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A critical evaluation and the identification of the next teaching and learning steps focussing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

Assignment Title:	A critical evaluation and the identification of the next teaching and learning steps focussing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.
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an observed critical incident.

Introduction to the critical incident:

Reflective practice is a crucial skill to possess as a teacher. Being reflective allows teachers to become self-aware of their professional development by identifying their strengths, weaknesses and areas to improve upon (Tripp, 2012). By developing their skills and teaching strategies, educators have a greater opportunity to benefit their student's learning and well-being. According to David Tripp (2012), critical incidents provide a great opportunity for educators to be reflective and to examine their skill sets, such as their teaching method approach, use of academic language and their classroom management ability. In my experience as a student teacher, analysing critical incidents is a useful practice to determine if you are demonstrating the professional standards for teaching and leadership as set out by the Welsh Government (2017).

Tripp (2012) created the concept of a critical incident in education to refer to the deep analysis of a classroom observation. He explains that a typical classroom incident becomes a critical one after we critically analyse it to identify any potential underlying issues or concepts contributing to the event (Tripp, 2012). In Tripp's critical incident methodology (2012), he emphasises that critical incidents do not solely have to be negative events, as his methodology allows teachers to reflect. Hence, it is important to reflect on positive classroom events, as well as poorer ones, in order to aid professional development for the benefit of students learning.

In the hopes of shaping my own teaching and learning methods through reflection, I observed a critical incident whilst in an immersive classroom experience. The critical incident involved a Year 4 pupil playing with their hair whilst the teacher was conducting the starter activity of their English literacy lesson (Digital Services, 2023). I categorised this event as a critical incident because it made me question the reasoning behind them playing with their hair, whether this behaviour was acceptable or if it should be stopped, and if it impacted the student's learning in any way. I believe this incident is of significance as the surrounding pupils did not react the same way, instead, they were sitting still or raising their hands to answer the questions (Digital Services, 2023).

Childhood learning theories (Gray and MacBlain, 2015) highlight that factors, such as cognitive, emotional and environmental influences, can impact a student's learning ability and knowledge retention. Therefore, in this essay, I will examine these factors in greater depth as I believe they are underlying contributors to the cause of the critical incident. Although it is worthwhile to note that the immersive room was an excellent way to observe a class, it does come with the consequence that I have no prior knowledge of the class itself and any of the learner's needs. Thus, the teacher may already have a clear understanding of why the child plays with their hair, but from my perspective, the explanation is unclear and open to speculation. As I only have a broad understanding of the context, deciphering the meaning behind the incident is a complex task.

Explanation of case study:

As previously stated, I observed a critical incident whilst in an immersive classroom experience (Digital Services, 2023). The observation involved a Year 4

mainstream class partaking in their English literacy lesson at half past nine on a Wednesday morning. The classroom whiteboard displayed the date, the twelfth of July, indicating the near end of the academic year. The classroom tables appeared to be grouped by ability, with the higher ability at the back of the classroom furthest away from the teacher. While watching the immersive classroom (Digital Services, 2023), a student (Student A) from the higher-ability table caught my attention as they were playing with their hair, sometimes putting it to their mouth, while the teacher was asking questions during the starter activity. Student A stood out to me as all the pupils at this table were interacting with the teacher's questions by raising their hands and turning their attention to the pupils answering, except for Student A. Instead, Student A played with their hair which made me question if this act was affecting their learning in any way, initially considering if it was distracting and disengaging them from the lesson.

Before applying any specific learning theories to the cause of the critical incident, the reason could be a simpler answer than assumed. As stated earlier, childhood learning theories (Gray and MacBlain, 2015) share how environmental factors can affect one's learning ability. For instance, you could suggest that Student A is playing with their hair as they are lacking focus as a result of the classroom being hotter than normal since it is July, a typically warmer month in the United Kingdom. Feeling hot can make it harder to concentrate (Therm, 2021), so it is easier to become distracted by simple things like playing with your hair. Another thing to consider is that emotional influences can hugely impact a student's learning (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2018). For example, Student A could be playing with their hair as they are disengaged from feeling tired. As it is the first lesson of the day, being tired and disengaged is a likely answer for the critical incident. Alternatively, as it is the start of the school day, Student A may have missed their breakfast that day and so

they are hungry. Therefore, as a response, they are putting their hair to their mouth as a mimic of eating.

It is difficult to decipher the true meaning behind the incident, especially as an observer of that single lesson. Furthermore, mental influences are more challenging to identify as the cause of the critical incident since I have no prior understanding of that student's well-being. However, it is fair to assume that Student A may be mentally fatigued and in need of rest due to the prolonged period of cognitive activity since the observation took place near the end of the academic term. For this reason, Student A's tiredness may be outweighing their attention span and so they have focussed on a simpler task of playing with their hair. From another viewpoint, I believe Student A's act of playing with their hair may be a response to anxiety as a way of regulating their emotions and calming themselves (Young Minds, no date). Although, I will discuss this in greater detail in the literature review.

It is important to note that in ethical terms I would be classed as a researcher in this context and therefore have to adhere to the BERA (2018) guidelines. As an observer, I have been permitted to analyse the immersive classroom video as those involved in the video have already given consent to be filmed for the purpose of research. When analysing the data, I will maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of those involved, as well as ensure the fair treatment of the participants (BERA, 2018).

Overview of relevant literature:

In the following section, I will be discussing literature surrounding maintaining student's positive well-being and the use of coping strategies in a classroom environment. Childhood involves a great deal of development, both mentally and physically, and for many, this can fluctuate one's well-being (Children, Young People

and Education Committee, 2018). According to the World Health Organization (no date), well-being represents a state of being happy and healthy, hence, it is hardly surprising that schools and educators have a key role in ensuring the well-being of their students. In Wales, the Welsh Government (2016) illustrates the importance of educating students on leading healthy lifestyles and holding positive well-being as it prepares pupils for a successful and healthy adulthood. This is clear in Graham Donaldson's (2015) influence on the Welsh Curriculum Reform as one of the curriculum's main purposes is to ensure pupils become healthy, confident individuals who have a strong emotional, social and physical well-being. Alongside this, one of the Welsh Curriculums (2016) Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) is Health and Well-being. Donaldson (2015) stated that the Health and Well-being AoLE would develop students' emotional intelligence and introduce them to healthy coping strategies, which will prove to be a beneficial resource as a large proportion of students' well-being was and is still affected by COVID-19 (Hill, 2023).

In relation to the critical incident, when I first observed Student A playing with their hair, my initial reaction was that this act could resemble a coping mechanism as a response to a strong emotion, such as anxiety, fear or stress. It appeared as a self-soothing technique due to its repetitive nature of playing and stroking the hair. One could argue that this coping strategy will benefit the students' learning, as without it, their strong emotions will interfere and steal focus from the lesson (Young Minds, no date). Yet this technique allows the learner to regain control of their emotions as a form of self-regulation.

It could be perceived that through encountering their strong, unpleasant emotions, Student A has developed a coping strategy that best supports themselves. This resembles the notion of self-regulated learning. Zimmerman (1990) explains that

through self-regulated learning, individuals take control of their learning by setting goals, developing strategies to reach these goals and monitoring their progress. In this hypothetical example, Student A wants to focus on their academic learning, but first, they need to learn how to regulate their intense emotions and behaviours as it is proving to be an obstacle. They have set the goal of learning to regulate themselves independently and utilised a strategy of playing with their hair to reach this goal. After the incident has occurred, Student A can monitor their progress to determine if this strategy has helped them reach their goal of being able to take control of their worrisome emotions and turn their attention back onto their learning. By being a reflective individual, they will become an effective learner who can respond and adapt to their environment, especially when it is becoming a stressful stimulus (Zimmerman, 1990).

As an alternative perspective, Vygotsky (1978) introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. In addition to supporting self-regulated learning, Vygotsky (1978) highlights how much more a learner can achieve when guided by a more experienced individual. Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) shared how cultural tools can also shape one's learning as learners are given the tools necessary for developing competence through social agents and their environment. From Vygotsky's view, Student A will be able to learn coping strategies through their environment, their access to regulation tools, and from more knowledgeable others. By developing this higher cognitive function of emotional regulation, Student A will be able to deescalate their emotions and redirect their attention back to their learning. From a different viewpoint, you could argue that Student A's hypothetical response to a stressful stimulus is representative of B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning, specifically positive punishment (Gray and MacBlain, 2015). For example, Student A wants to stop and

remove the unpleasant emotion before it affects their well-being and learning, as such, by introducing the soothing technique of playing with their hair, they are limiting the intensity of this emotional effect. Eventually, the response of playing with their hair as a calming strategy will hopefully decrease the likelihood of strong, unpleasant emotions occurring to the extent of their well-being and learning being poorly impacted. In time, the act will become an unconscious habitual response to that stimulus (Gray and MacBlain, 2015)). Nonetheless, it has been argued that operant conditioning does not address the root of the behaviour and will not prevent it from occurring (Mcleod, 2023). Consequently, this statement undermines my previous comment as Mcleod (2023) says we must first acknowledge the cause of the strong emotions before we can address the associated behavioural response, therefore, the soothing technique is only a temporary solution and will not eliminate the behavioural response if the stressor is still present.

Now having read about self-regulated learning and the zone of proximal development, I understand that there are different views on whether children learn more efficiently when they receive assistance from others or when they work independently. In regard to maintaining students' well-being, I think that an approach that combines the two ideas is required. Inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) work on cultural tools and assistance from a more knowledgeable other, I believe that teachers should create a safe, inclusive learning environment that provides students with access to tools that support their well-being, for instance, self-help books and soothing mechanisms. Similar to the concept of the Health and Well-being AoLE, students should be educated by their teachers on positive well-being to inspire them to live healthy, fulfilling lives. However, I also agree with Zimmerman (1990) that students should take control of their learning. Therefore, with the support from the tools and

inclusive environment, students should reflect on how they feel they can best manage their distracting emotions and disruptive behavioural responses. Being reflective is a valuable skill that will benefit learners throughout their lives. Since all learners have a diverse set of needs, they will be able to comprehend better than anyone how they personally feel they can best support themselves, their well-being and their academic performance.

Teaching and learning methods:

When I first observed the critical incident, my immediate thought was that Student A was playing with their hair as a coping strategy to overcome a strong emotion, such as anxiety. Hence, in my literature review, I focussed on literature that promoted the benefits of incorporating self-regulation and self-soothing techniques in learning environments. I found that self-soothing techniques are likely to help learners deescalate their unwelcome emotions (Young Minds, no date) and to adapt their strong emotions and behavioural responses to fit their learning environment (Zimmerman, 1990). With this adaptation, the invasive emotions have a significantly smaller impact on the student's learning capability. As evidence has shown, self-soothing techniques can be effective (Young Minds, no date), thus, I believe expanding on this and adapting it into a teaching strategy will be beneficial if this critical incident were to occur during my teaching practice.

Ultimately, giving students the means to care for their mental and emotional well-being is the aim of this teaching strategy. Before even considering any learning, this needs to be accomplished to allow learners the mental capacity to process new information and retain it. Recognising that this teaching strategy will concentrate on the whole learner rather than just their intellect, it reflects the fundamentals of holistic

education (Beauchamp, Adams and Smith, 2022). Consequently, I will incorporate Assessment for Learning (AFL) but adapt it to an emphasis on well-being in place of academics. AFL allows teachers to evaluate their student's understanding and progress on a given task so that they are able to intervene and alter their teaching method to meet the needs of the learners (Black, 2003), which are often unpredictable. Black and Wiliam (2001) highlight that assessment is intrinsically linked with how students feel about themselves as learners, and with this in mind, I want to transform AFL to focus on student's well-being.

A well-known AFL strategy is the Traffic Lights Strategy (TLS). This technique is a quick way for teachers to get feedback from their learners on how they are feeling about something, most commonly how confident they feel after being introduced to a new concept (Cambridge Assessment International Education, no date). There are many different approaches to the TLS, but a common approach is that students will change the coloured circle on their table to correspond to their confidence level (Cambridge Assessment International Education, no date). For example, a red circle would indicate that the learner is struggling and severely requires teacher support, whereas an amber circle would signal the learner understands the concept to an extent, and then a green circle would show that the learner is confident in this concept. In the event of the observed critical incident, I would implement a TLS to monitor the student's well-being. Similarly, a green circle would reflect a positive well-being. Alternatively, an orange circle would mean that the student is struggling with something personally, and would like a conversation and advice from their teacher. As a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978), the teacher can have a one-to-one conversation with the student to offer guidance but ultimately listen to the student express their emotions. By simply expressing their issues to another person, the

student can begin to heal and feel a sense of relief (Dreher, 2019). Finally, a red circle would mean that the student needs immediate support as they are having difficulty regulating their emotions. However, the teacher is not the only support resource available in this situation. Other resources can include excusing themselves to the 'calm down' zone in the classroom (Thompson, 2021) or using a self-soothe box. In the learning environment, these cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978) would shape student's learning on their well-being and emotional intelligence.

Concerning the critical incident, I believe a self-soothe box would be a great resource to introduce as it helps struggling individuals feel more relaxed and grounded (Young Minds, 2019). A self-soothe box is filled with a range of sensory objects that can be personalised to each student's needs (Young Minds, 2019), for instance fidget toys, visual sensory timers, comforting essential oils and bubble wrap. Therefore, after displaying a red circle, Student A could use their personalised self-soothe box and the objects inside to seek immediate comfort and relief from their overwhelming emotions. A self-soothe box would allow the opportunity for self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1990) as the user would be able to reflect on their emotional needs and determine how effective the self-soothe objects were at grounding them. From here, the student can develop their emotional intelligence as they assess and learn what strategy or object best supports them.

Despite being a valuable resource (Young Minds, 2019), self-soothe boxes do pose limitations. Similar to the earlier comments made by Mcleod (2023), self-soothe boxes only provide temporary relief and do not address the root cause of the emotional distress. In the long run, this will not support more severe conditions and allow children to develop into emotionally healthy, successful adults as the Welsh curriculum's four purposes aim to do (Donaldson, 2015). In addition, learners have a diverse set of

needs (Black and Wiliam, 2001) and as such, this strategy may not positively contribute to most individuals' well-being. Alongside this, the AFL strategy of the TLS possesses limitations also. One can argue that this method is effective in quickly assessing a learner's confidence, but is not suitable for assessing the complex notion of one's well-being (Dabell, 2019). In addition, the TLS can lead to potential stigmatisation surrounding students who use the red circle (Dabell, 2019). Consequently, this can leave students feeling embarrassed and vulnerable displaying a red circle, and so they refuse to do so leaving them with a sense of isolation and struggling with their emotions alone (Dabell, 2019).

Discussion:

Now that I have observed the critical incident and expanded my knowledge of the relationship between well-being and self-regulation techniques, I feel that my philosophy of education has been influenced. Most notably, observing the critical incident has strengthened my support for reflective practice as a teacher. It has become apparent to me that teaching is a profession that changes often, such as the implementation of the updated Welsh curriculum, and so the teaching role requires individuals to be educated on new research, skills and theories often. As such, teachers should be open-minded to changing their philosophy of education and pedagogical choices for the benefit of their pupil's learning but for their professional learning also (Furlong, 2015). For this reason, it is deemed that being reflective is a vital skill to possess (Tripp, 2015). By being a reflective practitioner, educators are able to critically assess the impact of implementing a new teaching method or resource in the classroom (Furlong, 2015). With regard to John Dewey (1997), reflective practice is about accepting mistakes made as it will act as an opportunity for learning and improvement. I will integrate this message heavily into my personal teaching

philosophy as it is encouraging to learn that by embracing our mistakes, we are learning and developing as an educator and in turn supporting our student's learning. On my teaching placements, I will aim to use Donald Schön's (1991) reflective model as I appreciate the 'reflection in action' as well as the 'reflection on action' structure. As a student teacher, I feel this reflective approach will be helpful as I am learning to introduce AFL into the classroom for the student's benefit, but I had never considered it for my own benefit as the teacher. Now I will aim to take that time to assess the students' response to the lesson, their working level and what I can do to adapt and ensure they reach the lesson success criteria.

My original philosophy of education focussed on teaching monumental historic events and like-long skills. I had never thought to acknowledge the health and well-being of pupils, I thought only of their academic attainment. Now having educated myself on a holistic education approach, I cannot imagine teaching a pupil without first addressing their well-being as their health and happiness should be the priority, and from there the learning will follow (Beauchamp, Adams and Smith, 2022). Prior to this realisation, my original philosophy encouraged the use of learning through play as it allows self-expression whilst the learner is discovering new knowledge. I believe I have continued to demonstrate this factor of my philosophy through the adoption of the self-soothe boxes for the critical incident. While being a self-soothing technique made for relaxation, this activity can also bring the students joy as it can involve sensory toys that are entertaining. I believe it is one of the more enjoyable ways for students to express and regulate their emotions.

I believe that the implementation of Donaldson's (2015) Health and Well-being AoLE has shaped my pedagogical choices to deliver a greater holistic approach. For example, if I observed an incident similar to the critical incident, I would take note of

that pupil's behaviour as a form of safeguarding. Despite it appearing as a minor issue, it could be a contributing factor to a greater risk that demands adult supervision and support. Another way that I aim to take on a holistic approach is by encouraging mindfulness in the classroom. In my ideal learning environment, students will have access to well-being resources like self-help books, self-soothe boxes, calm zones and worry boxes (Welsh Government, 2016). By writing down their worries, students aim to accept and let go of them by placing their concerns inside the worry box (Young Minds, 2020). They can then return to deal with the emotion when they are more capable. Through the Health and Well-being AoLE, I will aim to educate students on self-awareness, managing their feelings and caring for themselves and others, among other important topics. As discussed earlier, children develop significantly during their school years (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2018) and as they mature, they become more capable of understanding complex concepts (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). Thus, they must be revisited frequently to ensure students comprehend and retain this crucial knowledge, which includes caring for their well-being. Especially considering that these topics are not a one-off conversation (Young Minds, no date), therefore I will aim to designate the time and focus these delicate topics deserve.

Conclusion:

In summary, this essay has discussed the observation of a critical incident using Tripp's (2012) methodology. After observing a student appearing disengaged when playing with their hair, I conducted a literature review on the relationship between well-being and self-soothing techniques and their ultimate impact on students' academic attainment. Zimmerman's (1990) work highlighted that the student playing with their hair demonstrated aspects of self-regulated learning. Whereas Vygotsky (1978)

emphasises the impact cultural tools have on one's learning which inspired me to look into self-soothe boxes as a teaching strategy. For helping students with their mental health, these self-soothe boxes proved effective (Young Minds, 2019) but they were criticised for their long-term effect as they do not help students address the root of their problems (Mcleod, 2023). Whilst focusing on student well-being, I developed my understanding of holistic education which in turn influenced my philosophy of education as I now believe a student's well-being should be prioritised over their learning. This will be impactful on my developing teaching practice as it has made me aware of self-soothing techniques and how to recognise them. As such, I will observe my mentor for their response to students displaying emotional distress so that I can learn and apply this to my 'Offering Expertise' professional teaching standard (Welsh Government, 2017). As inspired by Schön (1991), I will utilise their reflective model when on placement as a way of assessing my strengths and weaknesses in order to improve my professional learning.

Appendix:

OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES Record 1
Date and time, year group: • 12th July @ 09:30. • Year 4 class.
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context • First lesson of the day on a Wednesday. • English lesson (Language, Literacy and Communication AoLE). • Higher ability pupils at the back of the class, with the lower ability at the front. • One table has an LSO. • During the summer term. • A fairly calm environment.
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident(the more detail the better to refer to in your later work) • One pupil from the higher ability table at the back of the class is playing with their hair for a long duration of time. • They appear to put their hair into their mouth at one point. • They look disengaged or distracted. • They do not participate in the lesson as much as the other pupils on their table.
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be" under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? • Anxiety = Playing with their hair could be a side effect of anxiety or could be a way to calm themselves down because they are feeling anxious. • ADHD = If they are biting their hair, it could be a small indicator of ADHD. • Disengagement = Look into how to make the lessons more engaging for all. Maybe include more hands-on activities so that the student does not feel the need to play with their hair. • Lack of confidence = The student could be playing with their hair to avoid eye contact with the teacher so that they do not have to answer any questions since they do not understand the lesson fully.
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) • 09:30 am = They could still be tired. They could have missed their breakfast and that is why they are putting their hair to their mouth. • July = The classroom may be hotter than normal so they have become disengaged. • Ability groups = They may not feel as intelligent as those on their table and begin playing with their hair due to a lack of confidence. It could be a nervous reaction. • Busy environment = The classroom door is open and the corridor is noisy at times. There are often students in the corridor which distracts many of the students in the class at different times.

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