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Critical Incidents in Classes: How Do Teachers Deal with Them in Relation to Their Need for Cognitive Closure?

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Critical incident is usually an undesirable situation experienced by an employee (Rosenal, 1995). In the educational system, critical incidents are not necessarily sensational events involving many tensions. Rather, they may be minor incidents that happen in every school (Angelides, 2001). Critical in this sense simply refers to something that was crucial, significant or surprising to the person (Fook, 2007; Schön, 1995). Tripp (2011) notes that critical incidents arise in practice from the way teachers look at a situation and interpret its significance. They support professional growth in one's knowledge of teaching, which comes about when reflection on critical incidents involves critique of one's self or professional values, which can lead in turn to changes in practice (Hanuscin, 2013).

One of the key personal characteristics influencing teacher's behaviour in critical incidents can be their *need for cognitive closure* (NfC). NfC can be defined as individual's motivation in relation to information processing and judgement, respectively as a desire for an answer in order to end further information processing and judgment, even if that answer is not the correct or best answer (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). NfC represents a relatively stable dispositional characteristic of a person but it can be temporarily increased by situational determinants (time pressure, stress) or decreased (fear from mistakes based on fast judgement).

Research question

How do teachers deal with critical incidents according to their need for cognitive closure?

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

The research is based on an integrated mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The main, qualitative part is designed as field research based on an ethnographic research design. It includes an analysis of video recordings of lessons in relation to critical incidents (e.g. classroom problem behaviour, non-communication, academic cheating) and analysis of interviews via open coding (perception of critical incidents and their importance for professional growth).

The quantitative part is based on statistical analyses of survey data regarding teacher's need for cognitive closure by the adapted Need for (Cognitive) Closure Scale – NfCS (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011; Czech version Širůček, 2014). NfCS consists of 15 items with six-point Likert type ratings measuring five sub-scales: desire for predictability, preference of order and structure, discomfort with ambiguity, decisiveness, and close-mindedness.

The sample consists of six experienced teachers in six lower secondary comprehensive classes in six different schools (ISCED 2A) in the Czech Republic. From each teacher we videotaped (teacher camera, student camera) six lessons taught in subjects of Czech Language, Civics or History, conducted an interview, and administered the NfCS questionnaire.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

Need for cognitive closure (NfC) affects teachers' behaviour in critical incidents and perception of critical incidents in their professional growth. We describe three types of teachers: with low, middle, and high NfC and show their behaviour in critical incidents and their perception of critical incidents. The findings can be beneficial in further teacher education in European countries, because teachers are exposed to similar situations within this context. The paper emphasises importance of critical incidents in professional development and explains how they are perceived according to the NfC.

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