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Introduction

Critical incidents, as explained by Tripp (2012), do not exist independently of observation, as if awaiting discovery. Rather, critical incidents are described as being like “all data” in the sense that they are created. This paper will look at critical incidents and how they can be identified and observed in a primary school setting. The critical incident that is discussed will be linked to the Welsh Government’s (2020) four purposes as laid out in the newly rolled out Curriculum for Wales. The school context will be laid out in an anonymous manner, adhering to ethical guidelines detailed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2019). The critical incident set out and discussed in this paper will be thoroughly investigated and the components will be explored in relevant literature. Also discussed within this paper is the role of critical reflection within education as well as its general application in educational research. The researcher will explore critical reflection and decide upon appropriate “next steps” to take on an individually professional scale. The overarching purpose of this paper will be to provide a platform for educational researchers to briefly explore the ways in which critical reflection can aid in the improvement of practice following observations of critical incidents.

The role of critical reflection.

Reflection, described by Dictionary.com (2022) as “a fixing of the thoughts on something or careful consideration,” is the process by which professionals evaluate their practice by considering the implications of their actions in order to take a critical stance or attitude towards their own practice (Leitch and Day, 2000). Critical reflection can be thought of as combining reflection with critical thinking. Despite often being used interchangeably with standard reflection, critical reflection tends to denote an increased level of reflection beyond what is typically covered in standard reflective documents such as diaries and journals (Victoria State Government, 2007). Critical reflection can be seen as a descriptive and analytical process which adds depth to experiences, allowing professionals to build connections between theory and practice (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2021). This is something that is described by Dewey (1923) as the link between thinking and doing. According to Ash and Clayton (2009), experiences without critical reflection has the potential to run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes or preconceived notions held by the professional. Critical reflection is widely regarded to be crucial in helping professionals to articulate questions, compare and contrast the similarities and differences between theory and practice and also provide a basis for identifying systemic issues. Critical reflection is a skill that some professionals will take to better than others. However, critical reflection can be improved by repeated use as well as receiving feedback from peers and other professionals (Rodgers, 2002). Critical reflection is important for professionals involved in the teaching profession and Brookfield (2004) asserts that a key component of the critical reflective process is the active challenging of historical and contemporary social, political and cultural conventions.

Professionals will often need guidance on how to critically reflect in an effective manner as it is not always apparent. To that end, multiple reflection models exist to aid professionals in building the muscle that is critical reflection. The Experience, Reflection, Action (ERA) cycle is among the most simple models of reflection as it contains just three stages (Jasper and Rosser, 2013). This reflective model places an emphasis on next steps as it promotes the immediate reflection of an experience and consideration of changes or alterations to be made in similar situations in the future. These changes and the actions that are implemented will lead to further experience which will be reflected upon and from which further action will take place. The ERA

cycle can be closely compared to Driscoll's (2006) '*What?*' model which also consists of a mere three stages. In this reflective model, the cycle goes in the order of '*What?*', '*So what?*' and lastly '*Now what?*'. Each of these stages can be linked to the corresponding stage in the ERA cycle. Like the ERA cycle, this reflective model places emphasis on next steps and encourages near immediate reflection of an experience and the actions to take in going forward. The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is a reflective model which is less simple than the model outlined previously but allows professionals to critically reflect with more depth (Kolb, 2015). The basis for the ELC is in the theory surrounding the ways in which people learn and ascertain information and focuses on the concept of developing understanding through actual experiences. The model consists of four key stages which are 'concrete experiences', 'reflective observation', 'abstract conceptualisation' and 'active experimentation.' In keeping with the previous model, the first stage of the ELC is based on having real experiences. The second stage entails recalling the experience and noting any aspect which has not previously been experienced. In the third stage involved developing new ideas as a result of the reflection of the experience, such as working out why something has happened or how to avoid it in future. The final stage entails the application of these new ideas in different situations.

Observation – School Information

In accordance with BERA (2019), the names of the school, staff, pupils and the immediate area in which the school is situated that are referred to within this paper will be anonymised.

The non-participant researcher observed a mixed year 5/6 class in a primary school located in Swansea. This school was last inspected in 2019, at which time the three-year rolling average for free school meals stood at roughly 44% - a number that was significantly higher than the then national average of 18% (Estyn, 2019). According to school information, around 21% of pupils on roll had been identified as having additional learning needs which was equal to the Welsh national average. During the 2019 inspection, the observed school was adjudged to have been 'Good' in each of the five key inspection areas. The class that was observed by the non-participant researcher was a mixed year 5/6 class with ranging abilities. The critical incident took place within the classroom and occurred after all other children had left to attend a whole school assembly. The pupil involved in the critical incident (Pupil A) belonged to the year 5 portion of the classroom. In the previous inspection, the school was noted as having a focus on wellbeing and creating an environment which fosters the development of capable, enthusiastic learners.

Observation – Critical Incident

The following observation took place on Monday 26th September 2022.

Pupil A, who is already a point of focus in the classroom with regards to Additional Learning Needs (ALN), had in her possession a soft stuffed rabbit toy that she had brought into school with her that day. She had remarked to the class teacher that it was a gift to her from her older brother and that she had brought it into school as it was meant to comfort her throughout the day. The class was told that they would be attending a whole school assembly, after which all pupils stood and lined up by the door. Pupil A remarked to the class teacher that she wanted to take the stuffed rabbit toy with her to the whole school assembly. The class teacher explained to Pupil A that it may not be fair to other children, particularly the much younger ones from lower in the school, if she were able to take with her the stuffed rabbit when the younger ones are not allowed toys into assembly themselves. Pupil A was not initially receptive, taking herself to sit on the classroom carpet in what appeared to be an act of defiance. The rest of the class was dismissed by the Learning Support Officer (LSO), after which they left the classroom to attend the whole school assembly. Pupil A, who was at this point still sat on the carpet, stated that she would not attend the whole school assembly if she was not allowed to bring her stuffed rabbit toy with her. The class teacher remained calm and assured Pupil A that leaving the stuffed toy in the classroom would only be a temporary measure and then offered her two choices. The first choice was that she could leave the stuffed rabbit in a safe place within the classroom and come right back to get it after the whole school assembly had finished. The second option, should Pupil A not wish to accept the first, would entail the removal of the stuffed toy from the classroom entirely, with it only being returned to Pupil A at the end of the day and before going home. Pupil A immediately became more engaged and opted for the first option, to leave the toy in the classroom, and seemingly understood that it would indeed be only a temporary measure. The class teacher further helped Pupil A to process the situation by continued use of engaging language, encouraging Pupil A to make sure that the Rabbit was “safe” and “cosy” by putting it on the teacher’s desk and wrapping it up warm in her school cardigan. Pupil A then accompanied the class teacher to the whole school assembly where she conducted herself in a pro-social manner. Following this, there was no further incident. It is clear through the class teacher’s handling of this critical incident that the school does indeed place a great

deal of importance in tending to the emotional needs of the pupils which can be directly tied to one of the four purposes set out in the Curriculum for Wales, which states that

“all our children and young people will be healthy, confident individuals who are building their mental and emotional well-being by developing confidence, resilience and empathy, form positive relationships based upon trust and mutual respect and are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society” (Donaldson, 2015).

Literature review

From the observation it is clear that the class teacher displayed fantastic behaviour management in relation to Pupil A, as they were able to deal with the critical incident in a timely manner and reached a conclusion that suited all parties. Teachers often find themselves in a position where they are required to employ one of any number of different behaviour management strategies as the means to help reduce classroom disruption, allowing children to focus on building their self control skills (Brophy, 1986). By learning self control and honing this skill, children are subconsciously practicing self regulation which will allow them to more quickly return to a calm emotional state following a period of high arousal. Behaviour management strategies have been noted by teachers and behaviour analysts alike as being significantly effective in helping to reduce classroom disruption (Brophy, 1983). Functional assessment is the collection of data that is specific to an individual, their relationships and their environments for the purpose of exploring their behaviours (Martin, 2012) and principles of this are being incorporated into modern classroom behaviour management strategies (Waguespack, Vaccaro and Continere, 2006). Some such strategies have been known to derive from a multitude of behavioural change theories. Behavioural change theories are attempts to explain the reasoning behind the change in human behaviours (Van Der Linden, 2011). Despite this, the majority of common behaviour management practices find their roots in traditional applied behaviour analysis principles. These principles include positive reinforcement such as a rewards, and mild punishment such as time out (Daddario, Anhalt and Barton, 2007). Teachers also utilise the differential reinforcement strategy – a staple of applied behaviour analysis. The purpose of differential reinforcement is to encourage appropriate behaviour by either giving or withholding reinforcement. Individuals tend to repeat behaviours that are reinforced or rewarded and are less likely to continue behaviours that are not reinforced. In essence, teachers will reward appropriate behaviour in classrooms whilst withholding praise for undesirable behaviour by means of minimal engagement (Daddario, Anhalt and Barton, 2007; Applied Behaviour Analysis Education, 2019; Guinness et al., 2021). Reinforcement of behaviours within the modern classroom often take the form of a token economy. A token economy entails the systematic reinforcement of targeted behaviours using symbols or ‘tokens’ that pupils can exchange for other reinforcers (Dictionary.com, 2015). These reinforcers will be rewards that the pupils can choose from a selection provided by the class teacher to further incentivise the appropriate

targeted behaviours (Cancio and Johnson, 2007). Cotton (1988) reviewed thirty seven studies on praise, token economies and other similar rewards based strategies and concluded that they can each be considered significantly effective in the managing of pupil behaviour within a classroom setting. A thorough assessment of token economies measured against the degree of behavioural severity in children can be found in H.M. Walker's 1988 book 'The acting-out child: Coping with classroom disruption' (Kauffman, 1996). Behaviour management systems in a classroom context have been known to consist of three separate entities: whole group, table group and individual (Hussung, 2016). For example, a marble jar can be used to tally tokens achieved as a class, prize charts can be utilised on a table by table basis to record tokens earned by group and also to create a minor competitive angle, and a grid chart can be used with a space for each pupil to score individuals accruing of tokens. A common stumbling block encountered by teachers in primary schools, when implementing token economies and rewards based strategies, is when pupils do not receive tokens or rewards for behaviours that they themselves deem to be positive or situationally appropriate (Morin, 2021). By not receiving a token for what a pupil has self assessed to be appropriate behaviour, it may foster a more inappropriate behavioural tendency to ask for rewards. Another criticism levied against the use of token economies is that children will become reliant on rewards in order to display appropriate behaviours. If a pupil is aware that in any given situation where there is no reward for appropriate behaviour, they may be prone to disregarding the value of said appropriate behaviours instead of doing what they want. Spiegler and Guevremont (1998) note that there is a significant movement of people that advocate for the removal of token economies entirely as they are deemed to be demeaning, not only to children but in a more generalised, societal sense. In response, Spiegler and Guevremont (1998) assert that the very individuals that advocate for the abolition of token economies 'forget' that they themselves participate in a larger scale, potentially global, token economy each time they involve themselves in a monetary transaction. It is argued that the implementation of a token economy within a classroom setting can serve to enhance pupils' dignity by increasing their self esteem, pride, self respect and sense of worth (Kirigin et al., 1982). A strategy of behaviour management within a classroom setting was observed by the non-participant researcher in the previously discussed critical incident wherein the class teacher gave the pupil a choice in effecting the outcome of the 'incident.' Penn State University (2017) note the

importance of giving children choices in order to foster a sense of autonomy and to give allow them a feeling control in a situation where they may otherwise feel they have none. Welsh Government (2012) also underline the significance of enabling children to make their own decisions and choices. It is also stated that this should be encouraged whilst simultaneously ensuring that a responsible adult, such as a teacher within the classroom context, is present to foster an environment in which the children learn and understand the consequences of the choices that they make. Affording children the opportunities in which to make their own choices is vital in empowering them and helping to prepare them for life (Education Scotland, 2020). Public Health England (2013) state that having choice and control is vital to children and young people's complex emotional and wellbeing needs. Evidence has shown that there is a direct relationship between positive wellbeing in children and health outcomes in adults. Children's wellbeing has been found to have a strong link with the wider neighbourhood and community in which they live, where schooling also plays a significant role. A secure school environment, in which children are afforded a bounty of opportunities in which to make decisions and choices, together with the continuation of the presence of opportunities for autonomy at home, can be considered the very foundations of good child wellbeing. Blackburn (2018) asserts that allowing children autonomy and providing them with opportunities to make their own choices is a child's right as set out in Article 31 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2019). Blackburn (2018) also notes that it has been found that allowing children to make their own choices and decisions is a key contributor to their neurodevelopment as it affords their developing brains the opportunity to consider and simulate the various consequences and outcomes of the decisions that they make. Children who do not develop a sense of autonomy may become doubtful of their own abilities and can lead to feelings of shame and inadequacy (Shaffer, 1996). Autonomy allows children to explore and provides them with opportunities to acquire and develop new skills. Autonomy can be considered to consist of two separate aspects – an emotional component where an individual relies more upon themselves more than they do their parents or primary caregiver, and a behavioural component wherein an individual makes decisions in an independent manner through the use of their own judgement (Berk, 2012). It has been hypothesised that autonomy within children and young people is associated intimately with their journey of identity. As children enter a scholastic environment they make connections with peers who have the potential to

act as agents of influence. Peer influence has been noted as a possible component in the development of autonomy as it can lessen the impact of parental and other adult influence (Shaffer, 1996).

Reflection and Next steps

During the course of the bridging experience at the anonymous school in Swansea, I was able to observe two classes across the span of two days – a mixed year 5/6 class on the first day and a year 1 class on the second day. The critical incident studied within this paper took place on the first observation day within the mixed year 5/6 class. Following the undertaking of the literature review to explore themes from within the critical incident that I observed, I feel I have learned various things that I can take forward in my professional journey and into the classroom. With regards to behaviour management, it was impressive to see the ease with which the class teacher utilised behaviour management strategies to immediately engage the pupil that was involved in the critical incident. By offering the pupil a choice in which they could affect the outcome of the situation, the class teacher was giving the pupil a chance to be intimately involved in their school experience and fostered a sense of autonomy. The pupil, as stated, was almost immediately engaged and any further serious incident as a result of prior behaviours was avoided. This component has instilled within me the importance of good classroom management skills and the necessity for basic behaviour management training for classroom practitioners. Equipped with the skills to effectively head off a potentially serious behavioural incident, classroom practitioners will be in a position where they are able to keep pupils on task and keep general classroom disruption to a minimum. This will allow practitioners to more easily foster a learning environment that is safe and inclusive. It is interesting to note that the critical incident that was observed took place at a time when the pupil was isolated from her peers. It is worth considering the implications of how the incident could have played out differently if the class had been full instead of virtually empty. It is also vital to note that, whether it was intended or not, the class teacher tended to the pupil's wellbeing needs. As discussed earlier in the paper, the school in which the observations took place have been very candid about their approach to wellbeing and the emphasis that they place upon its importance. In line with this, the class teacher's response to the critical incident was not only a display of great classroom management and, more significantly, behaviour management, but also served to meet the needs of the pupil's developing brain by helping to foster a sense of autonomy. Despite the outcome of either choice that was offered to the pupil being agreeable with the class teacher, even the allowance of the choice in the first place is a great example of how teachers and other classroom practitioners can aid in a child's neurodevelopment. By

providing the pupil with an opportunity with which to practice autonomy, the class teacher was, in that very moment, fostering an environment that allowed the pupil to hone a skill that will become an invaluable aspect of life as an adolescent and future adult. It is important to remember that classroom practitioners are not only responsible for the teaching of the children via the Curriculum for Wales but are also responsible for fostering a learning environment which encourages children to develop emotionally and socially. Going forward in my own professional journey into the classroom and beyond, I will keep with me the importance of tending to a learner's emotional needs before expecting them to be capable of undertaking learning. Thus, it can be argued that before considering Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, a classroom practitioner must first consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943; Bloom et al., 1956; Berger, 2020).

Conclusion

The critical incident discussed within this paper has been beneficial to the non-participant researcher's understanding, not only of critical incidents themselves, but of the need for consistent and regular reflection of one's practice. Through reflection, classroom practitioners will become more dynamic professionals and will be more adept at dealing with varying situations. By repeated practice of critical reflection, practitioners will be able to more easily spot critical incidents as they happen within the classroom and can draw on prior knowledge and experiences to formulate strategies to effectively deal with them before they evolve into more serious matters. Good classroom management can be an effective preventative measure against significant critical incidents and a basic understanding of behaviour management strategies can further help classroom practitioners in keeping classroom disruption to a minimum. Behaviour management operates seamlessly alongside the nurturing of children's wellbeing and it is important to remember that tending to a child's wellbeing is often required before expecting them to be capable of any learning. Good practitioners also realise that this is an ongoing process and will not expect a child to be capable of learning on any given day simply because they were capable of learning the previous day or indeed the previous session. Through regular critical reflection of one's practice, teachers and other classroom practitioners can effectively teach and nurture children and young people and will foster fun, inclusive and safe learning environments for the adults of the future.

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