

A critical evaluation and the identification of next teaching and learning steps focusing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

1. Introduction

The term critical incident refers to an event or a situation which highlights a significant turning-point or significant change in a person's life or that of an institution, event or lesson, Tripp (1993). However, this does not mean that the term "critical incident" refers to a negative consequence, but simply, a situation that has been analysed critically, Tripp (1993).

Tripp (1993) details that critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation. This can be described as the observer making an initial judgement based upon its perceived value and from that, the value bears the weight of the significance the observer attaches to the incident. This process is the beginning of the diagnostic teaching cycle, whereby, situations are observed, creating critical incidents, responses are planned and implemented, responses are then evaluated and adapted and the cycle thus repeats.

Tripp (1993) explains that there 3 types of judgements a teacher must master when analysing critical incidents which are professional, diagnostic and reflective skills. However, reflective judgement is different in that it leans towards subjective evaluation. Webster, et al (2019) states that a teacher's ability to self-reflect on their own performance and outcomes is one of the most important skills in teaching.

Linking to this, the new curriculum for Wales triggered by the recommendations of Donaldson's (2015) Successful futures, highlights the importance of developing teachers as reflective practitioners.

This assignment will critically evaluate an observed incident within the classroom environment whereby a disengaged MAT pupil presents with low-level disruptive behaviour. The results of this evaluation will firstly, make crucial links between observed behaviours and learning theory, and secondly, provide recommendations to inform, design and implement future teaching practices.

2. The critical incident observation

The observation was recorded in a secondary school within South Wales. The school currently educates over 1700+ pupils from a catchment that has high levels of social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is 32.7% which is 15.3% higher than the national average, Esytn (2017).

The following critical incident was recorded on the 17th October 2023 at 13.19pm, the lesson after lunch break. The class observed was year 9 top set and the subject was geography, specifically hydrographs.

As the pupils entered the classroom the teacher instructed each pupil to take their allocated seat and complete the starter activity provided. The majority of the pupils did attend their seats, however one pupil who will be referred to as pupil (A) was firstly late to the lesson and secondly being disruptive from the moment they entered the classroom. The teacher instructed pupil (A) to be quiet, take their seat and begin the starter activity like everyone else. Pupil (A) did engage with the start activity and finished it before the rest of the class, after pupil (A) had finished the starter activity they began to engage in low-level disruption of the other pupils around them. This included making small remarks about other pupils, throwing pens at friends, tapping peers legs from under the table and attempting to start conversations with friends from the other side of the classroom.

The teacher identified that the level of disruption was increasing and therefore raised their voice at pupil (A) as a means to control their increasing disruption. The teacher then completed 5 minutes of direct teaching on the theory of hydrographs and this went smoothly. The teacher handed out a worksheet that the class had to complete; this included plotting annual rainfall on a hydrograph. The class began plotting the data onto the hydrograph and after about 3-4 minutes pupil (A) completed all of the work that was currently set by the teacher and the rest of the class was still working through completing the assigned work.

Upon completing the work pupil (A) continued with the same low-level disruptive behaviours as before, which in turn caused 3 additional pupils to begin talking and engaging in the same behaviours as pupil (A). The teacher singled out the 4 pupils by name and informed them that they should not be talking, but in fact completing their work in silence. Pupil (A) then said that they have completed the work, to which, the teacher said that they should now remain in silence and wait for the class to catch up.

After another few minutes pupil (A) again continued with the same behaviours of talking with friends, throwing pens, making faces at others and the teacher trying to maintain the level of noise within the classroom by being louder than the pupils. Pupil (A) then went on their mobile

phone under the desk whilst everyone else was completing the work pupil (A) had completed. Once realised this was happening the teacher asked pupil (A) to hand over their mobile phone, pupil (A) refused and continued to be on their mobile phone. This led to the teacher informing pupil (A) if they do not hand over their mobile phone then they will receive a behaviour point and be removed from the classroom. Upon hearing this, Pupil (A) put their mobile phone in their bag and walked outside the classroom, the teacher followed and words were exchanged. The time in which the teacher was outside of the classroom addressing pupil (A) the pupils remaining within the classroom became very talkative, loud and disengaged with the set work, pupil (A) did not return to the classroom.

After the lesson had finished I approached the teacher and asked about pupil (A). The teacher stated that pupil (A) is considered a MAT pupil, however, has had a very hard childhood with long-standing family trauma and this is the reason for how and why they behaved during the observed lesson.

From analysing the observation there were 3 key questions to explore for further investigation, which include:

- What consequences could be driving and maintaining pupil (A)'s behaviour?
- What proactive teaching strategies could be implemented to ensure pupil (A) remains on task?
- How can we reinforce the behaviours we would like to see in the classroom environment?

3. Literature review

The works of Doyle (2006) explain how teaching is considered a demanding profession, specifically relating to classroom environments. Dorman (2006) explains how efficiently these classroom environments are managed has a major impact on student learning. The following theories will conceptualize how learning theories have helped shaped the way in which we think, change, adapt and reinforce behaviours within the classroom environment.

Classical conditioning is a type of learning first discovered by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov in 1927. It works by forming an association between two different stimuli which results in a learned response. For this to work effectively there had to be a non-neutral stimulus, also known as the unconditioned response and the addition of a neutral stimulus also known as the conditioned response. Pavlov's early work included experiments on dogs whereby through conditioning dogs were salivating at the sound of a bell (neutral stimulus) with the assumption a reward would be present, Furze (2013).

This early work was further developed by B.F Skinner in 1938 which led to the expansion of reinforcement-based learning models. In 1905 Edward Thorndike studied the learning of animals within a puzzle box and proposed the theory of “law of effect” whereby actions followed by desirable outcomes are more likely to be repeated and those that followed undesirable outcomes are less likely to be repeated, Thorndike (1905). However, Skinner (1938) proposed that the early works of Thorndike did not account for the use of reinforcement and how this can influence decisions under experimental conditions. Skinner (1938) explains that operant conditioning works by the changing of behaviour using reinforcement after the desired response. This identifies 2 different types of reinforcement, firstly, positive reinforcement, whereby, this strengthens behaviours by providing a consequence the individual finds rewarding, and secondly, negative reinforcement, whereby, the removal of an unpleasant reinforcer can also strengthen the behaviour, Bustos, (1996), Mcleod (2007).

Woolfolk (2008) talks about applying these foundational principles of reinforcement into the classroom. This focuses on praising learners for their good behaviour and ignoring misbehaviour, with hopes that the undesired behaviours will diminish overtime. Alber and Heward (1997) agree with this and go on further to say that the systematic application of praise and attention is the most powerful motivation and classroom management tool available to teachers. Landrum and Kauffman (2006) propose the strategy of differential reinforcement that aligns with this thinking, in which, we ignore inappropriate behaviours and make sure to reward and reinforce accepted behaviours.

However, studies completed by Pfiffner and O’Leary (1987) highlight that low-level disruptive behaviours can still maintain overtime, even if teachers effectively utilise positive consequences. This can be attributed to the pupil receiving positive reinforcement from other sources other than the teacher - e.g. peer-attention, which again, will maintain the behaviour overtime, Woolfolk (2008). This is further reinforced by Skinners views in the book “Beyond Freedom and Dignity” (1971) where Skinner explains too much praise could have the opposite desired affect and in fact result in praise overload. This is when the schedule or frequency of reinforcement is either being used too much or being utilised at the wrong time, and therefore, either reinforcing undesired behaviours or the reinforcer losing its power over-time.

A study completed by Morisano and Shore, (2010) highlights that 50%+ of the more academic and talented pupils may not achieve their full potential during their time in education. A report released by Estyn (2018) details how we should best support MAT pupils by putting in place effective provisions. Some of these provisions include very strong subject knowledge, enriching activities, high quality feedback and stimulating and challenging learning experiences. Prior to this, in 2008 the Welsh Assembly released a report titled “meeting the

challenge” which aims to address the standards we must reach for MAT pupils. This reports stipulates that we must ensure MAT pupils develop intrinsic motivation to learn, as quite often MAT pupils may lack motivation as an attempt to hide their exceptionality, Butler-Por (1993).

The 2008 Welsh assembly report discusses the challenges of teaching MAT pupils and that we should be providing new knowledge in a way where they can relate it to their current knowledge, encourage inquiry-based questions, provide constructive feedback and plan enriching teaching and learning activities. In 1920 Lev Vygotsky developed the concept of zone of proximal development. This model represents an individual at the centre or within their zone of actual learning, and to access the further zone of proximal development it requires the help or aid of a more-knowledgeable other, Shabani (2010). With this thinking in mind MAT pupils should always be pushed beyond their limits to access the zone of proximal development to maintain engagement and motivation.

Piaget (1964) developed the learning theory of constructivism which holds similarities with Vygotskys zone of proximal development. This theory details that learning is modelling, transformative, and understanding how something is constructed, Piaget (1964). Alexander and Winnie (2006) add that any knowledge acquired can build upon pre-existing knowledge. In this way, it relates to Vygotskys theory by the addition of scaffolding information and how this can promote deeper thinking. It is important to realise for knowledge to be built upon in this way, appropriate knowledge must be pitched to the learner in the first instance.

Reis, (2018) explains that it is important for teachers to accommodate the different needs of multiple learners within the classroom environment. Therefore, differentiation can provide this variation in learners capacity by matching content, instruction and assessment to the pupils current ability, Reis et al, (2018).

Throughout the literature review we have compared different learning theories, with recognised strategies for improving engagement and motivation. Moving into the next section we shall now evaluate the case study against the literature.

4. Teaching and learning methods & Discussion

During the explanation of the case study 3 key questions were posed for further investigation which include:

- What consequences could be driving and maintaining pupil (A)’s behaviour?
- What proactive teaching strategies could be implemented to ensure pupil (A) remains on task?
- How can we reinforce the behaviours we would like to see in the classroom environment?

In this section we will aim to address each of these key questions based upon what we have explored during the literature review and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each method.

During my observation it was evident from the moment pupil (A) entered the classroom he seems disassociated with the lesson, this was drawn from the fact that pupil (A) was firstly late to the lesson and secondly disruptive from the moment he entered. When pupil (A) sat down and engaged with the starter activity he completed it before anyone else. This makes sense considering after the observation the teacher informed myself that he was a MAT pupil. However, when pupil (A) had completed the activity, the teacher did not identify this and in fact pupil (A) from that moment disengaged with the lesson as there was no learning challenge.

As stated in the 2018 Estyn report pupils should be engaged in challenging learning experiences and this was not provided. In addition to this, once pupil (A) had completed his starter activity, the teacher instead of providing praise to reinforce this good behaviour in fact provided punitive action in the form of raising their voice for low-level disruptive behaviours. However, thinking proactively, if the teacher provided some additionally challenging material for pupil (A) this could have potentially avoided this altercation all together.

Moving onto the main activity, pupil (A) completed this within 3-4 minutes whilst the rest of the class were still working. This clearly shows that the pupil is eager to learn as pupil (A) had no problem with remaining on task, the problem occurs when that learning material comes to an end. Once again pupil (A) engages with similar low-level disruptive behaviours and the response from the teacher was the same as the previous interaction. Pupil (A) informed the teacher that they had completed the work, no alternative work was offered, and in fact pupil (A) was told to remain quiet whilst everyone else caught up.

Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development tells us that as much as possible we should be pushing students to access the ZPD and to not just remain in the actual zone of learning, Shabani (2010) however, this was not the case for pupil (A). Pupils need to be pushed beyond their limits to illicit deeper critical thinking. This is especially true for MAT pupils, Rosika (2014) explains that this is the challenge we as teachers face, ensuring that MAT pupils always remain engaged with the learning material. In this case, pupil (A) had completed his work and therefore, was no longer engaged with the lesson, this then led to pupil (A) engaging in the types of behaviours that we would not like to see within the classroom environment; however, these unwanted behaviours were being reinforced in-line with what Woolfolk (2008) explains around receiving positive attention from other pupils in the classroom.

Leading on from this, pupil (A) was again disengaged from the lesson and began going on their mobile to pass the time. This was an opportunity for further work to be introduced,

however this did not happen. The teacher noticed this and instructed pupil (A) to hand over their mobile which resulted in pupil (A) becoming confrontational and leaving the classroom.

The teacher had multiple opportunities in the lesson to provide the MAT pupil (A) purposeful and engaging learning material, however this also did not happen. As mentioned earlier Reis (2018) pushes the importance for teachers to provide learning materials than can cater to all learners abilities within the classroom. If this had been provided then the lesson had the potential to carry on as normal and avoid all of the unwanted behaviours that were present during the observation.

The following questions can now be answered:

- What consequences could be driving and maintaining pupil (A)'s behaviour?

Pupil (A) is eager to learn, this is clear throughout the observation. Pupil (A) also likes to receive attention. However, the lack of reinforcement from the teacher upon completing tasks and learning opportunities that cater for MAT pupils open the doors for pupil (A) to seek out attention from sources. In this case it was via disrupting the flow of the lesson and the learners surrounding them.

- What proactive teaching strategies could be implemented to ensure pupil (A) remains on task?

As stated earlier, pupil (A) is eager to learn and did complete the work that was set, however, not challenging. If I was to teach pupil (A) I would address the situation proactively. When pupil (A) enters the class, I would direct them on task straight away and have already pre-planned alternative challenging and differentiated activities ready for them to engage with. Drawing from the theories of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development I would have developed additional exercises that would cater for pupil (A)'s higher ability. This would ensure that pupil (A) remains engaged with the learning and in fact accesses deeper thinking with the correct scaffolding to help them get there as the teacher.

- How can we reinforce the behaviours we would like to see in the classroom environment?

Pupil (A) likes receiving attention, even if its positive or negative attention. If I was to teach pupil (A) I would ensure that I utilise two different forms of reinforcement-based schedules. The first being an intermittent schedule of reinforcement, this would function by verbally praising pupil (A) whenever they do well during tasks or completing task-based activities. This would help pupil (A) associate positive praise with working well through tasks or completing tasks. The reason for choosing an intermittent praise schedule over a continuous schedule

relates to skinner's (1971) point on avoiding praise overload, which can occur from providing too much praise within a short time frame.

The second strategy would be to utilise differential reinforcement as stated by Landrum and Kauffman (2006), this works by rewarding only positive behaviours and ignoring inappropriate behaviours in the hopes that they would diminish overtime as nothing is reinforcing it. I believe this would be especially effective for pupil (A) as they seem to be constantly seeking attention.

From analysing the critical incident and applying this case study to the literature there were 2 distinct conclusions that I could draw for my own pedagogical choices. Donaldson's (2015) report successful futures details the 12 pedagogical principles for teachers, even though all 12 are important for teachers to strive, promote and work towards, the 2nd and 4th pedagogical principle which relates to sustained effort, problem solving, and critical thinking resonate with the critical incident analysis I have completed. This focuses on praise and support being essential to driving learners sustained effort and using critical thinking to activate powerful learning for pupils, especially pupil (A).

Within Successful Futures (2015) there are 4 purposes that encompass the whole curriculum for Wales. From these 4 purposes I found that my personal pedagogical principles also aligned with the purpose "ambitious capable learners". This is because it includes characteristics that cover seeking to enjoy challenge, building upon knowledge and applying that knowledge in different contexts, enjoying solving problems and evaluating critically what they find. I believe that these are the strengths that I would want to carry forward as a teacher and apply these principles in my own teaching.

5. Conclusion & recommendations

This assignment has evaluated a critical incident within an educational setting. It has explored learning theories and strategies related to the critical incident and from this conclusion can be drawn. Theories including constructivism and ZPD have been explored and accepted and how they can relate to pupils considered to be MAT, as well as ensuring all learners have been accounted for through the correct use of differentiation, making a direct link to the professional standards of teaching. Positive reinforcement strategies and schedules have been explored and verified as methods to counteract low-level disruptive behaviours as well as ensuring that pupils including those considered to be MAT remain on task and receive correct praise for their actions. Appropriate links have been made to the 2nd and 4th pedagogical principles in that they relate to the critical incident analysed and this has also been linked to the 4 purposes

stated within Donaldsons (2015) successful futures. Overall, the completion of the critical incident assignment has developed sound knowledge and understanding of learning theory and how this can translate into the practical teaching environment.

Going forward it is sensible to recommend for any teacher the importance of fully utilising a range of reinforcement-based strategies to promote active engagement in learning. This can include the methods detailed within this assignment of intermittent and differential schedules, however, there are many other types of reinforcement-based strategies that can also be considered effective. In addition to this, another recommendation alongside best teaching practice and the professional teaching standards, fully utilising the use of appropriate differentiation can help support MAT pupils in accessing deeper critical thinking.

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