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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

In educational settings, occurrences happen in the learning environment defined as 'critical incidents' (CI). A CI does not have to be a dramatic, negative or critical event or a situation. The context this assignment will be using is; an event occurring within the learning environment, making the viewer stop and think critically. The significance of the event is interpreted solely by the observer and their perspective of it (Tripp, 2011). A CI ranges from non-verbal cues (Brookfield, 2017, p.31), body language of a teacher and how people might interpret that body language, in turn effecting their engagement in the classroom, to incidents of undesirable behavior such as low-level disruption or violent outbursts.

Critical Reflection

The purpose of critically analysing these incidents is to reflect on the implemented practises with the intention of improving upon them and developing professional judgements (Tripp, 2012, p.8). This approach allows teachers to provide a more supportive and deeper learning experience for students as reflecting (reflecting-on-action) enables us to increase self-awareness and enhance problem solving skills (Schon, 1983). Reflective thinking encourages us to consider the consequences of an action and work towards refining teaching methods (Dewey, 1910, p.3). Kolb (2014, p.47) discussed the importance of 'The Learning Cycle', stating that learning is a continuous loop with 4 stages (experiencing, reflecting, learning, applying). Considering this model would be beneficial to reflecting on teaching practices as it implies there is always room for professional development, showcasing a simple model of how to improve. However, Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988, p.38) focused on the emotional aspect of reflection, stating that feelings and emotions play a vital role in how we interpret and understand experiences.

Throughout this essay, my aim is to discuss, critically analyse and reflect upon an incident I have witnessed in a Primary School in Wales. I will consider various academic perspectives on the key areas of the incident, along with the approach of the new Curriculum for Wales. Donaldson (2015, p.73) advocated that critical reflection, along with use of a sound pedagogy is important to gain a deeper, more effective approach to teaching. It will be crucial to gain different perspectives on varying aspects of the incidents as stated by Calleja, (2014, p.123) supporting a more well-rounded view. Brookfield (2005, p.7) agrees, claiming that in addition to theoretical perspectives, critical reflection benefits from analysis through multiple lenses (autobiographical, perspective of learner and colleagues). These lenses enable us to gain an understanding of the methods that could be put in place in our teaching practice when considering incidents, improving the overall learning experience of students. I will consider that there may be factors and influences unknown to me as a viewer of this incident, I will analyze and reflect upon what I personally have witnessed.

School Context And Confidentiality

I will maintain anonymity of the participants and the school. This allows me to focus on reflecting in an honest way and ensures the privacy of the participants is respected to assist with safeguarding any identifiable personal information. The school this assignment will be discussing is in Swansea, Wales. It is an English language speaking school. In total, the school has 435 students enrolled (as of March 2023), 307 of which are of statutory school age. The percentage of pupils who use English as an additional language is 10.7%. An Estyn report from 2023 stated “*nearly all pupils feel safe and happy at school*”. The teachers and students are said to have positive, productive relationships and there is a noticeable dedication from the school to well-being and creating an inclusive learning environment

(Estyn, 2023, p.5). I will refer to the teacher by title. Students who will be discussed will be referred to as 'Student A', 'Student B', etc. Student A and the teacher will be the focus of this analysis.

Critical Incident Overview

The incident took place in an English-speaking year 4 class with mixed-gender students sat at their tables. There were 24 students, 5 of which use English as an additional language (EAL). The teacher (male) stood primarily at the front of the class, teaching from the board. To the teachers right, there was a teaching assistant (female) who was sat supporting several students who were working at a lower ability level. To the teachers left, there were 4 EAL students sitting at their own table. There were 3 other tables around the classroom, one was front-on with the board and was facing the teacher, there was another EAL student sitting at this table.

There were two additional tables at the back of the room, facing the board. The students at the EAL table and the lower ability level table did not have a front-facing view of the board or the teacher, they were angled so several of the students were sat with the board slightly to their right or left side. This may have made it more challenging for them to see what was being presented. It also meant that the teacher was not always able to face them while teaching from the board, instead having to turn his side or back to them from time to time while engaging with the rest of the class. Students were in a literacy lesson near the beginning of the morning (09:20). The lesson was about inferences. Initially, students wrote answers down on individual boards before putting their hands up voluntarily, to be chosen to speak as a way of responding, interacting and participating with the lesson (this supports

information from the 2023 Estyn report that stated students and teachers have a respectful working relationship. Students are showing respect by waiting their turn to contribute) (Estyn, 2023, p.5).

The teacher was stood in front of the board encouraging students to participate by reading out the answers they had written on their boards. The task in this lesson was to come up with an inference based off a picture on the board of a cartoon mole in an underground cave. Several students contributed and the teacher responded with phrases like “brilliant”, “amazing effort”, “interesting” and “well done”. The teacher used positive responses to contributions. The teacher made the students aware that he was going to take 5 more responses from different students. He stated, “I will have to stop you then, because we will have to move on”. Many of the students excitedly held their hands in the air. The ones who already held their hands up raised them more firmly and made sounds and gestures indicating a desire to contribute their answers to the discussion.

The first student he asked to contribute was one of the students (Student A) from the EAL table. Student A had his hand raised for a few minutes already. Student A was sat directly to the left of the teacher as he was teaching from the board. His positioning in the classroom meant that when the teacher was at the board, he had his back slightly turned to Student A for a significant time period. (Appendix item 2). Despite this, Student A was chosen to contribute to the lesson, saying “I infer that they are underground because I see the dirt”. This answer was praised by the teacher who responded, “brilliant effort, da iawn”. The teacher noted that Student A had used “because” in his answer and drew praise to the expanse of the answer. Student A lowered his hand and sat quietly. Student A continued to put his hands up several times before the lesson concluded to contribute when the teacher

asked questions or gave opportunities for students to speak.

Links To The New Curriculum

The 'Curriculum for Wales 2022' reform has had a transformative impact on education in Wales. The approach shifted to include a holistic, student-centered approach (Donaldson, 2015). It is important to consider the new curriculum and the four core purposes when reflecting on the previously described incident as the framework that will guide education in Wales and teaching practices should therefore align with those foundations that support a student's learning journey.

Initial analysis of the CI linked to one of the four purposes 'ambitious, capable learners' (Welsh Government, 2020). Student A is showcasing an ability to 'explain the idea and concepts' that he is learning about (Welsh Government, 2020). Through use of the 'hands-up' method, the teacher is encouraging students to contribute to the discussion. For an EAL student, this could be quite an intimidating experience, however Student A is exhibiting characteristics of a 'healthy, confident individual' (Welsh Government, 2020) and overcoming language barriers he may have struggled with through 'developing confidence' participating verbally.

Literature Review

The following literature review will take an in-depth look at a variety of key areas regarding the CI. It will compare and contrast what several theorists have discussed about these identified areas. A key area identified in this CI is the use of the hands-up method, typically considered a method of voluntary participation. This method is supported by Vygotsky's

(1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where he discusses the learner might require a more knowledgeable other (MKO) to perform certain tasks and progress towards independence. In the CI, the teacher is the MKO and is supporting Student A. The hands-up method allows students to communicate in their own time. This is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) discussion of what is considered 'scaffolding', where the teacher supports the student temporarily to assist them with a task. The hands-up method allows the teacher to identify more able students who are looking to share, and learners who may have questions or require assistance. Once the learner has engaged with the teacher for support, the teacher can meet their needs and assist them. Vygotsky believed that these interactions are what lead to cognitive development. Additionally, Piaget (1954) provides a constructivist view on cognitive development and how social interaction and active engagement from students is crucial to how they learn. Regarding the hands-up method, students are actively choosing to participate, engaging socially with the teacher. Rogers (1994) conversation about the importance of respect between teachers and students implied that the hands-up method fosters positive and respectful relationships. Students wait patiently, allowing the teacher to choose who to speak without shouting answers out, this portrays respect for the teacher and peers it creates a more inclusive learning environment.

However, it can be argued the hands-up method does not always contribute to the inclusivity as intended. Freire (2000) argued that a traditional method like raising one's hand and waiting to speak may be more akin to conforming to what they think they are expected to do as opposed to forming their own critical thought and engaging in a discussion from an independent will. Freire advocated for students to actively participate, but the hands-up method may hinder voluntary participation, instead suggesting participation through conformity. Kohn (1999) added that extrinsic rewards (the recognition of the student by the

teacher) can contribute to conformity and reduce the learners desire to progress and engage through a passion for contributing, which he labels as an intrinsic reward (a much more desirable pursuit in Kohn's mind). Raising one's hand could also be intimidating, drawing unwanted attention to socially anxious students, some may not wish to participate due to the perceived threat of being judged (Brandt et al, 2014).

Diving deeper into the method, we can also investigate the positive reinforcement of a teacher's response. When a student is chosen, not only do they receive the attention they may desire, but they may be rewarded with positive feedback (e.g.: well done, good work). This positive reinforcement is stimuli and generally encourages participation from the learner with the desire for receiving positive reinforcers (Skinner, 2014). Classical conditioning interpreted by Venn & Short (1973) backs up these findings. Maag (2001) also supported the use of praise, stating that it creates a positive, inclusive environment. He noted that despite the notion that freedom is compromised as positive feedback can be seen as a form of coercion, positive feedback is fundamentally a positive thing (Maag, 2001). Maslow's (1970) Hierarchy of Needs implies that praise (also contributing to a sense of belonging) is a common, important desire, arguably as important to some as food and water. This is expanded by Dewey's (1938) concept of the Experiential Continuum (an ongoing cycle for learners where a response, positive or negative, shapes their learning process. Praise, the positive response, tells the learner that what they have contributed is desired). He considers the method more 'humane' than criticism. In contrast, through his theory of Social Learning, Bandura (1971) advocated for positive reinforcement. However, he stated there should be a differentiation between mediocre contributions and ones that reach higher standards. Similarly, to the hands-up method, Kohn's (1999) use of extrinsic rewards can be applied to the use of positive reinforcement and praise.

Another noticeable element of the CI is the grouping of students in their academic abilities. Vygotsky (1978) spoke of the more knowledgeable other (MKO), this role is not limited to the teacher. Vygotsky's concept indicates that an MKO could be a more knowledgeable peer. This peer can use their knowledge and understanding to assist others, guiding them to an independent approach. Ability grouping could deprive students of support from that MKO, instead relying on the teacher to fulfil that role. Developing this notion, it has been claimed that a democratic approach to classroom layout is beneficial. By implementing mixed-ability grouping, educational segregation is avoided, and students are collaborating socially in more diverse groups (Dewey, 1938). A study conducted in Johannesburg regarding mixed-ability grouping found that it provided opportunities for collaborative learning, leading to social acceptance due to the diverse groups (Hove, 2022). Additionally, this study also indicated that from the lens of the teacher, instructions can prove complicated to provide effectively, leading to an impact of learning on the higher ability students (Hove, 2022). Other studies have concluded that grouping students according to ability enables benefits for higher-ability learners, however, for lower and mid-ability students, the concept becomes detrimental to their educational experience (Ireson & Hallam, 2009) (Kulik, 1992) (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000).

In the CI, the EAL students are sat at a table. Similarly, to ability grouping, it must be taken into consideration that this positioning could be seen to work against classroom inclusivity as it is important to ensure that EAL students do not feel excluded (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). When EAL learners are included in an appropriate and culturally sensitive way in the classroom, it encourages them to contribute further. They must be seen as an integral student who is part of the class foremost, not just as an EAL student (Macdonald, 2015). Murtagh and Francis (2012) spoke of the importance of EAL students finding their own

identity and how critical it is for teachers to have the knowledge and resources to support these students and their diverse needs. Additionally, the table in the CI has been placed to the left side of the teacher. This limits eye contact, a useful teaching skill which plays a crucial role in raising performance levels of learners (Atta & Ayaz, 2014). There are positive benefits to language learning through the consistency of teacher-student eye contact and the use of non-verbal communication such as hand gestures which adds a visual element for reference (Pan, 2014) (Barati, 2015). Opposingly, Yin (2013) took multiple accounts from a range of students regarding how eye contact from teachers made them feel, many found it intimidating and anxiety-inducing. This argument, supported by findings in 1993, suggested eye contact can be an unsettling experience for lower ability students, they did not find the experience to be an affectionate one (J. et al., 1993).

Teaching And Learning Methods

Throughout my initial analysis of the CI, I identified the key areas that the above literature has covered. Taking an in-depth explanation of what the approach to each area means for teaching practice and learners' experience will require me to link the literature to these areas. I will be keeping in mind Tripp's concept that this is my own interpretation of the incident (Tripp, 2011). An area immediately identifiable was the class-wide use of the hands-up method, a popular approach used throughout classrooms and one that I would be likely to incorporate into my own teaching practice as it has been shown to have positive effects on students' cognitive development through social interaction and active participation (Piaget, 1954). I also agree with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development where the teacher in the CI acts as the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and confirms and acknowledges Student A's contribution. As Student A is an EAL

student, this acknowledgement could be beneficial to ensuring he feels a sense of belonging in the classroom, therefore adding to the inclusive environment teachers should provide and enabling Student A to create his own identity in the classroom (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018) (Macdonald, 2015). The teacher acts as the MKO, which also provides a form of scaffolding for Student A, supplying him with opportunities to receive feedback through use of the hands-up method (Vygotsky, 1978). I also believe the hands-up method is beneficial as it shows respect between the student and teacher, something I believe to be a powerful dynamic in the classroom. Student A waits patiently with his hand raised to be chosen by the teacher, allowing other students to speak first without interruption and maintaining the desired peaceful and positive learning environment (1994). However, it should be considered that some children may be participating in the method through a sense of conformity and not through a desire to contribute (Freire, 2000), some may not be contributing at all out of a sense of anxiety and intimidation (Brandt et al, 2014) and some may be conforming through the hope of an extrinsic reward (positive feedback, teachers attention) (Kohn, 1999). Taking these aspects into consideration, I suggest the implementation of a range of participation methods, such as discussions between tables and allowing one student to feedback their tables ideas, supporting the use of the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) through peer-to-peer interaction. Students had boards to write their answers before they were chosen to speak, supporting inclusivity as each student is able to write their answer and compare answers. This allows the teacher to see who has taken part. The hands-up method additionally supports enabling students to become ambitious, capable learners by overcoming the challenge of participating (Welsh Government, 2020).

I noticed the teacher implemented use of positive feedback when students contributed. This is another method I would use as it encourages further participation from students as it is

a stimuli, acting as a positive reinforcer (along with the attention of the teacher, if this is something a student desires) (Skinner, 2014) (Venn & Short, 1973). The teacher in the CI responds positively to Student A. As the lesson progresses, Student A seeks to contribute further with the discussion, potentially seeking further praise, (Venn & Short, 1973) which Maslow (1970) lists as part of our Hierarchy of Needs. The CI shows that Student A's needs may be fulfilled through praise, adding a positive experience to Student A's experiential continuum of learning and shaping his learning experience positively (Dewey, 1938). It also supports Piaget's (1954) concept of learning and cognitive development through social interaction. I agree, to an extent, with Bandera's (1971) idea that there should be a differentiation between high-achieving answers from students, however I believe that it comes down to knowing your students' ability levels well enough to see when they are putting in the extra effort through frequent formative assessment. I believe the priority with this approach would be to ensure each learner feels valued and respected. The teacher praised Student A and specifically noted he had added a "because" in his answer, elaborating on what his inference was. This acknowledged the extra effort he had put in. This is desirable as it is inclusive and encouraging.

Overall, positive feedback is positive (Maag, 2001). It could be seen as a form of coercion through the external stimuli and extrinsic rewards of feedback (Kohn, 1999). However, there may already be high levels of anxiety for some students, like EAL students like Student A (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018), and giving students negative feedback once they have taken the intimidating step of contributing, could be detrimental to their well-being (Brandi et al, 2014). The arguments against the use of positive reinforcement through praise were not as accessible as the arguments for it, indicating that it is a useful method to apply when teaching. The utilization of ability grouping was identifiable in the CI. As referenced, the role

of the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) can be fulfilled by a teacher or student. Using mixed ability grouping offers opportunities for students to use each other as an MKO. The teacher has a poster above the board that says “C3B4Me”, meaning that the students should 'see 3 other people before coming to him for support'. I believe this to be a useful concept as it incorporates other MKO's into the learning process and allows the teacher more opportunity to focus on students who require additional support and may not be comfortable seeking it from peers. The use of C3B4Me combined with the grouping of students based on ability means that the higher-achieving students have higher-achieving MKO's on their table than the lower-ability or EAL students who are sat on their own tables, this would have a negative effect on them academically (Ireson & Hallam, 2009) (Kulik, 1992) (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000). Using mixed ability grouping offers a more diverse and collaborative social learning environment (Dewey, 1938), which is crucial to learners' cognitive development (Piaget, 1954), in turn, avoiding educational segregation (Dewey, 1938). In contrast, considering this method through the lens of the teacher indicates that teaching with more specific instruction to the higher ability learners can prove difficult, impacting negatively on their learning experience (Hove, 2022). This must be kept in mind as it could impact on the inclusivity of the environment, which could affect student well-being negatively. Mixed ability grouping has been implemented in part in the CI. The table in front of the teacher has an EAL student, an ALN student with visual impairments and two higher-achieving students. It is unclear as to why this has been implemented on one table but not throughout the classroom, perhaps it was for the support of two higher ability MKOs.

Once students were made aware that the teacher was asking for 5 more responses, Student A was the first to be chosen, allowing him to engage in a beneficial social

interaction (Dewey, 1938) and cementing his identity as a contributing member of the class (Macdonald, 2015) (Murtagh and Francis, 2012). However, the placement of the tables in relation to the direction the teacher predominantly teaches offers a lack of support towards the inclusivity of the EAL students (and the lower-ability learners, though the teacher is able to turn and face them more than the EAL table, which is behind his teaching position for some of this lesson (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). It is admirable that the teacher took the opportunity to engage with Student A, perhaps he realized he had not been as inclusive through his positioning and wanted to engage with Student A. This positioning limits eye contact to view body language or gestures, a crucial component of communication, particularly for EAL learners (Atta & Ayaz, 2014) (Pan, 2014) (Barati, 2015). Learners may find that social communication through eye contact or identifying body language and gestures key to their cognitive development (Dewey, 1938). Opposingly, some students may find eye contact intimidating or unsettling, deterring them from contributing further engagement (2013) (J. et al., 1993). Overall, it is important to be mindful of the varying needs of students, perhaps engaging in a discussion about preferred communication styles is appropriate (this also supports student voice, which is an important factor in the classroom for inclusivity). I think engaging students with gestures and body language adopts an inclusive approach to the environment, ensuring that students can see this is crucial.

Discussion & Conclusion

This analysis has led me to understand the needs of learners can be extremely diverse. I will ensure that I support their needs to be able to provide them with the most effective and

inclusive learning experience. If students feel heard, safe, appreciated, understood and respected, they are more likely to engage positively. Through this analysis I have come to see that there is always room for progression (for both teachers and students) and identifying those areas in need of improvement and those that are working well (through reflective practice) is key to becoming a more well-rounded practitioner. I will pay close attention in the future to ensure I am providing learners with a variety of ways to contribute to the learning environment, supporting them and their diverse needs. Understanding what my students' needs are and considering multiple ways to support them appears to be an effective approach to creating an inclusive classroom experience.

There are multiple theorists and sources of literature to back up the positive benefits of an inclusive classroom environment. This assignment considered a variety of arguments from theorists and researchers such as Maslow (1970), Piaget (1954) and Vygotsky (1978). Each of the theorists' approaches were considered when analyzing the CI using Tripp (2011) and Brookfield's (2017) definition of a CI. Research shows us that excellent teaching must be varied and catered to the learners' diverse needs. Teachers must be adaptable, aware and considerate, supporting learners across multiple areas. It has also come to my attention how important social learning is to cognitive development. This will encourage me to provide more social opportunities such as small group-based discussions (Bandera 1971). This CI analysis has shown me that I must continuously reflect on my own practice to develop and progress in my own personal learning cycle. Through my own pedagogical choices, the intent to incorporate a variety of inclusive methods supports effective pedagogical practices as listed by Piaget (1954) and showcases the expanse of my professional learning through literature. The standard of innovation is covered through the implementation of a wide range of tactics to create an inclusive and supportive learning

environment for students.

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Appendix

Item 1 – original notes on critical incident:

OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES

Record 1

Date and time, year group: 12th July 2023 9:30 am

Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context

Literacy lesson, classroom, inferences. ~~Atted~~ ability grouping.
Exploring, smelling, describing appearance of different shoes to
make "inferences"

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work)

EAL table didn't seem engaged, teacher didn't seem to
prioritise engaging with them. Girl - turning around (distracted?)
TA with lower ability group. One boy with hand up - wants
to contribute.

Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be "under the hood" in these incidents?
What avenues of research could you consider?

Elements of humanistic approach - letting kids explore
- inconsistency of support across classroom.

Disengagement - ALAs? ADHD?

Constructivist approach - learning through doing.

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)

Start of the morning, door was open, people coming
to classroom door. End of term, children aren't as
motivated. One TA. Low ability and EAL separate
table

Item 2 – table plan of classroom showing positioning of students and teachers, layout of ability tables:

