



Prifysgol Cymru

Y Drindod Dewi Sant

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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.

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A critical incident can be described as an event out of the range of normal experience, in the classroom it refers to a situation that has a significant impact on students, teachers or the school community. Although these situations may be positive, they can also be traumatic or disruptive and may lead to negative consequences. A critical incident can provide a valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses of an individual and are events that encourage further reflection and research (Tripp, 2012). Schon also stated that critical incidents are opportunities for learning and professional development. The purpose of a critical incident is to help teachers learn and grow to better serve their students, it will identify areas for improvement and allow teachers to use their reflections to apply new knowledge to future pedagogy and teaching philosophies. It is important to note that whilst the incident itself doesn't have to be critical, the research following the event and further practice is. It is important that teachers are able to reflect on their practice so that they can be aware of underlying beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching. Reflection can allow teachers to meet a number of professional standards which ensures that they are providing their pupils with best practice (Murphy, 1995).

This assignment will discuss in detail a critical incident observed in a year three classroom based in a primary school in the Vale of Glamorgan. The school's latest Estyn inspection reports that pupil's wellbeing and emotional development are at the heart of the school and that staff place a great deal of emphasis on ensuring that the school is a reflective and inclusive environment. The classroom where observations have taken place comprises twenty-six pupils with no diagnosed additional learning needs. The teacher has no learning support assistants and places the children in mixed ability seating. The research being conducted in this assignment will identify the connection between disruptive behaviours displayed in a classroom and whether these behaviours could indicate signs of underlying anxieties.

The critical incident observed will be discussed in relation to various research including behaviourist and psychosocial theories, behaviour management and mental health in the classroom. This assignment aims to identify the connection between disruption and anxiety in pupils and link this with appropriate and relevant literature before outlining personal reflections that can inform future practice.

Children who engage in disruptive classroom behaviours may be communicating their anxiety. It is important that rather than labelling bad behaviour, teachers instead question why these children are disengaged (Bates, 2021). A variety of factors can contribute to children's disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Children experience physiological changes that are driven by hormonal activity and these changes work alongside the child's own personality and character, this can lead to issues relating to both positive and negative behaviours. Hughes (2020) linked disruptive behaviours with attachment difficulties, stating that children who had not formed secure attachments with their caregivers were more likely to present disruptive behaviours. He developed a theory of P(L)ACE (playful, loving, accepting, curious and empathetic) which he claims enables a child to develop resources to resolve and integrate difficult emotional experiences without being overwhelmed by anxiety. Perry (2003) on the other hand, linked disruptive behaviours with childhood trauma, he believed that trauma disrupts the development of the brain's stress response system which can result in problems such as hypervigilance and difficulty controlling one's emotions which in turn leads to disruptive behaviour. Perry did however believe that anxiety could be a trigger for disruptive behaviour and declared that children who were anxious were more likely to act out disruptively in order to cope with their anxiety. Nash et al (2015) noted that challenging behaviour in children is caused by underlying fear and anxiety rather than an intent to be disruptive, where anxiety at school is shown in forms of disruptive behaviour the pupil may be disciplined for behaviour to which she had a small amount of cognitive control over. In order for a child to manage this anxiety there needs to be a response that the child can tolerate (Howard, et al, 2020). Howard, et al, (2017) highlighted that the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice outlined that schools needed to support children who have social, emotional and mental health needs. This included children who were withdrawn or isolated as well as those who exhibited disruptive or challenging behaviours, with these conditions often being linked with anxiety. "A child who appears oppositional or aggressive may be reacting to anxiety he cannot articulate", Miller (2016) explains anxiety as something that exists because of a physiological response to a threat in that person's environment, a threat to which a child would respond with a fight, flight or freeze. In schools, the more common identified symptoms of anxiety in a child are avoidance of particular tasks/activities and a behaviourally inhibited temperament. Broeren (2009) would agree with Miller, also claiming that children who show behavioural inhibition were more likely to be afraid, anxious or uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations. Miller goes on to discuss how it is not

uncommon for children at school to have undiagnosed anxiety and also be disruptive in the classroom, more specifically when demands and pressures are put onto them.

B.F. Skinner believed that behaviour is shaped by its consequences. His theory of operant conditioning referred to the idea that behaviours followed by positive consequences are likely to be repeated and those behaviour followed by negative consequences were less likely to be repeated. Ollendick (2015) recognised the importance of operant conditioning processes, claiming that they were a major mechanism in identifying that external factors caused childhood anxiety. Skinner expressed that disruptive behaviours in children could be a sign of anxiety, he suggested that anxiety could be learned through operant conditioning, that if the response to their anxiety was an overreaction that they will in turn believe that anxiety should be feared and avoided rather than dealt with, this is a conditioned fear that ultimately would make their anxiety worse (Schlinger, 2022). Like Skinner, Ivan Pavlov also based his theory on the idea that behaviour is shaped by consequences. Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning has been used to explain human behaviours such as anxiety and disruptive behaviour. Pavlov suggested that children who are exposed to a traumatic event are likely to develop a conditioned fear of people or the situation associated with that event, a fear that results in anxiety which is often displayed through disruptive behaviours. Pavlov also discussed that anxiety could be learned through observational learning: a child who sees a parent acting anxious in particular situations may learn to associate those situations with those behaviours and will often mimic them (Gray and Macblain, 2015). Albert Bandura would agree with Pavlov, also stating that children learn by observing the behaviours of others. Bandura's social learning theory identified that children learn new behaviours through observation of others, by being rewarded or punished for their own behaviours and by imitating the behaviours of others. Bandura's theory linked anxiety with perceived threats, discussing the idea that when children experienced anxiety, they learn to avoid situations that trigger this emotion which led to avoidance behaviours that interfered with their learning (Grusec, 1994). Skinner, Pavlov and Bandura's theories derive from a behaviourist point of view, an approach that has been criticised for using external rewards and punishments to control behaviour, whilst ignoring the underlying emotions that may be driving the behaviour. Although often considered to be a powerful way of conditioning children to behave, it is also allowing children to rely on rewards or fear of punishment to make them behave, once it has been

removed the children may then struggle to self-regulate their behaviour on their own (Rose, 2016).

Erik Erikson's idea of anxiety and disruptive behaviours comes from a humanistic approach believing that problem behaviour is shaped in part by social environment. Erikson believed that the development of a child's personality depends directly on trust, autonomy, intimacy, individuality, integrity and identity and certain behaviours and emotions may be signs of developmental issues such as anxiety. Erikson suggested that anxiety and disruptive behaviour in children could be an indication that the child is having difficulty mastering a certain task, he implies that children who display disruptive behaviours do so in order to assert independence and often experience anxiety because they are feeling inadequate or incompetent (Barker-Smith, 2001).

Thomas Gordon developed a theory of communication and conflict resolution. Gordon did suggest that disruptive behaviours and anxiety were linked however, Gordon also argued that disruptive behaviour can instead be caused by a variety of factors including unclear expectations, lack of choices, power struggles and unmet needs and ultimately comes down to parenting styles that are either too controlling or too permissive (Gordon, 1991). Rudolph Dreikurs' theory of social discipline considered that disruptive behaviour is a way of children trying to get their needs met in an unhelpful way. Dreikurs proposed that all behaviour, including disruptive behaviour, is purposeful and is driven by a child's need to belong and to feel significant (Dreikurs, 2013).

The chosen incident for this assignment occurred in a year three classroom on the first week of placement experience, there were 26 pupils in the classroom with just one class teacher and myself. The pupils all sat at their desks in mixed ability groupings as the teacher conducted a mathematics and numeracy lesson with a focus on multiplication and division. The children were all provided with whiteboards and marker pens to write down their sums and answers. The teacher began to recap on the previous lesson, asking the children multiplication sums and writing them on the board and at this moment I noticed child A picking up a pencil sharpener, that he had already been asked to put away, and begin to sharpen his pencil. The sharpener itself was rather a noisy one and so gained the attention of the other children in the room. As the teacher continued to ask children questions using a hands-up only response to answer, child A did not contribute and instead continued to use his pencil sharpener. Child A was very

observant of his peers, looking around the classroom and listening to his peers answer the questions. Child A proceeds to roll an eraser over the table, which again causes disruption to the class, and throws it numerous times into the air. The teacher asks child A to put this down to which he obliges. After a few moments the teacher asks the children to open up their maths books and write down the date and learning objective. Child A begins to swing on his chair whilst again moving the eraser around on the table. When child A is asked to start his work, he opens up his book straight away and starts to write the date and learning objective. I noticed that this took child A quite a while to do and so I approached him to see that he was happy and understood the task. His response was 'yes' and therefore I left him to continue. After a few minutes I notice the class teacher approaching child A where she notices that he has not yet started to write down the sums provided in his book, she asks the child the questions instead and he is able to answer them very quickly, without using any calculation aids. From this observation it is clear that child A understood the task at hand but was unaware that his disruptive behaviours contributed to the disruption of the teaching. This observation allowed me to consider many different avenues to focus my research on; special educational needs and disability, anxious behaviours and lack of 'more able and talented' (MAT) support were all considerations. I identified early on during my start of placement that there was no additional support for this class teacher in the form of a learning support assistant and therefore the teacher is extremely busy during lesson times, she spent all of her time floating between the pupils and providing as much support as she possibly could whilst also ensuring they were all on task and given extension tasks where necessary. I also noted that this lesson was the first of the day, the children came into the classroom quite excitedly and took a few minutes to settle. The teacher's directions were clear however during the lesson activity I noticed that the MAT children would often wander around their peers, causing distraction to them. For this particular critical incident I have chosen to focus my further research on child A potentially experiencing anxiety which may link with the constant disruptive behaviours he presents, not only in this specific lesson but throughout the majority of his day. This school's behaviour and relationship policy provides a statement that says they are committed to Trauma Informed Schools (TIS) educational practices which protect, relate, regulate and reflect, as a part of this they follow Hughes' PACE theory, to which all staff are trained in. Hughes' theory encourages teachers and school staff to be warm, empathetic, playful and curious which has been shown to 'shift' pupils out of flight, fight or freeze situations (Hughes, 2015). As per the above literature, many theorists in

education believe that anxiety and disruptive behaviours in the classroom are connected. Sheridan (2019) stated that children who are disruptive often have difficulty identifying and managing their emotions. Vygotsky claimed that children who display behaviours that are disruptive are aware of their mother's moods and use these to interpret their environment, this involves emotional regulation, a mood that children often need assisting with (Hornbuckle, 2010), this idea relates back to that of Gordon who believed that parenting styles played an essential role in a child's development of anxiety. Bronfenbrenner and Erikson believed that anxiety and disruptive behaviours were interlinked, with both theorists suggesting that children who were unable to regulate their emotions would begin to display disruptive behaviours at school. Although Pavlov, Skinner and Bandura had differing ideas on why the two were linked they still believed that anxiety played a part in the development of anxiety in children.

Typically, the general guidance for managing disruptive behaviour in the classroom is to avoid turning the incident into a class issue by addressing only the pupil who is causing the disruption, avoid developing any argument and to not blame or ridicule the child (Baker, 2020). It is important to address behaviour management appropriately to take into account potential anxiety and the teaching styles that are more beneficial for these children. In doing this, research has evidenced that it is essential that children are praised when they have done something well: praise that is immediate, specific and consistent demonstrates the teacher's belief in the child's potential. A way of being consistent could also involve liaising with the child's caregivers wherever possible to have a consistent home and school plan to manage anxiety and disruption (Farrell, 2006).

For children who display disruptive behaviours often in the classroom, it is important to consider various teaching and learning methods that they are more likely to respond to. The teaching and learning methods that I would be more likely to use frequently include creating a structured and predictable learning environment, using positive reinforcement and using differentiated instruction.

Inquiry-based learning is one method of teaching that I feel I would like to use in the classroom to effectively be able to identify the difference in learning in the children who show disruptive behaviours/anxiety. Where teachers have more freedom to provide various tools, resources and experiences that enable children to investigate, explore, reflect and ask questions, children will be given the chance to express their curiosity and

explore their environment with inquisitiveness. From these experiences children are more likely to build their confidence, actively engage in lessons and therefore decrease their anxiety (Ryan, 2016). Although inquiry based learning does not help to create a structured environment per se, it does allow for differentiated instruction. Inquiry based learning allows teachers to provide open-ended experiences and investigations that children can enter at their own readiness levels, it is centred around their interests and questions and children's reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are enhanced. Children learn best when the opportunities given to them are authentic and this is a principle that can be more fluently incorporated into an inquiry-based approach (Williams, 2013). Whilst this method of teaching and learning is widely accepted as a strong pedagogical strategy, it has been criticised for its inability to achieve standardisation of curriculum for all pupils. Allowing different learning experiences for different pupils can make it challenging to ensure that all pupils have the same strong educational foundations, which is a key goal in education. Murdoch (2019) also highlighted that inquiry based learning lacks sufficient support for pupils, the absence of clear intentions and the need for teaching that is more explicit.

Positive behaviour support (PBS) in the classroom can help to alleviate stress and improve children's behaviours, thus creating improved classroom culture. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning had a major impact on the development of PBS, his research shows that positive reinforcement is an effective way to help to increase desired behaviours (Jarmolowicz, 2015). PBS is based on a set of principles, it reiterates that all behaviour is caused by something, that it has a purpose and that behaviour can change when the environment is changed. In the classroom it would involve identifying disruptive behaviours and the consequences that go with them, developing a plan to role model appropriate behaviours, create positive and supportive classroom environments and work with caregivers to create consistency. PBS and inquiry based learning are approaches that can be complementary, where PBS gives its attention to teaching and reinforcing behaviours, inquiry based learning is more a pupil-centred approach which highlights critical thinking and problem solving skills (Luiselli, 2010). PBS and inquiry based learning can be integrated in various ways; through establishing clear expectations and consequences and providing children with opportunities to earn positive reinforcement, teachers are able to create positive classroom cultures where children feel safe and respected. Children will learn to work collaboratively and resolve conflicts using mediation and problem-solving strategies. Teachers can also use PBS to set realistic goals and provide support through scaffolding which encourages children to

persevere when faced with challenges. This is essential for inquiry based learning as children will often need to use trial and error before solving a problem or learning new concepts.

Although PBS and inquiry based learning are both highly used and considered to be effective in the classroom, they do not go without their criticisms. It has been argued that PBS primarily focuses on compliance which means that it is less focused on helping children to develop self-control and autonomy; it can be time consuming and 'labour intensive' as it requires teachers to plan and implement interventions; PBS also may not be effective for all students, some may not respond to these strategies and some may not be able to if they have more complex behavioural needs (Bruhn, 2014). This is also the case for inquiry based learning, it can also be time consuming as it requires children to engage in open ended exploration and experimentation. Inquiry based learning has been criticised for being difficult to assess student learning, Barron (2010) implied that inquiry based learning made it harder for teachers to identify children's progress and measure their critical thinking and problem solving skills.

When it comes to relating the critical incident to my own philosophy of teaching, I think it is important to implement strategies that I consider to be key in managing a classroom with disruptive pupils. Firstly, I believe that all children learn differently and that as teachers, it is our role to work around their individual needs and provide differentiation in the way of resources, teaching methods and levels of support as best as we can. It is essential that as the teacher, one gets to know their children including their needs, wants, interests and learning styles. I also believe that it is as important to create a classroom where the children feel safe, respected, heard and valued: the way in which I would look to achieve this would be through the provision of opportunities for every child to participate and contribute. Children can participate in many ways including through discussion, activities and tasks and teachers can encourage this through using cooperative learning strategies or as discussed in this assignment, inquiry based learning. When it comes to my teaching I would ensure to be present, flexible and adaptable in order to meet every child's needs, this could be seen in the form of changing teaching methods to keep children engaged or lesson plans to consider further differentiation and also being willing to listen to feedback from both the children and their caregivers. It is the responsibility of the teacher to use the limited time that they have with children in school to help them to grow into capable, healthy and well-rounded individuals who can succeed in the uncertain future (Donaldson, 2015).

Peer (2016) suggests that when a child displays disruptive behaviours in the classroom, it is important to be respectfully positive and 'low intrusive' wherever possible. Praise that is genuine and deserved was seen to be particularly important for children who were anxious (Westwood, 2011) and according to Curriculum for Wales (2019) having an awareness of one's own feelings and emotions is the foundation upon which empathy can be developed, thus a child's mental health and emotional wellbeing are shaped by how they interpret and react to their experiences. Rogers (2015) stated that in order to deal with disruptive behaviours effectively it was important to address the underlying anxiety first. He suggested that teachers worked alongside caregivers to create an environment that is supportive and can guide the child to develop coping skills. Where teachers create a safe environment for children they are also providing them with the support to deal with and manage their behaviours and anxieties appropriately. Where Rogers focus is on the child and having the ability to cope with their emotions, Peer (2021) focused his ideas of managing disruption on approaches to reduce the behaviour and improve attention. He discussed the idea that by simply standing behind/beside the disruptive child it will alleviate their negative behaviour and 'dampen' the activity level without using a spoken word. Peer also looked at rewards for children, stating that if rewards are to be an incentive for positive behaviour they must be allocated frequently and immediately to achieve realistic and tangible targets.

As discussed above there are numerous ways to reconsider the teaching methods and approaches used in a scenario similar to that of the critical incident observed. This can be completed through effective reflection. Reflective practice involves paying attention to one's own emotions and using them to learn from experiences, improve strategies and achieve goals. Schon acknowledged that reflection starts with an eye-opening event and is followed by confusion. Schon states that this causes stimulation to understand what has shocked us and to use that learning to improve how to respond to it in future (Tripp, 2012). In relation to the critical incident observed for this assignment, Zwozdiak-Myers (2012) talks about reflection as finding solutions to improve the effectiveness of teaching which in turn enhances pupil learning and well-being in the classroom. Dewey (1933) stated that the attributes of a reflective individual include being motivated and having an understanding of what they want to achieve and why. These attributes are very much in line with those of a teacher and when linking with disruptive behaviours and anxiety it is important that teachers remain positive and focused on their pupils and have the ability

to anticipate and prevent disruptive behaviour before it happens (Dornyei, 2019). These attributes also follow the professional teaching standards stating that it is essential to set high expectations to motivate and challenge pupils and to manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good, safe learning environment (Welsh Government, 2021).

This assignment is based on the identification of a critical incident that observed disruptive behaviours shown in the classroom. It outlined the importance for teachers to take into account various considerations that led to these behaviours which included the possibility that these children have underlying anxiety. The vast amount of literature on the connection between disruptive behaviours and anxiety can be exhaustive, with many arguing that disruptive behaviour is caused by anxiety that stems from trauma, parenting styles and social environment and others believing that this behaviour is learnt from others in that child's environment and the child's emotions do not play such a pivotal role in the cause of disruptive behaviour. Ultimately, all agreed that in some shape or form, the two were almost definitely associated with one another. When considering the teaching methods and approaches to apply to children who are disruptive, anxious or both, research suggests that it is important for teachers to be consistent in their methods, praise wherever possible, differentiate and be adaptable with their teaching and lesson plans. This assignment discussed the effectiveness of inquiry based learning and positive behaviour support in the classroom, with both having their criticism taken into account. From this assignment it is clear that learning is influenced by an excessive amount of factors whether behavioural, environmental or social. The critical incident observed has provided insight into the impact that teachers have on children and how appropriate responses to disruptive behaviour can allow a child to develop self-regulation and a real sense of emotional literacy. It is essential that teachers are motivating and proactive in their approach to allow for consistency. Lastly, using Tripp's (1993) methodology this incident was recorded and utilised for further reflection taking into consideration the work of Schon and Dewey. The essential need for Professional Teaching Standards and the Curriculum for Wales has been highlighted as a crucial requirement for teachers to engage with and implement in their classroom.

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