**Reflecting on Practice**

**Advocating for reflective practice: a case study on the practice of setting, streaming and mixed abilities in secondary schools.**

Within any form of professional practice, whether in medicine, social work, or education, the ability to practice reflectively is a crucial part of continuing professional development. The ongoing process of reflection enables professionals to adapt and change their own methods in order to meet challenges which arise and evaluate in what ways their practice is effective (McGregor, 2011). To practice reflectively refers to the way in which professionals use these reflections to inform the rationale behind their practices, based on previous experiences, experiments or research (McNiff, 2013; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2010; Trinder, 2000). Within the education sector, reflective practice is one of the most productive means of practicing optimally. By continually analysing and assessing how practices within schools work, this enables practitioners to construct and adapt methods of teaching that provide the highest quality educational experiences for the students. The term ‘practice’ can be applied to consider not only how the professionals, such as teachers, conduct their teaching but also to the way in which establishments, such as schools, operate.

However, as successive governments and administrations continue to interfere with the education sector, dictating means in which teachers should practice and reducing their autonomy (Hargreaves, 2000), the opportunities for professionals within education to practice reflectively have become restricted. ‘Top-down’ policies, such as the 1988 Education Act, teacher standards (DfE, 2011) framework and the construction of initial teacher education (ITE) curricula, have contributed to the reduction in such opportunities for reflective practice, by promoting particular best means of practice from an early point within teachers’ careers. The art of reflective practice, therefore, is suffering from a slowly diminishing standing, with its position threatened within the education system, in favour of more uniform practices between schools.

Thus, it is critical to assess the role reflective practice should have within the education system, and how a resurgence can help to support an introduction of more effective methods within the education system that reflect specific contexts, in opposition to unilateral approaches to practice from government. This essay will provide a discussion in respect to what reflective practice stands for, by outlining its various principles, while reaffirming the advocacy for increased reflection from teachers in their day-to-day work. Informed by various authors including Schön (1983), Ruch (2002) and Loughran (2002), it will be argued that reflective practice can help to address the problems continually faced in professional practice. This essay will argue for an individual and contextual-based conduction of reflective practice, based upon the recommendations of such authors, with a contrast to previous suggestions of ‘evidence-based practices’ being utilised solely as a means of reflective practice (Hammersley, 2001).

Afterwards, attention will be given to the practices of setting, streaming and mixed-ability classroom organisation, based upon observations made within co-educational secondary school in an English new town. For the purposes of confidentiality, this will be referred to as ‘School *x*’. Data that has been included for evaluation has come from publicly available league tables and Ofsted reports; for the purposes of maintaining anonymity these have not been included. Drawing upon theory, the essay will critically reflect on how the observed practices within the school were effective and also ineffective in providing the best possible educational experiences for students; whilst providing support for both setting and mixed ability. The observations made will highlight problems that reflective practice would suitably address. From this, the essay will conclude by considering the extent to which increased reflective practice within School *x* could support positive change in the observed practices of setting and streaming, raising an important note that schools should individually consider the best forms of classroom organisation based upon the pupils and community to which they serve, as opposed to ‘research-based’ practices that are not always generalisable.

***Principles and Practices within Reflective Practice***

Firstly, the theories and principles of reflective practice need to be addressed in order to understand its importance within education. When teachers participate within reflective practice, it is through a process in which they ‘structure or restructure actions, beliefs, knowledge and theories that inform teaching for the purpose of professional development’ (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2010: 83). In this sense, teachers adapt their own means of practice informed through growing knowledge bases, whether via academic research or a practitioners’ own ‘action research’ (McNiff, 2013). As Schön (1983) rightly notes, professional practice is a process of problem solving, and coupled with Zwozdiak-Myers’ (2010) interpretation of reflective practice, it is clear that the ability for teachers to be open-minded and reflective in their methods is integral to aspects of continuing professional development for teachers. Furthermore, as problem solving can occur at different stages within practice, in line with a fluid, post-modern education and professional setting (Hargreaves, 2000), maintaining open-mindedness within reflective practice is crucial in a teacher’s willingness to adapt methods to meet new demands and challenges in day-to-day experiences.

Reflective practice is a vital part of a teacher’s repertoire as it helps to create connections between doing, thinking, feeling, believing and context (Ruch, 2002). Rather than professionals relying on the increasingly restrictive competency models proposed from government, such as the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2011), or the guidelines of the National Curriculum, their ability to practice reflectively helps them to develop their own methods of working based upon the context in which they operate, the knowledge which they hold, and their own beliefs. Reflecting on these aspects helps teachers to evolve in how they practice, based upon an evaluation in different methods, providing the scope to adapt individual methods to the challenges faced within practice. Additionally, utilising the ability of reflection within practice gives teachers an increased autonomous capacity, something lacking within the current, post-modern state of teaching professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000). While teachers should be expected to follow various guidelines in relation to what is practiced, having the power to reflect on how they deliver education – in the means that both Ruch (2002) and Zwozdiak-Myers (2010) propose – provides a space for teachers to grow individually, teaching using methods which they have found to work as well as those based upon their personal knowledge base and belief.

With top-down education policy contributing to a suffocating of professional autonomy for teachers (Hargreaves, 2000), reflective practice is needed to ensure teachers do not fall into a trap where alternative ways of seeing or doing are unable to be considered (Loughran, 2002). This mirror’s Ruch’s (2002) advocacy of reflective practice, as it connects the actions – the practice itself – with the teacher’s own thoughts, the context as well as the larger knowledge base. This can be either socially constructed within a local level such as among other teachers - similar to Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivist learning - or via wider research absorbed by the professional. Ultimately, it is clear that the purpose of reflective practice is to ensure teaching professionals have the capability to refine their own means of educating, often taking shape in a continual process as the education system evolves. Today, this is reinforced with a greater emphasis on curriculum and pedagogy within school inspections; well-refined methods that meet such expectations can be achieved through the participation within reflective practice.

‘Evidence-based practice’ (Trinder, 2000: 2) highlights the way in which knowledge becomes a common tool within the teaching profession, and how it is enacted within educational reflective practice. Following its emergence within the medical professions in the 1990s, evidence-based practice follows the principles of knowledge being created through the use of randomised control experiments and case studies (Trinder, 2000). Thus, a scientific element to professional teaching practice comes into the equation. Previous experiments and trials are helpful in cases of social workers dealing with mental health issues in children (Shlonsky and Gibbs, 2004), and also for teachers working within special education (Spooner *et al*, 2011), as they provide a framework of working with particular types of cases which can often be generalisable. For example, Shlonsky and Gibbs (2004) demonstrate that without evidence-based practice, guidance for working with children suffering from suicidal thoughts would be non-existent; the knowledge collated by the professional base that has formed evidence contributes to ways to resolve the issues arising within the child. Additionally, as Spooner *et al* (2011) discuss, evidence-based practice can be used to support academic teaching to students with severe developmental disabilities, utilising mass trials and one-to-one tuition to help teachers construct a means in which to develop their students’ learning.

However, when considering the teaching profession overall, the use of evidence-based practice raises some concerns in terms of its effectiveness and the ideology behind it (Hammersley, 2001). While merit is clearly shown in the case of special education (Spooner *et al*, 2011), Hammersley’s (2001) critique of evidence-based practice highlights a disregard for the importance of the consideration of context. For example, evidence-based practice within teaching follows a similar assumption to medicine in that there are specific goals to be reached; in today’s neo-liberal educational setting, this could potentially relate to achieving learning objectives required in order to fulfil criteria culminating in the awarding of qualifications, such as GCSEs or A-Levels. Yet education, as Hammersley (2004) views it, should encompass multiple different objectives that can vary between contexts, a component which Ruch (2002) notes should be considered within all reflective practices. Therefore, the notions of what is effective and is not, stemming from evidence-based practice and the research surrounding it, can often vary. This can be true within the context of special education as well, with Spooner *et al* (2011) advocating for an evidence-based practice they deem supports learning within individuals suffering from developmental disabilities which has been available for special schools to adopt. However, the perspective of Hammersley (2004) and Timperley (2001) illuminates that even a case such as Spooner *et al*’s (2011) may not be applicable to all individuals whom they consider due to differing levels of needs and the complexities of issues which they may suffer from. Moreover, knowledge is a social construct – it is not static, and so the rationale behind evidence-based practices can lose validity as time progresses or as contexts vary (Timperley, 2001). Resultingly, Hammersley (2004) and Timperley (2001) argue that the introduction of evidence-based practice into the teaching profession raises concern for a worsening of educational performance, by introducing practices derived from context-limited research. For example (as will be discussed in the next section) some academics may advocate for mixed-ability teaching, where classes are organised to include a wide range of ‘abilities’ (Boaler, 2008), yet the theory behind these cannot necessarily be applicable nor yield the same results as may be found in other cases.

What is required, as opposed to a reliance on research-based practice purported from teacher training bodies and councils, is a responsibility upon the professional themselves to practice reflectively, using their own experiences as a teacher and their own research. McNiff (2013) indicates that action research provides an opportunity for this to be achieved, in which it encourages a continual consideration of how a professional can improve their own practice, sometimes through a trial-and-error approach. While often experimental, it places the professional in an active role within their reflective practice, rather than being passive under the dominance of evidence-based learning (Hammersley, 2004; Timperley, 2001). Consequently, this presents a more pragmatic approach to which teaching professionals can – based upon their own research and, to some extent, that of others – construct their own reflective practice with a continual mindset of how to improve in relation to meeting the needs of students.

This section has highlighted the principles and ways in which reflective practice can take shape. Whichever means are followed, the goal for reflective practice is to support the continuing professional development of teaching professionals (McGregor, 2011) in order to create the best methods of teaching. While autonomy is continually being constricted, and can be under an evidence-based approach to practice (Hammersley, 2004), the ability to remain a reflective practitioner is vital in providing some autonomy and creating practice which is effective within the context that it takes place. The next section will focus on the practices of setting, streaming and mixed-ability teaching, based upon observations that have taken place, with critical reflection made towards these.

***Reflecting on the Observed Practices of Setting, Streaming, Banding and Mixed Ability Grouping***

Setting, steaming, banding and mixed ability grouping, act as examples of teaching practice as they provide an insight into the way classes are organised within schools (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). Each of these means of structuring class cohorts vary in numerous ways, and are often dependent on the ‘current achievement’ levels of pupils, which become deemed as their ‘ability’. This section will firstly define the practices of setting, streaming, banding and mixed ability grouping, to highlight the differences. Then, based upon observations within a specific school, these practices will be reflected upon appropriately, which will also be reviewed in line with literature that has provided critiques on the relevant structuring.

Three of the four means of classroom organisation which are focused on here rely heavily on the education system’s notion of a child’s ability; that is, their current achievement level. Setting, streaming and banding, use this as a factor in which to allocate particular pupils into the most ‘appropriate’ group. Streaming is defined as ‘assigning pupils to classes on the basis of … their general ability’ (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998: 2). The practice allocates pupils into groups based upon their ability and achievement across all subjects, and then they are assigned to the class within which they remain for all subjects. This practice emerged into the education system within the mid-twentieth century, as part of the introduction of the tripartite system – the allocation of pupils to secondary moderns, grammar schools and technical colleges based on achievement within the 11+ test (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). As it is based on the general ability of pupils, there is a key issue with such a practice in that it does not account for pupils’ lesser abilities within subjects while performing strongly in others (Hallam and Parsons, 2013), leading to a questioning in the validity of this means of organisation.

While streaming has lost prevalence in the education system (Butler and Weir, 2013), setting has become a more dominant method of classroom structuring in light of the revolutionary 1988 Education Act and the way it changed assessments for pupils (Hallam, 2012). Setting groups pupils based on their ability – or, more appropriately, current achievement – in particular subjects, with the flexibility to move between sets for different subjects as a result of this (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). This has previously been perceived to be a key practice that helps to deal with the new challenges set out by the 1988 Education Act and the introduction of GCSEs, by creating ability groups that highlight which students need potentially more support to avoid underachievement. However, this notion has been widely contested and is often seen to be divisive in creating a facility for labelling students (Hallam and Parsons, 2013). Furthermore, some studies have found there to be no evidence that suggests streaming raises educational standards (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). These claims are, as alluded to earlier, to be questioned, nonetheless, with potential scope to raise standards within particular schools and contexts, linking back to Timperley’s (2001) suggestion that knowledge is never static and thus evidence-based practice cannot always be effective nor ineffective.

Banding is often incorporated with the approach of setting, comprising of multiple ability groups, to which pupils can move between provided it is within the particular ‘band’ (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). This represents a hybrid approach of both streaming and setting, with bands often being based upon a child’s general ability, to which their competency within specific subject areas are then focused upon in set allocations. From observed practice, it has been found that schools – or, more specifically, academies – are utilising banding as a method of allocating pupils into ability groups in order to create equalised pools of admissions; such practice will be discussed further in the latter part of this section.

Contrasting to these means of classroom organisation, is the practice of mixed ability grouping, which sees teachers working with classes that include widely ranging levels of achievement and competency from pupils (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). Mixed ability teaching has advantages according to various literature pieces as it removes potential for stigma or attacks on pupils’ self-esteem, which would then contribute towards a vicious cycle that negatively impacts on pupil attainment (Hallam and Parsons, 2013). The largest issue in relation to this style of organisation, however, is the difficulty in catering for all pupils’ abilities within these classes, with higher ability pupils not being challenged appropriately in their work and underperforming students sometimes finding work too challenging to cope with, in consequence to teachers often instructing to an “imaginary average” child within the group (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). Due to the impact of the 1988 Education Act, and the neo-liberal system of educational attainment and emphasised achievement, mixed ability grouping has lost popularity within schools, and now is often reserved for GCSE ‘option’ choices in which such is necessary due to varying levels of uptake which would render setting or other ability-based methods unviable.

Each of these types of classroom organisation has been observed as practices within School *x*, a secondary comprehensive school in England. The school implemented setting and banding policies within its practice for many years, but at various points dabbled with other classroom organisation methods. In the 2011-12 academic year, the school trialled mixed-ability grouping across all subjects, and prior to this had largely utilised streaming across all year groups in compulsory subjects. Although these practices have particular flaws, which will be discussed shortly, it is vital to highlight that such change in structure illustrates reflective practice in action at a whole-school level, with experimentation a key aspect in the structuring and restructuring of actions and beliefs in relation to what constitutes as best practice (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2010: 83). The act of experimenting and utilising a ‘trial-and-error’ approach shows a willingness from the school to adapt practice for the changing knowledge field, akin to Timperley’s (2001) view of reflective practice, as opposed to relying purely on ‘evidence-based’ practice, which raises issues of contention in consequence to knowledge being ever-changing (Hammersley, 2004; Timperley, 2001).

Before adopting setting and banding across the school, School *x* widely utilised streaming within its classroom organisation practices, basing allocation of class groups on the general ability of each pupil, in line with Sukhnandan and Lee’s (1998) definition of the practice. While in place for many years before the 2011-12 academic year, issues were raised in respect to the inflexibility for pupils to move between streams. For example, some pupils were outperforming their peers within the same stream in some subjects such as mathematics and the sciences. However, due to the basis of general ability in allocations, these pupils could not move to higher streams if they were underperforming in other subjects, such as English or the humanities, preventing further progress to be made. These cases are found consistently within literature on streaming (Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998), marking a contrast between this practice and setting in terms of the flexibility in allocating and moving pupils between groups. As Hallam and Parsons (2013) argue, this lack of flexibility is often detrimental to a child’s educational trajectory, causing the system to become deterministic at a young age for children. In School *x*’s case, the implementation of streaming as a practice had been deterministic for children coming into new year 7 intakes, as they were placed into a stream within which they had been assessed on their general achievement, rather than subject-specific.

With streaming becoming a deterministic factor in the learning outcomes of pupils at School *x*, this led to the vicious cycle which Hallam and Parsons (2013) describe. Pupils at School *x* who were allocated within lower streams held lower self-esteem due to the lower expectations that were placed upon them, alongside negative labelling interactions from pupils in higher streams (Kutnick *et al*, 2005). This resulted in what teachers deemed as poorer behaviour and learning attitudes, which reinforced how the teachers labelled lower streams, similar to Johnston and Wildy’s (2016) discussion on teachers’ mediation of streaming’s effects on pupils. While there is a clear impact on pupils’ esteem and performance that is brought about by the streaming system itself, reflection and theory indicates that the way in which teachers mediated the effects required more empathy and less stereotypical labelling in order to negate the effects of the system (Ireson *et al*, 2002).

In order to combat the consequences of streaming, School *x*, upon review of evidence within its GCSE ‘option’ groups as well as from wider literature, opted to experimentally convert to a full mixed-ability class allocation across all subjects and all year groups. This was deemed to be a method that would alleviate issues that had been caused by dividing groups based upon academic achievement, and also breakdown the vicious cycle found amongst pupils in lower streams, as indicated by various literature (Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Johnston and Wildy, 2016). Teachers were also less inclined to label particular classes as the divide in ability and accompanying behaviour had been removed under the mixed-ability system, often found in the research in relation to this system (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). Additionally, due to the school’s ‘co-operative’ philosophy, senior leadership saw mixed ability grouping as an opportunity to foster mentoring roles for each student, with higher ability pupils within classes supporting the lower ability pupils, a strategy of co-operative learning often in place across many schools (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998).

Despite evidence pointing towards positive impacts upon learning for lower-ability pupils within mixed ability groups (Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Ireson *et al*, 2002), the experiment within School *x* had failed. Teachers had not been sufficiently trained in the shift towards the new construction of classes, continuing to rely on previous methods of whole-class teaching which they did not adapt effectively from streaming to the mixed-ability system. As some studies have illustrated, this is a wide problem found in mixed-ability groupings, because teachers base their whole-class instruction on teaching to the ‘imaginary average’ child of the class (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). Resultingly, higher-ability pupils were not challenged enough, and lower-ability pupils could not cope with the high level of work placed upon them in consequence to this average.

The reason other schools have been able to convert to this system can be found in the reflective practice taken in terms of the teaching aspect; that is, teachers had been provided with the training that helped them to create more differentiation in tasks that would stop a teaching to the ‘average’ (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). While the work of mixed-ability teaching is likely to be found more difficult than ability-group teaching (Hallam and Ireson, 2005), the interactions remain more positive due to the reduction in labelling. School *x* did not provide its teachers with the capability to provide differentiated teaching within mixed-ability groups, nor did all teachers have the power to utilise the ability to reflectively practice. Consequently, School *x*’s mixed-ability grouping structure, in spite of the evidence-based practice approach they aimed for, did not manifest the rise in educational standards in which it had hoped for, partly due to the lack of continual reflective practice and professional development that was necessary to help teachers to re-structure their own methods in response to the new system.

The case of School *x* and its failing mixed-ability experiment acts as a reflection of how Hammersley (2004) and Timperley (2001) view evidence-based learning; not only does it often contribute to declining educational standards, but also, has the risk of failing due to not mirroring the context in which previous experiments have succeeded. Regardless, on reflection, it does highlight the importance of experimenting and taking a pragmatic approach within reflective practice, with the potential for evidence-based practice to succeed with additional continual professional development to support the restructuring of knowledge and methods amongst teachers (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2010).

From observation, after School *x*’s practice of streaming and subsequently experimental mixed ability grouping, it moved towards a policy of setting, favouring it being in place widely across the school, with mixed ability groups used for GCSE ‘option’ choices in key stage 4 (years 9-11). Pupils were once again allocated classes by achievement, but based upon subject-specific attainment in contrast to the generality of previous streaming techniques (Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). While this is only one specific case study of a school and thus may not be representative of the educational establishment overall, it is key to note that School *x*’s case supports the trend which shows schools advocating for ability-based setting across the school in order to meet the challenges of raising standards within today’s neo-liberal system (Hallam, 2012). School *x*’s took a particular rationale in implementing setting: the system would help to identify groups of pupils whom needed support with their curricular development, and could be allocated the correct resources and staff whom can meet the demands of such groups, a notion recognised within literature (Kutnick *et al*, 2005). It also allowed mobility within pupils, both in-between subjects and within subjects, matching their own attainment levels to help meet their academic needs.

In addition to this belief, it also acted as a counter that many staff had experienced with teaching mixed-ability groups; there was no longer a need to cater for the “imaginary average” (Hallam and Ireson, 2005: 5), which allowed higher ability pupils to be challenged more sufficiently and lower-ability pupils being able to progress at a more steady pace that matched their own learning style and needs (Ireson *et al*, 2002).

This ideology, however, has been questioned by many critics of setting within schools, because of its relationship with labelling pupils and contributing to a vicious cycle within learning (Hallam and Parsons, 2013), and does not necessarily present any evidence that illustrates a raising of education standards (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). In 2011, School *x*’s GCSE results saw 33% of pupils achieving five A\*-C grades in GCSEs including mathematics and English – the lowest of its Local Education Authority and one of the worst performances nationally. By contrast, mixed-ability teaching within the 2011-2012 academic year saw results rapidly improve with the same measurement of GCSEs being attained by 56% of School *x*’s pupils. After a move towards setting, this result fell once again to just a third of pupils attaining the five ‘good’ GCSEs measure. It is crucial to note that such statistics are likely to be non-causal correlations, as scrutiny of neighbouring schools in the 2011-2012 academic period also celebrated higher pupil attainment while maintaining whole-school setting policies. Thus, it is difficult to discredit setting for what appears to be a causal declination of educational standards, based on this measure alone.

Nonetheless, setting at School *x* reintroduced a divide within each pupil cohort, with a split between pupils based on ability reigniting issues relating to labelling and negative student interactions that were countered by mixed-ability grouping (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). Labelling from teachers also became rife once again, with teachers holding lower expectations and negative conceptions of pupils within lower ability sets, creating the vicious cycle that had been witnessed within streaming (Hallam and Parsons, 2013). Coupled with a banding policy that further divided cohorts into halves (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998), social mobility under setting became less flexible than had been imagined under School *x*’s rationale for the setting structure. For instance, pupils whom were in the lower band but were excelling in a particular subject were not able to progress to a higher set as these were in the higher band, thus mirroring previous policies relating to streaming as the mobility for pupils was hampered. Resultingly, the concerns in previous literature with regards to streaming became re-founded in the case of School *x*, in contributing to a potentially more inequitable system of schooling than was seen within mixed-ability teaching (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Johnston and Wildy, 2016).

The present section had critically assessed practices that took place and were observed within School *x* in relation to its classroom organisation. Each policy had specific issues that needed to be addressed in order to improve both teaching practice, and the educational experiences of pupils; a key mission of professional practice (Schön, 1983). This idea is part of the notion of reflective practice (McGregor, 2011), and raises a question as to whether, with greater commitment to restructuring teacher knowledge bases, School *x* could have improved and adapted setting or mixed ability policies to meet the challenges needing to be resolved.

Whilst there is not sufficient evidence to determine whether mixed ability grouping is more successful in improving educational standards than setting and banding, or vice versa, one of the key issues found across both policies was the lack of reflective practice amongst leadership and teachers that would have solved each policy’s problems (Timperley, 2001). These could have taken the form of strategies such as providing continual professional development that allowed teachers to share and develop their own knowledge bases, or constructing a mentoring scheme that would give teachers opportunities to observe one another’s practice and appraise these (Kullman, 1998).

For example, as is often the case within schools implementing mixed-ability groupings (Hallam and Ireson, 2005), teachers at School *x* had not adapted their methods of teaching to meet increased ability ranges within one class. There was a continuation of whole-class teaching which, under the system, was so similar to the instruction found within setting and streaming that it taught to the “imaginary average” (Hallam and Ireson, 2005: 5) and did not provide sufficient differentiation for the varied abilities. As is recommended within the literature (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Ireson *et al*, 2002; Johnston and Wildy, 2016), when schools adopt mixed-ability practices, it is vital to provide the correct level of training that equips teachers with the more difficult task of teaching broader ability ranges, and also enables allocation of differentiated tasks that both challenge and respect pupils’ academic abilities. Additionally, as the system was an overhaul from the previous streaming approach, teachers may have struggled alone with adapting to the system, and thus school leadership should have provided mentoring support for teachers by pairing them with teachers whom had previously worked under mixed-ability grouping mechanisms that would have encouraged wider reflective practice that worked towards problem-solving (Kullman, 1998;Schön, 1983). Resultingly, these two aspects of reflective practice – both continual professional development opportunities, and a mentoring scheme – would have been useful in supporting positive change that may have seen mixed ability teaching flourish within School *x*’s context. Fundamentally, the case of School *x* highlights the necessity for reflective practice to take place within schools in order to meet the challenges presented within schooling systems.

***Conclusion***

This essay has aimed to create an advocacy for the art of reflective practice to take a greater role within the teaching profession. Framing it as part of a critical aspect of ‘problem solving’ within professional practice (Schön, 1983: 39), this essay has applied this towards the case of School *x* and its trial-and-error approach towards pupil grouping within classes.

While it took a more haphazard approach than was necessary in its experimenting, School *x* highlighted key issues relating to each policy of streaming, mixed ability grouping and setting, which have been recognised across the literature (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Ireson *et al*, 2002; Johnston and Wildy, 2016). By noting the difficulties observed within the practices at School *x*, attention has been paid to the role reflective practice could have had within problem solving in relation to class organisation structures, with solutions including greater continual professional development opportunities, mentoring schemes, and also encouragement from school leadership for departments to assess and critique their own knowledge, beliefs and methods.

In consequence, the case of School *x* helps to illustrate how crucial reflective practice can be in responding to the challenges within the teaching profession, not only to setting and mixed ability groupings, but for many other aspects of practice found within the educational establishment.

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