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Insight Series

Reflection and Practical Wisdom in Special Needs Education

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'The unexamined life is not worth living' – Socrates

1. Context

As the current government places an increased emphasis on life outcomes in its *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2014), the requirement for special education to prepare young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) for life after secondary school has never been so pertinent.

The government's self-proclaimed vision for children with SEND is one of equality and individual and civic accomplishment: a reformed special education system; one that is efficient in both identifying needs and support; focuses on inclusive practice and removing barriers to learning; supporting successful preparation for adulthood so that children with special needs may lead happy and fulfilled lives.

The latest reform marks a significant overhaul of its 2001 predecessor as it aims to reflect the changes introduced by the 2014 *Children and Families Act*. One of the many prominent changes is the strong focus on high aspirations for, and the ambitions of, children with SEND. This holistic view on academic achievement comes at a time when student 'flourishing' is increasingly seen by politicians and the wider public as the principal goal of educational efforts (Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson, 2015:85-86).

In 2014, the then Labour Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt argued that 'character' and 'resilience' are vital components of a rounded education that prepares young people for employment. Former Conservative Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan said that 'for too long there has been a false choice between academic standards and activities that build character and resilience.' Which, in her view, 'should go hand in hand' (cited in: Arthur, Kristjánsson, Walker, et al., 2015:8).

Research by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues found that public opinion is in support of this burgeoning cross party view. Of those surveyed, 84% of UK parents believe that teachers should encourage good morals and values in their students (2013a), and 91% of UK adults said that schools should help children develop good character (2014).

The principle aim of character education is to enable all pupils to 'flourish'. By its own proclamation it is, then perhaps, the duty of educators to ensure all students access the character curriculum and, indeed, all curricula. It might appear somewhat paradoxical to look at SEND students in isolation from their 'mainstream' peers given the universal aspiration character education sets out. However, it is perhaps only by investigating SEND practice separately that we may correctly understand and justly evaluate the true accessibility and implications of character education practice for all pupils.

First, we might begin by grounding our understanding of what SEND can mean for *whole-child* attainment. Both the affective and academic implications of SEND are well documented in literature, and while it is not practicable to investigate every avenue, understanding the broad implications of learning difficulties on pupil development may allow us to more efficiently consider how a character curriculum might attempt to appropriately and effectively address the needs of young people with SEND.

Research appears to show that SEND can hinder the development of behavioural skills and cognitive capacities that enable some individuals to put their moral habits into practice (Blimes, 2012; Moorefield, 2005). There is evidence that childhood-onset neuropsychiatric disorders, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and learning disabilities can lead to deficits in character maturation and the development of personality disorders in later life (Anckarsäter et al, 2006). For example, adults with lifetime ADHD and ASD are more likely to exhibit lower levels of 'self-directedness', 'cooperativeness', empathy and persistence compared with members of the general population (Anckarsäter et al, 2006; Cloninger, 1993; see also: Pelligra et al., 2015).

Deficits in character skills may serve to indicate potential shortfalls in academic attainment. According to research conducted by the Jubilee Centre of Character and Virtues *The Good Teacher: Understanding Virtues In Practice* (2015), studies suggest character strengths, such as self-discipline,

persistence and determination, predict academic success better than cognitive indicators. Statistics released by the Department for Education (2014) arguably support this view, as they show pupils with SEND are struggling to meet national benchmarks of attainment at both primary and secondary levels. For example, 67% of pupils without an identified need gained level 4 or above at the end of primary school, compared to 26% of all pupils with SEND. Furthermore, 65.3% of pupils with no identified need achieved at least five A*-C GCSEs or equivalent, compared to 20.5% of all pupils with SEND (DfE, 2014; cited in: Benardes et al. 2015). Such findings not only call for educators to reconsider their neglect of so-called “non-cognitive” factors (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, et al., 2015:4), they arguably support the need for SEND interventions that explicitly target the affective attainment of pupils.

Pupils with profound learning disabilities, such as autism (ASD) and speech and language impairments may have a particular struggle with understanding the ‘language’ of character (see Harrison et al. 2016:66-68, on virtue understanding, reasoning and practice). Arguably, addressing this in a school that does not have an explicit character curriculum is equally as important in a school that is developing or already has a character curriculum as it may better enable children with SEND to understand, reason and practice the ethos of the school and expected behaviours. On this basis, it may not be beneficial to the child to leave the affect aspects to learning implicit and believe pupils with SEND will simply absorb abstract notions; to allow these pupils to struggle to engage meaningfully without explicit differentiation. Therefore, it is important that both qualified teachers and teaching assistants are themselves educated in delivering and differentiating a character curriculum through interventions that focus explicitly on developing character strengths.

2. Reflection

Reflecting on thoughts, language and actions allows individuals to consciously form habits of virtuous action (Arthur et al, 2014). Understanding how one reasons and acts in contexts requiring virtue not only requires individuals to think deeply about their own moral development, but also about their position and role in society (Harrison et al. 2016). The idea that reflection is an important part of character development is not new. Aristotle believed that responsible action requires *phronesis*, or ‘practical wisdom’ – the ability to make wise judgments on different courses of action (Kristjánsson, 2015).

Literature maintains that moral thinking is principally an intuitive and automatic process (Narvaez, 2008) that draws from assumptions implicit in an individual's beliefs about how to act (Mezirow, 1990). However, the intuitive manner in which individuals respond to ethical dilemmas is neither innate nor predetermined; rather moral thinking becomes habitualised gradually by repeated practice (Arthur et al, 2014). By examining the presuppositions that justify their moral convictions, individuals can guard against routinised and limiting habits of thinking whilst promoting their own moral autonomy.

As Paxton (2011) demonstrates, individuals can override immediate intuitive moral judgments when induced to be more reflective. For to reflect is to assess 'the grounds of one's own beliefs' (Dewey 1933:9); and as such, one might consider self-reflection integral to the development of ethical reasoning, and the key for 'educating one's emotional responses' (Harrison et al. 2016). However, Paxton's finding not only highlights the role of the individual in their own moral development, it also imparts significance to the role institutions can play by 'inducing', or facilitating, reflection in individuals. This view would support the theory that individuals have the potential to develop a sophisticated reflective capacity over time if provided with an environment in which they can engage in reflective practice (Harrison et al. 2016).

2.1 Promoting Reflection

Educators can promote reflective thinking in young people by providing a supportive environment in which young people are encouraged to critically think about the affective aspects of their learning and theorise future outcomes. Epstein (2003:2) recognises the importance of not merely asking pupils to report what they have done, and argues by encouraging pupils to reflect and plan teachers promote evaluation and future prediction in an 'on-going cycle of deeper thought and thoughtful application'. By reflecting retrospectively on an action pupils are able to critically assess what they did, explore and formulate new hypotheses by considering what went well and how it can be improved.

Young people can be encouraged to reflect in a number of ways. The role of educators is to create an encouraging environment and provide opportunities for pupils to reflect on their virtues before, during and after activities. One way this can be achieved is through written reflection interventions. Examples of written reflection exercises include character logs, passports or journals. A highly

structured written reflection intervention might ask pupils to identify particular character virtues they hope to develop and to hypothesise strategies towards achieving their aim. The benefit of committing personal reflections to writing is that it requires pupils to follow a single line of reasoning to a logical conclusion (Arthur et al, 2014:9), and will engage multiple cognitive faculties of the pupil.

2.3 Reflection and Whole-Child Development

The link between reflection and self-learning is well documented in literature (see: Kolb, 1984). For example, as Evans (2002) explains, assessment (reflection) and prediction (planning) not only facilitates social problem solving, 'it is at the heart of mathematical and scientific thinking'. Furthermore, the use of de-contextualised language adds complexity to a pupil's vocabulary, which is a critical component of literacy development (Dickinson & Smith 1994; Snow et al. 2001). A pupil's reflective capacity is also reported to have a positive effect on their self-directedness (Sylvia 1992; Veen, Roeleveld & Leseman 2000), and creativity (Arts Education Partnership 1998).

There is an emerging view that for social skills interventions to be successful they should seek to foster 'self-awareness' in pupils with SEND (Williams White et al. 2007; Krasny et al. 2003) as this skill is linked to 'social-motivation', 'social-awareness', as well as mental health (Foden, 2009). Literature suggests that "non-cognitive" skills such as self-restraint, adaptability, and motivation are principal determinants of adult outcomes (Lindqvist & Vestman, 2011; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Borghans, Weel, & Weinberg, 2008; Waddell, 2006). For, it is suggested that interventions not evaluated by standardised measures of attainment have meaningful effects on long-term outcomes, such as educational attainment and employment (Booker et al. 2011; Deming, 2009; Deming, 2011). Such a sentiment further supports the case for interventions that focus explicitly on promoting self-reflection in pupils with SEND.

An encouraging report by Lindsay (2015) highlights the behavioural benefits to self-reflection interventions. Lindsay's findings supports the view that self-reflection can decrease negative pupil behaviour while significantly increasing desirable behaviours (De Haas-Warner, 1991; Holifield et al., 2010; Shapiro et al., 1998). By opening a 'conversation' with teachers, pupils' understanding and ability to explain their behaviour and its impact on others also improves (Lindsay, 2015). As

Moorefield (2005) observes, self-reflection interventions can also lead to a reduction in pupil-teacher conflict.

3. Small-Scale Pilot Reflection Intervention

To further explore the potential influence of reflection on pupil behaviour we conducted a small pre-pilot research project that developed and trialled reflection material for pupils with SEND in two schools. Due to the limited time frame of four weeks in which to conduct our small-scale pre-pilot project, our aim was to be exploratory rather than attempt to be scientific. We hoped that post-tests would provide some insight into the influence of self-reflection and allow us to develop hypotheses for potential quantitative research and a larger scale research project in this area.

The project adapted a reflection intervention currently in use in the SEN department of one of the two schools participating in the research (School A). This material was revised by a number of consultants currently supporting children with SEND, including SENCOs, teaching assistants speech and language therapists, in the week preceding the intervention period. The material was adapted further by the Head of the Speech Centre for Autism and Language Impairment at the second of the two participating schools (School B) so that the virtues referenced in the material were those of that school.

The reflection material asked pupils to reflect on their school day and to identify one positive or negative aspect they would like to improve and how they would like to implement this. Pupils had to identify one 'virtue' that this chosen aspect related to. Pupils were first asked to reflect verbally before they commit their reflections to paper. This first step is particularly important if the pupil has been involved in a behavioural incident as it allows participating staff to resolve the incident and to ensure the pupil understands the implications of their actions. The verbal reflection also helps the pupil to structure their written reflection, which may be beneficial for pupils with deficits in their working memory. Completed reflection sheets were collected by the practitioners at the end of each intervention. The Heads of the two specialist education provisions led the interventions, teaching assistants occasionally supported in these sessions. The reflection intervention took place after school and during the pupils' timetabled intervention periods.

3.1 Participants, methods, hypothesis

The two Heads of the specialist educational provisions in School A and B were recruited via verbal invitation during a series of meetings exploring the possibilities of collaborative research. The Jubilee Centre was aware of the schools and practitioners through previous work and involvement in character education. We recruited School A as it is a school with an existing character curriculum. We recruited School B as it has an emerging character curriculum. We felt that this would allow us to observe the effectiveness of a reflection intervention in both an existing and emerging context. Furthermore, the intervention was trialled in the SEN department of School A, and a specialist centre for pupils with severe autism and language impairments in School B. We felt that trialling the reflection intervention in both a setting for broad needs of varying severity and in a setting for those with acute difficulties would provide a greater insight into the possible implications of reflection on a large range of needs.

There were twelve pupils participating in the structured intervention and follow-up questionnaire stages of the project. The heads of the provisions were involved in identifying and approaching appropriate pupils with SEND whom they support. It was a selective approach based on their prior knowledge and awareness of the pupils. To be included in the project pupils had to meet each and all of the following criteria:

- The pupil has an Education, Health Care Plan (EHCPs are for children with special educational needs and disabilities where an assessment of education, health and social care needs has been agreed by a multi-agency group of professionals).
- The pupil receives support from a specialist education provision within their school.
- The pupil has been highlighted as experiencing current behavioural difficulties by the head of the specialist provision from which they receive support.

The pupils were aged between eleven to fourteen years.

The research methodology consisted solely of post evaluative measures. While we acknowledge the limitations of this approach, we hoped the findings would be indicative of the utility of a reflection intervention and allow us to evaluate the pupil's experience of the intervention. Questionnaires were undertaken as a post evaluation process with participating pupils. The five-item questionnaire asked pupils: what they thought of the intervention; whether they found it useful, and why; how reflecting

on their behaviour made them feel; whether they had noticed a change in their behaviour; and whether it matters to them what their teachers and peers think about their behaviour.

Heads of provisions were interviewed at the end of the intervention period to gain their personal observation and evaluation of the impact, effectiveness and limitations of the pilot intervention and to gain their recommendations for future adaptations and implementations.

We hope that the reflection intervention will show promise in developing the practical wisdom of pupils with SEND in helping them to acquire and contextualise virtues. We hope that by engaging in self-reflection pupils may develop their reflective capacity, which in turn may have a positive impact on both their affective and academic attainment. Furthermore, SEND practitioners may wish to use completed reflection sheets to appraise the behavioural and emotional progress of their pupils, to inform current support, and as an aide-mémoire for pupils in future reflection interventions.

4. Findings

In this section we discuss data from the interviews with practitioners in School A and School B. Findings from the interviews are presented in three sections: *benefits*, *limitations*, and *recommendations*. Common themes emerged from the interviews, as such each of the three sections are in two parts: *shared* (common themes observed in both School A and B); and: *other* (observations specific only to either School A or B). We then explore the qualitative data gained from the post-intervention questionnaire completed by participating pupils.

4.1 Benefits

Shared benefits:

- Regular timetabled interventions bring structure and routine to the pupil's school day. Both practitioners observed the pattern and predictability that the reflective intervention offered was particularly helpful in reducing anxiety in participants; and suggested pupils with acute psychological disorders such as autism may benefit especially from this.

- The reflection intervention offered a 'safe' space for pupils to reflect on their actions. The SENCO of School A said the reflection intervention 'became a chance for an autistic child to unpick the whole day.' This observation suggests that the utility of such a reflective resource is adaptable enough to address specific needs of the individual, and that its use has the potential to become more targeted over time.

Other benefits:

The reflective intervention appeared to show its greatest promise in School A. The practitioner of School A found that 'most pupils were able to make a connection between behaviour and virtue.' The findings suggest not only does self-reflection have the potential to develop the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of the pupil, the SENCO of School A claims self-reflection allows pupils to 'signpost what they need.' That is to say, the reflections of young people informs teacher practice so that they may tailor their support and differentiate curriculum materials and behaviour management effectively and specifically to the individual; for example with the use of 'visual prompts' and 'role play'. Furthermore, the SENCO of school A argued that the reflections of her pupils revealed the effectiveness of wider school practice: 'reflections of young people with SEND offered an insight into how systems are working, how children respond to virtues and how teachers understand special needs.'

4.2 Limitations

Shared limitations:

- Both practitioners gave one example of a pupil with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) who did not engage with the reflection intervention. The practitioner in School A claimed that the pupil with BESD 'can't or refuses to see how he is in certain situations', and that he 'can't see out of himself.' The practitioner of School B felt that the pupil with BESD 'gets stuck' when reflecting on their own behaviour, and will not concede the possibility of their wrongdoing.

Other limitations:

The greatest limitations to the reflection intervention were reported in School B. The practitioner in School B found pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) struggled to reflect on the self and others, and suggested that virtuous language is 'too abstract' and that the pupils with ASD 'don't understand the meanings, even the high functioning pupils.' Furthermore, the practitioner in School B suggested that pupils found it difficult to differentiate between virtues of 'too similar' meaning, and gave 'compassion' and 'empathy,' as an example of this. It was reported by the practitioner in School B that pupils with ASD also struggled to transfer their social skills to 'overwhelming' real life scenarios during the reflection intervention period. Furthermore, as School B has only an emerging character curriculum, virtues were not taught consistently and in all lessons, as such, the pupil's virtue knowledge and understanding was not being reinforced outside of the reflection intervention sessions. As such, the practitioner of School B found progress of the pupils' understanding of virtues was minimal.

4.3 Recommendations

Shared recommendations:

- Regular, systematic and long-term use of the material in order to develop and reinforce pupils' reflective capacity and virtue understanding overtime
- Positive reinforcement: praise linked to virtues; separate sanction from the intervention
- Visual reinforcement of virtues
- Teachers should engage in formal self-reflection practice to more effectively respond to the reflections of young people

Other recommendations:

For pupils with ASD and speech and language difficulties, as well as SEND pupils in an emerging character curriculum context, it was recommended pre-teaching should be conducted in order to establish a base understanding of virtues and virtuous behaviour before attempting the reflection

material. 'Social stories' interventions with appropriate language were suggested as a possible method towards achieving this aim. It was also recommended that pupils should be 'pre-taught how to self-reflect', and to develop their virtue vocabulary before attempting the reflection material. Working with a speech and language therapist on a series of simple reflection exercises or 'word web' activities that focus on a specific virtue was a suggested strategy towards achieving this aim. Another recommendation is for teachers to have training in active listening and in framing questions back to young people during reflection sessions. A broader recommendation is for schools to limit the amount of initiatives introduced to allow teachers time to learn, adopt and develop existing initiatives.

3.4 Pupil Feedback

Out of the eleven pupils who completed the five-item questionnaire, nine reported a perceived improvement in their own behaviour. This feedback is encouraging; particularly as only three out of the eleven participants who completed the questionnaire thought self-reflection was useful. For example, one participant wrote: 'I don't see the point in doing it [reflection].' When asked if they had noticed a change in their behaviour post intervention, the participant reported: 'Yes because now I try harder.' Another example of this: one participant said, 'I don't like it [the reflection intervention] because there is no point in looking back on what happened in the past...I don't need teachers bugging me more because I can think about it myself.' This pupil reported that their behaviour had changed, 'a little.' A final example: regarding the utility of the reflection intervention, another participant said, 'I don't know,' but claimed: 'I have been really kind to Alice and look after her now.' While these examples suggest the "usefulness" of the reflection intervention is not immediately apparent to the participants, their feedback does, however, indicate that their behaviour may have improved during the intervention period.

Only two responses appear to explicitly support claims from the SENCO of School A that: *most of the participants could link behaviours to virtues*. For example, one pupil said: 'I think it is good because it makes you reflect and improve your virtues.' Another participant claimed: 'I have shown *resilience* by trying my work, and if I find it hard I will keep on going.' However, as the majority of participants claimed they felt their behaviour had improved post-intervention, this, perhaps, implicitly supports the teacher's observations that, in practice, these pupils were able to link virtues to their own behaviour.

There is also some evidence to support the recommendation from the practitioners of both School A and B that the sanction element should be removed from the intervention (i.e. those pupils reflecting during detention), and for the emphasis of the reflection material to be one of positive reinforcement. For example, those pupils reflecting on negative behaviour tended to respond negatively when asked how the reflection intervention made them feel and whether they thought the reflection intervention was useful. One participant wrote: 'Not happy because I'm having to write what I did/do wrong and it's obnoxious.' Another participant wrote: 'Boring because you already know what you have done.' Another claimed it was 'lame.' However, each of these participants felt their behaviour had improved, and one conceded that, although reflecting was 'lame', it was also 'helpful.' For those pupils reflecting on positive behaviour, their responses to all items on the questionnaire indicated that the reflection intervention was a positive experience. For example, a participant wrote: 'I think it is useful because it [is] nice to reflect what you have done good like I get green stamps everyday, no amber stamp, it make[s] me feel proud...[it is useful] because it[']s about character virtues like how you [have] been good. If you [have] done something wrong, how can you make it better.' Another participant wrote: 'Very good, it helps you a lot...[M]y teachers feel very proud of me.'

There was also an indication to support the observation that the reflection intervention could be approached in different ways, or 'tailored' to the needs of individual pupils, as one participant wrote that although they found the intervention useful, they 'preferred to talk to the teachers more.' This response also supports the use of verbal reflections before the pupils engage with the written element of the intervention.

4. Discussion

As well as cases gathered in the literature review, the empirical data, although limited, offers, some, further positive indications supporting the use of reflective material in SEND interventions. The findings suggest not only does self-reflection have the potential to develop the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of the pupil, reflecting enables the child to 'signpost what they need,' as such the teacher may tailor their support and differentiate curriculum materials and behaviour management effectively and specifically to the individual reflections of the child. Furthermore, it was reported that the reflections of pupils with SEND revealed the effectiveness of wider school practice: how current school systems are working, how children with SEND respond to virtues and how teachers understand

special needs. This revelation was not anticipated in our hypothesis, and offers a strong case for the potential benefits of a reflection intervention.

There were a number of limitations to our pilot reflection intervention. The most significant limitation of the intervention was the inability of children with ASD to access and effectively engage with the written material. As we explored earlier in the paper, children with ASD and other learning disabilities and speech and language difficulties may struggle with the abstract nature of virtue language. The empirical part of our research appeared to confirm this, and suggested that the reflection material we piloted was not effective on its own at addressing these needs. A future reflection intervention might first seek to 'pre-teach' children with acute learning disabilities to understand individual virtues before asking them to engage with a substantial self-reflection. Furthermore, the reflection material itself could be developed to include supporting pictures which may help pupils to both recognise and contextualise each virtue. While we acknowledge that no one material can address all needs of all children, this fact perhaps further supports the recommendations both for SEND practitioners to engage in formal self-reflection, and to be responsive and proactive to the reflections and learning styles of their pupils in order to tailor the reflection interventions and subsequent support to each child. A future study in this area may wish to conduct the empirical research over a longer period of time, across a great number of schools. This should perhaps include a control group and pre, as well as post, measures.

While there are a number of limitations, the positive implications of reflective interventions could be broad and far reaching. As the studies above suggest, successful SEND interventions will inform the way in which pupils interpret and negotiate their inner world and their surroundings. Developing the child's critical gaze both inward and outwards; the achievement of moral and intellectual, as well as civic potential should arguably be the informing principle and principle aim of SEND interventions. A holistic and future-minded emphasis to SEND interventions of this kind would also be in tune with the current trend in special education policy: that of the aspirations and future lives of children with SEND. A further, more rigorous, study in to the central themes of this pre-pilot project is required to explore the promising outcomes of self-reflection as indicated by our findings, so that we might begin to better understand the possible relationship between reflection interventions and the practical wisdom in special needs education. Future research projects might wish to establish an open- and sustained-dialogue with SEND practitioners in a manner that is collaborative in terms of the

exploration, development and showcasing of materials and practices designed explicitly to promote whole-child attainment for children with SEND.

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