A Critical Incident Involving Avoidant Attachment and Classroom displays: Are they an Aid or Distraction?

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to understand the role the classroom environment has on a student and their attainment, exploring what is an effective and purposeful learning environment. It will also look at attachment theories (Ainsworth & Bowlby 1991) and how this can affect the learner's ability to concentrate and have a meaningful relationship with the teacher. The essay will centre around a critical incident at a mainstream Primary School in Swansea, (Digital Services 2023) where a higher ability learner in a year 4 mixed ability class (8.28 minutes) avoids the instructions her teacher has given and turns her chair around to look at the classroom display on the wall. Before delving deeper into the incident, it is important that firstly the identity of a critical incident is discussed. According to Tripp's Critical Incidents in Teaching (p8. 2011) *critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation.* It is how the observer views, interprets and understands the incident which makes it a critical incident. It is the importance which the observer links to something's meaning, which turns it into a critical incident. What may be a critical incident to one observer, is not to another. Critical Incidents do not need to be negative, (Tripp 1993) its importance is in the value which the observer places on the incident.

We can read any and everything that happens in a critical fashion. Often the events we notice and remember are just routine things we feel good or unhappy about, or things that amuse us. (Tripp p8 2011)

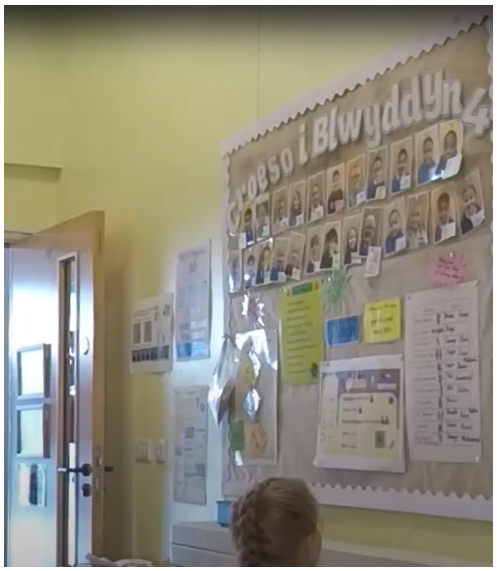

Figure A.

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The higher ability student sits on a single sex table of girls all of higher ability and turns her back for roughly one minute while the class teacher is giving the children instructions on the task, to look at the classroom display. The learner does not move to get the resources which are asked but instead stays seated until another learner, handing out books, draws the learner's attention back to the lesson. Throughout the observation the same learner can be viewed

yawning, playing with her hair, and distracted by other events going on in the classroom. Later on in the observation (15:28 minutes) the teacher comes to her table to discuss their work. The learner disregards the teacher being present and focuses on her work. When the pupils are asked to discuss with their peers the work they have been given, the child again avoids all interaction and makes little effort to talk to peers. (16:29 minutes).

Literature Review

Classroom displays and creative effective classroom environments have long been a topic of argument among educators. (Higgens et al). Maintaining a learner's attention in the classroom is complex and challenging particularly with the many distractions such as technology, classroom displays, design of the classroom and the noises that can all be found in one. Even the personal interests of a learner can influence their ability to focus in this environment. (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006) The attractiveness and allure of a display, particularly one that the learner finds stimulating can significantly affect a child's attention span. (Marzano, 2007) This is also suggested by Barrett, Davies and Zhang, (2015), who argue that the layout and design of a class has a strong impact on the learner's ability to focus. Barret, Davies and Zhang found classrooms which were well organised and clutter free tended to promote better attention and engagement. Fisher et al, (2014) supported this claim by stating that classrooms with excessive decorations and displays may overwhelm students and reduce their own (the teacher's) ability to concentrate and stay focused on the task and on the student. Maria Montessori (Figure B) is quite famous for her studies on effective classroom environments and the importance they have on a learner's ability to focus and learn. The typical

Figure B

The Montessori Classroom: Inspired Design

Montessori classroom is meticulously organised, with each material having its special place on shelves or in a designated area. This sense of order in the classroom helps the learner develop a sense of structure and responsibility (M.Montessori 2013) This could all seem quite relevant for this case study if the classroom was filled with bright walls and busy displays of artwork, but the displays in the classroom in which the critical incident took place are very bare. However, the learner, on whom this critical incident is based, is found staring at the busiest display in the classroom. Looking at the display in finer details it can be recognised as a class charter, with a muted hessian background and written in a dyslexia friendly typeface. (Figure A) This could be interpreted as the learner not using this to aid her education or to seek out her own independent strategies but purely as a distraction. Which would lead the observer to question "Why would the learner ignore the teacher's instructions and stare at the class charter? Is it an issue of attachment?" John Bowlby has emphasised the importance of emotional bonds between individuals, where in most cases the learner is seeking the attention of the caregiver for security and emotional support. Bomber (2007) outlined that there are three possible types of attachment disorders "Avoidant attachment" "Ambivalent attachment "and "Disorganised attachment" For the individual in question, the focus could possibly be the avoidant attachment style which according to Bates (2021 p52) can be displayed as the following: outwardly the child is eager to please, they may be internally feeling anxiety, achievements and accomplishments are valued more than intimate relationships, they can be socially uncomfortable, to feel safer, they will control things when they can, pain is often internalised as sickness, aggression is built up, the learner will meet their own needs independently. Bates (2021) states that this is often related to a depressed or abusive caregiver, which is supported by Bomber (2007). This is backed up by the theory of the child avoiding not only the teacher's initial instructions but when the teacher comes over to the table she is on to discuss their work. The learner makes no effort to talk to the teacher or even provide any signs of eye contact, but instead appears to be heavily fixated on the task she has been given. The learner also struggles to interact with her peers, yet is very quick to act the role of a more knowledgeable other (Vgotsky, Smolucha

2021) outside of work related tasks. She is seen directing another student placing books and helps another child to get an object in the classroom. So one argument could be that the learner might have been avoiding the teacher due to the lack of a secure attachment or the learner has a negative emotional association with the teacher. The learner might have been observing the display on the wall to seek comfort and act as a source of interest. This is supported by the fact the display is hessian and has semiotic meaning. Semiotics refers to the study of signs and symbols and how they are used to convey meaning Sean Hall (2007). There are many semiotics visible in hessian such as the cultural association, the sustainability and eco-friendliness of the material and hessian holds historical signifiers but in this context the comforting connotations can be found in the material's texture and appearance. Texturally, hessian provides the learner with a sensory experience due to being coarse and rough (Guest S, et al). This rough texture can connote a sense of grounding and authenticity which provides a contrast in the classroom to the often smooth and synthetic materials found in this environment. The earthy tones and its rugged appearance can symbolise warmth and nostalgia to many viewers. It can even provide the learner with a connection to nature, signifying a sense of belonging. The display also is a class charter which could reinforce the student's sense of belonging and thus providing her comfort, as supported by Guest S, et al.

Case Study

The critical incident observed takes place in a mixed ability year 4 class on a Wednesday morning at half past nine. The lesson focuses on the area of learning (AOLE) Languages, literacy, and communication and is a lesson on inferences which then leads into a task of writing about different shoes, with each table given a single shoe to inform their writing. The critical incident focuses on a female high ability learner, who is sat on a single-sex table all of whom are high ability. The incident takes place at 8 minutes and 28 seconds, whilst the teacher is giving the specific instructions on the task and the resources the learners need in order to complete the task The pupil turns her back on

the teacher and instead is seen staring at the display behind her. The learner continues to stare whilst other pupils begin to move around and gather the resources which have been asked of them. There is a conversation on her table which the other students are taking part in, yet she remains fixated on the display. That is until another student handing out books places her book in front of her. This grabs her attention back into the classroom, where she then helps that learner handing out books identify where the other learners in the classroom are sat. During this interaction it seems that the class teacher is unaware that her attention has been directed elsewhere. It is also worth noting that the learner who sits next to her is out of her seat and instead is taking on a role of responsibility handing out items in the classroom. The display that caught this learner's attention is the busiest display in the classroom and appears to be a class charter, with a variety of information about the class. It is not a typical art display nor is it a working wall that would further aid the learner in her education. Throughout the rest of the lesson, the learner can be observed playing with her hair, yawning obsessively, not engaging with the assessment for learning (AFL) technique hands up (Danso J and D Dunn), and disengaging with a positive reward scheme in the class. This most strongly relates to Bomber (2006) and their theory of attachment, particularly avoidant attachment. The learner avoids the instruction of the teacher, avoids the teacher when he approaches the table for discussion, she is not interested in the shoe that has been placed on her table and has little to no reaction to the reward of a class dojo. Bate (2021) suggests one theory of avoidant attachment could be due to an abusive or depressed caregiver. Bowbly's attachment theory suggests that early childhood experiences, such as interactions with caregivers play a significant role in the development of attachment styles, Bowlby concluded that children who experience unstable, inconsistent, or even neglectful caregiving may develop an avoidant attachment style. Ainsworth (1985) supports this with her studies including avoidant attachment styles and how they were linked to the quality of care received in early childhood. It could be suggested that the learner in the incident has a role of responsibility at home, maybe as a young carer, and the observation of the learner yawning, potentially through a lack of sleep, or a lack of nourishment such as breakfast, could support the

claim that the learner is not receiving sufficient caregiving. Yet the learner takes on responsibility not being assigned to her, by pointing out where other pupils are sitting when another learner is handing out books. This signifies that the learner is used to independently taking responsibility when not asked in order to help others out, thus supporting the concept that the learner is potentially a young carer. Another argument could be that the learner is not being challenged to her ability. As a high-ability learner, she could be finding the work too simple, thus zoning out in the lessons and being less engaged due to finding the work too simple, as supported by Yahir G (2000) who states that with structural motivation theories, learning is better when the work is challenging.. There might also be a transition involved. The lack of discussion with peers might indicate that she is a new pupil and has still not made meaningful relationships with peers or developed trust with the teacher. The learner observing the class charter could be the pupil's way of identifying other students in the class. At 11:15 minutes in the video the pupil sitting next to the learner left her chair to whisper in the ears of the female students sitting opposite but did not talk to the learner. This might suggest some form of bullying and isolation is present, which again supports the idea of transition and the learner being new to the school, thus the display being a source of comfort..

Teaching and Learning Methods

The teacher in this classroom made sure the majority of learners would be engaged throughout this lesson. The teacher provided a hook when the learners started the task of the shoe, which also provided an authentic learning context (Welsh Government,Hwb 2023) for the learners with their writing and led them to inquiry about the object, with many touching the shoe, smelling the shoe and one learner putting the shoe on his arm. The teacher then went and sat at the table to assess the learners and how they were developing in this task. The teacher used hands up and down for AFL and for volunteers to have a role of responsibility in the class to keep engagement with the learners. The teacher at the end of the lesson used a positive reward scheme “Dojo” to positively reinforce the

learners for their achievements throughout the lesson. However, the learner in the critical incident is not engaged with the teacher or activity, and remains disengaged, even though a high-ability learner. Firstly, due to the nature of this paper, it would be important to discuss the display, and how this could be turned from being a distraction into an aid. Recent studies have shown the impact on learning that too much visual stimulation has on a developing child's ability to focus and learn in the classroom (Barett 2015 and Fisher 2014) It is a very busy display, with a few bright colours that contrast against the neutral theme of the display. If the overall aesthetic is neutral and easy to read, as the dyslexia-friendly typeface here demonstrates, keeping the display minimal and neutral would support the learning rather than distract. It would also be important to create the display with the learners allowing them to lead their own learning and role so they know what is on the display, to ease the awe and wonder (Seefedlt 2002) of observing it. The teacher could also have used the AFL technique of lollypop sticks (C Howard and C Robinson 2018) with learners' names on rather than using hands up and down, which can be used to reinforce the success criteria for the students, also eliciting responses from the learners. Lollypop sticks keep students mentally alert and ready to contribute to the lesson. (E Hartell 2018 & C Howard 2018) Using lollypop sticks might have potentially increased the chances of the critical incident's name being drawn, and reinforcing her knowledge and understanding of the task. When considering the incident in relation to my own response as a teacher, using Graham Gibb's six stage reflective model allows for a more in-depth analysis as compared to the Brookfield lens. This on first impression is an accessible and effective way to reflect, but Gibb's model allows the teacher and/or observer to develop more detail on the critical incident by asking the user to describe the incident, how they felt, an evaluation of what went well and areas to be improved, analysis of the incident to make sense of what happened in the situation, a conclusion which focuses on what the teacher or observer have learned and finally, to come up with an action plan on what they will do differently for a different outcome. In respect of the significance of the display in the critical incident Mary Hanley et al (2017), evidenced a study that looked at the impact that visual displays have on learning, particularly with learners with autism

spectrum disorder (ASD.) It found that learners performed significantly worse in the decorated classroom than the sparse one. In the decorated classroom more time was spent off task, with learners looking at peers and looking at the walls 38.58% in total as opposed to 28.42% in the sparse classroom. This is supported by et al Barrett et al, (2015) and Fisher (2014), where evidence suggests that wall displays have an impact on a pupil's attention and learning particularly in a primary setting. As a teacher on placement, it would be important to focus on the use of displays and how they can be turned into an effective tool in the classroom. As previously discussed the use of hessian as a neutral background In this context (Figure A) was successful, however it is the contrasting bright colours and the vast amount of content that is visible on the display which counteracts the neutral effect of hessian so the display becomes a distraction.

Discussion

In practice, it will be important to adopt Tripp's critical incident methodology alongside Gibbs reflective model, for the most effective way to reflect and learn from incidents that have taken place during the classroom and also how best to improve in the future practice. Currently, my own philosophy of education has strong roots in progressivism, social reconstructionism and existentialism. Reflecting on the twelve pedagogical principles of pedagogy and the four purposes in the curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, HWB 2023), it is important that the learning remains learner-focused, yet displays in the classroom are often teacher-led. This creates curiosity within the learner about the display and what its contents are. However, more primary schools are introducing working walls (Severs J, 2013) which allow learners to actively use the wall to reinforce their learning in a particular subject as an active resource. Allowing the learners to actively participate in the creation of a display, will give the learner more autonomy in their learning experience. Key considerations in a classroom environment as supported by Montessori, Barrett et al (2015) and Fisher et al (2014), would be a highly organised environment, with minimal distractions, the

classroom should, in line with my pedagogical principles and the twelve pedagogical principles, be purposeful and meaningful to the individual learners. Muted displays with subtle use of colour, and information on a display should be clear and simplistic making sure not to cognitively overload a pupil, or distract them from their learning. What that display is connoting to the individual is also important, any factors such as their additional learning needs, ASD or ACE's and as discussed attachment style will impact how the learner engages and interprets a display in the classroom. Tripp's critical incident methodology has shown that, despite a display seeming at first glance neutral, yet purposeful to the learners, how an individual student interprets this display, it actually can actually cause a distraction to a higher ability student.

Conclusion and recommendations

Adopting the critical incident methodology has positively impacted my understanding of learning theories and child development. By delving deeper into a single incident, and by using relevant literature to support it provides the teacher and observer a greater understanding of the incident and the learner. Moving forward it allows a stand alone incident to be dissected, theory used to support why the learner may be responding in a certain way,and by getting to the root of the incident, finding how as a professional it will be solved. With regards to the teaching and learning methods, it is believed that they will be impactful, based upon the research. Showing how they are impactful is by how the learner interacts and responds to the methods used. If the AFL technique of hands up and down is used, and the learner does not engage, then the professional might assume that the use of lollypop sticks might be more successful, though, in this circumstance, it is not possible to tell whether they would have helped this particular learner. Changing the display cannot be done in a moment, but, once changed, a further observation would be needed to assess whether it succeeded in furthering the learner's education or was still a distraction (viz. Research of Mary Hanley et al)

Interventions as well could take place that support the learner's attention span such as establishing a stable routine, small groups or one on one instructions, well-being check ins with the student, establishing if the child is eating healthily and receiving enough sleep, then if necessary a referral to the alternative learning needs coordinator (ALNCO). Making sure that the learner is receiving the necessary support is extremely important in aiding the learner's ability to focus. When learners are supported correctly they are more likely to succeed as supported by Hattie (2019) and Vygotsky (2021). The professional standards (Welsh Government,Hwb 2023) that may be covered by my own pedagogical choices in reflection to the incident, is the pedagogy strain by refining my teaching and learning skills through effectively managing the classroom environment. Taking this forward into practice, it will be important to consider the impact that an overly decorated classroom has on the learners' ability to focus, and how the learners may articulate these displays if there are ACE's, ALN or other learning needs which the display is being used for.

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