**When Paul Dix changes everything: a critical reflection on practices observed in an educational setting.**

The term reflective practice is often interpreted as having many different meanings. Finlay argues that whilst it ‘carries multiple meanings’ which range from ‘introspection’ to ‘engaging in critical dialogue’, from ‘formal’ and ‘explicit’ to ‘fluid’, reflective practice is often ‘seen as the bedrock of professional identity (Finlay, 2008, p2). As a way in which to engage in life-long learning and development of practice reflective practice is a fundamental tool. How, when and how effectively this is done in practice is contested. However, when done effectively reflective practice can be ‘an enormously powerful tool to examine and transform practice’ and therefore improve teaching practice and the outcomes for children (Finlay, 2008, p10). Drawing particularly on the work of Schön (1999) and Gibbs (1989), this essay seeks to identify a framework by which to use as a tool to reflect on practice, observe practice through this lens and then recognize how reflective practice could support further positive change in this particular element of observed practice. I will examine and reflect upon the implementation of a new behaviour policy inspired by Paul Dix and his book *When the Adults Changes Everything Changes* (2017), looking at how this was implemented and the extent to which it has been embraced by staff and the impact that this has had.

Schön describes reflection in two differing ways, reflection *in* action and reflection *on* action. Reflection in action is where a practitioner reflects and responds in the moment. This is often in terms of practical, actionable pedagogical changes. For example, observing that a child is reversing the b and d in writing and so presenting them with a visual reminder as a prompt. Schön argues that reflection in this way can lead to a ‘narrowness of vision’ as practice becomes ‘repetitive’ and a practitioner is ‘drawn into patterns of error which he cannot correct’ (Schön, 1999, p60, 61). Schön states that in real world contexts problematic situations are ‘puzzling, troubling and uncertain’ (Schön, 1999, p40). In this light reflecting on practice must embrace the notion of a practitioner not immediately knowing the solution to a problem. Conversely then, reflection on action is where a practitioner thinks back on a situation, project or event and how they reacted or handled it in a conscious and deliberate effort to ‘prepare themselves for future cases’ (Schön, 1999, p61). In reflecting on practice a practitioner is able to involve themselves in a more critical examination of their practice, evaluate the reasons behind a problem, have professional conversations and explore new ways of thinking. To illustrate this Schön draws upon a research project called the Massachusetts Teacher Project where through reflective practice the teachers ‘allowed themselves to become confused about subjects they are supposed to “know”’ (Schön, 1999, p67). Rather than thinking that they had all of the answers the teachers allowed themselves to probe and question which gave them the opportunity to truly develop practice.

One particular model of reflection is Gibbs’s reflective cycle (1988). The model proposes a model whereby the process of reflection is cyclical. An event or situation is described, evaluated, analysed and a plan is created. Once this has been actioned then the cycle repeats in order to reflect upon the changes in practice. A key distinction with Gibb’s model is the inclusion of feelings. It is impossible to remove feelings from a situation, in acknowledging how you felt as a practitioner and how the other staff and children felt in a particular situation you can look at the reasons behind why a situation evolved as it did.

Whilst there is a history of reflective practice in education and many models through which practice can be viewed through, it is often the case that there is an over reliance on reflection in practice rather than reflection on practice. Gillian Ruch (2002) argues that whilst reflective practice in theory supports the continued development and learning of professionals the ‘positivisically-orientated knowledge culture dominating learning and practice in social work’ has lead to the main barrier to reflective practice being anxiety (Ruch, 2002, p200). Although Ruch is looking at reflective practice through the lens of social work education her hypothesis can easily be extrapolated to all education practice. The notion of ‘competency culture’, performance management targets and performance management linked pay all mean that there is fear of the ‘puzzling, troubling and uncertain’ that Schon speaks of. Ruch describes practice which is ‘increasingly risk averse, restrictive and ritualistic’ suggesting that whilst the phrase reflective practitioner is often used, and indeed celebrated, that the anxiety that competency culture has created means that practitioners are more likely to be reflecting in practice and not on practice (Ruch, 2002, p202).

Another barrier to reflecting on practice is context. It is important to not ignore the politics of a given situation. Often there are practical reasons as to why many teachers do not regularly reflect on practice. These include a lack of time, a lack of resources and money in order to make changes with and often a lack of tools with which to reflect with. The 2011 Teacher Standards state that teachers must ‘reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching’ and ‘take responsibility for improving teaching through appropriate professional development’ (DfE, 2013). Despite being a fundamental part of teaching teachers are often not taught how to ‘reflect systematically’ particularly with reference to ‘approaches to teaching’. Without being given the tools or framework with which to reflect with there is often an over reliance of reflecting in practice with the question as to whether children achieved a lesson objective but rarely the question as to whether the objective was the right one in the first place. Teachers must be taught and given the opportunity to hone critical analysis skills.

In the school that I work in, for several years there was an increase in the use of physical restraint of and fixed term exclusion of children as a response to challenging behaviour which included physical aggression towards staff and other children. Despite professional conversations, actionable changes being implemented, and the behaviour policy being followed consistently by staff there continued to be an increase in the number of incidents where physical restraint was used, and a fixed term exclusion was given as a consequence. At this point staff morale was also incredibly low. Schön talks of a critical event occurring which is often the catalyst for reflection on practice (Schön, 1999, p67). In looking at this situation through the lens of Schön I can see that we were reflecting in practice which meant we found ourselves in a situation where changes were repetitive and did not evaluate the causes of the problem. As Ruch discussed, there was a fear that reflecting on practice and highlighting a problem would be viewed as underperformance and as such there was a reluctance to reflect on practice and have professional conversations that challenged and disputed existing policy and practice. The continued increase in incidents despite teachers following the policy that had been set out for them. This become the critical incident that required a real change in practice which could only come from reflection and a change in culture. Through research the Executive Leadership Team found the work of Paul Dix and his book *When the Adults Change Everything Changes* (2017).

All staff in the school, from senior leaders, classroom based staff, office staff and site staff were all required to read Paul Dix’s book as a directed task during Covid-19 lockdown and be prepared to implement the changes that the book suggested in September 2020. As part of this development senior leaders regularly met with Paul Dix to develop an action plan and a policy. In meeting and asking questions of Dix himself leaders were able to engage in professional dialogue, ask about specific circumstances and individual children. The implementation of the Paul Dix approach has been a huge change from the policy and practice seen in the school previously. Firstly, the move away from a punitive approach to restorative justice has required reflecting on practice that has been carried out for many years. The importance placed on relationships and the context of an individual child has again been a huge change in mindset. Another change has been the way in which we look at the emotion of a situation and how a teacher manages their own emotions in evocative situations. One of the biggest changes has been in the way behaviour is approached as a whole school. It is not the responsibility of a class teacher or of pastoral staff but of every member of the school community because ‘that is how we do it here’ (Dix, 2017, p). This shift in culture has been a huge change. In embracing a change like this there is space for further changes to practice being made where staff reflection on their practice and feel confident to make changes. Furthermore, Cochran-Smith (1999) draws attention to the roles of relationships and communication as a tool of effective relationships. Through working collaboratively with not only each other but also an external expert, Paul Dix, there is opportunity for reflective conversations to take place.

Although Dix does not explicitly reference theorists or research papers, he calls upon his own experiences and that of schools that have implemented his model. Dix begins his book *When the Adults Change Everything Changes* (2017) by highlighting the performance management culture in schools and the need move away from teachers being ‘trained in reinvented, rehashed pedagogy’ (Dix, 2017, p2). Through beginning in this way Dix is aligning his behaviour management model with reflecting on practice and the need to move away from what Ruch (2002) highlighted as the anxiety produced by competency culture.

Dix’s model is reminiscent of Schön. Just as Schön describes the teacher who sees that a child’s difficulty in learning to read is not a deficit of the child but of the practitioners own instruction, Dix believes that the change that is needed in behaviour management lies with the practitioners themselves (Schön, 1999, p66). His approach requires teachers to reflect on pedagogical approaches that they may have done for all of their teaching practice and, just as in the Massachusetts Teacher Project that Schön draws upon, they must challenge themselves (Schön, 1999, p68). One example Dix gives is the behaviour chart that many teachers use as hierarchies for reward and punishment. As a school our policy was to have a traffic light system where children moved their names to green, yellow or red dependent on their behaviour. Moving their name to yellow or red resulted in a consequence of “reflection time” where children were required to sit on a chair for a given number of minutes and reflect on their behaviour. Whilst reflecting in practice I noticed that some children would regularly be asked to move their name to yellow or red and “reflect” on their behaviour but their behaviour did not change. I would put more and more strategies in place in an attempt to support these children but despite knowing that the traffic light system was having little impact on behaviour I was not reflecting *on* practice and having professional discussions about real changes to practice.

With reference to children’s learning Dix says ‘in settings where punishment is king, the anxiety of forgetting and being punished can easily shift the focus away from learning’ (Dix, 2017, p6). If this is true of children’s learning then it is also true of practitioners and their professional development. If there is a culture of scrutinising, data gathering and competency then there will be a lack of reflection on practice and the embracing of puzzling, troubling and uncertain. In embracing Dix’s culture change the shift from fear of a problem to reflective practice is encouraged. Dix does make is clear that these changes need to be ‘from the top’ (Dix, 2017, p13). In order for these changes to become truly embedded and ensure that all staff buy in to the changes the culture must change. There must be an approach that encourages reflection and embraces the puzzling, troubling and uncertain as a route to developing practice which is reflective and evolving. My lack of reflection on the traffic light system as a behaviour management tool was rooted in my anxiety to question school policy and the regular monitoring of the recording of incidents where children had been asked to move their names to yellow or red. In a move away from this there is also a move in to a culture where reflection on practice is not only encouraged but is celebrated. Whilst this has been as a response to a critical event rooted in behaviour management it will also have a positive impact on other areas of teaching too.

Following on from all staff being required to read Dix’s book and the combined development of a new behaviour policy I observed how staff in two different classrooms had taken from the Paul Dix approach and what impact this has had in their classrooms. Firstly, I observed a classroom where the two members of staff in that room had wholeheartedly embraced the Paul Dix approach. On entering the classroom in the morning, the teacher stood at the door and individually greeted each child. She spoke to each child individually commenting on previous conversations and asking them about their reading the previous evening or what they had eaten for breakfast. It was evident that she knew each individual child and was building strong relationships with them. She clearly set out her expectations using simple language that the children were obviously familiar with. Children followed routines in the classroom which showed they had been practised and repeated. For example, when the teacher wanted to gain the attention of the class she raised her hand and calmly but assertively said “1, 2, 3” and the children stopped what they were doing, but their own hands up and replied “look at me”, giving the teacher their full attention. It was clear that all children understood what was expected of them in this moment, this was achieved through practise and repetition and clear explanation of expectations. When a child did not stop in this moment the other member of staff in the room discretely went to that child and privately reminded them of the expectations. The teacher did not begin her instructions until all of the children were focussing their attention on her. Through reminding in private the teacher did not give public attention to the negative behaviour but only to the behaviour she wanted to see.

In contrast, in the other classroom I observed staff having taken elements of the Paul Dix approach but without the wholeheartedness and consistency seen in the first classroom. As the first children entered the classroom the teacher was preparing resources for the lesson. After several of the children had come into the classroom the teacher turned around and rushed to the door where she then said good morning to each of the remaining children as they entered the room. Some children replied to her greeting whilst others simply walked past and sat at their seats. When the teacher wanted to gain the attention of the children in the class, she used the same attention grabber as the first teacher observed and said “1, 2, 3” whilst the children replied “look at me” they did so whilst continuing with their writing. This meant that although the children had acknowledged the teacher wanting their attention, they did not give it to her. She continued to give her instructions whilst two children continued talking to each other. When the teacher noticed that the children were talking, she stopped her instructions and told the children that they needed to miss part of their playtime. Not only did she jump immediately to a punishment, she did so publicly. Another time the teacher clapped her hands as a method in which to gain the attention of the class. Again, some children stopped what they were doing, and some continued their activity. This time she did not issue a sanction to those who were not listening to her.

From this observation it is clear that this teacher is not consistent in her approach. Dix argues that consistency is the key. Whilst initially arguing the need for consistency may seem that you are not taking into consideration the context of an individual child, but the consistency lies in your expectations and your responses. A child feels safe in the knowledge that they can predict your expectations, your rules and your routines and your responses. Nothing is hidden and as such the child feels safe and therefore is able to achieve (Dix, 2017). Again we are reminded of the move away from competency culture that Ruch (2002) argues is the barrier to reflective practice because it does not allow for the recognition of the ‘uniqueness of each situation encountered’ (Ruch, 2002, p202). Whilst again it may seem that consistency is at odd with this notion of the ‘extraordinary complexity of human functioning’, the building of relationships that is put at the forefront as a result of the Dix approach means that the individual’s context has already been identified and reflected upon (Ruch, 2002, p202). The consistency again lies in the expectations of the adult and their response to behaviour which is not desired.

One particular ‘visual consistency’ that our school has focused on as a result of work around the Paul Dix approach is the use of a recognition board. In both classrooms there was a prominently displayed recognition board. In both classrooms the teachers made regular use of it, explaining clearly the behaviour they were looking for and praising the children who displayed that behaviour. Dix uses the recognition board to promote the behaviours you want to see and to ‘untangle behaviour’ so that positive and negative consequences are separate (Dix, 2017, p25). The child who did not initially stop when the teacher wanted them to in the first observation had been recognised on the recognition board for sharing resources. His name was not removed because he did not immediately stop when asked.

In examining child development and the development of moral understanding (Schaffer, 1996, Rescheke, 2005, Kohlberg, 1969 as cited in Shelton and Brownhill, 2008) show that children develop a sense of what is “right” and what is “wrong” and a way to behave as a response to societal expectations and pressures. Through experiences children develop an understanding of ‘ethical fairness’ (Shelton and Brownhill, 2008, p24). Therefore children need to be taught how to control their emotions and follow societal norms and behave in ways expected of them, it is not something they inherently know how to do. Dix says that children ‘bring their behaviour into school with them; learned at home, rehearsed in the community and delivered to your classroom doon’ (Dix, 2017, p55). Those challenging behaviours are not only the result of children who cannot yet regulate their emotional responses but also behaviours learnt and practised. Therefore in order to see the behaviours you want in your classroom you must teach these behaviours, practise and rehearse them and give children the opportunity to embed them so they become a natural response. What is more, as Reay (2012) draws attention to, what is socially just is a social construct and therefore is problematic. What one person in one classroom views as socially just or socially acceptable may differ to another person in another classroom, or indeed another person in that same classroom.

In applying a reflection on practice framework to this critical event and the outcomes on practice observed in the classrooms we can see how practice can be impacted upon positively even further. From my observations in these two classrooms it is evident that the different members of staff have embraced the Paul Dix approach to differing degrees. Although there has been an initial positive change in the developing of a culture whereby teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice and embrace the uncomfortable feeling of a puzzling problem the observations show that this has not been embraced by all staff. The question is therefore raised as to why not all staff have engaged with the change to the same degree and also if the change truly engages in reflective practice as previously discussed.

In requiring all staff to read Paul Dix’s book and mandating that they must embrace this approach in their practice is problematic. Whilst all staff would agree that we reached a point in which our behaviour management system became increasingly punitive and was not having the impact on behaviour that we desired there has been little room for reflecting on practice as part of a wider conversation. Through reading Dix’s book it was highlighted that reflection on practice was necessary and that the high stakes, data driven, scrutiny based culture that had been cultivated was not beneficial to staff or children. It became clear that in order to truly reflect on practice we must embrace the puzzling problem as to why we were reaching for the punishments and not identifying the reasons for behaviour and to be brave in stepping away from only doing small actionable pedagogical changes and look at larger more culture based changes.

One way in which a reflective practice model could have been implemented to encourage a bigger change and more staff to buy in to the change more wholeheartedly is to present the change as a piece of action research. The problem of increasing numbers of incidents of aggressive behaviour and the increasing use of physical restraint and fixed term exclusion could have been presented to staff as a problem that we needed to overcome together through action research whereby reflection on current practice could have sparked initial conversations for change. On reading the Paul Dix book many staff felt more confident to express their opposition to physical restraint of children which again highlights a key barrier to reflection and professional discussions around big changes to practice as anxiety as a result of a high stakes competency culture (Ruch, 2002). Moreover, when staff feel they have an active role in the process or reflection, particularly in the development of actions, then they are more likely to embrace the changes enthusiastically.

This acknowledgement for the need to reflect and make changes has been a hugely positive step towards working using a reflection on practice model. However this must go further in order to truly embrace the model and gain the biggest impact, not just on behaviour but on the culture of the school. It is vital that the executive leadership team and senior leaders place value in reflection on practice and provide staff with the time, opportunities and resources to do so. We have seen commitment to this in the investment of time on inset days and as part of staff meetings to discuss how staff are finding implementing the Paul Dix approach, any problems that they have had and sharing successes. A way in which this could be furthered would be to organise these meetings by applying Gibbs’ model as a framework to reflect. Markkanen et al (2020) used the Gibbs model for reflection as previous studies found it to be ‘helpful in identifying the connection between personal experiences and professional values’ (Markkanen et al, 2020, p 50). Although their sample size was small, only carried out over seven weeks and was based in Finland, Markkanen et al found that using Gibbs’s framework helped to ‘focus’ reflections and ‘turn challenging situations into valuable learning experiences’ (Markkanen et al, 2020, p 59).

Applying Gibbs’s model is particularly pertinent with his inclusion of feelings. Paul Dix talks about ‘being in control of yourself and your emotions before addressing poor behaviour’ (Dix, 2017, p60). In order to be in control of your emotions you must acknowledge and understand what those emotions are. If a child is repeatedly not following your routine of stopping what they are doing and giving you’re their attention when you say “1, 2, 3” and you become annoyed at that they are not following the routine and you may quickly jump to a punishment. This does not teach the desired behaviour but rather models the acceleration of sanctions and the emotions attached to that. Rather, if you use Gibbs’s model and identify that you feel annoyed but that the child feels anxious that they have not finished the first task that you have set or that that morning no one has spoken to the child until they arrived in school and so they just have a lot they want to share. In giving space to identify these emotions through the use of Gibbs’s model you can more clearly identify the reasons for a behaviour and therefore the steps to find a solution to it. Markkanen et al (2020) also found that participants in their study ‘held the view that dealing with challenging situations could be considered an opportunity to develop themselves professionally’ (Markkanen et al, 2020, p 58). In using the Gibbs model of reflection teachers are able to reflect on their own emotions in a situation and not just the events that occurred. Those in the study described that ‘controlling their reactions in challenging situations became easier’ with more experience (Markkanen et al, 2020, p 58).

Moreover, Gibbs’s cycle encourages a continuous sequence of reflection. It is not enough to have identified that we must reflect upon our behaviour management systems and techniques but rather we must continually reflect upon them. We now know that the solution to behaviour is not the implementation of a singular or several pedagogical techniques and strategies and as such we must continue to describe what has happened, identify the emotions involved, evaluate, analyse, conclude, identify actions and repeat.

Since I carried out my observations, as a whole school staff we have been given the opportunity to pose questions to Paul Dix in a virtual meeting. This allowed us to ask questions about individual situations and explain the contexts of children whilst questioning how the Dix approach would work in those situations. This opportunity not only gave staff an opportunity to reflect but to also have professional conversations with an external expert in order to develop understanding and practice. This meeting also cemented the commitment from the executive leadership team and senior leaders. In investing not only time but also money in to opportunities like this they are demonstrating the importance they place on these reflective professional conversations. Dix acknowledges that often initiatives are brought in to inconsistently because teachers are short of time and energy but if teachers know that it is something that everyone is committed to for longevity then they with ‘buy into the changes with heart and soul’ (Dix, 2017, p4).

Zeichner and Liston (1996) argue that reflective teachers should look to further their practice by examining values and not just looking at whether practice is effective or not. Although there are many areas that reflective practice could have been done more thoroughly or more effectively in the implementation of the Paul Dix approach in the school that I work in, there has been a key change in culture which has begun the journey to become more reflective as not only practitioners but as a school. In looking at the teaching of behaviour, relationships between children and adults in school, and the emotional regulation of adults and children there has been a step away from not only a punitive approach to behaviour management but also a realigning of values and ethos as a school community. In order to continue on this journey it is vital that the commitment to change comes from the executive leadership team and the senior leaders to provide staff with time and opportunities to hone and discuss critical analysis skills and to allow teachers and other school staff to reflect on their practice in a way that can make real changes. There may have already been some changes in practice but in order for them to be the ‘seismic shifts’ that Paul Dix calls for there must be continued reflection. Whilst the impact of the Paul Dix approach has been initially hugely positive, both in terms of the reduction in aggressive behaviour incidents and staff morale, a longer period of time and further reflection is needed to see the true impact on teacher practice and the school ethos as a whole.

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