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

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Introduction

Drawing on an observation of a critical incident in a classroom setting this essay seeks to evaluate this observation as part of a reflective practise in order to develop one's own professional judgement and teaching methods. Using Tripp's (2011) critical incident methodology, this essay aims to explore below the surface of what happens during a critical incident to look at *why* and *what* it means. According to Tripp (2011), a critical incident is a personal interpretation of an event, based on one's judgement at that time. Incidents may appear 'typical' or 'mundane' at the time, but through analysis are rendered critical (Tripp, 2011). This essay seeks to use Tripp's (2011) critical incident methodology to analyse the underlying concepts of the observation to enlighten future practise. Using this method of reflective practise will allow this essay to connect with research in a focussed way that can ultimately be adopted in a classroom setting.

Zwozdiak-Myers (2012) argues that reflective practise is a vital and core component of professional development, empowering teachers to understand how to translate pedagogical knowledge into their own practice. The phenomenon of reflective practise is complex and Loughran (2002) suggests that the nature of the reflection itself can be enhanced through teacher training programmes in order to become a meaningful element of learning. Similarly, Tripp (2011) discusses how our reflections are influenced by our existing world view, values and culture. This highlights the complex nature of reflective practise and how it is important to have a professional awareness when observing incidents, as a critical incident is produced by the way in which we look at the situation (Tripp, 2011).

This assignment will firstly reflect on current literature, identifying relevant theories in relation to the critical incident with reflection on potential gaps in the existing research. The observed incident will be outlined for a discussion and analysis of how it can be used to enhance and improve my own future professional practise. The critical incident took place in a classroom at the beginning of the day. The teacher instructed the class to get ready for a 5-minute guided meditation exercise, which the class then engaged in. The themes and theories this essay will explore centre around ideas of emotional literacy, well-being, promoting resilience and a humanistic approach to education.

Literature Review

This literature review will be structured thematically and will explore research that both supports and causes debate in this essay. Whilst highlighting gaps in the literature, the next section of this assignment seeks to examine research surrounding resilience, mindset and meditation in schools. Bound up in this research are learning theories such as the humanistic approach and 'flow theory'. Whilst exploring research surrounding the idea of meditation in schools, this literature also seeks to critically reflect on this approach and make suggestions of alternative research in the field that will broaden this essays outlook on the topic.

Meditation in schools

The charity *Mindfulness in Schools Project* (MiSP), an established provider of mindfulness training in schools, believes that mindfulness in schools not only helps young people manage difficulties, but allows them to flourish (MiSP.org.uk, 2023). Over the last decade, the amount of research and evidence supporting the benefits of mindfulness in schools has grown exponentially. The observed incident is a mindfulness exercise that is a training in awareness and an activity aimed to focus the mind in order to be 'present' and fully engaged. Yerbury (2021) supports the idea and looks at the effectiveness of stillness meditation during a 10-week study. The study suggests that the meditation exercises during school time promoted helpful emotions and behaviours whilst helping children to unwind from their lunch break. This suggests that it could potentially work as a transition tool to be used at certain points in the day to help students transition from leisure to study time. Yerbury (2021) strongly believed that meditation is a useful strategy that can be implemented in schools to build children's skills in resilience and coping strategies. Felver et al (2013) also supports the idea that meditation in schools contributes to increased engagement and academic behaviour.

Although there is lots of positive evidence surrounding meditation in schools Owen et al (2020) argues that before we begin encouraging children to practise meditation, it must stem from the teachers first. After a six-week mindfulness training program, a study showed an increase in educators job satisfaction, resilience, and wellbeing (Owen et al, 2020). The study revealed positive perceptions and the idea that educators felt it would enhance their ability to implement the practise in schools (Owen et al, 2020). This suggests that there is a need to firstly ensure that the educators themselves are practising mindfulness, before introducing it to the students. Terjestam et al (2011) supports this idea and argues that the way meditation is introduced and delivered by teachers in schools is vital to its success. This is linked to the observed incident which witnessed the teacher also engaging in the meditation activity.

'The Four Purposes'

According to the 'Mind over Matter' report, stress and anxiety levels amongst pupils are increasing (Welsh Government, 2018). The report argues that an increased level of resilience and early intervention work is paramount, highlighting that the new reform of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) will give an opportunity for well-being to become embedded in our future generations lives (Welsh Government, 2018). The observed incident can be linked to learners building emotional and mental well-being by developing strategies to foster this idea of resilience (Donaldson, 2015). The 'Mind over Matter' report supports this idea of encompassing healthy coping strategies into school life, which is linked to Maslow's hierarchy and the concept that attainment cannot be achieved without well-being (Welsh Government, 2018). Health and Wellbeing, one of the six areas of learning and experience, is designed to allow pupils to develop their own strategies that they can use to regulate their emotions and improve mental health (Welsh Government, 2020). This is linked to the observed critical incident and how perhaps the purpose of the guided meditation observed was to give learners a technique and strategy to cope at the face of adversity, which will be addressed later on in the essay.

Resilience

Banerjee et al (2016) suggests that the idea of 'resilience' is becoming increasingly paramount within the fields of education and mental health. Similarly Cahil et al (2014) argue that the concept of resilience is bound up in notions of coping and 'bouncing back'. There are many strategies that schools adopt in order to strengthen resilience and this essay will focus on meditation in schools as an approach to boost resilience and embed well-being in the curriculum. However, Naglieri et al (2012) explores the difficulties in measuring resilience and suggests that the application of resilience-based strategies can only be possible once the term is measured in a valid and reliable way. Therefore, this essay will consider the complexities of striving to achieve resilience amongst learners, but also having a reliable and fair way in which to measure it.

Mindset

Running alongside the idea of resilience is the concept of mindset and more specifically the idea of a 'growth mindset', coined by Dweck (2016). Dweck (2016) suggests that it is not solely talent and ability that brings success but the way in which we approach the situation with either a fixed or growth mindset. This is linked to the observed incident and the purpose of 5-minute guided meditation. The observed incident could be seen to support Dweck's (2016) idea of a growth mindset whilst preparing children to be ready to learn. It could be argued that the guided meditation is a tool or strategy that fosters a growth mindset and a technique that learners can use in order to engage fully in learning. Yeager and Dweck (2016) look at the implications of students mindsets on their resilience in the school setting. It was found in the study that those with a more positive mindset that believed that their academic abilities could be improved showed greater achievement when faced with challenging school transitions (Yeager and Dweck, 2012). This highlights the intrinsically linked concepts of mindset and resilience in schools and a possible gap in the literature whereby this is linked to meditation in the school setting. Roeser and Peck (2009) also support this idea of contemplative education and practises that ignite awareness in

students personal growth and a sense of compassion for oneself. Whilst Maslow's (1943) theory is highly regarded and supported by many scholars, in this setting it appears that the pyramid is missing one very important component, a healthy mind. At the base of Maslow's pyramid are the basic survival needs that the body requires, however this essay argues that a healthy mind has the same importance as a healthy body and should therefore be at the base of the pyramid alongside the body, or intertwined throughout the whole pyramid. Rojas et al (2023) suggest a need for a strategy that does not follow Maslow's sequential satisfaction and instead argues for an integrated view of human beings needs. This is similar to the new reform for the Welsh Curriculum, whereby well-being and emotional needs are aimed to be intertwined and embedded throughout the curriculum, rather than as a standalone entity.

A state of 'flow'

In line with the idea of mindset is the concept of 'flow' and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who coined the idea of the 'flow theory'. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that optimal learning happens when learners are fully 'present', engaged in the activity and in a state of 'flow'. This idea is directly linked to the observed incident and the purpose behind the activity, as a method allowing the learners to take control of the mind and their inner experience to allow learning to occur. Allingham (2020) supports this and argues that without 'flow' we are missing a critical piece of the pedagogical jigsaw. Maria Montessori's philosophy of education also advocated the importance of having a sustained focus and a consciousness of self and others (Montessori, 1912). However, due consideration must be given to alternative strategies that also help focus the mind and potentially have the same desired outcome as the guided meditation. For example, Brown (2014) in her book '*The Doodle Revolution'* talks about the power of doodling and the importance and value of visual thinking as a tool to awaken the mind. Tadayon and Afhami's (2016) experiment that sought to assess the effect of doodling on the learning performance of high school students in Tehran concluded that those that were encouraged to doodle, if they felt like doing so, significantly outperformed the group that did not doodle. There is lots of evidence in the literature to suggest that doodling has a positive effect on recalling information, which suggests that doodling creates a focussed learning environment. Therefore, as well as looking at meditation as a practise to increase levels of 'flow' amongst learners, this essay will also explore alternative ways of doing this.

Case study

Overview

The observed incident took place at in a classroom setting, which appeared to be at the beginning of the day. To put the incident into context, the 25 pupils were all sat at their desks when the teacher projected a guided meditation video onto the board, with sound. The learners were instructed to sit comfortably and were given the option to keep their eyes either open or closed. It was evident that this exercise was familiar to the learners, whilst they followed the teacher's instructions. During the five-minute meditation the teacher also appeared to be taking part in the guided meditation. Towards the end of the five minutes approximately half of the class seemed disengaged, with the other half of the class appearing to be 'in the zone'. This observed incident is supported by a whole body of literature which supports mindfulness in education and the idea that mindfulness has the potential to improve attention and psychological well-being (MiSP.org.uk 2023).

The Teacher

During the guided meditation, the teacher also appeared to be taking part in the exercise. This idea of the teacher also be engaged in this exercise is supported by Owen et al (2020) who highlights the importance of mindfulness in education stemming from the teacher. Instead of closing her eyes, the teacher instead bowed her head towards the table, which enabled the teacher to remain in control and aware of what was happening in the classroom. However, one could question here how fully engaged and committed to the meditation could the teacher be, if still being responsible for managing the class behaviour.

The Students

When instructed to take part in the guided meditation exercise the students did not appear phased by the instruction and it appeared to be an activity the students were used to participating in. Approximately 70 percent of the class put their heads on the table, whilst 20 percent visibly closed their eyes, leaving 10 percent of students maintain a soft focus on the wall in front of them. Buddhist monk and co-founder of the well-known app '*Headspace*', Andy Puddicombe, believes in the importance of sitting upright and maintaining a soft focus before closing the eyes, during guided meditations (Puddicombe, 2012). This leads us on to question the effectiveness of the observed incident if most of the learners are sitting with their heads placed on the desk. During the observed incident a high percentage of the class were engaged in the activity and appeared to be following the instructions of the video of breathing in and out.

Towards the end of the exercise approximately half of the class were engaged in the activity, with the other half of learners who were distracted and seemingly not 'in the zone'. These learners were smiling at each other and looking around the room. These learners were in one area of the classroom and as a result were not significantly impacting the learners who were engaged in the activity. Perhaps they were sitting together for this

purpose in order to not distract others. However, one could argue that did their distractions feed off one another and perhaps if they were sat amongst the students that were engaged, it would have created a different outcome.

Next teaching steps: reflection and evaluation

Philosophy of education and pedagogical choices

Inspired by the critical incident and relevant literature, my philosophy of education centres around a humanistic approach to education, whereby well-being is at the heart and embedded in the school make-up. Whilst my philosophy of education is still developing, throughout this reflective process I have aligned my own values with teaching practises and believe that, similar to that of Rodgers (1957), the development of the child as a 'whole' is paramount. The ability to be aware of one's emotions is key to progressing in a learning environment and having a growth mindset. I will choose not to force this into individual lessons, but instead intwine and embed it in everything that I do.

Well-being, resilience and the 'four purposes'

In response to the array of evidence to suggest that mindfulness-based activities in schools, such as meditation, is an excellent way to build on young people's resilience and coping strategies, I will adopt the practise of engaging learners in guided meditation as a classroom activity. Yerbury (2021) looked at the effectiveness of stillness meditation in schools and argued that it is an important strategy that can be implemented in schools to build children's skills in resilience and coping. I will firstly seek to adopt the practise during morning form time, before moving on to utilising the practise in my subject classes. In contrast, Hafenbrack et al (2022) uncovers an unusual side of meditation which highlights how participants engaging in a 10-minute daily meditation were found to have reduced levels of guilt and used meditation as a default way of reacting to stress whereby participants used meditation to unintentionally avoid things that they would be better off facing directly. Therefore, although there is much evidence to suggest the positive effects of meditation in increasing levels of resilience, it is important to note the possibilities which suggest meditation as an easy escape route, rather than a tool to face challenges directly.

Growth mind-set, state of 'flow' and improving academic achievement

I intend to use meditation and mindfulness techniques as a dual method to achieve both well-being and academic excellence simultaneously. Orosz (2020) study used mindfulness as a way to manage negative thoughts and cope with setbacks. Therefore, I intend to use mindfulness techniques, such as meditation, to inspire a 'growth mindset' that is free from negative thoughts and beliefs. This in turn then should foster a positive learning environment whereby learners can fall into a 'state of flow' which is highlighted by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as being a key construct for optimal learning to occur. I will utilise meditation as a tool to motivate and create agency in my learners. In order to create a supportive environment whereby learners have a positive attitude towards learning, I aim to use Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory whereby teachers support autonomous motivation through fostering notion of competence and autonomy in their learners. One could argue that this was observed in the critical incident whereby the

teacher gave autonomy to the class and allowed them the 5-minute meditation to spend the time meditating but did not reprimand them if they disobeyed. I will also follow the same strategy whereby I will not force the learners to take part in the activity, but instead promote the activity by striving for autonomous learners.

Reflecting on the incident and reading relevant literature has inspired me to think about when I will apply mindfulness techniques, how often and for what duration. Huppert and Johnson (2010) look at the correlation between length of time in practise and levels of well-being. A positive correlation was found, whereby the greater amount of time spent meditating, the increased levels of well-being were found. This is a potential limitation to the method as it is not feasible in schools to spend a large proportion of time meditating. For example, in the observed incident just five minutes was spent on the activity. Therefore, the time spent meditating has to be respected and cherished and practised effectively. I intend to overcome the idea that although evidence suggests the more time meditating the better, Puddicombe (2012) believes that every moment counts and just the smallest amount of meditation can be beneficial.

I will implement a seating plan that aims to merge the pupils that are disengaged with pupils who actively participate in the mediation. Mckeown et al (2016) believes that understanding class dynamics and relationships is becoming increasingly important. Therefore, after observing my classes, I will make informed decisions, based on the class dynamic in order to draw out a seating plan aimed at minimising disruption and making effective use of any time spent meditating.

Yerbury (2021) found that the teachers in the study felt that meditation after lunch break helped with allowing the children to unwind from the busy playground environment. As a result, I intend to use guided meditation practises as a transition tool. For example, after both break and lunch time, I will use my informed judgement to decide if a guided meditation would be useful or appropriate to allow the children to unwind from their break.

Teachers engaging in the practise of meditation

Kidger et al (2010) highlights the importance of the teacher embracing meditation before introducing it to students. This research combined with the observed incident has inspired me to also engage in the meditation practise to familiarise myself before introducing it to learners. Similar to the teacher in the observed incident I will also engage in the activity whilst encouraging the students to participate in the practise. Although I questioned how the teacher can be fully engaged in the meditation if they are also managing the class, Puddicombe (2012) suggests that the nature of the practise often encourages you to be aware of your surroundings. Therefore, I will be able to subconsciously react to any classroom behaviour issues whilst meditating with my eyes open.

Whole-school approach

A limitation of mindfulness strategies, highlighted by Hudson et al (2020), is that they only prove to be most effective when delivered as a whole-school approach. In their study across five UK secondary schools, it was found that school leadership, early intervention and a

clear whole-school ethos were key constructs in promoting well-being and resilience building. Therefore, in order to address this limitation, I aim to collaborate with colleagues and network in schools in order to discover if meditation is used as a strategy. If meditation is not used in the school I aim to introduce the strategy, with reference to literature, in order to spark innovation and thought provoking ideas. Whilst I believe that the guided meditation witnessed in the observed incident succeeded in created a calm environment and appeared to set the learners up well for the day, I recognise that there are many mindfulness techniques that can be adopted, but firstly it needs to be bound up in a whole school approach. Welsh Government (2021) supports this and highlights the importance of developing a consistent whole-school approach to building positive well-being.

Cynefin

Another important strand of the guided meditation and a reason to bring it into my teaching practise, is to foster a sense of Cynefin. As emphasised in the new reform for the Welsh Curriculum, the learning process hopes to support learners in exploring their own Cynefin (Welsh Government, 2021). Meditation could be a tool to foster a sense of Cynefin in learners that struggle to feel a sense of belonging in Wales. The new reform of the Welsh curriculum promotes 'Cynefin' as bound up in notions of culture, language, and history through the idea of putting meaning into a place. In contrast, Massey's (1994) widely cited 'A global sense of place' makes a plea for a new conceptualisation of 'place' and challenges the idea of place as solely rooted into one place of meaning. Massey (1994) argues instead for a fluid and hybrid sense of place, whereby place is the product of interconnecting flows that are 'routes' rather than 'roots'. In response to Massey's (1994 'sense of place' I think it is important to recognise, in our connected and ever-changing world, that many learners will not find their Cynefin through their 'roots', but instead through a sense of togetherness, which mindfulness and meditation can instil. MacQaurrie et al (2021) supports this and found in their study, on mindfulness meditation in the classroom, that participants often reported how mindfulness meditation fostered a sense of togetherness and connection in the classroom. As well as creating a collaborative learning environment, this study found that the participants felt meditation mindfulness allowed them to feel "more equal and less intimidated" (MacQaurrie et al, 2021, pp.267). Therefore, in response to evidence that meditation in the classroom can lead to a feeling of 'togetherness', I intend to adopt meditation practise in the classroom as not only a tool to foster resilience, but to also promote cynefin, allowing students to find their own sense of belonging without it having to be rooted into one place.

Alternative strategies

Being aware that meditation is just one technique used in mindfulness and that there are other approaches that can also be adopted, is vital. For example, Andrade (2010) suggests that 'doodling' whilst working has the potential to be beneficial. The study found that the 'doodling' group had a better performance and recalled more information on a memory test than the control group that did not doodle (Andrade, 2010). Therefore, I will not limit my mindfulness strategies to solely guided meditations, but also look at alternative strategies such as encouraging the class to 'doodle' during certain tasks. There has also been research by Wilson et al (2016) that suggests that ten-minute activity breaks outside the classroom

positively influences cognitive attention and behaviour. Therefore, whilst I have focussed a lot of my research on meditation practises in the classroom, I will seek to explore alternative strategies that also work towards the same goal.

Student teacher agency

Although as a student teacher I may not have as much agency, I believe that we are still agents for change and collaborating with other teachers in the school, attending INSET days, meetings and workshops will allow me to communicate my ideas and impart my knowledge that I have discovered during this assignment. Earl et al (2023) strongly believed that more emphasis needs to be placed on student teacher agency in educational settings to build a teacher's all-round abilities. Scott (2023) supports this and highlights the importance of student agency in the classroom and feelings of autonomy. Therefore, whilst respecting boundaries and maintaining professionalism, I intend to develop my sense of agency as a teacher by the little changes I can make within my power, such as imparting knowledge and fostering a sense of resilience and motivation in learners through practising meditation and mindfulness strategies, where appropriate.

Conclusion

To conclude, the importance of promoting emotional health and wellbeing in schools today has never been more paramount. Using Tripp's (2011) methodology, this essay has used reflective practise to contextualise the observed incident whilst engaging in relevant literature, in order to evaluate and discuss future teaching methods. As a way of promoting positive well-being in learners I will use guided meditation, as seen in the observation, as a mechanism to encourage learners to stay focussed, foster a growth mindset, increase resilience and create a sense of Cynefin.

I aim to nurture children to become less anxious, more self-aware and confident individuals. I believe that fostering resilience amongst learners is paramount to learners becoming well-rounded individuals and in order to achieve this I will use strategies such as the guided meditation as supported by scholars such as Yerbury (2008) and Hudson et al (2020). I will not use meditation as an outcome based or summative activity, but a fluid process that is ongoing. Applying mindfulness and meditation practises in primary settings could also be given future thought, as a way of ensuring early intervention.

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