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 - 4352

Introduction

Throughout this essay I will focus on a critical incident I have observed within a secondary school classroom. I will analyse the actions of the teacher and subsequently the effects these actions have on the learners. I will then discuss how I might translate this knowledge into my own teaching, discussing how it may be beneficial to or impact my own practice. I will also look at various theorists and their different views on pedagogy and methods of learning in the classroom. As student teachers, it is important to investigate critical incidences and use this to inform our practice. This is supported by Orchard and Winch (2015) who believe that good teachers engage with theory and educational research, they rely on well thought-out conceptual framework as well as empirical evidence to make informed decisions in the classroom. By observing experienced teachers and making connections to research and theorist, we will gain the skills to make informed decisions within our own classroom. Theorist Kolb (1984) emphasised the importance of reflective observation within experimental learning as a way of analysing and concluding from an experience. After a situation has occurred, if the practitioner has a general understanding of the concepts encountered, they can then transform this information into knowledge. This knowledge can then be re applied and built on, broadening the practitioner's knowledge every time it is re applied in new situations. This idea is very applicable within teaching, especially when observing another teacher, by evaluating these critical incidents we not only reflect and analyse our own teaching but absorb the techniques and methods of other professionals.

A critical incident may be described as an interaction or point of interest that can be explored further. There will be positives and negatives to this type of reflection, but there is no right answer. It is also subjective to personal judgement. As Tripp (2012) explains, it is how we interpret these events which give them the significance and meaning within a classroom. A situation which may seem typical can become critical through this analysis. He also explains how thorough and systematic analysis is essential for professional practice to diagnose and critique existing beliefs and explore new possibilities. This idea of reflection and analysis to enhance future possibilities surrounding a teacher's practice in the classroom is also supported by Francis (1997) who describes a critical incident as an analysis explored to promote reflective practice and understanding of classrooms.

During my first day of placement, I observed a year 7 Geography and English lesson in a secondary school. According to Welsh Government (2022), the school had 1103 pupils enrolled in 2022, 24.7% of them in receipt of free school meals. Both classes had approximately 26 pupils, the geography class was mixed ability whilst the English class was set ability. I witnessed 2 critical incidents which stood out to me, both surrounding low-level classroom disruption (LLCD). I will look further into LLCD and the effects this has on both the learners and teachers. I will also look

at why the pupils might be grouped in mixed ability/set ability classes, looking at theories for and against this decision and whether this has an impact on LLCD in any way.

Literature review

Low-level classroom disruption (LLCD) is an ongoing issue throughout both primary school and secondary school classrooms. According to Bennett (2010) low-level disruption is any behaviour within the classroom which effects the flow of a lesson without completely disturbing it. This may include pen tapping, swinging on chairs, chatting, texting or maybe shouting out in class, any action which may cause a distraction to others. Bennet (2010 p.21) also refers to it as "kryptonite for the well-planned lesson". Although the name suggests it has a low impact on the learning environment, Cogswell *et al.* (2020) argues that LLCD creates a dysfunctional classroom atmosphere. Subsequently, this has a negative effect on the academic success of the pupils. Whereas, learning with minimal distraction in the classroom enables effective teaching and learning. She also explains how LLCD has a negative effect on teachers, by creating greater workplace stress, emotional exhaustion, and has a negative effect on their confidence. This suggests that although LLCD is seen as a low-level behavioural risk within schools compared to high-risk behaviours such as bullying or aggression, it still has a profound negative effect on both learners and teachers. This is supported by Tennant (2007) who explains how the freedom of teachers to work with pupils in innovative and creative ways is limited when they must deal with behavioural problems, thus effecting their pedagogy too. However, he does argue that what teachers perceive as misbehaviour may be seen as reasonable and acceptable behaviour by some students. Low-level disruption can also be subjective and vary in interpretation from teacher to teacher. Silva and Neves (2007) argue that students' performance is also evaluated based on how well they adhere to rules and expected behaviours within the educational setting which she refers to as "padagogic practice" (Silva and Neves, 2007, P. 207). She states that students need to grasp specific rules which are tailored to the school or subject they are studying to perform well. In short, this stresses the significance of student learning and following rules within their school or classroom. It also suggests that different subjects and schools may have different rules or behaviour expectations. For example, a subject such as science or DT would have significantly different rules compared to maths, due to the increased risk to harm or danger. This is supported by Bennet (2010) who explains that each classroom has its own culture, with different beliefs and values about what is important and acceptable. Whilst rules are very important, Coristine, et al., (2022) explains the benefit of a good relationship between pupils and the teacher. In a classroom, this cultivates trust and mutual respect, cultivating a positive relationship with students not only contributes to their academic success but also creates a secure and inviting classroom atmosphere for everyone. This is arguably as important as rules as it sets the scene for the classroom, if the pupils respect the teacher, they are more

likely to behave within lessons and listen when reprimanded. They're also more likely to enjoy that subject and engage more.

There are many reasons a pupil may be disruptive in class. Looking through a behaviourist perspective could explain minor disruptions and how particular behaviours may be encouraged unintentionally within a classroom setting. Mcleod (2023) Looks at the studies of B.F.Skinner and operant conditioning, according to Skinner's research, actions or behaviour that result in positive outcomes are usually repeated. On the other hand, actions followed by unpleasant outcomes are less prone to be repeated. Mcleod moves on to explain that within an educational setting, a student may exhibit disruptive behaviour to avoid a task or attract attention. Naturally, a teacher's response to LLCD would be to reprimand or ask them to stop and carry on with work. Interestingly, if their behaviour is to gain attention then they have accomplished this and according to Skinner's theory, the pupil will see this as a positive outcome and is likely to repeat this behaviour.

This idea is supported by Pisacreta *et al*, (2011) who's research implied that reprimands from a teacher may inadvertently serve as positive reinforcement by giving attention to students' disruptive behaviour. Subsequently, contributing to the overall disruption of the class. In contrast, they found that higher rates of teacher praise not only resulted in better behaviour within the classroom, but also increased motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. Pisacreta *et al*, (2011) gives the example of a teacher praising students for abiding by the classroom rules, such as thanking them for having their book readily open on the correct page to start the lesson. Praise like this was given for both social and academic behaviours and was found to decrease classroom disruption by almost 20%. This is a clear demonstration of Skinner's theory in practice with the use of positive reinforcement.

Furthermore, many schools have introduced heterogenous classes which require a lot of differentiated teaching. Within the classroom, dynamics like this can influence the concentration and productivity of pupils in both positive and negative ways. In usual set ability classrooms, all students will experience the same content and engage in the same activities. Whereas within a differentiated classroom, pupils are provided multiple avenues for learning, and it takes into consideration each student's needs as individuals. This links with the new curriculum for Wales which emphasises personalised learning based on the four purposes (Hwb, 2022). According to Tomlinson (2017) teachers that implement differentiated instruction within a classroom tend to have more control and leadership within their classroom, thus resulting in more concentration and productive behaviour from the students. A heterogenous classroom may also be beneficial as it creates an adaptable and inclusive learning environment that supports meaningful learning. It also creates an environment where pupils work with a variety of peers, drawing on their strengths and weaknesses, therefore encouraging peer learning and assessment. However, Danzi, J., Reul, K and Smith, R (2008) argue that within heterogenous classrooms, the gifted students often receive less challenging work and are used as 'tutors' instead of being challenged

to reach the best of their potential. This research tells us that there are advantages and disadvantages to this type of classroom setting, whilst it promotes collaboration amongst students, it may not challenge high achieving students which would stop them reaching their full potential. This puts a lot of extra pressure on the teacher to create extension work to accommodate these pupils whilst also accommodating the pupils who may need extra attention or simplified work.

Case Study

On my placement I observed a Geography and English lesson in which I identified two critical incidents. The geography class had approximately 26 year 7 pupils sat in rows of 8. The teacher explained how it is a heterogenous class and she purposely sat them alternating in ability with the intention of them helping each other. This does have advantages, however, Danzi, J., Reul, K and Smith, R (2008) argue it may create a classroom where higher ability pupils are used as 'tutors' or copied and the work may not be challenged enough. However, with this classroom it did keep most pupils quiet and on task when completing work.

The teacher begun the lesson with a starter quiz to see what the pupils remember from their last lesson. The higher ability pupils seemed to be the only ones putting their hands up and answering, this was clear to me due to the seating plan being alternating. As Tomlinson (2017) explained, there is benefits to this type of seating and it does encourage peer learning from the more able pupils, however, it was the same group of pupils answering the questions each time. This almost seemed like the other pupils didn't want to answer so this didn't check whether they understood the context of the lesson.

My focus turned to pupil X who was sat in the middle row, the teacher had set the class the task of drawing a bar graph. I noticed him as he had his arm slightly in the air, but not high enough for the teacher to notice. He continued to keep his arm half in the air for a few minutes whilst looking around and his peers. After approximately 3 minutes, whilst most of the class were getting on with their work, pupil X started to become disruptive. He began turning around and disturbing the pupils on the row behind, he then tried stealing a few of their pencil cases. The pupils sat at the back of the class were then distracted and only focussed on keeping their pencil cases. He was very persistent and was clearly getting distressed. The pupils in the back row start to get agitated and this leads to the teacher noticing pupil X was not doing his work and distracting others. She approaches him and asks why he has not drawn his bar graph. He then explains he did not have a pencil. This is then resolved when the teacher gives him a pencil and he started working.

Similarly, I witnessed another case of low-level classroom disruption (LLCD) in the English lesson. This class also had approximately 26 pupils sat in rows, this time however the class was set in

ability. When entering the classroom, all the work booklets were set out ready on the desks and the lesson objective was on the white board. Pupil X arrives late but quickly starts disrupting the class. To begin, he interrupted the teacher explaining the task to say he hasn't got a pen, the teacher only responds by handing him a pen and carries on explaining the writing task. Shortly after this, the teacher begins a popcorn reading task (pupils take it in turn to read a sentence each). There is a hands up system for who would like to read next. Pupil X places his hand up but when the teacher calls his name, he doesn't read, instead he asks an off-topic question trying to be funny. As stated by Tennant (2007), this kind of LLCD effects the pedagogy of the teacher, she included the popcorn reading task to make her teaching more creative, only to have it ruined by pupil X disrupting every few minutes. The teacher jokes back before making him read the next line. Throughout the reading task, he continued to do this and started shouting over the other pupils reading if they mispronounced a word. Again, the teacher reacted in the same way. This linked to what Sean Mcleod (2023) stated about Skinner's theory, by the teacher reacting in a joking manner, she may be creating the opposite reaction to what she intended and may unintentionally encouraged this type of behaviour. If it's attention that the pupil is looking for, that's exactly what he is getting. Subsequently, making him more likely to repeat this behaviour, which he did throughout the lesson. Opposing to this, there was a clear relationship between the pupil and teacher. As Coristine, *et al.,* (2022) argued, this may be more valuable to the teacher. Ny having this relationship with the pupils, they seemed to enjoy her lesson and had no problem engaging in the reading task which some may have found daunting. This proved that she had created a safe learning environment for these learners within her classroom.

Teaching and learning methods

According to Ofsted (2014) consistency is key when trying to tackle Low-level disruption and behaviour issues. They state the importance of behaviour policies and expectations, these should be implemented consistently by all staff throughout the day. It also states how these expectations need to be communicated clearly at the beginning to all parties; pupils, staff and parents. This is simple but very important, how can we expect pupils to behave when we haven't set the boundaries of what good behaviour looks like? Reminders on how pupils should conduct themselves such as posters within the classroom or reminders during registration in the morning could help with this idea in mind. In essence, as teachers we are training them to behave in the way we want them to behave. This idea of setting the expectations in the beginning is also supported by Bennet (2020) who explains how to build a classroom culture, although it's time-consuming, he claims it's the most effective behaviour management strategy. These cultures might include getting pupils to line up outside the classroom before entering or answering questions in an orderly manner. These examples should be universal throughout various subjects, but he also explains how different subjects have their own expectations and pupils have should recognise the correct way of behaving dependent on which classroom they are in. Bennet also discusses the positive effect of being part of a group. He talks about it in the context

of a class, but it would also be applicable within group work. He claims that being part of a group has benefits such as improved mood, reduced loneliness, and greater self-esteem. Shared attention in a group also increases pupils' ability to focus and think about the same thing. All of these link to the concept of the pupil feeling like they belong, which also links to them feeling safe and secure, linking to social identity.

The great teaching toolkit (Coe *et al.*, 2020) has identified four priorities which they claim will make an effective teacher: understanding the content, creating a supportive environment, managing the classroom, and activating students' thinking. Firstly, they suggest that teachers should be knowledgeable in their specific field. They should also have a collection of clear, carefully designed explanations, examples, and activities for each topic they instruct. This would make lessons more engaging and interesting, by engaging the pupils in lessons, there is less opportunity for disruption or boredom. They also discuss the benefits of visual representations and models to help students visualise and understand the concepts they are learning. This might be in the form of work examples, a Power Point presentation with images or even a film or video linked to the topic the pupils are learning. The teacher's knowledge is important here as they will need to find the interesting visual content that links to what they are teaching, the more current and relatable to the pupils, the more engaging it will be. Linking to Bennet's idea of giving instruction, the Toolkit also states that great teachers efficiently use their time and resources, they minimise settling down time and give clear instructions so that students can start work straight away. They also state the importance of routines, likewise to Bennet also. Having a clear routine in the classroom which is continuously implemented seems to be key with classroom management. The rules and expectations need to be clear from the very start and consistent. All teachers will experience disruption within the classroom at some point, the toolkit mentions great teachers using 'whithitness' within their classrooms, being aware of what is happening in the classroom and signaling this awareness to students. Linking to Mcloed (2023), they also state the benefits of using praise and positive reinforcement to support desired behaviour.

Teachers use various assessment for learning techniques (AFL) to keep pupils engaged in lessons, as we have discovered the more engaged the pupils are, the level of LLCD decreases. Looking at group work again, Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (2007) explains the round robin method. This involves small groups of pupils sharing ideas or answers in a circle or around a table. This method encourages participation and brainstorming. This also generates multiple responses within the time, the group can then share their answers with the class. This method also enables peer learning, Western Govenor's University (2022) states that this approach strengthens the pupils' understanding by instructing each other. When pupils teach each other under supervision, it's proven to improve learning and memory retention. This happens because in order to teach another pupil, the pupil must have a comprehensive grasp of the concept and sharing this knowledge helps to consolidate this knowledge. I think these group work methods are great to include in lessons, students love to chat, and chatting is usually seen as a LLCD. However, with this round robin method, we're encouraging them to talk amongst their groups

about the topic they're learning, and it's proven to have a positive effect on their learning and therefore academic success. It will also make the lessons more exciting. Some may argue that this could cause distraction and pupils may not talk about the work, this is why it's important to supervise and circle the room throughout the activity. Referring to the heterogenous grouping I looked at previously, I believe this kind of grouping would be perfect for the activity. Especially when it encourages peer learning, pupils who understand will all explain the information differently, therefore there's more chance of the other pupils grasping the concept. Working together in these smaller groups also makes it less daunting to give their opinion or make mistakes.

Discussion

Following my research into creating classroom culture and the relationship between pupils and teachers, I believe this is one of the most important aspects within a classroom. Creating this mutual respect not only benefits the academic success of the pupils but also the behavior management in the classroom. Where the English teacher created a laid-back approach to the pupil's disruption, although it sometimes created a situation where pupils felt comfortable to 'back chat', they did respect the teacher when asked to settle down. It also prevented the situation escalating further than the usual LLCD. This classroom culture she had created made the pupils feel safe, they took part in the popcorn reading task without hesitation and every pupil felt comfortable enough to read in front of the whole class, even if they made mistakes. I do, however, think the teacher unintentionally used positive reinforcement when pupil x was chatting back, and this made him repeat his behaviour as he found it funny. After looking at Skinner's theory, utilising this method slightly differently and giving praise for being quiet when others were reading may have created a different outcome. Additionally, clearly stating before starting the activity that others who aren't reading must be respectful and quiet would have set the expectations from the beginning of the lesson.

Moreover, although I see the benefits of the heterogenous seating plan the teacher used within the geography classroom, I do think pupils feel more comfortable working with their friends. I do think mixing ability is great for peer learning and assessment as it will highlight pupils' strengths and weaknesses. However, I do also agree with Danzi, J., Reul, K and Smith, R (2008) that it could lead to the higher achieving pupils doing most of the work and being used as 'tutors' or being copied. This would affect the progression of the higher achieving pupils when they need to be challenged to reach their full potential. It also wouldn't indicate where the lower ability pupils are progression wise as they would have copied other pupils' work. Within heterogenous classrooms, grouping in ability may benefit some pupils as the teacher can then allocate differentiated work to the groups, pupils will then work amongst others at the same level and the teacher can prioritise their time with pupils who need the extra help.

Furthermore, referring to the idea of consistency being vital within the classroom, in particular, when you're setting expectations and rules. I do think this can be achieved by having posters around the classroom regarding the classroom or school rules, this would be applicable to the context of the pupils' learning material too. Neither classroom had many visuals on the walls. If consistency and repetition increase memory retention, having a classroom filled with eye catching posters and information on the walls for pupils to see every day will not only create a vibrant and exciting classroom but also help reiterate the context they're learning.

Both teachers made interesting and engaging lessons, both utilised real-life situations and relevant content. They also made links across the other areas of learning and experience (AOLE). When looking into the curriculum and progression for pupils in Wales, Hwb (2020) state that they want teachers to encourage learners to approach activities from various perspectives and to view the same subject through different viewpoints to gain a comprehensive understanding of a topic. They both demonstrated these connections across various subjects and areas, helping learners develop a unified comprehension of a wide range of information where they're also able to make links to experiences rather than learning disjointed facts. This is something I will use to influence my teaching to meet the new curriculum criteria and academic progression steps.

Conclusion

To conclude, reflecting on a critical incident has helped me acknowledge how small actions by the teacher can influence the learners, both positive and negative. Following my observation within the classrooms and my research into supporting literature, I have found methods and techniques that I will use to influence my own pedagogy. The research I have conducted has identified various reasons for LLCD as well as possible methods and solutions to tackle the classroom issue.

Firstly, I want to create a comfortable and safe learning environment within my classroom. I will focus on building a respectful relationship with pupils, where I set out the expectations and rules from the beginning so that they know boundaries yet still feel safe to ask questions or make mistakes. This trust will come over time, but I will use the knowledge gained from Bennet (2020) by implementing this from the very first lesson. After researching into heterogenous seating, I wouldn't choose to create a seating plan initially, however, I will use one if the disruption becomes too frequent. I will, however, use the heterogenous grouping for group work; I do think this is a great tool for peer learning and assessment, especially with AFL activities like round robin. This technique encourages peer learning within small groups, making it easier for pupils who may be struggling to answer confidently. As mentioned previously, by multiple pupils answering or discussing the same topic in slightly different ways, it's also more likely that pupils will grasp the concept and remember the context. With me in charge of the grouping, I can also

decide who would work well with each other and separate those who may cause a problem, tackling the issue of LLCD.

Adding to this, I also believe it is vital to be knowledgeable in my field. As discovered in 'The great teaching toolkit' by Coe *et al., (*2020), the more knowledge and understanding of the context I am teaching, the more engaging and exciting my lessons will be. Having a deep understanding will also help me be creative and innovative with work and tasks I set, this too would have a positive effect on the class and decrease the level of disruption and increase engagement. Being knowledgeable will also enable me to make connections across various AOLE's, therefore developing the pupils' progression across the curriculum not only in my subject.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Date and time, year group: Monday 9th October 2023 at 11am, year 7 class, approximately 26 pupils.

What happened:

Upon entry, all work booklets were already on desks for the pupils. The lesson objective and aim were clearly stated on the whiteboard along with the date in Welsh. The class entered and settled down when the teacher began the register. Pupil X comes in late and starts interrupting the register by shouting "I don't have a pen". He then continues to disrupt trying to make conversation with the teacher, off topic. I noticed he is sitting in the back row next to some girls, it seems like he has been placed here deliberately to separate him from his friend in the front row. He begins shouting out to the teacher, telling her about his weekend. She responds in a witty way, you can see that they have a good relationship, but this also gives him attention, so he proceeds to interrupt. The teacher then begins a popcorn reading activity (pupils take it in turns to read), pupils volunteer to read by putting their hands up. This causes some pupils to start chatting, but the teacher reminds them to be quiet when someone is reading. Pupil X keeps putting his hand up to volunteer and interrupting the reading, but the teacher does not pick him as he's being disruptive and gives the turns to other pupils. Pupil X starts to correct other pupils' pronunciation when they are reading, and the teacher carries on and tries to ignore him. As he sat in the back, I realised that due to where he was sitting, nobody paid him much attention. This indicates that he was purposely put to sit next to the girls who were carrying on with their work. He continues to put his hand up for a turn of reading and the teacher chooses him, instead of reading he asks an off-topic question, it seems it's for attention again.

The teacher continues with the popcorn reading, I found it hard to keep up with the context of the text with it being so broken up with pupils taking it in turns. Following the reading task, the teacher quizzes the pupils on the text they just read. They answer as a whole class, the teacher writes the answers on the board. This creates an atmosphere in the classroom, and everyone seems to be participating. One pupil asks what the word malicious means, instead of the teacher answering she asks the class if they know what it means. This created some peer learning; it also checked the class' understanding. The teacher set the pupils on task and a pupil asks for help, the teacher reminds them "three before me", this AFL method encourages the pupils to ask each other for help (Pupil learning/assessment), if they still don't know the answer then they ask the teacher.

At the end of the lesson, the pupils all pass their booklets to the bottom of the desk and stand behind their chairs before being allowed to leave.

Areas of possible exploration:

- AFL method – popcorn reading
- Hands up method, does it really work?
- Seating plans
- Low level classroom disruption
- Behaviour management
- Peer learning & assessment
- AFL - Three before me

Appendix B

Date and time, year group: Monday 9th October 2023 at 2pm, year 7 class, approximately 26 pupils.

What happened:

Upon entry to the classroom, the starter quiz was on the whiteboard. The teacher explains to me that this is a mixed ability (heterogenous) class, and she has purposely created a seating plan with them alternating in ability with the intention of them helping each other. Once the quiz had begun, it was obvious that they were sat in alternating ability, with the higher achievers being the only pupils to put their hand up to answer the questions. The teacher then sets the task for the pupils to draw a bar graph. Again, the higher ability pupils started immediately whereas other pupils started walking around the class or sat copying the person next to them.

The teacher is sat at her desk, I notice pupil X with his hand half in the air. The teacher does not notice him, and he continues to hold his hand in the air for approx. 3 minutes. He begins to get frustrated but still won't lift his hand any higher or call the teacher, as if he did not want to draw attention to himself. Pupil X begins turning around and disrupting the pupils sat on the row behind him, trying to steal their pencil cases. This disrupts approx. 3 pupils in the back row. He continues to do this until the teacher notices, she asks why he's not doing his work and he says it's because he hasn't got a pencil. The teacher hands him a pencil and he starts the task.

Areas of possible exploration:

- Heterogenous seating/ classes
- Differentiation
- Low-level classroom disruption
- Hands up

Notes:

Heterogenous grouping seems to keep the pupils on task to begin the lesson, far less talking and calmer atmosphere.