

ECAD6007 – C : Who am I teaching?

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Term 1 Assignment: 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

Word Count: 3740

Introduction

This essay will engage with the importance of 'reflective practice', to help imbed such reflection into my career as a student teacher; and also inform my future professional practice. To habitually encourage such thinking, I have observed a 'critical incident' in the real-life classroom, which will be deconstructed in an academic fashion to determine what action could proceed.

David Tripp (2012) cited widely in the field of educational research, proposes that although good techniques and routines can support good teaching practice, they are not sufficiently effective independently, and it is rather the continual awareness of there lying an array of potential solutions to the incident in question that can be seen through different lenses, that really spurs the art of professional judgement within teachers – emphasizing the significance of his critical incident model and analysis. Tripp (2012) states that critical incidents are not occurrences which happen irrespectively of an observer, but are 'created' when an individual witnesses an occurrence that lends itself to interpretation, it is about attaching significance to the occurrence, even if it is not explicitly or stereotypically noteworthy, or even negative. This habit of considering multiple interpretations of an event is what the author encourages throughout his book, that follows the exploration of learning theories. It is a form of 'diagnostic teaching' (Tripp, 2012, p.8), that Bell Et Al (1993) defines as when the messages of the teacher harmonizes with the demands of the pupil with the pupil's powers at the present moment. Tripp (2012) is aware that this form of diagnostic teaching is a difficult-to-acquire intertwining of experience, flexibility, informed opinion and constant self-monitoring, but by actively analysing class-room experiences and relating them to academic 'best' practice, it can be encouraged; and that is what I aim to do here.

This essay will first provide background information on my observed critical incident, along with a description of the issue identified which is non-engagement, that will be followed by reasoning why pupils may be unengaged in a class-room drawing on theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It will then explore relevant literature regarding operant conditioning as a behaviourist learning theory that was used to tackle non-engagement in this instance, and will ensure to regard other theories such as constructivism that can replace tackling the issue of non-engagement. From the literature, I will then conclude next teaching and learning steps and what this means for my own practice.

Observed Critical Incident and Context (Case Study)

The following critical incident in context will ensure that the collected data remains protected, following the standard BERA Guidelines (2018) for ethical educational research. This will include anonymity of the school, and it's relevant pupils and staff to the study. I would also like to disclaim that I am by no means criticizing the current methods in place to tackle non-engagement within the school, the school is fantastic and knows their pupils best - but rather I am exploring alternative means of tackling the issue, hence delving into the academic exploration of reflective practice.

To further adhere to confidentiality when providing context, I will avoid citing the school's website and instead refer to the school's Estyn reports. The observation was noted by myself in an 11-18 English-medium secondary school that I am undertaking placement in in the county borough of Bridgend, Wales – during October of 2023. The school's most recent Estyn report (2021) confirmed no further requirement for Estyn inspection, due it's sufficient progress in addressing the recommendations from the Section 28 inspection, therefore there is no contextual information included in this report. According to the report conducted in (2019), there were 1,036 on roll at that time – with around a quarter of pupils being eligible for free school meals which is higher than the national average. The current national average for eligibility is 23.8% (GOV, 2023) and in reference to

a conversation with a staff member at the school during early October, the eligibility now tops the national average by at least another 7%. Around half of the pupils live in the 20% most deprived of Wales (Estyn, 2021), and upon conversation with that same school staff member, almost 30% have additional learning needs as of 2023. In their last inspection, the school developed a clear vision for raising aspiration in pupils through effective teaching and strong pastoral support – with the involvement of collaboration, research and innovation to effectively model the four purposes as part of the new Welsh Curriculum. The schools strategies were said to be successful in securing high levels of attendance and improved results at KS4, as well as progress of classes as a whole, along with effective provisions for ALN and vulnerable pupils (Estyn, 2019). The school however, at the time possessed an issue with attitudes towards learning; but despite this improving as a whole with no need for further inspection after 2021; there are still pupils that remain to have adverse attitude towards learning upon observation.

The specific class the incident took place in was a Year 10 GCSE class, fourth lesson before lunch time. There were around 20 pupils present in the class, with around 3 absent, and one class-teacher present. The class was mixed gender, but seemingly the majority were male, it appeared that they were allowed to sit together in friendship groups if trusted to do so whereas a select few were seated strategically closer to the teacher for monitoring. The nature of the lesson meant high levels of engagement were required as the teacher was re-visiting topics discussed in the lesson prior, using verbal questioning to check for understanding before they moved onto the next topic. One teacher specifically told me that the strategy of good teaching and learning in the school relies heavily on building relationships, and although the evaluation of this incident will not surround relationship theories, I think it is important to emphasize that the school and this particular class environment embodies this effectively.

At the end of the lesson, I noticed the way in which the students respond to operant conditioning, specifically positive reinforcement (see literature review). The critical incident is as follows:

PUPIL A: 'Miss (addressing teacher) it's not fair, PUPIL B (referring to classmate) always gets the sweet at the end of the lesson'

The school has a blatant problem with non-engagement, and so positive reinforcement in aim to improve engagement is a strategy that seems to be used widespread throughout the lessons I observed, and an effective one at that. The teacher gives out a piece of candy to the person who engaged the most throughout the lesson, and this certainly works as a motivator hence Pupil A's response to Pupil B receiving the sweet. It is unclear to me whether it is the sweet itself in this instance that acts as the positive behaviour trigger here, after all it is a sweet, or whether it's a neutral stimulus representing the strive for validation upon engagement. I would guess the latter.

What I largely take from this critical incident however is that the class struggles to stay engaged unless there is reward, and the fact Pupil A feels worthy of reward without receiving it suggests to me by his verbal communication of 'It's not fair', that this could perhaps have a negative impact on their problem of non-engagement going forward if it does not work for the class as a whole.

Literature Review

There lies an array of literature that suggests poverty is an explicit cause for non-engagement. As outlined in the case study, half of the pupils that attend the school live in the top 20% of the most deprived areas in Wales (Estyn, 2019). With even more pupils now eligible for free school meals, it suggests that these numbers of pupils attending from deprived areas has not declined in time. Although poverty is not the sole variable responsible for incidents of non-engagement (ASCD 2013), It would be ignorant to dismiss the starkness of the issue the school has with both poverty and non-

engagement, and strategies to tackle this may need to be tailored to those experiencing poverty. Ensuring not to mistake causation for correlation, the following has been researched relatively.

According to Eric Jensen (2013) on behalf of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, an internationally recognized institution that supports educators in engaging in the development of highly effective learning systems, pupils from lower income households are more likely to possess adverse attitudes towards learning. A study involving 81,000 students in the US purported that pupils who were not in Title 1 programmes continuously demonstrated higher levels of engagement than students who were eligible for free meals (Jensen citing Mintz, 2007). Drawing from the works of Gorski (2008) on 'The Myth of the Culture of Poverty: Educational Leadership', the author primarily clears up the general narrative that it amounts to the working and middle-class holding values about hard-work that vary (Gorski, 2008), when factually they overlap. The author upon extensive research synthesizes seven main differences between social classes that have a direct link with non-engagement, standing out were poor nutrition, lack of hope from poverty cycles, fixed mindsets, and trauma and it's consequential effect on cognitive ability. In support of this and most reputedly cited in the research surrounding poverty and learning, is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, that Dr. Serhat Kurt (2020), an educational psychologist, applied to learning. Maslow's Pyramid claims humans are motivated by goal accomplishment that allows them to meet their individual desires and needs (Maslow, 1943) – but physiological needs are the first priority followed by safety, and must be satisfied first. Just as Jensen (2013) argued, factors like good nutrition and a stable home environment must be established foremost, otherwise non-engagement can present itself even in the extremes of falling asleep in class, or taking anger out from home on others, as 'people must have these basic needs met in order to focus on anything else – otherwise, their actions will focus solely on meeting these needs', in this instance, education is not their priority and non-engagement will appear (Kurt 2020).

By understanding the pivotal differences between the classes, Jensen (2013) claims teachers can help mitigate some of the negative effects of poverty that appear in their classrooms. For example, returning them to the present by keeping things exciting can be an effective way to retain engagement. Using buy-in-strategies is encouraged – such as curiosity developers, revolving learning about the pupil's ideas by offering them autonomy (Jensen 2013). Aligning with the four purposes of the new Welsh Curriculum (GOV, 2023), Jensen further encourages connecting to pupil's worlds in ways that allow them to see a viable and materialised reason to 'play the academic game', - trends, technology, their friends, and money can be relevant vehicles to do so – minimizing the chances of them 'giving up' due to a demotivating disconnect between their school and outside life. Furthermore, he also cites Miller (2020) – who recommends not making pupils aware that they have a limited focusing capacity. This is especially relevant in this critical incident as it occurred fourth lesson before lunchtime, where pupils are naturally less engaged. Incentive can be 'Stick this out just a little longer, you can do this!' as opposed to 'Don't feel bad you didn't finish, It's late in the day and we all have brain drain' (Miller 2012, cited by Jensen 2013). Teacher and learner beliefs about having fixed 'smarts', limits growth mindset that presents itself in cases of poverty. Ultimately, Jensen (2013) concludes here that his most significant suggestion is to get to know the pupils well, and without taking time to connect with them – these factors will mean very little - just as the school in question philosophizes themselves.

Although poverty seems to be the main driver for non-engagement in the school, it's vital to briefly consider the various other catalysts for non-engagement. For example, Harvard University (Education) (2022) published lack of interest in lesson material and lesson heaviness as two that present prominently. The university also published other factors as causation that overlap with the symptoms of poverty as listed by Jensen and Gorski (2013), but may not be explicitly caused by it –

such as exhaustion, fixed mindsets and hopelessness, that can exist in any pupil despite their background life.

As discussed in the case study, positive re-enforcement seemed to be the most widespread behaviour enforcer in the school. Positive reinforcement is a form of operant conditioning theorized famously by BF Skinner in 1930 (Bates, 2019), building off the traditional behaviourism works of Edward Thorndike in The Law of Effect in the early 1900s (Bates, 2019) – a teacher-led activity that ‘assumes the teacher is in control of what needs to be done, how it will be done and what evidence of behavioural change needs to be produced’, suggesting that the basic foundation of behaviourism is that pupils need direction and that if the stimulus is something they either fear or desire, then the pupil will respond consequently and there will be a visible difference in voluntary behaviour (Bates, 2019). Skinner’s re-enforcers specifically make it more likely a pupil will repeat a behaviour, in this critical incident case – engaging verbally at the end of a lesson in order to receive the sweet (reward), which also requires their attention throughout the whole duration of the lesson in order to get the questions correct in the end.

Behaviourism remains the basis for a lot of teaching even in the 21st century (Bates, 2019), markedly for pupils who require a heightened sense of direction. Skinner (1953) proposed in his initial experiments that not only did PR in particular have a longer effect on behaviour than negative reinforcement, but that the latter could actually be counterproductive. It is ‘Ethical’, unlike punishment-based methods (Waller, 1982), and considered a more humane approach to behaviour modification than negative re-enforcement. Additionally, it can be individualised to suit pupil preferences and motivations, making it adaptable to different situations and classes.

Bates (2019) ensuring to also spin a critical perspective on behaviourism, indicating his diplomatic research methods, claims that more modernist academics view it as an autocratic, transmission led method which does not consider the individual and enquiring nature of people’s mental processes, primarily because of the emphasis on external control and manipulation of behaviour – that objectively disregards free will and internal influences such as thoughts, moods and feelings, which can be likened to autocratic systems (Moore, 2013), suggesting that this can also cause resistance in some pupils. Justifying this argument in context, positive reinforcement may not work for the class as a whole as much as we think, hence Pupil B’s response to Pupil A ‘always receiving the sweet’.

Here it may be important to further consider some opposing academic theorists that may encourage engagement consistency for the class as a whole, and that personal agency and preferences are considered. Bates (2019) builds on the ideas of cognitive expert Piaget (1957 - 1970), who proposed that pupils devise their own knowledge based on their experience and stage of neurological development, key ideas are that ‘learners should be allowed to learn from their mistakes’, and ‘the focus should be on the process of learning as well as the outcome’ (Bates, 2019), respecting their interests, abilities and limits in the meantime, similar to the ideas of Jensen (2013). Ultimately – the author suggest that learners all have something different to offer, and by using more autocratic approaches like operant conditioning and choosing the best pupil, this potential may be untapped.

However, revisiting Kurt (2020) when he explored Maslow’s Pyramid, he alleges that teachers can make students feel safe simply by giving them a sense of predictability, ‘teachers and leaders should enact routines in their classrooms. Set forth clear-cut rules and processes for your students. Maintain a predictable daily schedule’ (Kurt 2020). This suggests that although positive re-enforcement is not a direct response to the child’s personal physiological and safety concerns, it can help foster an environment for them that they may lack at home, that feels expectable and safe to engage more in, as a result having a positive effect on their learning – so this mechanism may well be one of the best the school can use given their context.

Teaching and Learning Methods

Coe Et Al (2020) presents an evidence-based review to formulate 'The Great Teaching Toolkit', comprised of four dimensions that can be met by 17 elements on the route to improve teacher effectiveness. This was identified, reviewed and summarised drawing from both academic reviews and existing frameworks. Given the literature explored in relation to the critical incident that allowed me to understand the wider justifications for teaching practices, I will pull from the dimensions suggested by Coe Et Al (2020) that relate to the specific arguments made in the literature review.

'Ensuring that rules, expectations and consequences for behaviour are explicit, clear and consistently applied' is one of the said elements that is underpinned by the principle of 'Maximising opportunity to learn'. This element mirrors arguments for behaviourism, indicating pupils need a sense of direction. Although behaviourism sees it's critics, It was argued that positive reinforcement not only showed more effective results in modifying behaviour but that it was also more ethical than other behaviourist tactics – and so if I were to carry over any behaviourist ideologies into my teaching It would be positive reinforcement as for the most, was also effectively demonstrated as a motivator in the critical incident and as the literature suggests, a more humane approach to managing behaviour than punishment. Moreover, where Maslow's Pyramid was considered, he alleged that teachers can make students feel safe simply by giving them a sense of predictability, that the objectivity of positive reinforcement can channel in a classroom, which may be suited practice working in a school that faces the symptoms of poverty that were listed in the literature review.

Accounting for the fact it may not be a sustainable managing method going forward, 'Creating a climate of high expectations, with high challenge and high trust, so learners feel it is okay to have a go; encouraging learners to attribute their success or failure to things they can change' and 'Promoting learner motivation through feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness' are two others in the framework that are principled by 'creating a supportive environment'. This on the other hand echoes more of a constructivist approach, that was theorized by Piaget and echoed by Jensen (see literature review). Bates (2019) suggests that if this is going to be implemented in the classroom, teachers must be aware that pupils react and learn differently depending on what stage of cognitive ability they are at, learners should be allowed to learn from their mistakes, and to most importantly 'congratulate your learners on their efforts as well as achievements', considering the process as well as outcome. As Jensen (2013) suggested, this is also a good way to engage those experiencing poverty, as well as those who are not. 'While many personal, family, and cultural factors contribute to students' outcomes, a large body of research indicates that what teachers do, know and believe matters more to the achievement of students than anything else we can influence' (Coe Et Al, 2012)

Given the circumstances and following the notion of my own independent nature to take less of an autocratic approach, I would likely keep behaviourism techniques to a minimal in aim of adopting a more holistic approach. This can be justified by Pupil A feeling dismissed by his efforts and not being the one person at the end of class to receive the sweet, that in future can cause behavioural resistance issues. In doing so, I am not dismissing the effectiveness of operant conditioning and the positive intentions it was incorporated through in this instance, but rather to attempt a fresher slant on non-engagement that does not depend on operant conditioning, equating their progress with individual level of effort instead. More specifically and accounting for external factors like time of day, such as this taking place before lunch time where attention naturally dwindles, I would be inclined to take the advice of Miller (2012) who suggests limiting making students aware of fixed 'smarts', or in this case enticing a sweet to retain engagement and instead use motivating language like 'Stick it out, you can do this!'

On balance, Coe Et Al (2020) states that great teaching must be defined by its impact, and cannot be defined by compliance to certain practices however justified, as it is a complex art. However, as the evidence suggests, it is better to bring the latest findings in than not to.

Discussion

Critical evaluation is able to highlight strengths and weaknesses of a particular teaching practice, this enables me as a student teacher to understand how improvements can be made on a continual cyclic basis. For example, I think it is crucial that the theories of Piaget are carried over into my practice, as they are premised on the idea that pupils devise their own knowledge based on their experiences and stage of cognitive development, meaning their development cannot equate to outcomes of reinforcement or punishment methods and instead their personal processes. Piaget's ideas have allowed me to consider the wider picture of child development and that it is not linear thus I must work holistically.

In contrast to this, as I am taking placement in this school, it would be radical to entirely re-invent the wheel when attempting to improve engagement, the teacher in the observation knows their learners, and just as Tripp (2012) is aware of, diagnostic teaching is a difficult-to-acquire intertwining of experience, flexibility, informed opinion and constant self-monitoring, which a qualified teacher with years in the classroom has more of – re-iterating that this is engaging in reflective practice mainly by academic theory, with no relationship of my own currently to these learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although we often think that critical incidents are earth shattering events, 'lesser' incidents have proved from the literature to have a disproportionate and profound potential effect. On reflection of the scenario, I am able to appreciate the reasons why practices were carried out. Moreover, Kurt (2020) alleged that teachers can make students feel safe simply by giving them a sense of predictability, that positive reinforcement embodied that in turn theoretically, has a positive effect on their learning, despite not being a direct response to their psychological needs whether poverty related or not. This is where the works of Piaget, Jensen and Gorski could perhaps be introduced.

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