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

Introduction

This assignment will critically evaluate and reflect on how that LSA's (Learning Support assistants) can aid and help learners with ALN (Additional Learning Needs) and how it can improve their confidence to progress them through school years.

The Welsh Government (2021) defines a child with ALN as someone who has 'significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age'. It is important to note that not all Learning needs are visible and many of them effect children in different ways. Lacey (2001) describes the LSA's role, saying 'LSAs work in the classroom alongside teachers and pupils. They support individual pupils with ALN enabling them to be educated with their more able peers,

The link and relationships between LSA's and children with ALN is seen as essential in mainstream schools in today's education, which provides the foundations for this assignment.

The aim of this assignment is to evaluate an observation that has taken place of a critical incident that has happened in the classroom setting using Tripp's (1993) critical incident methodology.

Tripp (1993) defines a critical incident as "an interpretation of the significance of an event" A critical incident is determined on not the scale of the incident, but how one person judges a certain situation and how they think this has affected them or made them ponder about something they have observed.

This assignment will focus on reflective practice as a teacher through the observation of the chosen critical incident, comparing it to various teaching and learning methods throughout the assignment and theories of a number of authors on relevant literature to focus on the chosen topic for the assignment, while also concluding on the next learning steps.

Literature Review

ALN is as relevant as ever and is a current topic. Due to a large number of children who have been diagnosed with ALN and the considerably resources required to assist these children in their learning progression. The Welsh Government (2022) say in their February 2022 census that There were 74,661 pupils with additional learning or special educational needs in maintained schools (15.8% of all pupils) by February 2022.

In this critical incident observed, the child with ALN is struggling to answer a question asked of him and his confidence is low, the LSA however guides him and helps him to successfully answer the question, this happened several times in the observation, showing the sheer importance that LSA plays in this child's school life.

LSA's play a huge part in the development and all-round experience of these children in classrooms with ALN, backed up by Breyer & Klicpera (2023) suggesting 'learning and support assistants (LSAs) have been found to be a key element in enhancing participation and learning for all students in inclusive schools.' In this observation the LSA was just focusing all their attention solely for the one child, demonstrating the important role they are playing in helping the student develop.

With the teacher and most likely the child's parents wanting the students learning to be as normal and like the rest of the class as possible, the LSA is a key factor in making this happen. With McConkey and Abbott (2011) backing this up, suggesting 'The presence of LSAs' in classrooms is thought by many parents and teachers to be a critical factor for successful inclusion'.

Further supported by Haycock and Smith (2011) who suggests 'regularly liaising with LSAs, planning lessons in advance with them and the prior knowledge LSAs had of pupils' needs were among the other benefits LSAs brought to the teaching'. In this instance, with the LSA focusing on the single child, they will know a lot about them and how best they learn, how to engage them fully and how to help them to reach the next progression step. Further back up by Gray et al. (2007) who say, 'evidence suggests that LSAs have a greater impact on individual rather than group performance'.

However, there are sometimes concerns that LSA's are not always appropriately trained in order to deal with the learners needs, meaning they cannot fully comprehend all the problems that the learner may encounter. Blatchford et al. (2004) suggests that there is 'little evidence that the presence of teaching assistants or any characteristic of teaching assistants such as training ... had a measurable effect on pupil attainment. 'this is further supported by Butt and Lance (2005) recently suggesting 'to allow LSA to operate most effectively there must be 'more involvement of teaching assistants in ... planning; and more training for [them] in their expanding roles'.

A worry of the LSA's involvement with the learner with ALN, is that they could become solely dependent and attached to the LSA, this can be linked to Bowlby (1984) and his views on attachment theory.

John Bowlby's attachment theory is the belief that people are born ready to make connections with others and that when we enter the world, we are biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help us to survive. In this case, the child is spending around 7 hours a day for 5 days of the week, meaning they could see the LSA as their primary caregiver outside of home, meaning they can become extremely dependable on them.

However, Conboy (2021) suggests In a school environment, TAs may act as this secure base to help a child make sense of their learning environment while concurrently meeting the emotional and physical needs of the child.

With this the child, they may become so reliant on the LSA that they may stop thinking fully and trying to answer questions for their self as they may think that the LSA is going to give them the answer or solve the problem for them, which is no good for the student and their future development. Blatchford et al. (2009) suggested that 'there was a negative impact on the academic progress of pupils receiving most support from teaching assistants.'

Lorenz (2013) further backs this up suggesting 'Assigning one LSA to one pupil, as happens in many statements of SEN, is largely criticised. The close relationship that can be built up between the child and adult can be counterproductive, especially if that adult is absent or leaves thereby upsetting the child'

However, from the observation it seems that LSA is invaluable to this student McConkey and Abbott (2011) suggest the role LSA's play are essential in helping classes and certain students' development 'They assist teachers and often provide individual support for pupils and attend to their particular physical, social as well as educational needs.'

Case Study

This section will follow BERA (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research which stands for British Educational Research Association, and will be keeping the learner, the school and any teachers/LSA's completely anonymous. For the sake of this assignment, the student with ALN will be known as student/learner and the Learning Support Assistant will be referred to as an LSA.

The observation was of a year 4 class from a school in the Swansea area. The classroom included around 20 students all mixed gender and mixed ability. The classroom also included one LSA who was sat with the child in focus, the child with ALN.

There was no previous knowledge of this child and their learning abilities, but from the critical observation it was ascertainable from the learner's demeanour, body language and initial behaviour in the lesson and the fact that the LSA was solely helping and putting their focus on guiding them, as well as the child's hesitation to participate, that they were recognised as having additional learning needs. See appendix 1 for observation on Critical Incident.

The child in focus was chosen for this observation due to them catching the attention straight away, with the learner's body language looking anxious and nervous while looking hesitant to wanting to answer any questions voluntarily. This was exhibited when the teacher wanted to engage the student, maybe recognising that they were not involving their self with the task and asked them a question, wanting them to engage with the rest of the class, but it seemed the child struggled to get involved, looking shy and nervous of their ability to answer the question alone, almost freezing under the pressure of the question being asked of them. The observation also showed the LSA who was sat directly with the learner, obviously aware of the learner's difficulty and lack of confidence.

This then changed when the LSA stepped in. Under the guidance of the LSA, which involved reassurance and encouragement the child seemed to become empowered, and their confidence level seemed to improve greatly. So, the learner then found themselves in a completely different scenario to before the LSA stepped in and was successfully able to engage themselves and answer the question. The teacher recognised the effort put in from the student with ALN and gave a form of positive reinforcement in the way of praise and encouragement on the answer and the engagement from the student. This in its own can be seen as a confident boost for the child with ALN. With this encouragement and praise from the teacher and the LSA as well, the learner realises they can actively participate in class tasks, and this will promote a newfound confidence in their abilities for future lessons.

With ALN being so common in schools, I thought this was a pertinent topic to explore for my critical incident. According to Snap Cymru (2023) Approximately one in five learners in Wales have Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Highlighting how recognised it has now become in today's learning society. This could be for reasons such as, it now being widely identified and investigated more, with teachers and school inspectors and school boards being better equipped to helping children with ALN.

In recent years, the Welsh Government has put a lot of focus and time into helping improve children with ALN. With the Welsh Government (2021), introducing the 'ALN Code for Wales' in September of 2021. They described this newly introduced code as something 'to ensure

children and young people aged 0 to 25 can access additional support to meet their needs that is properly planned for and protected, with learners at the heart of the process.

With the implementation of this new code, it showed the effort and thought that Wales are putting into making sure children with ALN aren't at a disadvantage in comparison to other students and they get the same opportunities as all students who don't have ALN.

The importance of LSA's in the progression and development of children with ALN, cannot be overlooked, With Mistry, et al (2004) suggesting how important LSA's are seemed to be perceived in supporting children's learning. They are constantly playing a role in the development of children, with an LSA usually prominent in a majority of classes across primary school years, with their being a much higher demand yearly for these Learning Support Assistants, it makes it clear that they are helping in the progression of students. This is further backed up by Veck (2009) highlighting that 'the number of learning support assistants are continuing to rise yearly'.

In this case the child with ALN, will want to feel and be seen as the same as all of their peers in his class, LSA's will play a big part in making sure the student is getting the best attention and extra help that they can, in an attempt to try to ensure this is the case. Moran and Abbott (2002) further supports this, 'the importance of their support for both teachers and pupils are now widely recognised'.

Teaching and Learning methods.

The observation of this classroom based critical incident gives the opportunity to reflect on the teaching methods and the next steps that could have been applied within the lessons of the Critical Incident to help the child with ALN. Reflection is a key aspect for teachers in their everyday practice and gives teachers a chance to recognise what they have succeeded in the lesson and what they feel like they could improve on. This is a widely recognised process for teachers and is essential for the development of themselves and of students.

Boud, Keogh and Walker, (1985) suggest 'by engaging in reflection, teachers can deal with the uncertainties and unexpected situations in the classroom and school because reflection encourages them to critically appraise themselves, current beliefs and attitudes and their relationships with the students and others in the school'. Osterman (1990) highlights the

importance of reflection 'Teachers can develop new perspectives, new ways of looking at their own actions, and a new awareness or understanding of their own behaviours'.

Following on from discussions and points made in previous sections about the child, we know information and a description of the problems the child may face, one solution to this could be the introduction of IDP'S. IDP'S also known as Individual development plans.

Estyn (2018) report describes IDP as 'statutory plans for learners with ALN which contain a description of the person's ALN, a description of the alternative learning provision (ALP) which the learner's learning difficulty or disability calls for and anything else required of authorised by or under Part 2 of the ALN Act. During the phased implementation period of the new ALN act, some learners may still have a statement of special educational needs (SEN).

Although it is known that it would be statutory for and IDP to be in place for this child, from the observation and the brief knowledge, there is no way for us to tell and therefore the effects of having an IDP in place for the child will be discussed. IDP's are a reviewal of the child and not only their progress but also describes the ALN, it then plans the following actions and appropriate steps to help them with their progression. The main strength of the introduction of the IDP is that it is specifically tailored to the individual child, this will help them grow and set out specific pathways for helping their development as a student and as a human being, while also finding the best way to help find solutions with the specific ALN. Backed up Weishaar (2010) who suggests 'IDPs focus on student strengths and abilities, rather than weaknesses and disabilities'.

Whilst the IDP is being specific, you could hit problems because you could be restricting the child's potential and not letting them hit the heights that the child could be capable of. It can also cause separation from the rest of the class for the child with ALN, with Lingard, Mills and Hayes (2000) who suggests 'IDP'S can be seen as a hinderance to full inclusion,' which is the opposite of what is wanted for the child with ALN.

The aim is for the child to be included in everything in class, with the introduction of inclusivity as a teaching method, a key focus. With Wales undergoing a recent new curriculum reform in the recent years, inclusivity has been a key aspect to improve on with Knight et al (2022) highlighting this 'Inclusive education seeks to value diversity as part of a common humanity and to accommodate differences in learning within regular classrooms.

The observation portrayed good inclusion for the child with ALN, who was in with the rest of the class and showed that. The teacher has made an effort in making sure the child is learning the same as everyone else in the class. This is important and cannot be under appreciated, this will give the child with ALN a sense of belonging. With teacher seen to play a key role in the enjoyment and engagement of the inclusive classroom. Backed up by Darling-Hammond et al (2019) who say 'Students who experience learning difficulties have been found to benefit more from positive relationships with their teachers'.

However, there can be problems with this new reform and in the inclusion of all students, with some teachers becoming overwhelmed and not being able to cope with the mixed abilities in the class, seeing this as too much of a challenge down the sheer difference in learning capabilities. Argued by Florian & Graham (2014) 'Exclusionary practices, however, arise from teachers lacking confidence as practitioners and feeling that they are not sufficiently competent to teach everyone in their class. This contributes to the variability that is seen in inclusive practices, whereby some classrooms and schools are more inclusive than others.

This is where the LSA can be seen to play a key role in helping make sure the child with ALN is getting the same treatment as the rest of the classroom, with the use of their support and extra guidance in helping the child with ALN is learning at a speed which is good for them but also in keeping in line with the rest of the class. Supported by Giangreco et al. (1998) 'The presence of LSAs' in classrooms is thought by many parents and teachers to be a critical factor for successful inclusion'

Finally, is the use of a Person-Centred approach. A person-centred approach focuses 'on the views of the child...their aspirations, enhancing what's working, what's changing and what could be better' The Welsh Government (2015)

This is seen as an important teaching method, because often the things that are important to teachers aren't as important to the learners, and what the teachers think the children must learn is of the greatest importance. Whereas using a person-centred approach, gives the learner a voice and finds out what is important to them and what they want to learn.

The Welsh Government (2021) succinctly, as when working with a learner with ALN, you need to find out what is important to the learner as well as what is important for the learner. This is finding the balance which is key to a person-centred approach and helping the child with ALN in the most suitable way as possible.

Although there is a number of other effective teaching and learning methods that could help the child's learning, such as visual aids, positive reinforcement, personalised lesson plans as well as many others, the learning methods covered are seen to be of great importance to helping the child with ALN needs.

Discussion

As a teacher, from the critical observation I have been able to identify certain methods used by the teacher and also the LSA in dealing with the class and specifically the child with ALN, who was the main focus on in this Critical incident.

The early assessment of the child is necessary, so I can recognise and put in place the correct steps carrying into my first placement. This would Make similar children under my tuition feel comfortable, included and not isolated, while also pushing/challenging the children with ALN on my placement to learn to a high a level that is attainable for them.

From my observations and research into relevant literature and visitation of teaching and learning methods, I believe the best tools to do this would be through a self-centre approach and inclusion. This is where the child would have their personal and learning needs at a equal balance to help progress the child through the school years as effectively as possible.

For my own pedagogical choices, I believe sitting down and collaborating with children who have ALN and support them to set targets and goals that both the student and teacher feel are attainable would be of high focus. This can be in the form of SMART model, standing for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Manageable. With the SEND Code of practice (2015) describing SMART targets as 'an outcome can be defined as the benefit or difference made to an individual as a result of an intervention. It should be personal and not expressed from a service perspective; it should be something that those involved have control and influence over, and while it does not always have to be formal or accredited, it should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (**SMART**)'

Also, the principle of 'supporting learners to take responsibility for their own learning' would be of high interest, this would be to promote inclusion so children with ALN are learning independence and learning in a similar way to the rest of the class and to help to prevent over reliance on LSA's prompting them to participate and giving them to much guidance.

From literature, it seems there has been a bit of a theme where LSA's can have both a positive impact as mentioned by McConkey and Abbott (2011), Grey et al. (2007) and Haycock and Smith (2009) as well as negative impact on learners, namely from literature from people including Lorenz (1998), Blatchford et al (2009) and Conboy (2021). The positives mention helping improve confidence, inclusion and all-round better classroom experience for the child with ALN. Whereas the negatives underpin the effect where ALN students become too attached and reliant on the guidance given by the LSA'S.

In this circumstance, I believe the positives of the LSA's interaction with the child with ALN outweighed that of the negative. While the child looked for reassurance from the LSA, which displayed a lack of confidence and self-belief, the LSA with a small amount of encouragement and extra guidance and without disempowering the child was able to provide them with enough confidence and positive reinforcement to successfully motivate the learner to answer the question and interact with the rest of the class.

Conclusion

With this and the observation of the critical incident, demonstration of the pivotal role the LSA played, providing personalised one to one support and extra encouragement, this enabling the student to overcome their lack of confidence and therefore removing some self-doubt from the child and their belief on their own ability. To counteract from any potential negative effects or impacts that the LSA may have on learners, it would be essential to address challenges through proper and regular training to compliment the learner with ALN needs. By employing the teaching and learning method suggested of implementing IDP, Inclusion and a self-centred approach as well as regular positive reinforcement and regular reflection. I believe the LSA can continue to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment for the student that empowers them when struggling with confidence to believe in themselves and their ability's. Eventually encouraging a more independent student that is confident, able and eager to progress their learning ability to the highest if the learner's ability.

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Appendix

Date and time, year group: Y4 – St. Thomas, Swansea Mixed ability
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context The observation was to find a Critical Incident in a year 4 class context. The subject was Language, Literacy and Communication with learning intention being to make inferences.
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident(the more detail the better to refer to in your later work) A young student who has a LSA sat with him got asked a question by the teacher, they started answering and then stopped halfway through and looked at his LSA for confirmation if he was answering okay and he needed her to nod to say to carry on. He looked confused and was struggling until the LSA used guidance and her help and knowledge of the student to help him answer the question successfully. His confidence could be low, and he could struggle with independence. ALN
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be” under the hood” in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? I feel like the ALN route with the child struggling with confidence is a good idea to explore. This is due to LSA playing such a big role in school development and in children with ALN they play a big role in helping them through school life. There is lots of literature to explore on this and is a current topic.
Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here) The classroom size is of around 20 students, there is about 6 people on the table with the child in focus for the CI. The distractions and lack of confidence may come from students on his table, the LSA is there to help the child with guidance.