

Introduction

This assignment will critically evaluate an observed incident that took place within a classroom environment. Using Tripp's (1993) critical incident methodology, the aim of this task is to reflect on my own classroom experience, think deeply about the event, analyse what happened and make connections with academic research. This enables new learning and identifying the next steps for future practice. The observation required the recording of a critical incident from the classroom, this is shown in the Appendix section. A description of the classroom and lesson will be given to provide some context for the chosen incident. This will be followed by an overview of the incident, and its connections with the Welsh curriculum, then a literature review with the aim of discussing key points of learning identified from the situation presented. Finally a personal reflection and the next steps for future practice will then be outlined.

A critical incident is described as an event or situation that happens during the school day which provokes the educator to reflect on the experiences, develop reasons and understanding of their own work and discover ways to help the growth and development of their own practice (Johnson and Golombek, 2002). Tripp (2012) believes that critical incidents are personal to the individual and they are created because the situation has caught their attention and they feel strongly about what took place. These incidents then lead to 'enhanced critical reflection' (Bruster and Peterson, 2013 cited in Pourhassan and Nazari, 2023: 34) meaning that teachers see the results of their actions and practice which provokes change, impacting on their teacher identity, professional judgement and how they deal with challenges in everyday practice (Tripp 2012: Bania et al, 2021).

Classroom Context

When being an observer, it is important to follow the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines in relation to the treatment of participants being observed. This means data collected such as the name of the school, pupils and staff remains anonymous and confidential to comply with normal practice when conducting educational research (BERA, 2018). The observation took place in an English medium school located in the Swansea Local Authority. The previous Estyn report mentioned that teachers planned learning opportunities through routines and structured sessions to support pupils

with their progression, however it stated that they were 'over-directed' and recommended more independent learning opportunities and meaningful teacher feedback was provided to suitably challenge pupils (Estyn, 2023: 2).

The incident was recorded in a Year Four - Progression Step 3 class, there were 20 pupils in the class with a teacher and one teaching assistant. The pupils were sat in groups of four or five based on their academic ability. The higher ability (HA) pupils sat at the back of the classroom and were separated by gender, the boys were on the left side of the classroom while the girls were on the right. The lower ability pupils (LA) were sat in front of the HA boys with the teaching assistant, the pupils with English as an additional language were sat in front of the HA girls and there were four pupils sat in a row in front of the whiteboard, one pupil was visually impaired. The lesson involved writing inferences based on an item of clothing the teacher provided. The focus of the task was for the pupils to create as many inferences as they could on the owner of a shoe. They used their existing knowledge of inferences and information related to the shoe given to them during their task.

Critical Incident overview

The teacher introduced the task by giving the instructions and placing a shoe onto each table which the pupils used to make their inferences, the teacher then gave the pupils a time limit for the inferences task and told them to start. During the task I noticed the teacher only visited the HA girls table on a few occasions compared to the other tables, where they visited on multiple occasions and gave a lot more support, direction and input during the task. On one occasion they checked the HA girls progress and commented on their 'great teamwork', on another occasion it was to give the group additional information for their task and lastly they discussed and listened to the pupils' ideas for their work while making comments and asking questions such as 'Will that help you?' and praised them for their effort with the activity. During this interaction, a pupil shared her answers with the teacher and they praised the pupil by nodding and saying, 'What you just told me is an inference, well done' before moving on to another group's table. During the task, the HA girls remained focused and worked collaboratively, sharing the shoe around the table and communicating any information or ideas they had with each other, helping them to complete the task with little feedback from the teacher compared to the other groups.

Joshi (2018) highlights that incidents are said to be critical because they have some meaning or value which can be viewed in a wider context, meaning they can be analysed from different angles. This incident shows the significance of collaborative learning within the classroom. The pupils interactions with each other shows the importance of social interactions for the learning process and academic achievement (Hurst et al, 2013). Theories such as social and collaborative learning support the use of collaboration within education and highlights the benefits to pupils (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023). It also shows the significance of teacher and HA pupil interaction, a teacher's perceptions of HA pupils is critical and can influence the relationship and learning experiences provided (Weyns et al, 2021). Theories such as Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory show the importance of positive teacher-student relationships/interactions (Riley, 2011) and how they can influence the learning experiences provided to HA pupils. These factors will be discussed further within the literature review.

As well as reflecting on the observed incident it is important to look at how it relates to the Curriculum for Wales. The aim of the new curriculum is to help pupils grow into capable individuals who can use their skills, knowledge and learning to support them when facing challenges within Wales and the wider world (Donaldson, 2015). This is implemented by the four purposes which educational settings must implement to ensure academic achievement across Wales (Welsh Government, 2021). As mentioned in the overview, the group of HA pupils worked collaboratively to complete the task. This experience will encourage the pupils to work together and support each other in future learning and develop a deeper understanding of topics/skills. This relates to the purpose, 'enterprising, creative contributors who: give of their energy and skills so that other people will benefit' while also enabling them to 'connect and apply their knowledge and skills to create ideas and products' (Welsh government, 2015). Also through collaboration it enables pupils to develop positive relationships with each other which links to the purpose 'healthy confident individuals: who form positive relationships based upon trust and mutual respect' (Welsh government, 2015). The Curriculum for Wales emphasises the importance of collaboration within learning, so educational settings must ensure they provide these kinds of opportunities throughout the curriculum (Welsh Government 2021). Donaldson (2015) highlights, through collaboration pupils are able to explore, experiment and gain confidence while making connections and construct meaning within their education, promoting their learning and holistic development.

Literature Review

The observed critical incident highlighted some focus areas that can be discussed within the literature review. The following review will focus on research and theories related to a teacher's interactions and relationship with High Ability (HA) pupils and their approach to providing challenge and feedback, then moving onto the concept of collaborative learning and how this can be used within the classroom environment.

The importance of teacher-pupil relationships has been highlighted within teaching practice and research for many years, emphasising that developing positive relationships with pupils should be a priority within teacher's practice (Gallagher and Mayer 2006: Wood 2017: Allen et al. 2021). Kaufman (no date) states that, 'positive relationships are built on positive interactions'. This involves teachers investing a large amount of time and attention to gain knowledge and recognise the needs and interests of pupils (Gallagher and Mayer 2006), while respecting them as individuals and making a commitment to their care and education, enabling them to reach their full potential (Klem and Connell 2004: Allen et al. 2021). From this, teachers are aware of the pupil's individual and learning needs which can aid them with providing positive experiences and interactions (Soan, 2021). This enables the pupils to build a positive relationship with their teacher where they feel safe, secure and supported; leading to pupils having positive attitudes and wanting to engage with their learning, helping them to achieve academically (Kaufman, no date: Klem and Connel, 2004).

This relates to Bowlby's attachment theory, which focuses on the bond between a child and their primary caregivers such as their mother and believed the quality of the connection/bond within the relationship impacted on the child's development and learning (Beckley 2012). Fitzgerald (2020) criticised Bowlby's theory as they argued that the theory overly focuses on the relationship between child and mother and doesn't consider other adults in the child's life who care for them. Barrett et al. (2014) also agrees with this statement as they believe that children have a range of caregivers and support services in their lives who take care of them on a daily basis; children rely on developing secure attachments with their caregivers to help them feel safe and meet their needs. However, according to Kensler (2004) and Marrone (2014), they state that Bowlby did mention parental substitutes within his theory, suggesting that in addition to family relatives, children can develop attachments with other significant adults in their lives and these

relationships also influence their learning and development. Marrone (2014) highlights the importance of children forming relationships with other adults apart from primary caregivers in their lives, all attachment figures can provide comfort and support to a child in times of need. This can help them to develop a sense of security, help them build a positive mindset of themselves while preventing them feeling negative emotions during times of need (Riley, 2010).

Bowlby's attachment theory framework highlights the importance of the teacher-pupil relationship and emphasised the benefits of this relationship to pupils' learning and development (Riley, 2011). With regard to High Ability (HA) pupils, Kesner (2005) stresses that teachers have a vital role in the teaching and success of HA pupils learning and development. Hanum (2017) stresses that positive teacher-pupil interactions are needed within the classroom, HA pupils who have positive interactions/relationships with their teacher show an increase in academic participation and performance. Kesner (2005) and Shavinina (2009) both state that due to their HA pupils intellectual capabilities they may be more dependent on the teacher to provide learning experiences to meet their academic needs and are more affected by teacher interactions. Teachers must build positive relationships with their HA pupils to help identify their ability and provide an appropriate learning experiences, environment and challenge; ensuring the smooth running of the teaching and learning process (Leavitt, 2017: Hanum, 2017). This can influence the way they challenge HA pupils and feedback on their learning and progress, this can also affect their social and emotional development (Shavinina, 2009). The teacher's interactions and experience determines how they feel about the lesson; if the teacher is unable to meet their needs or guide the learning in a way to challenge them, this could have a negative impact on their self-confidence and attitude towards learning (Shavinina, 2009: Leavitt, 2017).

A study by Weyns et al. (2021) of trainee teacher perceptions of HA pupils showed that they had mixed feelings and ideas about them. Studies from HammerSchmidts (2016) and Moreschi (2022) also showed similar results, revealing that teachers perceptions of HA pupils can be negatively biased, influencing the teacher-pupil relationship and the way teachers interact, challenge and support pupils. HA pupils are described as advanced or reaching areas of their learning and development faster compared to other pupils their own age (Victoria State Government, 2019). Mohamed and Elhoweris (2022: 2) states that teachers understanding of HA pupils is based on their 'educational background, training

and philosophy'. However Stronge (2007) and Barbier et al. (2022) both state if teachers have limited knowledge and experience educating HA pupils, this could lead to negative perceptions and misconceptions. Moreschi (2022) believes this can lead to learning experiences that do not challenge pupils or negatively affect the guidance and feedback given to them by the teacher.

Within primary education, many teachers use the collaborative learning approach for pupils learning and development (Web-Williams, 2021). The collaborative approach and use of group work is common practice with primary education, teachers typically place pupils into groups based on their ability so pupils of a similar level are taught together, these can be organised as fixed or mixed ability (Taylor et al., 2020). According to Laine and Tirri (2016) teachers have difficulty trying to meet the individual needs of all pupils including HA pupils. Educational providers and teachers deal with this by using fixed grouping and favour this approach as they believe it can support the teacher and they can deal with differentiation, classroom and behaviour management at ease (Web-Williams, 2021). The fixed grouping strategy involves allocating pupils with similar intellectual ability onto specific tables where they work and sit together within their group; although they are all taught by the same teacher and follow the same curriculum, within these groups they are given different levels of challenge, support and feedback (Kutnick and Blatchford, 2013; Webb-Williams, 2021).

There are debates within academic research relating to fixed and mixed ability grouping and how pupils should be grouped to support their learning (Taylor et al. (2016): Ambreen and Conteh, 2021). Research from Taylor et al. (2016), Gomoran (2002) and Saleh et al. (2007 cited in Ambreen and Conteh, 2021) favour the use of mixed ability group as it is considered an inclusive approach, this enables all children from different abilities to work together and scaffold each other in their learning which can boost their motivation and improve their learning experience. However research from Gubbels et al (2014), Kim (2016) and Honstra et al. (2022) question this as their research shows that HA pupils worked best when they are with pupils of similar ability and like minded individuals; Their findings showed that pupils experience more satisfaction and motivation to learn while being placed in a pull-out classroom with other HA pupils compared to their normal mixed classroom. Although there are points for and against each type of grouping method, it is important to consider the needs of the pupils within the class. According to Inayat and Ali (2020) in order for pupils to develop and grow with their learning depends on the structure

set by the teacher, this requires careful planning and consideration from the teacher to ensure all pupils needs are met within the fixed or mixed group (Taylor et al., 2016).

Group work within the classroom has many benefits and has a vital role in enhancing pupils development and learning (Galton and Hargreaves, 2009). It can boost pupils participation within their learning, it gives them the opportunity to interact, share their knowledge, understanding and experiences with others (Hurst et al., 2013). Through discussion and questioning, pupils can intellectually scaffold and prompt each other, which enables them to discuss the topic from different perspectives and generate new ideas (Baines et al., 2017). This can also support pupils to make connections with previous learning and make sense of the new learning experiences, allowing them to enhance their comprehension, problem solving and critical thinking skills (Hurst et al., 2013). It can also show them that they can reach the same goal through collaboration and interaction, supporting their teamwork skills and encourages them to work together during future learning (Vermette and Kline, 2017). This relates to the co-operative learning theory which highlights how pupils can work together in a group to achieve the same goal, from this they are all able to have a positive academic outcome while maximising their own or others learning (Gillies, 2007).

Group working also relates to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which emphasised the importance of social interaction to children's learning and development (Psaltis and Zapiti, 2014). Vygotsky believed social interactions can shape a child's learning experience and how they develop their knowledge which can help them to enter their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Tuna and Hayden, 2010). Through collaboration, the child would receive support and guidance, which enables them to work within their ZPD, bridging the gap between what they can achieve independently and with support (Haith and Benson, 2009). However Vygotsky's work has been criticised, Liu and Matthews (2005) and Green and Piel (2010) states that Vygotsky's theory does not apply to all social and cultural groups, Vygotsky suggests through social interaction all children will gain the same meaning and experience; However all child have different needs and skills which means they may not develop the same meaning from the interaction. Although this is a possibility, Gelman (2009) sees this as a positive, children may not get the same meaning from the interaction, however they would all develop their own knowledge and perspectives which can support them during future collaboration. All children have different ways of thinking and problem solving which could be used during future collaborative opportunities to help

others think and discuss critically and make new connections, enabling them to enhance their own and others learning (Pollastri et al., 2019).

Reflection and Next steps for Teaching and Learning

Reflective practice has been highlighted as an important aspect for initial teacher education and professional development (Sellars, 2017) and Johns (2013: 3) describes it as 'learning through our everyday experiences'. Johns (2013: 3) describes reflective practice as 'learning through our everyday experiences'. Paterson and Chapman (2013) believe reflection allows teachers to explore and question their current knowledge, helping them to develop an understanding of their actions through current research, practices and theories. Dewey (1933 cited in Lundgren and Poell, 2016) emphasised reflection encourages teachers to think purposefully in a way that is systematic, which raises questions and the need for answers, leading to deeper thinking/reflection and improving professional development.

Teachers have a responsibility to engage in reflection for professional development, improving their understanding of pupil development and education (Geng et al, 2019). This can ensure they provide positive educational experiences which boost pupils motivation and attitude towards learning (Brock, 2015). Calderhand and Gates (2003) stress that without reflection, it limits the ability to engage in deep thinking and learn from experiences, limiting development of new perceptions or improvements in practice. Reflection is something that is also highlighted within the Welsh curriculum's vision for education and in the Teaching Standards used for initial teacher education (Furlong, 2020). It places more responsibility on professional and trainee teachers to engage with reflection, Donaldson (2015: 71) states engaging in reflection will help teachers discover the how, why and what of teaching, aiding them in the development of 'sound pedagogy' and achieving higher levels of professional development and learning.

Reflective practice has been highly recommended within teaching practice and professional development for many years (Loughran, 2002: Brock 2015). In regard to reflection within teacher education, it refers to the early work of Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983) for the basic ideas and understanding (Suphasri and Chinokul, 2021). Dewey (1933) believed that reflection is an active process that enables teachers to make sense of an event that was difficult to understand or explain (Sicora, 2017). Dewey states reflective thinking after an event requires to think about what happened and problem solve

systematically while exploring knowledge and reasons for the outcome, helping to build knowledge and make decisions to support future teaching experiences (Suphasri and Chinokul, 2021). Dewey's work has been criticised as his description of reflection does not mention the use of emotions and thoughts to support decision making for future development (Hebert, 2015). However, Schon (1983) theory builds from Dewey's work and extends the concept of reflective practice by stating that teachers are intuitive individuals who are able to use their thoughts and emotions to 'reflect in action' or 'reflect on action' due to their previous teaching knowledge and experience (Moon, 2013). From this, it enables teachers to use their knowledge and experience to guide their emotions/thoughts, practice and actions during or after a situation has taken place (Bassot, 2016).

The chosen classroom incident enabled me to reflect and critically analyse the incident to broaden the context of the situation. This process of critical reflection has highlighted the importance of understanding the reason for the strategies being used within teaching practice, which has been emphasised by Donaldson (2015). As mentioned, reflective practice within teaching was developed from the work of Dewey (1993) and Schon (1983) as this provided the basis for reflection (Suphasri and Chinokul, 2021). For my own reflection I will be using Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle as I feel this will be the best process to form my own reflection and develop the next steps for teaching practice. Gibbs reflective cycle follows the work of Dewey, because it supports the views of reflecting on experience which leads to new learning (Suphasri and Chinokul, 2021). It also reflects the work of Schon (1983) as the consideration of emotions to support planning of future development, follows Schon's statement of educators being intuitive individuals who's emotions enable them to learn and develop from their experiences (Moon, 2013). Gibbs cycle encourages exploration of an experience through six stages, it begins with a description of the experience before moving onto the evaluation, analysis and action plan while also including how the educator felt throughout (Bassot, 2016).

The observed incident showed an inferencing lesson where the pupils had to create inferences based on a shoe provided by the teacher. The HA girls group received less support, direction and input from the teacher as they visited their table on a few occasions compared to the other groups, the interactions they did receive involved short comments, praise and close-ended questions. However the HA girls group all worked collaboratively together, they all shared the shoe, communicated, made comments, expressed their ideas and questions with each other to help them complete the task. As an observer, I was intrigued when I noticed this and wondered the possible reason for the limited interaction

between teacher and pupil, but I felt positive about how the pupils in the group supported each other which enabled them to complete the activity.

This incident highlighted the importance of a teachers awareness of their pupils needs and ability. This can help them to support and challenge them appropriately, helping pupils reach their full potential and progress to the next stage of learning. This can also help create positive teacher-pupil interactions which will contribute to developing a positive relationship, Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory emphasises the importance of developing positive teacher-pupils bonds as the quality of these bond can influence the pupils development and learning (Beckley 2012). Turner (2011) considers 'get to know each other' sessions a good approach to support teacher-pupil relationships, this enables development of positive and supportive relationships within a positive and safe environment. This can lead to positive interactions and allows the teacher to discover the pupil's academic abilities, aiding them when planning future learning experiences (Turner, 2011: Soan, 2021). The use of group work was a reflection of the collaborative approach which could be potentially used to support and challenge the HA pupils. This highlights the use of group work within the classroom and the benefits to pupils learning and development. The pupils could have been potentially placed together because they are like-minded individuals who have similar ability and as Kim (2016) and Honstra et al (2022) mentioned, placing individuals like this together leads to more motivation and satisfaction with learning. Theories such as Vygotsky's sociocultural (Psaltis and Zapiti, 2014) and the co-operative learning theory (Gillies, 2007) emphasises the importance and benefits of pupils who interact and collaboratively work together can achieve positive meaning and academic outcome from a learning experience. Through collaboration, the pupils would all work together to achieve the same goal and share different perspectives and knowledge; which would encourage them to think critically about the task, enhancing their development and learning experience.

From analysing the incident, I personally feel that it is important to have positive teacher-pupil relationships, this can help to discover pupil's academic capability and provide opportunities for collaborative learning and something I would like to implement more in my future teaching practice. Taking the time and opportunity to provide these elements of 'get to know' sessions and collaborative learning within the classroom can help to provide positive interactions and learning experiences which can challenge and support pupils, benefiting their development and learning.

Conclusion

This assignment required me to reflect on an incident that took place within a classroom environment, the incident was recorded and critically reflected using Tripp's (1993) methodology. The incident raised awareness of teacher-pupils interactions/relationships and collaborative learning within the classroom. Through academic research it highlighted the various viewpoints and arguments in relation to developing positive teacher-pupil interactions/relationships, alongside the use of a collaborative learning approach within the classroom to support pupils learning and development. Reflecting on the incident led to the development of my next steps to aid with my own teaching experience and practice. I concluded that, 'get to know me sessions' and providing opportunities for collaborative learning would be something I would implement in future teaching practice, this would help me to provide learning opportunities that challenge pupils appropriately, allowing them to progress and reach their full potential with their learning and development.

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