

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.

Introduction

In order to critically evaluate and identify my intended next teaching and learning steps I focused on an observed critical incident of a group of learners. Critical Incidents are used for the purpose of identifying good practices of teaching and aim to highlight which practices are not working well. By reflecting on our practice, we can gain professional awareness and thus follow the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership. The evaluation of this incident will be discussed involving theories around memory retention and collaborative learning. Research associated with these topics will be investigated, their strengths and weaknesses analysed, with the aim of developing techniques in my future teaching practice.

The Role of Critical Reflection

The role of critical reflection is integral to the development of teaching as a profession. Through the interpretation and analysis of a teaching event we can see the significance that it had, and its effect upon the pupils involved. This methodology was pioneered by Tripp who emphasised the importance of the 'what'; the observation and documentation of an event, and the 'why'; the investigation into the meaning or value of an event (Tripp, 1993). Although earlier research doesn't support Tripp's conclusion, where critical reflection of an incident is seen as nothing but self-criticism with an angle towards improvement (Calderhead, 1989). However rather than self-criticism the use of reflection could be viewed as self-awareness, and a way for teachers to build a community of collaboration and open-mindedness. As responsible, whole-hearted and open-minded reflective people (Dewey, 1933), we can embrace wanting to do better comfortably and confidently. In our practice critical reflection is used to remain child-focussed, and not to be personally critical of ourselves. We can review our teaching technique, see our practice through the eyes of the student, receive colleague feedback and work with theoretical literature (Brookfield, 1995). Furlong, who wrote the review on teacher training, advised that there was too much focus on teachers being able to 'do' (or to be able to relay information) at the end of their training, and so not enough emphasis was being placed on research led teaching or critical reflection (Furlong, 2015). The emphasis needed, as outlined by Furlong, is mirrored by the new Welsh 2022 Curriculum.

The Welsh curriculum was reviewed by Donaldson in 2015, in *Successful Futures*, where it was made evident that clear purposes must be set out in order to display why the curriculum and pedagogy of the Welsh education system is formatted as it is (Donaldson 2015). The purposes were put into four parts - ambitious capable learners, enterprising creative contributors, ethical informed citizens and healthy confident individuals. Alongside these purposes, six areas of learning and experience were also outlined: Expressive arts, Health and well-being, Humanities, Languages, literacy and communication, Mathematics and numeracy, and Science and technology. These purposes and areas incorporate traditional school subjects and show how vital it is to provide a broad and balanced education, however it has come under some criticism in arguments querying why Donaldson's review cannot be united into one single coherent curriculum (Gately 2020). Gately claims that the content in the four purposes make the areas of learning redundant - activities that would fulfil Donaldson's purposes: are not possible within a subject-based curriculum. In order to enable critical reflection in teaching, we must be able to clearly reflect on the key elements of the curriculum and their inclusion within the classroom, and so the proposition of one coherent curriculum rather than multiple branches within said curriculum seems beneficial. Additionally, the five Professional Standards: pedagogy, collaboration, leadership, innovation and professional learning, give teachers a blueprint for the ways in which they should develop professionally and reflect on their teaching practice (Education Wales, 2018). Following these standards teachers can improve their pedagogy overtime and be more flexible with their leadership style. In combination, these guidelines should create happier and more effective teachers. A climate of collaborative mutual support to work productively with their school, colleagues and pupils, through reflection and innovation, extends and magnifies the teachers professional learning.

Observation

According to BERA guidelines for anonymity, names of pupils and of the institution will not be included and instead referred to as Pupil A, B, and C, and School X (BERA, 2018). These guidelines are followed in order to protect the privacy of those participating in research studies. Regarding the school and class context of School X, the Primary institution consists of 427 pupils aged from three to eleven years of age. According to School X's last Estyn report from January 2020, there is a three-year average for pupils eligible for free school meals totalling 21%, comparative to the lower Welsh national average of 18%. Most pupils are of White British ethnicity and come from homes where English is the first language, meaning that very few pupils speak Welsh at home. Approximately 30% of pupils in School X have Additional Learning Needs, which is substantially above the Welsh average of 21%. The case study observed specifically took place in a Year 1 classroom with children aged five and six. Within this classroom there were 25 pupils, with two of which having Additional Learning Needs. The institute also received judgements of 'Excellent' in each inspection

area of their 2020 Estyn report - it should be considered that an average of 15.6% of Welsh Primary schools receive this judgement of the highest level in every category (Estyn Annual Report, 2019-2020).

Critical Incident

The critical incident that will be referenced in this evaluation took place at nine o'clock on a Thursday morning (refer to Record 1 in the Appendix). The children were asked to sit on the carpet in front of the class teacher where the administrative activities to begin the day would start. The class register and lunch record was completed, and the class teacher went on to select the Helpwr Heddiw - Today's Helper. Two helpers were chosen each morning for the purpose of assisting the class teacher with simple tasks. These helpers would also be allowed to sit on the Helpwr Heddiw chairs for the day, that were placed in front of the rest of the class. The pupils were visibly excited to find out who would be selected, some voicing complaint when Pupil A and B were chosen and called up to the front of the class. The class teacher pointed out the Days of the Week and Today's Weather cards on the presentation board and asked the helpers to select the correct options to correspond with the day. These cards were in the Welsh language and had images to help the pupils with the meanings. Pupil A selected the Dydd Iau/Thursday card correctly and stuck it to the presentation board. They seemed proud and confident with their choice and rushed to sit in their Helpwr Heddiw chair. However, Pupil B was less confident and seemed anxious now being stood alone in front of the class. Pupil B quietly told the class teacher that they were confused between two of the weather options – Cymylog/Cloudy and Gwyntog/Windy. The class teacher turned to the class and asked if anyone could help Pupil B, immediately two children raised their hands eagerly. Pupil C was selected and answered that it was windy when they had got out of their parents' car that morning. The class teacher then addressed the class as a whole stating that the answer would then be Gwyntog. Pupil B had listened to the interaction, quickly grabbed the correct card and stuck it to the presentation board. The incident ended with Pupil B smiling and sitting in the remaining Helpwr Heddiw chair.

In relation to the four purposes of the new Welsh Curriculum, the case study observed is arguably representative of this balance between knowledge, skill and experience (Donaldson, 2015). Firstly, in this incident the daily integration of Welsh language is exhibited in a simple and functional format. In this sense the pupils can feel like and work toward becoming ethical informed citizens of Wales. In addition, the classroom teacher encouraged the pupils to be confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society by allowing scaffolding to take place between Pupil B, Pupil C and the teacher. Pupil B was initially anxious and unsure, but with support from their classmates they were able to complete the task happily and confidently. Gradually these behaviours will work to create empathetic and kind contributors, through helping each other to reach resolutions. The attitudes of the children at the beginning of the activity, their eagerness to be Helpwr

Heddiw, show their confidence in being ambitious and feeling capable. The assumed anxiety of Pupil B in this activity was quelled by the class teacher's introduction of classroom contribution. Overall, the experience during the incident displayed an Existentialist approach by creating meaning in the education being carried out.

Literature Review

Memory Retention

The ability to input information into long term memory is essential to education. Information must be processed and structured so that it can make sense to the learner. The use of specific tools, for example: repetition, association, visual stimulation, can enable pupils to reinforce ideas and move them from their short term to their long-term memory. In students being encouraged to learn they can benefit from building useful qualities like curiosity, self-motivation, and communication skills. However, without an awareness of well-being in the classroom pupil's ability to develop knowledge is hindered, and so in our teaching practice this factor must be at the forefront of our minds.

The basis of the modern curriculum was born from Piaget's theories on the origins of intelligence in children. Recent research conducted around learning and the development of cognition disagrees with Piaget and adapts his ideas. The theorist believed that learning was only advanced through maturation, and according to your age and level of ability (Piaget, 1952). Modern researchers place a greater emphasis on the stage of the child rather than the age.

The theory of Dual Coding, proposed by Paivio, outlined that there are two channels of cognition – verbal and visual (Paivio, 1991). Through pairing words and images, it was found that associate connections can be established. In the application of Dual Coding there are four guidelines (Volz, 2019): distributing information between verbal and non-verbal processes, the reduction of unnecessary processing, avoid redundancy and favouring graphical displays for complex information. These guidelines give pupils opportunities to engage in active learning and allows the teacher to put in the work to create a permanent store of knowledge in their pupils. In the critical incident observed, cards were used that combined weather images and words in the Welsh language, the combination of these worked to create an association between the two for the pupils. In using the aid of clear images to associate with the verbal cues, the difficulty of adding new Welsh language words was eased. To criticise the Dual Coding theory, it's debateable that the theory is applicable for all students. Pupils gravitate to modes of instruction as per their learning preferences. Therefore, it could be proposed that Dual Coding could still be used but according to skill level or stage, varying difficulty of words and size of visual images.

In order to retain memory, we must avoid information overload, the use of Cognitive Load Theory established that we must hold information in our working memory before it is

processed into the long-term memory. Sweller conceptualised the German Cognitive Load which focuses on the construction of schemas. A schema can be defined as the pattern of thought or behaviour that organises different areas of information (Sweller, 2010). Through the repeated use of schemas in combination with the students' applied prior knowledge, linking new and old information together, the transfer from working to long-term memory can function. Through this method students can take a shortcut in interpreting the information given to them. Criticism of this theory, outlined by researcher Julie Watson, explores how it is likely for students to become distracted if ideas are explained too simply to them. Additionally, within this theory there is an overemphasis on teacher-led instruction rather than child-led, which doesn't reflect the aims of the Welsh 2022 Curriculum. Lastly, cognitive load is not measurable and so we can only rely on self-reporting which would be unreliable to use as a base-level for all children (Watson, 2021). However, Caviglioli built on Sweller's work by adding the Transient Information Effect, stating that once something is taught verbally the words disappear and the students must put effort into keeping the words in their mind (Caviglioli, 2019). Linking to Dual Coding theory, when visual cues are applied to verbal ones a pattern is formed, and the data organised – thus a schema created. The way in which pieces of information are combined, the old and the new, is further explained by Donovan and Bransford (Donovan and Bransford, 2005). In their work they explained that expert learners make connections between pieces of information in order to create an understanding. However, novice learners do not make these connections and instead see the pieces of information separately and unorganised. An example of how to develop novices into expert thinkers would be to use Dual Coding methods, creating links in understanding between verbal and visual cues.

Collaborative Learning

The Professional Standard of Collaboration is important for teachers and pupils alike. In children working as a team within the classroom teachers can allow pupils to lead their own learning and share their knowledge and ideas. Additionally, collaboration can be fostered amongst the adults in a child's life, in order to offer support and stability. The work of Vygotsky, Brofenbrenner and Leavers explore the ways in which children learn and develop within their communities, their emotional awareness and intellectualism growing through social interaction.

The conception of the Zone of Proximal Development was established by Vygotsky, who viewed a child's educational development as inseparable from their social context. The zone was pinpointed by looking at the areas of what a child can and can't do and finding the space in between; what a child can do with help. According to Vygotsky we should socialise and thus learn with someone more knowledgeable than ourselves, or in other words our more knowledgeable other. The perfect setting for this zone of proximal development was concluded to be schools, where children can interact with those of all stages. An

environment that enables pupils to scaffold each other in their learning, with assistance from the class teachers, offering support until they can work independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Alternatively, there has been criticism of Vygotsky's theory, claiming that the role of the individual is not considered. In this sense it could be argued that the Zone of Proximal Development disregards independent intellectual growth and does not consider that people differ in their learning styles. Chalkin states that the theory is unclear as it fails to account for a clear picture of a child's learning needs, capability level or motivational influences (Chalkin, 2003). The Zone theory lacks in that there is little explanation of the development process itself or how the development occurs, and so using the theory as a tool to measure children's ability seems disadvantageous. Despite Chalkin's claims however, the use of scaffolding in the critical incident observed was effective in building Pupil B and C's confidence and allowed the children to direct their own learning. This showed a clear success in using the socially constructivist teaching method, despite some of its limitations in explanation and reasoning.

Support systems can be vital to children's ability to learn comfortably and happily. The collaboration between children, their parents, teachers and peers work to build a strong foundation where they can develop and learn securely. Bronfenbrenner built the Ecological Systems Theory, five systems of Ecology: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory was used to examine individual's relationships within their immediate family and wider society. As a holistic and dynamic approach, good communication between these systems creates a more complete understanding of an individual child's situation. Thus, enabling the community of systems to better serve the child's social, emotional and physical needs. Although Bronfenbrenner's theory is assumptive that children without a support system will develop negatively or have a lack of development. Christensen writes that an Ex-Macro system should be included within the theory, to account for the way in which individuals influence themselves and their own independent learning in life (Christensen, 2016). Children are not just passive observers; they have their own thoughts and experiences that contribute to their development internally.

In order to optimise the learning opportunities for each child in a classroom the teacher must be observant in taking in the level of involvement. The Leaven Scale of Levels of Involvement allows us to categorise pupils into groups from extremely low to extremely high involvement (Leavers, 1994). The inclusion of children within a group of peers, and the provision of stimulating activities, supports them in developing positive relations amongst children and with their teachers. The teacher's awareness of the scales of involvement within the classroom provides an insight into the well-being of children in the class environment. This awareness also ensures that the right physical and emotional environment is provided for learning. The scale created serves to create better observation skills in class teachers, however some factors have not been accounted for; children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and those with cultural differences (Learning Journals, 2021). Those with Additional

Learning Needs may not react in the same way to certain encouragement or activities. Additionally, the behaviours outlined to indicate involvement in the Leaven Scale aren't always evident in ALN pupils. Those with cultural differences or with English as an Additional Language (EAL), could face language barriers or may not be accustomed to the socio-cultural environment and so could feel ostracised. Through this viewpoint of the Leaven Scale, we can broaden our awareness and create more inclusive activities within the classroom for all children involved.

Reflection/ Evaluation and Next Steps

With the intention to develop and improve our teaching practice we must reflect on what we experience in education. As a key feature of the 2022 Welsh Curriculum, being able to observe class members actively speaking Welsh displayed how the language can be included alongside everyday learning. The ways in which the class teacher used dual coding, images alongside Welsh words, gave the children the tools to connect the two concepts together. Dual coding works to provide connections for learners so that ideas can more easily move from their short term to long term memory. Although in the incident observed dual coding was shown to not be completely effective, Pupil B was unsure of how to connect the two concepts of the weather image and the Welsh word. Pupil A and C were able to make these connections, and so a gap in the learning of some of the students was shown in Pupil B's reaction to the task. Reflecting on this experience, in my own teaching practice I would work to encourage the unsure pupil to make connections in their learning. As per Donovan and Bransford's model - what differentiates an expert from a novice is the ability to organise and connect a set of ideas (Donovan and Bransford, 2005). The ability to organise ideas is what creates an understanding. If Pupil B was still unsure after some encouragement, the method the class teacher carried out is how I would then look to proceed. Through using the Zone of Proximal Development, the teacher was able to offer other more knowledgeable students as a helping hand to Pupil B, and thus extend Pupil B's understanding. In scaffolding through peers, it seemed that Pupil B was better able to digest the information, seeming less nervous and anxious to hear the answer shared from a classmate rather than in front of the class by the class teacher. In guiding the children in this way, the class teacher allowed the children to lead their own learning and was also able to pinpoint which children knew the answer. If I were in a similar context in my own teaching practice, I would be interested in trying the 'No Hands Up' method. The idea of children not putting their hands up and instead the class teacher selecting children to answer. Originally cultivated by Rowe, it was found that an increased wait time should allow many pupils in a class to answer a question without having to raise their hands (Rowe, 1986). This approach also looks to encourage class discussion and the engagement of all pupils. Additionally, however, it is important to remain impartial in this method as the class teacher so as not to select the same children to answer. In order to combat this, it would be useful to use an ICT

application to randomise pupil's names (The Cool 'no hands' Approach to Assessment for Learning - Teaching Expertise, 2021). Through using technology in this way, the class teacher could also integrate digital competency by allowing a pupil to operate the randomiser or by encouraging the pupils to instruct the class teacher when to stop the randomiser.

The role of critical reflection upon informing my professional development is influenced by the work of Tripp and Brookfield. Tripp outlined that we can utilise observations of critical incidents by finding significance and meaning to attach to the incident (Tripp, 1993). In doing so teachers can gain greater self-awareness in their practice, actively research and share ideas with their fellow practitioners. Brookfield categorised four areas where teachers can process their critical reflection - a reflective model that puts the child at the centre (Brookfield, 1995). Additionally, Schön's outlook was reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, studying an event at the time and afterwards (Schön, 1991). Adding to Schön's theory, Wilson's ideas of reflection-before-action or reflecting-on-the-future look to create a more complete reflective practice (Wilson, 2008). The next steps I will take in my teaching practice will be to use the reflection techniques explored in order to remain aware and seek improvement as I grow as a teaching practitioner.

Conclusion

In evaluating the critical incident observed, using readings of learning theories and literature, I have been able to identify my next teaching and learning steps. In using critical reflection methods researched, I will be able to actively apply improvement in my teaching practice after each experience in the classroom. Reflective of the work of Brookfield and Wilson, my practice will aim to be child centred, mindful and research based. This approach to the role of the reflective practitioner will follow the new Professional Standards of Teaching and Leadership in keeping pedagogy, innovation and collaboration as key components. My research into memory retention will be used to make sure that my pupils have the tools to make connections between ideas and take on information through creating schemas. Whereas the theories researched regarding collaborative learning showed me how important communication between a child's support systems are. Furthermore, I found that learning can be provided by both the teacher and other students through scaffolding techniques. The awareness required in the classroom to bring these methods together is essential in being both a reflective and observant educator.

Appendix

OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES

Record 1

Date and time, year group: 22 nd September 2021, 9:10 AM, Year 1
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context First activity of the day. Children all sat on the carpet in front of the teacher. Choosing day of the week and weather of the day in Welsh.
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work) Two Helpur Heddiw were chosen to select the correct day of the week and weather of the day from the Welsh sticker cards to stick on the presentation board. Children were excited to be selected and got up to stand at the front next to the teacher. Upon selecting the correct sticker cards the children seemed to become unsure and nervous about choosing the right answer. Specifically, one of the helpers was unsure about whether to pick cloudy or windy, he asked the teacher for help and the teacher referred to the class and asked if someone could help him. Another child raised their hand and answered correctly. Both children completed the task and sat back down on the carpet with smiles on their faces.
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be "under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? Child was nervous about picking correct answer, possibly because of nervousness as he was in front of the class. However, child was comfortable enough to ask for help, and the help was given easily and happily - Could look at Mental Health and children's participation in class (could mention Ability Grouping in this class). Inclusion of the Welsh Language - the new curriculum Socio Constructivism - Lev Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding Germane Cognitive Load (development of schemas and applied prior knowledge) Dual Coding Children leading their own learning. Collaboration. Leadership - Professional Standards
Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here) All children were sat together on the carpet and focussed on the teacher at the front of the class. Children were excited about the Helpur Heddiw being selected, but otherwise not many distractions. Instructions for task were made clear and seemed to be repeated every morning.

Record 2

Date and time, year group: 22 nd September 2021, 12:45 PM, Year 1
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context After lunchtime, children sat on carpet, story time.
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work) Story time with 'Supertato' book. Class teacher read book to children as they sat on the carpet. Throughout reading class teacher highlighted images of food and used these as stop points to discuss diet and healthy foods. Class teacher made various gestures and made voices for characters throughout, which children repeated and mirrored.
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be "under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? Repetitive action and gestures from teacher copied by children – fine and gross motor skills. Expressive Arts in the children's copying of movement and language. Use of stop points during story to build on it and increase children's understanding of story.
Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here) Children very engaged, all sat on carpet and focussed on story

Record 3

Date and time, year group: 23 rd September 2021, 10:45 PM, Year 1

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

Before breaktime, children sat on carpet, phonics sing-a-long.

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

Children singing along to phonics video on Youtube. Not all children were looking at the board. Teacher addressed this afterwards and asked a specific child what they should do during the sing-a-long time. Child answered that they should be looking at the board and following the song.

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

Existentialism and child led learning. Collaboration between Teacher and pupil. Progressivism and nourishing spiritual and intellectual development.

Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here)

Lots of interest from pupils with singing and humming tune but not with following the phonics in the Youtube video.

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