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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 or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

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Introduction

The critical evaluation will explore the role of a critical reflection and will discuss the importance of professional development within the teaching profession. Reflective models that are used, along with how it is important for practitioners to reflect on their practice will be discussed. Following this, a critical incident that was observed will be identified and discussed in alignment with the BERA guidelines of anonymity. Alongside this section, a link to the Donaldson Four Key Purposes will be outlined. The researcher will delve into a variety of research that will support their critical analysis of the incident, which will be discussed in the Literature Review. The reflection on the critical incident and the potential next teaching and learning steps for professional development will be discussed following the review of the literature. Concluding will be a summary of what has been discussed throughout along with the researchers' main findings.

A critical incident is a significant event that takes place that makes you stop and think, the interpretation of the incident is what causes it to be a critical incident (Tripp, 2012). It provides an opportunity for the practitioner to question what happened and why it happened through analysis of research (Harrison & Lee, 2011). According to Tripp (2012), critical incidents enable reflective thinking of practice as it allows you to think about what happened during the significant event and what caused it to happen. They are often mundane incidents that become critical when they are analysed. Furthermore, they are important for developing professional learning as it initiates research and develops understanding into the interpretation of the event, practitioners learn from critical incidents because the analysis of the literature helps to improve their teaching (Joshi, 2018).

The Role of a Critical Reflection

Critical reflection for practitioners is vital to enhance and improve their professional development. Practitioners should reflect on their practice through research that can develop their teaching and support effective practice (Craft & Paige-Smith, 2007). According to Dewey (1933) “in order to engage in reflective practice, teachers need to have at least three attributes of reflective individuals ... open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness” (cited in., Farrell, 2012, p. 15). This suggests practitioners allowing themselves to explore new experiences and adapt their practice. Also, taking responsibility for their own actions and being critical of their practice whilst committing and giving their all to the teaching profession. It is suggested by Brookfield (2017) that Practitioners often use assumptions within their teaching. For example, on how they believe children learn best. These assumptions tend to be based on their own experiences and the way they interpret them, with critical reflection, practitioners are able to check the “accuracy” and “validity” of these teaching assumptions (Brookfield, 2017).

Reflective practice and its importance has been advocated by key theorists such as Dewey, Schön and Brookfield. All whom have highlighted that practitioners should reflect on their practice in order to professionally develop (Baxter, et al., 2021). The researcher has identified an interest in the reflective model developed by Schön (1978), whom suggests the concept of reflection in-action and reflection on-action (Schön, 2017). Reflection in-action allows analysis and critical thinking during the activity that is happening, this model of reflection is important as it enables the practitioner to adapt and change things as it is happening if particular strategies are not working (Bassot, 2016). Schön describes the reflection in-action as “thinking on your feet” by adapting your practice quickly and believes that this impacts the effectiveness of the lesson (Sellars, 2017). The other aspect of Schöns’ reflective model is the reflection on-action, which promotes critical reflection on the experience after it happens. Creating a more deepened understanding through observations and discussions of what worked and what changes are needed for the future, allowing for improvement and development in new situations (Schön, 2017).

Teaching as a profession has changed over the years and the importance of professional development is paramount in the effectiveness of learning for both children and practitioners (Welsh Government, 2021). It was highlighted in the Donaldson (2015) ‘Successful Futures’ review process that a key priority for the Welsh Government was the overwhelming need to change performance management. The proposals of Pedagogy within the new curriculum were

reviewed, and it was suggested that the purposes of the New Curriculum and Pedagogy are fundamentally intertwined (Donaldson, 2015). Following the Review, the Welsh Government (2020) produced a policy for practitioners to reflect on their practice and identify areas of professional learning in alignment with the New Curriculum. The Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership were created and published in 2017. There are 5 areas: Pedagogy, Leadership, Professional Learning, Innovation and Collaboration. All of which supports the ideas of reflective practice both individually and collectively, as well as supporting professional development (Welsh Government, 2020).

Observation Setting

According to the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, researchers should “take all reasonable precautions to avoid identification” (BERA, 2018, p.23). Therefore, the school, staff, and pupils that were observed will remain anonymous throughout. The researcher observed in an English-medium primary school (School X) in the Bridgend County of South Wales. The school currently has 582 pupils on roll with 18 classes, 7 of which are mixed-age classes and a part-time nursery unit on site. There are two classes per each cohort with an exception for the year 6 cohort, where due to a larger capacity there are 3 classes. The school has some children who have English as an additional language, however, most children attending the school speak English at home (Estyn, 2018). According to the Estyn (2018) report, the school has a considerably low average for free school meals (FSM) at just 6% compared to the national average of 19%. In addition, the school has identified that 11% of the children on roll have additional learning needs (ALN), which is also lower than the national average of 21% (Estyn, 2018).

The researcher observed across two days and noticed a series of what they believed to be critical incidents (Appendix 1). However, during an observation in a Year 5 classroom, an incident occurred that sparked the most interest and therefore the researcher has chosen to explore this critical incident further.

The year 5 classroom layout allowed children easy access to their cloakroom, year group toilets and their outdoor area. The classroom was medium sized which allowed enough room for the children to move around and had interactive ‘working walls’ for displays. The seating layout within the classroom consisted of 6 tables with 5 to 6 children on each table, with the seating plan decided by the pupils. The pupils had their own tray located underneath their desk which provided access to personal resources such as stationary, individual whiteboards and a reading book.

Critical Incident

The observation took place on Monday 28th September 2022 at 09:30 and there were 29 children present in the classroom with one class teacher. The Area of Learning and Experience observed was Mathematics and Numeracy, the lesson was 'Adding with Decimals'. The class were given the option of three worksheets, these were differentiated using a medium, hot or spicy rating. Teacher A discussed each worksheet and how they wanted the answers set out. The pupils were given the choice of the three worksheet activities depending on which one they felt suited their learning needs the best. The children were directed to complete five questions then self-mark using the answer sheet. After completing five questions, if the pupils felt they were completing the work sufficiently then they continued, if they felt they needed support or had questions incorrect then they asked Teacher A to help. Teacher A reminded the class to use the 'Learning Zones Bullseye' display throughout their lesson. This was where the children moved the pictures of themselves to the correct zone depending on where they felt their learning was and allowing them to self-assess themselves. The zones were: Panic Zone, Learning Zone or Comfort Zone. Teacher A discussed with the researcher that they hope children are in the Learning Zone where the activities are appropriately challenging rather than in the Panic Zone where the activity is too challenging or the Comfort Zone where the work may not be challenging enough and therefore too easy.

The specific significant event that identified the critical incident was when the researcher observed Child A. Child A was sat at the front of the classroom, playing with their ruler and tapping it on the table during the introduction of the lesson. Child A was observed choosing the 'medium' worksheet. Throughout the lesson, Teacher A was observed checking in on students through Pit Stops, asking the children questions to make sure they understood what the activities were and if they needed any support. After completing the 5 questions, Child A marked their work and were getting the questions correct. Child A went to the 'Learning Zones Bullseye' display and moved their picture from the Learning Zone to the Comfort Zone. Child A returned to their seat and continued to work on the 'medium' worksheet. At the end of the lesson, Child A was observed having all 28 questions correct. Teacher A spoke with Child A about their work and Child A suggested that they were going to try the Hot activity next time in order to challenge themselves and move back to the Learning Zone.

This incident stood out and therefor was identified as a critical incident as it caused the researcher to stop and think critically about the significant event. As it created an interest and questioning into the research into the effectiveness of Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies

and the Constructivist Learning Theory.

The researcher believes that the critical incident involving Child A links to several aspects of the Donaldson Four Key Purposes. In particular, “Healthy, confident individuals who: have the skills and knowledge to manage everyday life as independently as they can” (Donaldson, 2015, p. 30). Also, “Ambitious, capable learners who: set themselves high standards and seek and enjoy challenge” (Donaldson, 2015, p. 29). Child A was able to choose independently the maths activity they felt suited their learning best, allowing them the ability to develop and manage their own independent learning. In addition, Child A expressed a keen interest in trying a more difficult challenge next time therefore allowing themselves to seek and enjoy a challenge whilst developing their learning and moving back to the Learning Zone.

Literature Review

The researcher found that from their observations in School X that they wanted to delve into further research in Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies and the Constructivist Learning Theory, both of which posed critical thinking about the importance of these within the classroom environment. The analysis of literature and critical thinking is good professional practice because it is vital in allowing practitioners to establish what they potentially already know, whilst exploring something completely new (Tripp, 2012). The literature review will support these themes by identifying, comparing and contrasting context with literature and research findings (Jesso & Lacey, 2006).

The first theme that the researcher wanted to explore was the effectiveness of AfL within the classroom. It is important to point out that the Donaldson (2015) New Curriculum approach for assessment has the learners at the core and suggests that assessment needs to be “intrinsic” to the curriculum design as it is paramount in supporting learners to make progress. Assessment is a fundamental tool to be able to ensure that individuals are challenged and supported appropriately depending on their individual learning needs (Welsh Government, 2021). AfL, otherwise known as Formative Assessment (FA), provides feedback by both practitioners and learners, to gain an understanding of where the pupils are at within their learning and allows discussion on what steps are needed to progress, with clear outlines on how to achieve this (The Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

Several studies suggest that FA has a positive impact on the progress of learning, Black & Wiliam (1998), compared the classroom to a ‘Black Box’ as many focus on the input and outputs of the classroom but often didn’t reflect on what went on inside. By acknowledging the importance of reflection inside the classroom using FA, it is suggested that there is “firm evidence” to support the motion that it raises standards of achievement and therefore is the “heart of effective teaching” (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In a review by Wiliam (2020), it is argued how powerful it is to adapt lessons “minute by minute and day by day” allowing practitioners to respond to individual learners needs as and when needed. It can be argued that learners who do not have these interventions, may potentially finish the lesson with less enthusiasm and lack of engagement due to not understanding or being able to access the work provided. During the critical incident observed by the researcher, the pupils had the opportunity to ask the teacher for help, allowing the teacher to intervene and adapt the lesson to suit the needs of individuals if necessary. Clark (2008), agrees that AfL can have a positive impact on the learning and

believes that it has the potential to increase pupil engagement and confidence in learning. However, he also identifies how the effectiveness and quality of AfL in practice depends on the implementation by individual teachers as there is no clear structure on how to use it in the classroom. Further limitations to the use of FA are outline by Black & Wiliam (2010), who state that there are obstacles that practitioners face in supporting FA as there are national assessment policies that need to be adhered to, that focusses intensely on summative assessments which dominate teaching and assessment.

Hattie & Clarke (2019) supports the use of questioning as a powerful AfL strategy as it provides in-lesson verbal feedback as it is happening. When used by practitioners, it identifies pupils' current knowledge and seeks to establish what level of understanding they have at that given time. Depka (2017) state, that practitioners need to ask probing questions that are purposeful to the lesson for learners to be able to think more deeply and develop their thinking skills. Probing questioning is supported by Hattie & Clarke (2019) who agree this type of questioning is imperative for practitioners to evaluate the understanding a pupil has and therefore offer guidance in their next learning steps. Black, et al., (2004) suggests that research shows many practitioners wait as little as one second for learners to answer a question before answering it themselves or asking another question. Following this, they discuss the importance of increasing the wait time as it promotes students to have a positive involvement in discussions and provides a deeper thinking into the question posed. On the other hand, Ge & Land (2004) explains that using questioning has limitations to the engagement of pupils in the classroom, as studies found that some children answered questions "superficially" and failed to engage in the deeper thinking process resulting in a lack of attention.

Additionally, literature shows that Self-assessment as a form of feedback is another positive AfL strategy within the classroom. Pupils are able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses based upon the success criteria, allowing them to engage in their learning process and evaluate their personal performance during and at the end of their learning (Yan, 2020). Supporting this, Black & Wiliam (1998) indicate that it is beneficial to the progress in children's learning as they are involved in their own feedback and able to express their learning goals and individual needs. It is suggested that the willingness of learners to engage and act-upon the feedback is far greater when actively being involved in the discussion (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). Self-assessment was observed during the lesson in the critical incident, where the children were able to assess where they felt their learning was at, using the Learning Zones. Pupils were able to act on this by determining what their next steps were, which encourages them to become

“Ambitious, capable learners” (Donaldson, 2015). Pupils’ active engagement with the feedback process is critical, and positively relates to academic achievement providing significant learning gains which allows children to become lifelong learners (Yan, 2020; Topping, 2003). A study carried out by Yan (2020), showed that self-assessment is more beneficial to pupils if carried out during the learning process. Results from this study found that lower-achieving students, had a higher motive to self-assess their work, suggesting that they may understand the potential benefits of this when learning similar lessons. However, the results also revealed a downfall to the use of self-assessment as it found that higher-achieving students had less motive to self-assess the task if it had already been completed. Overall, “self-assessment can have powerful effects on learning” (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009, p.17) which promotes pupils to “manage one’s own learning” (p.13) which is a key aspect of the Constructivist Learning Theory as it promotes the role of pupils being the constructors of learning (Beirne & Velsor, 2012).

Following from this, the second theme of literature that the researcher wanted to explore was the Constructivist Learning Theory. Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger (2004) discusses key educational theorists such as Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner all whom propose the concept of active learning. Which encourages pupils to construct their own understanding, build on prior knowledge, enhance social interaction and develop learning through meaningful and authentic activities. It is based on learners having an active participation in their learning journey, where the development of their knowledge is built upon previous knowledge and personal experiences (Kurt, 2021). Xu & Shi (2018), describes the teachers’ role as changing from the traditional teaching style to instead being the facilitator, and pupils being active constructors of knowledge, suggesting that the learning process is developed when pupils have an input in their learning. Supporting this, Park & Choi (2014), proposes that pupils learning is improved when actively involved as they are more likely to retain the information which leads to positive engagement and can help to improve motivation. Constructivism suggests that students are the centre of teaching and encourages children to manage their own learning (Xu & Shi, 2018). The critical incident observed promoted children as being the constructor of their own learning by determining which activity to complete, using their prior knowledge and understanding of the topic to build on their learning and therefore having an active participation in managing their learning.

The Constructivist Learning Theory is explored in a learning approach that is the ‘Flipped Classroom’ idea, allowing a student-centred approach where the roles of the traditional teacher and student are reversed. Research conducted by Morosan, et al., (2017) concluded that there

are “notable results” in the use of the flipped classroom approach, with experimental results showing to have better learning outcomes when the traditional teaching approach was flipped. Further results from this research study found that the flipped classroom promoted an increase in understanding, pupils’ confidence and an improvement in social interactions. Furthermore, research carried out by Means, et al., (2013) found that a review by the Department of Education identified that pupils learning outcomes were better when involved in active learning when comparing with those who were exclusively online or face-to-face learning. Brau, (2020) argues that a potential limitation to the effectiveness of constructivism is the lack of structure, which may have a detrimental impact on the learning if the learner doesn’t have an initial understanding to build upon in the first instance. According to the Blooms Taxonomy, learners should have more of a structure to their learning using the hierarchy of thinking and learning. The first two stages show the importance of remembering and understanding, to be able to develop students higher-level thinking (Forehand, 2005).

To conclude the literature review, the findings generally supported the effectiveness of AfL strategies and overall outlined the positive impact it had on the engagement and progression of pupils learning. In addition, the literature on the Constructivist Learning Theory suggests the importance of active learning within the class and the effect that this has on pupils building on their prior knowledge. The researcher found that the literature intertwines the two themes as they both suggest that pupil involvement within the learning process is paramount.

Reflection, Evaluation and Next Steps

The importance of practitioners reflecting on their practice to develop their professionalism was outlined in the research by Baxter, et al., (2021) whom suggested reflective models produced by key educational theorist offers guidance and support into critical reflection. Following the research on the literature surrounding the themes identified in the critical incident, the researcher will seek to reflect and evaluate their findings. Furthermore, they will explore how to implement these in their own next teaching steps, to enhance their Professional Development.

Upon researching the reflective model developed by Schon (1978), the researcher seeks to implement the reflection in-action and reflection on-action in their own teaching practice. Reflection in-action proposes the importance of reflecting on the lesson as it is happening. The researcher intends to use this reflective model during their teaching practice to ensure that the activities set are appropriate for the development of learning, and if implications arise then the researcher will adapt and change the lesson to suit the needs of the class by thinking on their feet. The researcher will also ensure that they reflect on lessons after they happened as Schön (2017) suggests that it is important to critically reflect and analyse teaching practice to improve and develop their teaching methods. Using the literature to reflect upon the critical incident observed, Teacher A used self-assessment as a AfL strategy to encourage the children to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. Using this feedback, they were able to identify which Learning Zone they felt their learning was at. The researcher had the opportunity to discuss the use of the Learning Zones with Teacher A who explained the roles and purposes of the three zones. The researcher intends on implementing this AfL strategy within their own practice, as it encourages pupils to be active participants in their learning process. The researcher feels that this is a suitable strategy to implement in the classroom as literature findings promote the positive impact self-assessment has on pupil engagement and enhanced learning experience (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Yan, 2020 and Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009).

Furthermore, the critical incident demonstrated Teacher A using questioning to identify pupils' prior knowledge of the activities and continued using questioning as a feedback tool to ensure the pupils understanding throughout the duration of the lesson. The literature supports the use of questioning during the lesson to establish understanding at that given time and therefore the researcher seeks to use this AfL strategy in their next teaching steps to establish pupils understanding. During teaching practice, the researcher will encourage the pupils to think deeper about their answer, by asking probing questions that develops pupils higher-level

thinking. This was seen as good teaching practice as research identified that probing questioning were more beneficial as they supported the idea of more deepened thinking which also provides a positive influence on pupils learning progress (Hattie & Clarke, 2019; Depka, 2017).

Reflective Practice is particularly important in the researchers Professional Development, as during the course of completing the PGCE they are expected to meet the Welsh Government (2020) Professional Teaching Standards in order to achieve their 'Qualified Teacher Status'. The researcher has begun to develop the 'Professional Learning' strand of 'Wider Reading and Research' as throughout this critical evaluation they have undertaken extensive research into the literature posed from the critical incident. Furthermore, the researcher also developed aspects of the 'Collaboration' standard through the strand that is 'Seeking advice and Support'. The researcher had the opportunity to observe different practitioners during the two observation days, allowing for an insight in a variety of teaching methods and strategies used within School X. This opportunity also allowed for the researcher to ask questions and seek advice from many practitioners which then could be used in their own teaching practice.

The next steps that the researcher will focus on for the Welsh Government (2020), Professional Teaching Standards is developing their Professional Learning further, by engaging in the Professional Learning Passport to continually reflect on teaching practice which they can further develop and act upon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher has critically reviewed and evaluated relevant theory and literature surrounding the posed themes identified within the critical incident. The findings drawn from the literature review generally supports the impact of AfL strategies along with supporting the use of the Constructivist Learning Theory within the classroom environment. The literature has provided the researcher with a vast amount of information that they have been able to critically analyse and has developed their knowledge and understanding. The researcher has been able to reflect upon the research findings and from this, have drawn a clear reflection and evaluation on their next teaching steps and how they would implement their findings from the literature to support their future practice.

Alongside this, the researcher has been able to identify the importance of critical reflection in teaching practice and has a wider understanding of the reflection models supported by key educational theorists. The researcher has discussed in their reflection and evaluation how they would use Schöns' reflective model in their personal teaching practice to ensure they will be critically reflecting in-action and on-action. The Professional Teaching Standards have also been considered, to which the researcher has reflected upon how they have addressed these standards throughout the assignment. Also, how they are going to professionally develop and reflect on these standards within their teaching practice whilst ensuring that the pupils are supported in developing the Four Purposes.

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