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Critical Incident Observation, and analysis of critical reflection.

Introduction

Within this assignment, my aim is to critically evaluate research and key theories that establish the development of children, through critically evaluating a Critical Incident (CI) that has been identified within a school during observations, and to evaluate the approaches within this CI that best support the learners through the identification of next teaching and learning steps. A Critical Incident can be defined as “an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value of judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is a significance we attach to the meaning of the incident” according to Tripp (1993). Although some situations may not be considered critical at the time of observation, it can be regarded as critical through the analysis of the situation. Critical incidents within the classroom allow practitioners to analyse, develop and focus on our reflective practice, with the intention being to improve our practice, which Dewey, cited in Tripp (2012) “defined reflective thought as ‘active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’” (Tripp, 2012), which highlights an importance of reflective practice with practitioners through the CI’s which can be identified within a classroom.

Within this text, I will be referring to key educational theorists and terminology such as scaffolding and differentiation, which will be explored further on during the text. I will also be referring to the school that the CI took place as ‘School X’ and pupils within the school as ‘pupil A’ and ‘pupil B’; this is to ensure anonymity of the school in line with the BERA Ethical guidelines for Education Research (BERA, 2011).

The role of critical reflection

As an educational practitioner, the role of critical reflection is fundamental to guide our pedagogy to suit the needs of all learners. This can be described as, according to Tripp’s (1993) views on critical reflection as a practitioner, states that “the idea that reflective practice is a matter of maintaining an emotional awareness to guide our learning, and thereby our strategies and actions, towards maximising our sense of success” while reflecting on our own practice to meet learners needs in the future. In addition to this, Brock (2015) states that “reflection and reflective practice are core values of professionals and have a key role in professional training”. Tripp (1993) and Brock (2015) both suggest that by being a practitioner in education, it is fundamental to be able to critically reflect on your own teaching through our pedagogy, and also our own personal values, and reflect on how this can have an impact on the education of the learners in our environment through an inclusive curriculum in Wales, and the willingness to change to make it more effective.

There are a range of models of reflective practice which provide structure and guidance to allow practitioners to critically reflect within education, such as Kolb’s 1984 learning cycle, Schon 1978 reflection in action and reflection on action, and Brookfield’s 1998 reflective lenses. Kolb’s model of reflective practice being ‘the learning cycle’ elaborates on the idea that we as practitioners can evaluate and reflect on our teaching

through real life experiences, for example, from CI's that have been observed which will be discussed further on in the text. Kolb states that the cycle consists of having a "concrete experience", thinking about the experience through "reflective observations", learning from the experience through "abstract conceptualisation" and finally "active experimentation", meaning to put the reflections and outcomes into practice within the classroom (Tompkin & Ulus, 2016).

Applying this method of critical reflection may be useful as it allows practitioners to reflect on their first hand experiences and put their reflections into practice, ultimately allowing practitioners to observe whether their reflections and outcomes were successful in providing the most effective education to the learners, and where they can develop for the future. This method may also be deemed as most effective when reflecting on the critical incident observed within school X, as this was a first hand experience, being concrete evidence, which I had the opportunity to reflect on to develop my own pedagogical approaches to teaching. These models of reflection stated can provide a structure on how practitioners can be reflective, while also meeting Wales' Professional Teaching Standards and meeting the needs of all learners.

Within Wales, the Government has devised their own Professional Teaching Standards for teachers and trainee teachers within the education system in Wales to support best practice through clear expectations and principles. According to the Welsh Government (2017), the professional teaching standards "enable practitioners to reflect on their practice, individually and collectively, against nationally agreed standards of effective practice and affirm and celebrate their successes" by reflecting on each of the five professional standards to provide effective and inclusive practice within the current new Curriculum for Wales.

Observation

The school where the observation took place is considered to be set within a reasonably small town which was opened in 2012. Within the school, according to Estyn (2015), there are approximately 210 pupils within the school, spread across 10 mixed age and year classes, 3 STF (special teaching facility) classes for children with Additional Learning Needs. In addition to this, "around 35% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is well above the Wales average of 20%. The school identifies around 37% of pupils as having Additional Learning Needs, which is above the national average of 25%" (Estyn, 2015), and the many teachers described the local area as being rather deprived.

During my time for observation, I was within a mixed age year 5 and 6 class, where there were a total of 24 children within the classroom, yet only 6 of which were year 5 within a rather busy environment, possibly due to the fact it was the first lesson of the day. Within the classroom there was one class teacher and teaching assistant, who was also qualified to cover the class while the teacher was not there. The class teacher was to begin the lesson before she was due to have PPA time, where the teaching assistant was to take over the lesson.

Critical incident and Donaldson's Four Purposes.

The new Curriculum for Wales by professor Donaldson's and the Welsh government have created the four purposes, which are fundamentally the core of all learning across the education system in Wales, from foundation learning to key stage 4. In addition to this, the Curriculum for Wales is child and learner centred, and according to Donaldson (2015), the

“future success and well-being of every child and young person in Wales and to the country as a whole” is as vitally important for the holistic development of children and to establish pupil progress. The Four Purposes include being “ambitious, capable learners”, “enterprising, creative contributors”, “Ethical, informed citizens”, and “Healthy, confident individuals” (Welsh Government, 2020) which all aim to support children as they develop through their school years to create lifelong learners.

During my time within the school observing, there were many opportunities to observe a CI, which were linked to many aspects of the new curriculum and the four purposes. The lesson was a language, literacy and communication lesson, which began with the class teacher explaining to the class about using speech marks within a text when spoken word was involved. The teacher then went on to scaffold to develop the pupils learning on how to identify when there is spoken word within the text by reading the text aloud and stating when the text involved the speech marks by using a higher pitched voice, as if it was read ‘in character’, which allowed children to develop their confidence in their understanding, in turn becoming ‘confident individuals’.

The teacher also then encouraged the class to read *only* the spoken word within the text along with her, reminding them that they only read the sentences with speech marks. Once the children were able to identify the spoken word aloud the children were then encouraged to work independently by working through their own grammar books by writing out the whole text, and identifying the spoken word by underlining where they saw speech marks. The teacher scaffolding when and where to identify the spoken words, and by getting children to identify them out loud allowed a further understanding of how, when, and where to use speech marks within a written text.

Additionally, it was observed that a number of children had a different grammar textbook (G5 book compared to G6 book) to some, which was a slightly shorter text with less complex words compared to the more difficult textbook (G6 book). This was a clear use of differentiation in the classroom to best support the children to suit their needs and abilities. It was also observed that it was clear that the children’s understanding of when and where to use and identify speech marks came from the teacher first scaffolding the concept by reading the spoken word out loud. Scaffolding for the learners links to Donaldson’s Successful Futures of one of the Four Purposes of being ambitious, capable learners who were clearly able to “explain the ideas and concepts they are learning about” (Welsh Government, 2020) from initial concept the teacher had modelled and scaffolded before working on the text in their grammar books.

Furthermore, when the teacher had left the room for their PPA time, the teaching assistant was taking over the lesson while the children worked through their grammar books. Here it was observed that the children were communicating and helping each other identify where the speech marks were, and developing their understanding of that being the spoken word; this made it clear to see that the teacher beginning the lesson with the example and scaffolding ensured a deeper understanding with the pupils, so much that they had the ability to relay the information on to their peers. Within this lesson also, child A explained that they had previously worked on grammar book G5, and is now working on grammar book G6. Child A also explained that they find the new book more difficult, but then also went on to explain that they also find the work a lot easier when the teacher explains it first and shows the children how to do it, again suggesting that the scaffolding from the teacher at the beginning of the lesson benefited the children with their learning and development. Overall, not only did this CI of scaffolding within a classroom to develop learning and understanding promoted differentiation, it was clear to see that the four purposes as a whole were the core

of the critical incident. The incident promoted 'ambitious, capable learners' by encouraging the children to set themselves to a high standard and allowing the ability to explain the concept of the lesson, in particular to their own peers to support them, while also promoting 'enterprising, creative contributors' by also doing this as they were able to "give off their energy and skills so that other people will benefit" in a positive manner (Welsh Government, 2020). Lastly, not only did this critical incident promote many things within Donaldson's new curriculum, but in turn promoted the children to broaden their confidence by scaffolding and setting expectations and to build on their knowledge to become independent contributors to society from the one of the four purposes being 'healthy, confident individuals'.

Literature Review

As previously mentioned, According to Tripp (1993), to "take something as a critical incident is a value of judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is a significance we attach to the meaning of the incident". Upon the analysis of a CI, it suggests that the critical incident mentioned previously is deemed critical depending on the reader and analyser's opinion. Although the critical incident mentioned may be a 'normal' everyday event, it is important to understand that upon reflection on the incident, there may be many underlying areas for practitioners to reflect on in order to improve their teaching and pedagogy, in turn improving the development of their learners as a whole. For example, within the CI, the teacher began the lesson by scaffolding, which seemed to be a very useful strategy the teacher used to gain understanding of the learners. A common consensus of Scaffolding can be defined according to Olsen and Bailey (2014), established by educational theorist Jerome Bruner, as scaffolding being "the application of an engineering model to pedagogical practice. The teacher constructed a scaffold that could be used to support the efforts of the learner to construct his or her own understandings" and further implying that once the child has understood, the teacher would then allow the learner to continue with task on their own, suggesting that they will be able to do the task without instruction or a scaffold again in the future. When reflecting upon the critical incident identified, it is clear to see that the teacher performed the strategy of scaffolding to support the learner to develop their understanding, however, the efforts may be best supported when there is a deeper understanding of the term to support best practice.

It can be said that educational theorist Bruner clearly coined the term 'scaffolding', however Lev Vygotsky, another well established educational theorist although did not use the term, it was put into practice with his 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). The term ZPD suggests that children reach a zone of the best opportunities for development when supported and understand a concept. As stated by Hammond and Gibbons (2005), Vygotsky identified "that learning involves a communicative process whereby knowledge is shared and understandings are constructed in culturally formed settings" through a "social and cultural process", suggesting this is a form of scaffolding within the CI, where the teacher communicates and shares their knowledge themselves within the social setting in order for the children to construct their understanding. For example, Vygotsky's ZPD begins with the learner being unable to do a task, for example within the CI where the child initially was not able to identify spoken word in speech marks within a text, moving on to the task being scaffolded where the learner is able to do the task with guidance, for example within the CI where the child was identifying the spoken word by reading it out loud with the teacher, then finally moving on to the target, where learners are able to do the task unaided, where in the

CI, the children were able to work through their work books without the aid of the teacher and understood where the spoken word was within their books, suggesting that the teacher used Vygotsky's ZPD scaffolding model as best practice for the children's development. This also implies that scaffolding is an effective strategy to improve a child's development as it is used by two very well established educational theorists, and clearly used within schools in the present day. However, Malik (2017) suggests that scaffolding as a strategy may not be effective practice to improve the learners in their development as a whole due to the diverse classroom based environment, where Malik (2017) also asks "how can scaffolding be provided to a classroom with students from different backgrounds, strengths and weakness by one instructor?", which can be seen as a relevant point, as within the CI observation, it was noted that the classroom consisted of twenty six children, six of which were in a different year group. It is clear to note that each of those children may be on a different progression step within Donaldson's new Curriculum for Wales, may not have told the teacher their lack of understanding, and may have many diverse backgrounds, whereas all children may have been expected to learn and understand the task from one scaffolding input delivered by the teacher. Although from the observation and through research that scaffolding is a useful strategy within a classroom by providing "incentive for students to take a more active role in their own learning" (Northern Illinois University, 2012) and provides a supportive learning environment, it is again important to note that this may not be beneficial to all learners within the same classroom as all children learn differently, and many factors mentioned may not allow children to learn this way, in turn suggesting that teachers an educational practitioners could also ensure extra support is there for children who are unable to understand concepts this way when learning as a whole class, suggesting the possibility that teachers in future could check for understanding and support the learners who still do not understand individually.

According to the UK Government (2003) 'Every Child Matters' policy, it highlights to every member of the public, but more specifically to practitioners working with children, the legal policies in order to ensure children's needs are best met, and for children to "experience wider opportunities and benefit from rising prosperity, better health and education than those in previous generations". From this policy, it is clear to see that children are at the forefront of policies made in the UK, and it states that children deserve the best opportunities possible in order to meet their needs and to best support their development. In support of this, within schools today, there is often very diverse classrooms, with children having Additional Learning Needs (ALN), English as an Additional Language (EAL) and many children needing provisions and best practice to support their individual needs in order to get the best out of their education. To support this, schools and practitioners must differentiate their education and lessons to meet individual needs and in line with the Every Child Matters 2003 policy. Practitioners do this by differentiating "content, process, products, or the learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping" to support the learners (Tomlinson, 2000). This suggests that there are a range of ways a practitioner can support the learners in order to meet their needs in order for them to develop. In addition to this, it is clear that this strategy is used within schools today, for example, what was observed within the CI that children were working through different grammar books, with one being a slightly longer and more difficult text in order to identify spoken word within speech marks. Although this could be considered a more obvious differentiation strategy by giving the children who were not quite reaching the higher attaining grammar book, the question of what differentiation strategies are effective within a classroom is a much discussed topic. For

example Deunk *et al* (2018) states that effective teaching to aid child development “is largely determined by how teachers deal with these (cognitive) differences between students and by how they adapt their instruction to individual needs”, suggesting that differentiation is a key aspect in order to support all pupils. However, in order to best support all children in an inclusive manner, Westwood (2001) explains that there are a range of methods of differentiation that practitioners can apply to their teaching in order to become an inclusive practitioner. For example, differentiating the content of the lesson for More Able and Talented students (MAT) by allowing children to have “more and in greater depth, and often do the work more independently”, which was also observed within the CI for the children working on the ‘higher level’ grammar books, which is one of many differentiation methods. Additionally Westwood (2001) also claims that “diversity among students will be accommodated quite easily if teachers simply change the way in which they teach, and if they differentiate the curriculum to match the characteristics of the students”. These two statements by Deunk *et al* (2018) and Westwood (2001), although written in 2018 and 2001, 17 years apart, are quite similar concepts, indicating that if teachers adapt their teaching through differentiation strategies, that this will support all children in an inclusive way to meet their needs and aid their development.

Although from these statements this may seem like something that may be easy to do within the classroom, many argue with the fact that it is relatively difficult to do to accommodate all children, and there are many considerations to account for when applying differentiation, for example, taking into account whether teachers have had recent suitable training to apply differentiation, “are differences in pupil interests and backgrounds catered for?”, and “are there differentiated sources” available for those children who are in need of them (Raffan, 2001). This suggests that there is more to differentiation within the classroom than simply giving different grammar work books identified within the CI, and that there is more to think about when planning for this. Similarly to Raffan, (2001), Westwood (2001) also states that “there is now a considerable body of evidence to show that teachers have great difficulty in teaching adaptively, tailoring the curriculum, and preparing multi-level resources to match the different ability levels of the students”, indicating that although differentiation is required within the classroom to be inclusive and support children and their individual needs, especially with the the new Curriculum for Wales, as “at its heart is our aspiration for every child and young person” through a child centred approach, it may be considered as slightly more difficult than it is perceived to be, and as stated in the previous statements, there are many aspects to consider when planning to differentiate practitioners teaching to best support individual learners’ needs.

Reflection and evaluation of next steps

After observing the Critical Incident (CI) within School X, I had identified the importance of reflective practice and critical reflection as a practitioner. Reflecting on the Critical Incident I had observed, there are a number of aspects I believe I can take into my own practice and pedagogy as an educational practitioner, additionally, within Wales’ professional teaching standards, it is now a requirement to adopt the approach of being a reflective practitioner.

Firstly, within the Literature Review, it was discussed that scaffolding, according to Olsen and Bailey (2014) being the idea that “the application of an engineering model to pedagogical practice. The teacher constructed a scaffold that could be used to support the efforts of the learner to construct his or her own understandings” as a support system in

order to help develop children's understandings. Based on the discussion within the literature review, and from observations within the CI, it is clear that ensuring myself as a practitioner sets a clear scaffold, or model, when helping children understand what is required of them, which may be best practice by *showing* them exactly how, instead of *telling* the children. A good example of this would be within the CI, the teacher firstly read the text aloud only where there was spoken word, followed onto the children reading it with the teacher, following on to the children reading it on their own; this allowed children two opportunities to grasp an understanding while the teacher was scaffolding. In the future, if I were to scaffold a task in a similar way, I may allow opportunities to ask questions, and for children to raise their hands if they were still unsure, this ensures myself as a practitioner to assess whether all children have understood and where I can possibly scaffold another method of understanding the task.

Secondly, within the CI and literature review, it was noted that differentiation was a clear and useful strategy in order to create an inclusive environment and best support the learners. However, literature states that this may be a difficult task when it comes to having large classrooms of learners to differentiate tasks to, for example, as mentioned, Westwood (2001) stated that "teachers have great difficulty in teaching adaptively, tailoring the curriculum, and preparing multi-level resources to match the different ability levels of the students", however, it is also important to use the role of critical reflection when planning to differentiate tasks or resources within the classroom, as in the future, in order to differentiate effectively, I will ensure I understand where, and what each child is working towards. For example, by looking at where on the Curriculum for Wales' progression steps each child is at, and possibly through looking at formative assessments, in order to understand what is effective for each child's learning, in turn creating an understanding of what best meets their needs and development.

Lastly, to ensure I am being effective as a reflective practitioner, there are a range of reflective models within current literature that aids a clear and concise reflection. For example, Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning (1984) follows a step-by-step action plan in order to fully reflect on an experience, such as a lesson. For example, the concrete evidence to reflect on may be a CI, the reflective observation where I would initially react and reflect on the experience, where it can be asked "what was I trying to do? What did I do? Why did I do it?"; following to the "Abstract Conceptualisation stage" where I would reflect in depth by drawing conclusions with supportive literature, and finally, the opportunity to "actively experiment with new ideas and strategies, underpinned by the new knowledge you have gained about your teaching" (University College Dublin, 2022). This reflective model not only provided a step by step overview in order to fully reflect on experiences, when following this model, it also allows a greater understanding of the concrete evidence while linking it to current literature and knowledge, in turn improving myself as a practitioner and my pedagogy to support learners in the future,

Conclusion

Before heading in to observing a Critical Incident within school X, I initially aimed to observe and reflect on best practice when supporting children's development, and what strategies are in place to do so. Upon reflection, it confirmed that there are a range of strategies in order to develop progress and to meet children's needs, with also the majority of research showing that there is range of literature that support these strategies, such as differentiation and scaffolding, in order to provide best practice and pedagogy, and to support my teaching

in the future. Additionally, it is clear that in order to meet the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership in Wales, becoming and implementing critical reflection through my teaching is essential, where there are many reflective models that provide support to do so, in turn allowing my own initial approach to observing best practice within the classroom and ensuring a critical reflection on this observation becomes effective as the range of literature discussed and reviewed allowed myself to reflect on how to best support children's development, their needs and their progression through life to become, as the new curriculum states, ensuring "lifelong learning". (Welsh Government, 2020).

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