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Assignment ECAD007-C

Aim, focus and understanding of a critical incident

In the pursuit of creating a conducive learning environment, this essay will explore the role of verbal praise in the classroom. It will focus on the impact on pupil engagement, self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation within a mixed-ability classroom. This will be achieved by engaging with Tripp's (1993) critical incident methodology. His theory encourages teachers to have a "diagnostic" approach to the classroom (Tripp 2012), p.129). Desiring them to use reflective judgement to reveal their teaching practices and the values that underpin those daily routines. Tripp proposes that we challenge these practices through reflection so that the chosen actions and their subsequent outcomes can further the teacher's understanding and knowledge of best practices.

The critical incident methodology that Tripp proposes has been used in this assignment to analyse and reflect on an observed classroom-based experience. The interaction that was observed was chosen because it encapsulates the idea that a critical incident is occurring within every moment in the classroom. The moment observed was just an average student-teacher incident until it became critical through analysis and revelation of its underlying patterns and judgements.

The following exploration has evolved from a critical incident observed in an English-medium secondary school based within the Cardiff local authority. The school is situated close to the city centre and serves a catchment area in which there are high levels of social and economic disadvantage (Estyn, 2017).

As a researcher in this context, confidentiality rules will be followed consistent with the BERA guidelines. This essay will also draw on the school's 2017 Estyn report. As their most recent report, this will provide context, support discussion and form conclusions.

The observation occurred while on a pupil trail with a year seven form group. During the final period of the day, during a French lesson, that recapped numbers one to twenty.

The class was a group of mixed-ability students.

Educational theorists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan support mixed-ability grouping of students. They introduced the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises the importance of autonomy in motivation and learning, and they have explored how mixed-ability can support the creation of a collaborative learning environment.

Literature Review

Over the last six decades, using verbal praise as a positive reinforcer within the classroom has been a topic of considerable research and debate.

The observed critical incident described in this assignment focuses on the use of praise in a mixed-ability Year 7 French lesson. This review of the literature will focus on the potential of praise to enhance a pupil's intrinsic motivation and to encourage growth rather than a fixed mindset.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines praise as:

'To express your approval of or admiration for someone or something'

Praise can be expressed verbally or nonverbally through facial expressions or gestures.

Praise is distinct from acknowledgement or feedback which are neutral, and from encouragement which is more future-oriented." (Henderlong & Lepper 2002)

In our culture, through the influence of experts in the field of psychology and education and mediated through self-help books and magazines, praise has become a natural part of our interactions, especially with children. Praise has the feel-good factor, and neuroscience confirms this to be true. The sections of the brain that light up when we are given monetary rewards respond in the same way when we are praised (Bhangi and Delgado, 2015)

The concept of positive reinforcement emerged from the field of behaviourism, specifically operant conditioning (B.F. Skinner), a method of learning that employs rewards and punishments. According to operant theory, a desired behaviour will increase in frequency when a positive reward is used as a response. Teachers

have, therefore, adopted praise as a simple, no-cost tool to reward student achievement, good behaviour, and engagement.

Many studies have shown that increased rates of praise directly lead to positive student outcomes ([Becker, Madsen, Arnold, & Thomas, 1967](#); [Dufrene, Lestremau, & Zoder-Martell, 2014](#); [Reinke et al., 2008](#); [Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000](#)) Positive teaching environments, better teacher-student relationships, and increases in instructional times are all linked to teacher praise ([Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo, 2009](#); [Hall, Lund, & Jackson, 1968](#); [Rathel, Drasgow, Brown, & Marshall, 2014](#)).

However, from the 1980's, other studies began challenging the widely held belief that praise was always positively reinforcing. This research was informed by social learning theorists such as Albert Bandura, who suggested that 'motivation played a significant role in the link between observation and change in behaviour.' (Gray, MacBlain 2015,p.126) Bandura viewed motivation as a critical element of child development and viewed self-efficacy as central to education. Bandura brought the discussion away from a linear understanding of cause and effect, praise and dopamine, even though it is a factor at play; instead, he made sure that there was an emphasis placed on the context of social and cognitive elements all informing the situation.

'In Bandura's view, agency refers to the belief that one can exert much control over important events in one's life. This proactive view means that people do not simply react to events but rather make them happen'
(Schunk, DiBenedetto 2023, p.206)

'Studies indicated that praise has the potential to undermine a child's motivation, create excessive pressure to continue to perform well, discourage risk-taking and reduce a student's sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation' (Henderlong & Lepper 2002, Hitz, R., & Driscoll, A. (1988). Kohn 2001; Mangin 1998).

Most of these studies have examined how praise impacts a pupil's motivation to engage with a particular task. It follows a relatively standard methodology, i.e., a pupil performs a task, and the pupil is praised immediately afterwards. After a brief delay, the child completes a questionnaire on how interesting they found that task and how motivated they are to repeat it.

In this complex field of research, results appear contradictory, and the studies are difficult to compare. They do not use a standard coding method for the praise given,

often fail to employ a no-praise control group and work with children at different developmental stages.

Some indicate that praise increases a pupil's engagement with a task, whereas others show a decrease. (Anderson et al., 1976; Birch et al., 1984; Harackiewicz, 1979; Swann and Pittman, 1977; Weiner, 1992).

However, let's move away from a behavioural perspective where the focus is purely on the observable results, i.e., responses to a questionnaire. We see a different picture emerging. In the words of Daniel T. Willingham (American Educator Winter 2005-2006)

"The bulk of these studies do not actually contradict each other at all. Praise is a complex phenomenon, but a relatively clear picture has emerged that provides guidelines as to when and why praise will-and will not- be beneficial"

Henderlong and Lepper's (2002) study describes these guidelines well, where they identified a set of conceptual variables that appear to moderate the effectiveness of praise. They argued that:

'If praise is deemed sincere, then praise will enhance intrinsic motivation when it encourages performance attributions to controllable causes, promotes autonomy, enhances competence without an overreliance on social comparisons, and conveys attainable standards and expectations' (p. 774).

In this assignment, I focus on two highlighted variables, sincere praise and praise, that encourages performance attributions to controllable causes, e.g., praise of the process rather than the person (Dweck & Leggett, Ellen L. April 1988). It will then relate these variables to the observed critical incident within the discussion section to reflect on how it might inform my future practice in the classroom.

Sincere Praise

The perceived sincerity of praise, has been highlighted as a significant variable for moderating the impact of praise on a student's motivation. The features of praise associated with perceived insincerity are overly general, highly effusive or contradicted by other words or behaviours, such as being delivered only after an extended pause. (Ginott, 1965; Kanouse et al., 1981; Kohn, 1993; Lepper et al., 1993; O'Leary & O'Leary, 1977). This would have negative motivational consequences as children would be more likely to dismiss this type of praise. It is, therefore, essential that teachers ensure the praise given is specific, genuine, and not excessive so pupils don't find it easy to dismiss.

The perceived sincerity of praise may also be dependent on the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the recipient of the praise. This is mediated by factors such as teacher fairness and every student feeling a valued member of the school community.(Tillery, Varjas et al. 2013)

Performance Attributions

A key feature of praise is its potential to communicate messages about the causes of success or achievement. Theorists have made the distinction between process directed praise which is attributed to controllable, changeable attributions for performance (e.g., effort, strategy) and person directed praise attributed to uncontrollable, stable attributions (e.g. ability, intelligence. (Ginott, 1965; Kamins & Dweck, 1999).

Person praise directs attention away from the task to the self and 'has low information value to achievement and learning while praise directed to effort, self-regulation, engagement, or processes relating to the task and its performance (e.g., "You're really great because you have diligently completed this task by applying this concept") can assist in enhancing self-efficacy and thus can be converted by students back into impact on the task, and hence the effects are much greater. (Hattie & Timperely 2007)

Also praise focused on the person relies on the judgement or evaluation of the teacher while praise focused on the process behind the achievement of the task, encourages the student to reflect on their own effort and strategies for success. This can support an increase in intrinsic motivation as opposed to extrinsic motivation where a student might continue to look for teacher approval in the future.

This distinction between process directed and person directed praise links with the work of Dweck who introduced the concept of growth and fixed mindsets. Person praise encourages a fixed mindset. According to Dweck, challenging situations can be catastrophic for those with fixed mindsets because of the implication that if they don't already have the skills or intelligence to complete a task, there's no chance of improvement. When you have a growth mindset, you believe you can gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed, which makes every challenge a learning opportunity.

However, not all forms of process praise are equally beneficial. Effort praise has the potential to be seen as a consolation prize or signal of low ability, especially among adolescents (Amemiya & Wang, 2018)

The most effective praise, therefore, is that which focuses on other process-oriented factors, such as the use of strategy or perseverance.

Explanation of Case Study

The critical incident I observed has allowed me to explore the research surrounding positive reinforcement within a diverse learning environment and its role in creating an inclusive classroom. The incident observed was in a year 7 French class five weeks into the autumn term. It was a mixed-ability class of 25 students who had just come from a Welsh lesson into this final lesson of the day. The students sat at tables of two that were spaced out across the room (four across) all facing the whiteboard. This is a form group that has all their classes together at this stage of the term before they are moved into sets later in the year.

To provide further context, there are currently 1,721 pupils on roll, including 344 in the sixth form and 32.7% are eligible for free school meals (Estyn, 2017. Fitzalan Secondary School Report. Available). Which is considerably higher than the national average. And 'around 35% of pupils have a special educational need, which is above the national average' (, Estyn, 2017. Fitzalan Secondary School Report. Available, p.1). Regarding the diversity in the school, the report notes, 'Approximately 70% of pupils come from a minority ethnic background and speak English as an additional language. Over 60 different languages are spoken within the school community (, Estyn, 2017. Fitzalan Secondary School Report. Available:), p.1). The school is based in an area where 60% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales (Estyn, 2017, p.1).

The school has a clear process in place for discipline and classroom management and uses class charts as a tool to support this process.

The observed incident saw the use of verbal praise and class charts to reward a student for a correct answer to a question.

Student K was sitting at the very front of the classroom, on a table on the far left of the room. The students were sitting two to a table, facing the board, so student K had another student sitting to his right. At the beginning of the lesson, student K had asked to borrow a pen from the teacher, and had required one-on-one teacher

support to engage with the starter activity. The student was then quiet, slightly slouching in their chair, distractedly looking around the room and not volunteering any answers to the teacher's questions.

The students were being asked to focus on recapping their number skills and counting in French.

Halfway through the lesson, the students were asked if they remembered the number song, for 1 to 10 in French, that they had learnt in the previous lesson. A few students put their hands up, including student K who was now looking at the teacher with his hand up.

The teacher initially called on student T, who, when called upon, became shy and self-conscious and shook their head, signalling that they would not sing it.

The teacher then chose Student K who started to sing with clarity and in a loud voice so the whole class could hear him clearly. He sang the number song from one to ten with accuracy. Once student K had finished, the teacher's facial expression had changed. It now expressed genuine delight with an element of surprise and admiration for student K's accomplishment. Then the teacher burst out into spontaneous applause and all the students in the class joined in.. Once the applause had subsided, the teacher then gave Student K verbal praise.

The teacher said, 'Well done, that was great singing' and then the teacher announced that she would be giving student K two class chart points, one for bravery and the other for subject knowledge.

Student K's posture and demeanour then changed. They were smiling, sitting up straight in their chair while looking towards the teacher. The teacher had clearly indicated through their non-verbal gestures that singing in front of the class was a significant achievement.

The observed critical incident was, I believe, demonstrating a link between spontaneous, sincere praise and its visible impact on a student's engagement and motivation for learning, mediated through a sense of self-efficacy and competency. The use of verbal praise within this observed critical incident, illustrates more of a person focused as opposed to a process-focused example of teacher praise.

The teacher praised student K's for "great singing", and then gave them a reward for being brave. This praise was based on a teacher's evaluation of the student's singing ability and their personal qualities.

Teaching and Learning methods

The findings from the literature review will now inform the teaching and learning methods I would consider adopting to address this critical incident.

Firstly, we know that praise needs to be perceived as sincere to have any potential to impact a student's intrinsic motivation and enhance the student-teacher relationship.

Spontaneous applause and facial expressions of delight on the part of the teacher would have communicated to the student that the teacher's praise was genuine and sincere. This would have ensured that the teacher's verbal praise of "well done" and "great singing" was more readily received. As noted in the literature review, the features of praise associated with perceived insincerity are when the praise is contradicted by other words or behaviours or delivered only after an extended pause. (Ginott, 1965; Kanouse et al., 1981; Kohn, 1993; Lepper et al., 1993; O'Leary & O'Leary, 1977). In the observed critical incident, teacher praise was given immediately, and the words and behaviours were consistent.

For student K, it was evident in his change of posture, increased eye contact with the teacher and improved engagement with the remainder of the lesson that the praise received and his accurate completion of the task had a positive impact on his motivation and engagement.

Reflecting on this in my practice, I would place great importance on developing trusting and genuine relationships with students, providing an environment where praise can occur naturally and spontaneously.

With reference again to the literature review, I will consider my teaching and learning methods for encouraging a student's intrinsic motivation and engagement through 'process praise rather than 'person praise.' as described by ???

The observed critical incident was of a student being praised for singing a numbers song, being told "well done" 'excellent singing' by the teacher and given a point for being brave and learning the song.

This was an example of person-focused praise, as it reflected the teacher's evaluation of student K's singing and how they were brave to sing in front of the class.

The research would suggest even though students feel good when receiving this type of praise (Sharp 1985) it is not a method that will help to encourage a growth mindset. There was a lack of information with the focus on two fixed qualities, i.e. singing voice and being brave.

With this lack of information, Student K would be less likely to leave the lesson reflecting on the effort and the strategies he employed to achieve the outcome and more on the teacher's judgement of his qualities. We know that this type of praise is more likely to encourage extrinsic motivation and long-term approval seeking. It also supports a fixed mindset that could potentially present challenges for the student when faced with failure or disappointment in the future.

Process-directed praise would have given student K more opportunity to reflect on how their strategies and commitment to learning the song contributed to a positive outcome and if they were to apply themselves in the same way when facing future learning challenges then they had the potential to repeat the success.

Also, if they had also been provided with more information regarding the challenge of singing in front of an audience, that would not only have provided student K with the opportunity to reflect on his ability to overcome performance anxiety, it would also have been a way of supporting and validating Student A's difficulty at overcoming their performance anxiety rather than leaving them with the conclusion that they were not brave.

My review of the literature in this area of praise will most definitely reflect on my use of language in every interaction with every student. I will aim to avoid praise that does not contain task-related information as this will rarely be converted into greater student engagement, commitment to the learning goals, enhanced self-efficacy, or understanding about the task.

Discussion, recommendations and conclusions

As I start considering my pedagogical choices, informed by the literature and relevant teaching and learning methods. I have explored meta-cognition as a pedagogical choice to introduce to my teaching practice. I have chosen to explore this aspect of practice further due to its link with supporting students in developing a growth mindset.

As discussed, a growth mindset is a belief that your intelligence and ability can grow and improve with dedication and effort, and this can have a positive impact on a student's motivation to keep persevering and embrace challenges when they arise. It also shapes their view of failure into a growth opportunity. (Dweck, 2016).

Meta-cognition can support a growth mindset for pupils because it encourages them to consider and reflect on their thought processes. As well as supporting regulation and adjustment of their thinking strategies, as required when faced with a challenge. When students are supported to think in this way, it will enable them to be reflective goal-setters and gain assurance of the learning strategies that suit them best, creating an opportunity for them to reflect on the outcome of their learning.

As discussed, using metacognition in teacher practice directly supports the development of a growth mindset in students. As teacher models their meta-cognition processes with a growth mindset, this will enable students to understand

the language surrounding this and adopt this thinking for themselves. Process praise plays a part in reinforcing their growth mindset processes.

However, Dweck's research into growth mindset has come into question over recent years, with some not engaging with the study, labelling it another fad. Dweck herself wrote in a 2016 article that her research has been misunderstood. That successful implementation of her work will need more profound thought from teaching practitioners to ensure it has an impact in the classroom. (Dweck, 2016) It seems that the definition of a growth mindset has gotten confused with existing beliefs around encouragement to work hard and be open-minded. These are all valid ideas but are not the definition of Dweck's work on a growth mindset. She would encourage educators to start to unpack their mindsets to allow them to support students, as a growth mindset is not something you teach. It is more subtle than that. It is something you embody in everyday practice. Through high expectations of your students, give them an opportunity for collaboration and specific process praise. The benefit of being taught the language of meta-cognition for students will be lifelong, as attention is brought to the importance of how they make their decisions about learning and effort through their reflection and thinking processes.

The subtlety of this shift requires the teacher to have a growth mindset for this to impact students (*Yeager et al. 2021*). Research has also shown that a teacher's mindset about students' learning abilities has a significant impact on students' engagement, outcomes, motivation, and sense of belonging (*Muenks et al., 2020*). As previously discussed, praise plays a vital part in this mindset shift and effectively supports students in moving into a new thinking pattern and not staying stuck in a fixed mindset pattern. (*Nuhfer et al.'s, 2022*).

Regarding my school practice, my findings and the critical incident methodology have dramatically impacted how I view praise, and practically, I will be mindful of the impact of all interactions, as Tripp's methodology would encourage. I would use process praise to help support students into a growth mindset, where they are motivated and challenged and know the value of perseverance and good strategies. I will set high expectations and plan to challenge them in their work and their thinking, guiding them to learn from mistakes made and supporting them to self-regulate and self-assess by the way I model my behaviour and in the sharing of my growth mindset thinking process.

Regarding professional standards, I feel that this pedagogical practice of metacognition explicitly links to the expectations of advancing and influencing teaching practice. These two subheadings are a part of the pedagogy standards

outlined for teachers in Wales. Under these subheadings, expectations are outlined around students' progression and reflection on learning. As well as the expectation of creating real-life, authentic contexts for students. I also feel that the process of meta-cognition will help support the development of real-life strategies and skills that students can use when faced with problems in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

All teachers must reflect on their practice and implement their next steps from this pondering. The observations conducted for this essay used Tripp's (1993) methodology, which prompts a reflective practice. This model of reflection built a foundation for continual and consistent reflective practice, and it is clear from the teaching standards that this is an expectation of all teachers in Wales.

The observed incident was reviewed and scrutinised through the relevant academic literature. This uncovered the vast and, at times, contradictory views on using verbal praise in an educational setting. However, specific incident-relevant teaching and learning methods were brought to the fore and discussed. In conclusion, it was made clear that students need to be sincerely praised for their learning process and discussed in future practice.

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