locate pupils’ struggle zones? How can we ascertain where to pitch learning in our classrooms? Two methods spring readily to mind: exit tickets and hinge questions.

## Exit tickets

One way to determine the current location of pupils’ struggle zones is to issue exit tickets at the end of the lesson. Exit tickets are slips of paper with written questions to which pupils provide responses. Exit tickets act as quick, informal assessments of learning that enable teachers to rapidly evaluate their pupils’ understanding of the lesson content. They also help pupils to reflect on what they have

understood and not understood, and they enable pupils to express what or how they are thinking about new information and, by so doing, they encourage pupils to think more critically.

According to Fisher and Frey (2004), there are three categories of exit slips:

- 1 Prompts that document learning. For example: write one thing you learned today or discuss how today’s lesson could be used in the real world.
- 2 Prompts that emphasise the process of learning. For example: write one question you have about today’s lesson; I did not understand...
- 3 Prompts to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. For example: did you enjoy working in small groups today? Did you find peer-assessment helpful? Other useful exit ticket prompts might include:
  - I would like to learn more about...



## Matt Bromley

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- Next lesson, I would like you to explain more about...
- The thing I found easiest today was...
- The thing I found hardest today was...

I would go further than Fisher and Frey and suggest that the most effective exit tickets pose questions specific to the curriculum content of the lesson and require pupils to explicitly demonstrate their grasp of that content.

For example, if I had taught pupils how to use an apostrophe correctly, rather than ask them to vaguely comment on something they thought they had learnt, my exit ticket might require pupils to add an apostrophe to three sentences whereby one would be an apostrophe for possession, one for omission and at least one would require a decision to be made about whether to use -s' or -s's. I could then see at a glance if pupils had understood how to use apostrophes by assessing the three sentences.

Doug Lemov, in *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), says that exit tickets allow teachers to “know how effective (their) lesson was, as measured by how well (pupils) learned it, not how well (they) thought (they) thought it”.

A good exit ticket, therefore, must be closely aligned to the lesson's objectives. A good exit ticket must also:

- Assess pupils' understanding in all aspects of the lesson.
- Differentiate accurately between levels of understanding.
- Be quick to answer and assess.

Limiting the amount of space available for pupils to respond ensures the task is kept focused and, by the same token, writing a single question which incorporates the whole lesson helps to make assessing exit tickets more manageable.

Talking of which, when assessing

the exit tickets pupils have handed in on their way out of the room, we are likely to find that:

- All pupils got the right answer – in which case we can move on to the next topic.
- All pupils got the wrong answer – in which case we can reteach the topic in the next lesson before moving on.
- Or most likely, some pupils got the right answer but some got it wrong.

In this most likely scenario, we can briefly recap on the topic next lesson (perhaps as a starter activity), get a pupil who “got it” to peer-teach the topic or share their work as an exemplar to deconstruct (or group pupils to do this in pairs), and/or sit down with the pupils who did not get it when there is a suitable opportunity next lesson and reteach them while the others move on to the next topic.

A caveat...

I have argued before that learning is not always observable in the lesson. We can assess pupils' performances – the immediate regurgitation of what they have just seen or heard – but learning only becomes evident at a later time.

What is more, performance is often a poor proxy for learning – those pupils who appear to struggle initially often learn better long-term. Exit tickets, because they review pupils' understanding at the end of the lesson and not days or weeks later, are in danger of assessing performance rather than learning, so some caution should be applied. Nonetheless, they remain a helpful means of reviewing the success of the lesson and can provide a useful focus for the next lesson's starter activity.

To mitigate the limitations of exit tickets, however, it is worthwhile repeating the task in a later lesson and comparing responses – do pupils still claim to understand what

they said they had learnt last time? Do we need to recap or reteach a topic in light of their long-term retrieval ability?

## Hinge questions

Another useful strategy – though one that is harder to get right – is the use of hinge questions. These are multiple-choice questions so, before we go any further, let defend the humble multiple-choice question which, once a staple of schooling, has become unfashionable.

With open questions, the rubric defines the rigour. With multiple-choice questions, however, the options define the rigour. This is particularly true of hinge questions, which can be used just as effectively with the most able pupils as with the less able. The trick to making multiple-choice questions effective is to create several wrong options which are nevertheless plausible and closely related to the answer.

The best wrong options also uncover common misconceptions or false assumptions. As such, the best way to create the wrong options in a way which makes them plausible is to mine a class's work – or look back to a previous year when the topic was last taught – for pupils' common misconceptions, misunderstandings and mistakes.

If nothing else, trawling through pupils' work to discover what they tend to get wrong and what tends to stump them helps inform the lesson planning process, allowing the teacher to dedicate more time to those elements with which pupils most often struggle.

This act of mining pupils' work for misconceptions and then applying the findings in a way that helps anticipate pupils' difficulties and questions is the difference between content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, between knowing your subject and knowing how to teach your subject in a way which makes sense to pupils.

Analysing misconceptions also helps an expert teacher to view a

topic through the lens of the novice pupil, to narrow the knowledge gap between them and improve the lesson planning process.

A “hinge” is a point in a lesson when a teacher needs to check whether or not pupils have grasped a key concept and are ready to move on to study another. Usually, pupils' mastery of the concept that has just been taught is contingent on them being able to understand the next concept. It is important, therefore, that the teacher assesses pupils' levels of mastery before moving on – and this is exactly what a hinge question can do.

A hinge question is a diagnostic tool which a teacher employs when their pupils reach the “hinge” point. Pupils' responses provide the teacher with valuable evidence about what their pupils know, do not know and need to do next. A class's response to a hinge question should inform the teacher whether to completely reteach the topic, recap the main points, or move on to the next topic.

A hinge question, then, is a multiple-choice question which provides an immediate check of pupils' understanding. Crucially, a hinge question provides a check of understanding for every pupil in a class.

A hinge question informs the teacher if pupils have understood what they have taught and, if not, what they have misunderstood. As I say above, a hinge question should be asked at the end of an activity as the teacher moves from teaching one key concept to another, when the teaching of the second concept is reliant on understanding the first.

Every pupil must respond within a set timeframe, ideally one to two minutes. A hinge question is a quick assessment – a line in the sand – and, therefore, responses should be instinctive and almost immediate.

All pupils must participate in the process. As such, it is best to avoid a “hands-up” approach and instead employ a tactic that ensures every pupil shows the teacher their answer at the same time. This enables the teacher to assess every pupil and prevents pupils from being unduly influenced by others.

Simultaneous, all-class responses can be achieved by using mini-whiteboards on which pupils write their answers then hold them up when instructed. Alternatively, voting buttons could be used, perhaps on iPads, with the

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anonymised responses – perhaps reported as a percentage response against each option – displayed on the interactive whiteboard.

Or, perhaps more simply, pupils could hold up lettered, numbered, or coloured cards to indicate their answer. A set of four cards could be kept on desks or given to pupils to retain in their books or planners in order to reduce the logistical strain and permit hinge questions to become a quick, simple, everyday feature of lessons.

The teacher must be able to interpret pupils' responses quickly, ideally within a minute, so that the flow of the lesson is not stunted. Before pupils show their responses, the teacher – as I say above – needs to set a pass rate for what they consider to be an acceptable level of "mastery". For example, the teacher might decide that they will move on to the next topic if more than 80 per cent of pupils answer the hinge question correctly.

However, they will then need to consider what to do to support the 20 per cent. The teacher could set a task for the 80 per cent while working with the 20 per cent, scaffolding their learning, recapping on key points, and so on. Or perhaps the teacher could enlist some of the 80 per cent as peer-teachers to explain the topic to the 20 per cent.

### High expectations

Differentiation is – fundamentally – about enabling every pupil, no matter their background and starting point, to access the curriculum and achieve.

Last month, I explained that to suggest a pupil is "less able" implies there is an average pupil against which we are comparing all others (*SecEd*, April 2019).

But there is no such thing as "average". What is more, the term "less able" infers an immovable position – if you are "less able" you are destined to remain so ad infinitum, living life languishing in the left-hand shadow of the bell-curve.

When approaching differentiation, therefore, we would be wise to remember that all pupils – like all human beings – are different, unique, individual.

Differentiation, therefore, should not be about treating "less able" pupils as a homogeneous group. Rather, we should treat each pupil on an individual basis. We should not dumb down or expect less of

lower performing pupils; we should articulate the same high expectations, regularly reinforced through our language and our actions – but accept that some pupils, some of the time, will need different levels of support, different kinds of support, and be afforded different timescales to reach that destination.

We should, therefore, teach to the top and ensure our classroom provides challenge for all. Of course, some pupils fear challenge and so we need to eliminate – or at least mitigate – their feelings of fear and hesitation by creating a classroom environment which encourages the making of mistakes as an integral part of the learning process, and a pedagogical culture which explicitly communicates (through our choice of language, our modelling and thinking aloud, and through the routines in which we engage) that there is nothing to fear by trying your best and pushing yourself to do hard work.

To promote challenge in the classroom, therefore, we need to reduce the threat level, we need to ensure no one feels humiliated if they fall short of a challenge. They need to know that they will learn from the experience and perform better next time.

### The Pygmalion Effect

Once we have created a positive learning environment in which pupils willingly accept challenge, we need to model high expectations of all.

Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson published research in 1968 (see also Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996) showing that, when teachers expected an enhanced performance from their pupils, their pupils' performance was indeed enhanced. Their study supported the hypothesis – known as the Pygmalion Effect – that reality can be positively or negatively influenced by other people's expectations (Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who fell in love with the statue he had carved).

In other words, the higher the expectations you have of somebody, the better they perform.

This research led Rosenthal to predict that teachers subconsciously behave in ways that facilitate and encourage their pupils' success. In other words, teachers perpetrate the Pygmalion Effect

– when they have high expectations of their pupils, their pupils perform well.

It follows, therefore, that having high expectations of pupils is not only a nice thing to do, it actually leads to improved performance. But saying and doing are two very different things. After all, what do high expectations actually look like in practice? Well, as with most teaching strategies, having high expectations is simply about establishing a set of clear rules and routines. Doug Lemov shares a few such routines in *Teach Like a Champion* (2010).

For example, he says that teachers who have high expectations operate a "no opt-out" policy. In other words, a teaching sequence that begins with a pupil unable to answer a question should end with the same pupil answering that question as often as possible.

Lemov also says that teachers who have high expectations always insist that "right is right". In other words, they set and defend a high standard of correctness in their classroom. For example:

- They use simple positive language to express their appreciation of what a pupil has done and to express their expectation that he or she will now complete the task. For example: "You're almost there. Can you find the last piece?"
- They insist that pupils answer the question they have been asked and not a different question entirely. These teachers are clear that the right answer to any question other than the one they have asked is, by definition, wrong.
- As well as insisting on the right answer, teachers insist that pupils answer the right question at the right time. They protect the integrity of their lesson by not jumping ahead to engage an exciting right answer at the wrong time.
- Teachers insist their pupils use precise, technical vocabulary. Lemov says that teachers who

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have high expectations "stretch it". In other words, a sequence of learning does not end with a right answer; these teachers reward right answers with follow-up questions that extend knowledge and test for reliability. For example, they ask how or why, ask for another way to answer, ask for a better word, ask for evidence, ask pupils to integrate a related skill, and ask pupils to apply the same skill in a new setting.

Lemov says that, for the teachers who have high expectations of their pupils, "format matters". In other words, it is not just what their pupils say that matters but how they say it. To succeed, pupils must take their knowledge and express it in the language of opportunity.

### Pupils' own expectations

As well as having high expectations of our pupils, we should insist that our pupils have high expectations of themselves, because only by believing in yourself and in your own ability to get better will you actually do so. But what does this look like in practice?

First, pupils should have a growth mindset and believe that they can get better at anything if they work



hard. This means having a thirst for knowledge, accepting that work needs to be drafted and redrafted, and following the maxim that if it is not excellent, it is not finished (never settling for work that is less than their best). This also means setting aspirational goals for themselves and expecting to achieve them.

Second, pupils should embrace challenge and enjoy hard work because they know it will help them to learn. This means actively engaging in lessons and readily accepting any new challenges that are presented. It also means exerting a lot of effort and engaging in deliberate practice. It means pushing themselves in lessons, practising something over and over again, and regarding additional study opportunities such as homework as an important way of consolidating and deepening their learning, rather than as an onerous chore.

Third, pupils should seek out and welcome feedback. They should value other people's opinions and advice and use it to help them improve their work. Feedback should be given and received with kindness in a manner that is helpful

and not unduly critical, and yet it should be constructive and specific about what needs to be improved.

Fourth, pupils should be resilient. By being resilient – not giving up easily when things get hard – they will overcome obstacles. Moreover, they will be happy to make mistakes because they know they will learn from them. In practice, this means that pupils ask good questions in order to further their learning, this means pupils always try and solve problems for themselves before asking others for help.

Finally, pupils should be inspired by other people's success. They should seek out examples of great work, discovering what makes it great then using this knowledge to inform their own work. They should take collective responsibility for the work of the class and have a vested interest in everyone's success.

This means that pupils support each other and encourage each other to succeed. This means that pupils work well in groups and are confident expressing their views and sharing their ideas. This means that pupils are good at giving each other feedback that is – as I say above – kind, specific and helpful.

## Lesson design

What else can we do to help lower performing pupils learn and make progress?

First, we can put blocks in the way of pupils' initial learning (or encoding) – what Robert Bjork calls “desirable difficulties” – in order to bolster their subsequent storage and retrieval strength (Bjork, 1994).

Second, we can “chunk” information, ensuring we teach knowledge before skill. And we can link new learning with prior learning so that pupils can cheat their limited working memories.

Third, we can provide opportunities for our pupils to engage in deliberate practice, repeating learning at least three times but doing so in a different way each time, allowing pupils to do something new with the learning every time they encounter it in order to forge myriad connections and improve “transfer”.

And if all this works with lower performing pupils then it will work with all pupils.

That is the beauty of a “teaching to the top” approach: if you have high expectations of all your pupils and if you model grade 9 work

rather than grade 5 work, then although some pupils will fall short, because they have aimed high they are more likely to achieve a better grade than if you had placed artificial limits in the way of their learning.

What is more, why show pupils anything other than the very best? Why model the mediocre? As Matthew Arnold said in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869): “Culture ... is a study of perfection, (it) seeks to ... make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light.”

So, let us bring all our pupils, no matter their starting points and current performance, out into the light and watch them grow.

## Eight common approaches

Differentiation, as we have seen, wears many guises. Below, I review eight of the most common forms of differentiation in use in our classrooms today and analyse their advantages and disadvantages.

### 1, Differentiation by task

- What is it? The teacher gives different pupils different tasks, the level of difficulty of which is determined by the pupil's “ability”.
- Advantages? It allows the task to be set to test the mastery of skills of different groups of pupils dependent on their needs.
- Disadvantages? It can be time-consuming and it can lead to difficulties comparing pupils' achievements because we cannot assess the same things. It also places a limit on what some pupils can achieve.

### 2, Differentiation by resource

- What is it? The teacher gives different pupils different resources to support their learning, such as scaffolded worksheets or texts at differing word levels.
- Advantages? It allows pupils of different abilities to access the curriculum but in a manner appropriate to them.
- Disadvantages? It can be time-consuming.

### 3, Differentiation by assessment

- What is it? The teacher gives different pupils different assessment tasks based on

what they need them to demonstrate.

- **Advantages?** It allows an assessment task to be set to test the mastery of skills of different groups of pupils dependent on their needs. It can be quick to prepare because it can simply consist of different questions
- **Disadvantages?** It can be time-consuming and can lead to difficulties in comparing pupil achievements because different assessments may not be testing the same thing. It also runs counter to current examination practice in most subjects whereby papers are no longer tiered, and every pupil is assessed in the same manner.

#### 4, Differentiation by pace

- **What is it?** The teacher allows pupils differing timescales to reach the end goal, accepting that every pupil learns at a different pace.
- **Advantages?** It allows pupils to work at their own pace while striving towards the same destination.
- **Disadvantages?** It may mean that some pupils do not reach their destination and therefore do not cover all the content.

#### 5, Differentiation by support

- **What is it?** The teacher offers different levels of support to different pupils.
- **Advantages?** Pupils receive personalised support from the teacher, teaching assistant or other pupils.
- **Disadvantages?** It is difficult for the teacher to manage whole class progress and know exactly what has been taught and learnt so they can assess pupil progress and move on.

#### 6, Differentiation by extension

- **What is it?** The teacher provides additional tasks to pupils who finish soonest, enabling them to move on to more difficult content while the rest of the class catches up.
- **Advantages?** Allows the teacher to set a task that tests pupils' mastery of skills. It can be quick to prepare if it takes the form of questions of differing difficulty.
- **Disadvantages?** It can be time-consuming if it takes the form of different detailed activities. Can lead to difficulties in comparing achievement

“ Teaching assistants should sometimes provide whole-class instruction from the front of the room while the teacher supports targeted pupils ”

because different tasks may not be testing the same thing.

#### 7, Differentiation by dialogue

- **What is it?** The teacher uses one-to-one or small group discussions – such as verbal feedback – to provide assessment information and support which enables pupils to make progress.
- **Advantages?** It is an integral part of the lesson, builds rapport, enables the teacher to gain crucial assessment information and personalise the learning, and can be applied to all.
- **Disadvantages?** It is sometimes difficult to carve-out sufficient time in a lesson to talk to pupils on an individual basis without slowing the flow of the curriculum. Some pupils may receive a lot of feedback information while others deemed to be making sufficient progress are largely ignored.

#### 8, Differentiation by grouping

- **What is it?** The teacher places pupils into different groups depending on their current progress, strengths and weaknesses, in order to carry out different tasks, use different resources, undertake different assessments, work at a different pace, access a different level of support, work on extension tasks, and so on.
- **Advantages?** Differentiated grouping allows different groups to be tracked differently, it encourages collaborative learning and allows pupils to support each other. Sometimes, pupils are placed in groups of similar “ability”, other times, “less able” pupils are placed with “more able” peers who offer support, perhaps in the form of peer-teaching.
- **Disadvantages?** It can lead to



stigmatisation if some groups are deemed “less able”. Like all group work, if it is not tightly controlled and if the teacher does not explicitly teach group work skills or behaviours first, it can lead to off-task learning or to some pupils doing all the work while other pupils coast.

#### Using teaching assistants

The Educational Endowment Foundation's (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit suggests that teaching assistants are costly and have little effect on pupil progress. However, delve beneath the headlines and you will find that the picture is more nuanced.

First, there is strong evidence that when teachers delegate routine administrative tasks to teaching assistants it allows them to focus more time on teaching, planning, and assessment tasks. Teaching assistants also reduce teacher workload and improve teachers' job satisfaction.

Those teachers featured in the EEF evidence-base also said that the presence of additional adults in the room helped increase pupils' attention and supported the learning of pupils who struggled.

Furthermore, the poor effects of

teaching assistants tend to derive from situations where the teaching assistant has been used poorly or not at all. So, what does work? Here are five tips.

**The full range of pupils**  
Teachers need to spend at least as much time working with lower performing pupils as they spend with other pupils, which means that teaching assistants should also work with a range of pupils within the class rather than exclusively with lower performing pupils.

Teaching assistants should sometimes provide whole-class instruction from the front of the room while the teacher supports targeted pupils or engages in one-to-one feedback.

#### Communication

Teachers and teaching assistants need to work together and communicate with each other effectively and frequently. Teachers may need training on how to manage, organise and work with teaching assistants. Teachers and teaching assistants may need to set aside time to plan and review lessons together and to feedback on pupils' learning.

Teaching assistants need to



approach lessons with a clear understanding of the concepts and information that will be taught, and they need to know the intended learning outcomes of the lesson and be aware of any specific learning needs of the pupils they work with.

#### Pupil ownership

Teaching assistants should ensure pupils retain ownership of their learning and responsibility for their work. This means offering the least amount of support possible and allowing pupils to become increasingly independent. Teaching assistants should provide a healthy mix of support and challenge but allow the weighing scales to tilt away from support and towards challenge as time progresses.

#### Wait time

When asking questions, teaching assistants should afford sufficient wait time for pupils to think about and articulate their responses rather than proffer an answer themselves after just a few seconds, tempting though that may be.

#### Interventions

When delivering intervention sessions outside the lesson, teaching assistants should ensure

these are well-structured and that they explicitly consolidate and extend pupils' classroom-based learning. Intervention sessions should be kept brief (certainly no longer than 30 minutes), and they should be regular and sustained.

Each session should have a clear objective and they should be well-paced, well-resourced and carefully timetabled to minimise the time spent away from other lessons or activities.

There needs to be planned opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to discuss the sessions in order to ensure that they remain closely aligned to classroom teaching.

#### A united approach

To facilitate these five practices, it may be necessary to adjust teaching assistants' working hours to run before and after-school interventions and to timetable free time that coincides with teachers' PPA time. It will also be necessary to pay teaching assistants to attend relevant CPD.

Pupils can become over-reliant on teaching assistants, particularly if they work regularly one-to-one with an adult, and this can lead to learned helplessness. As such, it is

important that teaching assistants slowly remove the scaffolds, provide less support and more challenge, and enable pupils to become increasingly independent.

Here are some strategies – adapted from Bosanquet, Radford and Webster (2016) – to help pupils take greater ownership of their learning and progress.

- **Correcting:** The teaching assistant provides pupils with the answers when they get stuck. Pupils do not work independently and rely on the teaching assistant.
- **Modelling:** Teaching assistants show pupils how to complete a task by producing an exemplar and thinking aloud. Pupils observe then produce a model of their own. Pupils become more independent through practice but still rely on the teaching assistant at first.
- **Clueing:** Teaching assistants ask questions that provide cues to information stored in pupils' long-term memories. This is based on the notion that pupils know the answer but cannot actively recall the information. We provide a cue that helps the pupil retrieve the correct information and relieve a bottleneck in their thinking. Pupils are more independent, having to think for themselves.
- **Prompting:** Teaching assistants provide prompts to pupils that encourage them to use their own knowledge to solve a problem. This is similar to coaching whereby the teaching assistant encourages pupils by challenging their thinking, posing questions, and providing hints, but does not provide the answers or do the work for them.
- **Self-scaffolding:** Teaching assistants observe pupils and afford them sufficient time to process, think and articulate their understanding. Pupils are at their most independent.
- Teaching assistants can also be



#### INFORMATION & REFERENCES

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used effectively to help pupils develop metacognition and self-regulation so they become increasingly independent.

Ultimately, if teaching assistants are to be used effectively to aid differentiation, then they must not be used as an informal teaching resource for lower performing pupils. Rather, teaching assistants should be used to add value to the teacher and not to replace them – underperforming pupils need as much access to the teacher as any of their peers, perhaps more. **SecEd**



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