

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

This multifaceted research paper entails the critical evaluation and assessment of a specific school-based case study or critical incident. Subsequently, the indelible effect of this pedagogical investigation upon my own teaching practice will be considered. Moreover, I will meditate upon future actions that I will undertake during my teaching education and career. Therefore, expediting and enabling me as an educator to develop my own skills of reflective practice.

Hinnet and Weeden suggest that an act reflective practice is considered to be “any activity that involves the learner in a discussion about how to improve practice” (2010). Any form of critical evaluation and reflectivity towards pedagogical practice is “useful for teachers” (Collin, 2013) as the reflections from “specific events” can be “reinvested into professional actions” (Collin, 2013) that apply to situations utterly different to the original.

In order to reflect, I have deployed the use of David Tripp’s critical incident methodology. Tripp suggests that “critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation” and is, therefore, dependant upon the “interpretation of the significance of an event” (2012). He explains their importance by suggesting that an “analysed critical [incident] can communicate [its] aims and achievements better than many other kinds of evaluation” (Tripp 2012). Therefore, the model is highly accordant for practitioners who constantly look to improve their work through reflection.

In this essay, I will link critical reflection to current educational reform and thought. Furthermore, by linking my specific case study to Professor Graham Donaldson’s four purposes, I will review some of the educational literature surrounding technology in the classroom, group work, and outdoor learning. Finally, this analysis will enable me to theorise

upon the future actions I will undertake in my teaching practice, with the ultimate goal of enabling all learners to progress as best as possible in my classroom.

The unique and capricious environment of the classroom demands teachers to be proficient in “[making] their own choices” and [self-reflecting]” (Tripp, 2011). From the initial theories of John Dewey in 1933 to Donald Schön in 1983, reflection has been deeply entrenched within the pedagogical field for many years. According to Liu, “the goal of critical reflection should be transformative learning” (2017). This form of comprehensive self-evaluation and implementation of changes to refine ones craft is highly conducive to creating a workforce that will be best equipped to tackle the Welsh national education goal.

One of the most significant facets of critical reflection is that it aligns with current educational thought and literary findings of the learning process. Ebadi & Cheisari suggest that the modern-day “sociocultural thinking in teacher development” (2016) has cascaded into the notion of learning being widely regarded as “ongoing, social, situated, and actively constructed” (Ebadi & Gheisari, 2016). Via the deployment of critical reflection, a teacher is inclined to take a “retrospective stance” (Ebadi & Gheisari, 2016). Therefore, the practitioner will be committed to the lifelong learning process through frequent critical considerations. The ongoing self-evaluation and critique necessitate perpetual learning and adaptation, creating a fluid practitioner who can adapt to the ever-changing classroom environment.

With the implementation of the new *Curriculum for Wales Framework* there has never been a more decisive time for a teacher to possess the ability to reflect critically. To successfully achieve the government aims of “[raising] standards for all [and] [tackling] the attainment gap” (*Introduction to Curriculum for Wales Guidance*), practitioners must be open-minded and “willing to enter sympathetically into opposing points of view” (Liu, 2015). When a teacher continuously critically reflects, the notion of context-related improvement is inculcated. As such, the four purposes and ‘what matters statements’ can be taught to each

individual student in a more engaging, relative, and specific manner. Moreover, by using the dual element of critical reflection to “[pay] attention to own practice” and the “social conditions in which practices are situated” (Zeichner and Liston, cited in Liu, 2015), an educator is more likely to deliver equity in the classroom.

The theories of “Scholars such as Shulman (1998) and Zeichner and Liston (1996)” (Liu, 2017) promote critical reflection through collaboration. Individual and social critical reflection complements the multifarious and multi-subject demands upon the primary school workforce. Reflecting with other practitioners of different academic and cultural backgrounds could help better transmit the four areas of learning, cross-curricular skills, and other mandatory curriculum elements. This is because this form of collaborative critical reflection facilitates the concurrent fulfilling of gaps in an educators’ subject or cultural-specific knowledge, and thus, promoting the Curriculum for Wales guidelines of “[tackling] ignorance and misinformation” (*Introduction to Curriculum for Wales Guidance*).

There have been a variety of models and theories of critical reflection that have been created across time, from “Schön (1983) [describing] reflection as two existing time frames” (Liu, 2015) or Van Manen’s “three levels of reflection” (Liu, 2015), a key consistency of critical reflection that is is a “complicated social and cognitive process” that “needs to be cultivated” (Liu, 2015). For educators, a myriad of methods can be used to critically reflect, such as The ERA cycle (Jasper, 2013), Driscoll’s What Model, Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle, and Gibb’s Reflective Cycle.

The critical incident that this essay focuses upon occurred in a year 5 class at a primary school based in Swansea. According to Estyn Reports, in 2019, there were “526 pupils on roll aged from three to eleven” (*Estyn*, 2019) at the school. Within this, there are “17 classes, including two nursery classes” and “two specialist teaching facilities (STFs) on-site” (*Estyn*, 2019). “Approximately 44%” of the students were “eligible for free school

meals over the last three years” (*Estyn*, 2019). *Estyn Reports* found that the school “identified 48% of pupils as having additional learning needs” (*Estyn*, 2019). Therefore at my school, the number of pupils eligible for FSM was 26% higher than the national average in Wales during 2019. Likewise, pupils requiring additional learning needs were 27% higher than the Welsh national average that year.

The first thing to take cognisance of is that there are three year five classes in the school I observed, and there are approximately twenty-five children in each class. The total number of students in the class I was in is twenty-three when whole. Mainly due to covid-19, there were many absences during the day of observation. Thus, only twelve learners were in the class that day. In each year five class, there is a teaching assistant and class teacher. For most lessons, the learners are split into three groups that have been picked by the class teacher, not based on ability. However, the maths groups are divided based on proficiency. The teacher and teaching assistant each teach a different group. The other group then often uses technology as their source of knowledge, utilising digital education resources, such as Popplet or MyMaths.

My observation occurred during the third lesson, between the morning break and lunch. It was a literacy lesson, and as such, the pupils had been divided into three non-ability based groups and were beginning to complete their tasks in the aforementioned lesson style. Child A was sat in a group of six children at the back of the classroom, completing a whole-group literacy exercise on the whiteboard. The nearest group to Child A were using laptops to make mind maps, and the furthest away group were completing a worksheet guided by the class teacher. Fifteen to twenty minutes into the lesson, when the rest of the class had begun to settle, Child A began acting restless and disinterested in the task. The learner actively spun around and became fixated on the table next to them. Eventually, after being spoken to three times by the teaching assistant across the course of the next few minutes, Child A became

focused upon their literacy task. Overall, the class took a few minutes to settle after morning break but were generally focused with the teacher or working on laptops completing an inquiry-based learning task for the rest of the lesson, leading up to lunch.

A key factor to note about the observation day was the stormy weather. The rain and cloudiness caused some disruption during lesson one, as the general darkness of the sky led to learners feeling more tired than usual. To add to this, Child A had discussed their desire to play football outside during the first break many times. However, the school decided to call a 'wet play' due to the poor weather, resulting in every student staying indoors.

The ethical methodology used for this pedagogical research paper is the BERA 2018 guidelines. A key reason for this decision is how the guidelines can be deployed for various research methods. They "recognise and celebrate the diversity of approaches in educational research" and "promote respect for all those who engage with it" (*Ethical Guidelines*, 2018). Furthermore, BERA is a long-established and trusted institution that have "served [the] educational community of researchers well in the past" (*Ethical Guidelines*, 2018). BERA has ensured their guidelines apply to the contemporary world of educational research; taking into consideration "the rise of social media and online communities, new legislative requirements, and the growing impact on our research of internationalisation and globalisation" (*Ethical Guidelines*, 2018). Finally, as a researcher, BERA's endorsement and compliance towards the five "ethical principles agreed in 2015 by the Academy of Social Sciences" (*Ethical Guidelines*, 2019) aligns with my own moral principles and ethos towards researching the social sciences.

Following Professor Graham Donaldson's 2014 review of the Welsh education system and the publishing of the *Successful Futures Document*, The Welsh government released their 'four purposes' of the new Welsh educational curriculum. These four purposes were taken into consideration highly during my observations.

The critical incident I have chosen as the locus for my research is the point in which Child A became restless and disinterested in their task and turned around in their chair, fixating on a different group within the classroom. This is because this event has links to each of the four purposes in some way. Having observed Child A for many days and speaking to staff members, I was made aware that the distraction was not a regular occurrence. The child often “set themselves high standards” and “[enjoys] [a] challenge” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020). Thus, there was clearly one or multiple boundaries that were preventing the learner from working towards becoming an “ambitious” and “capable learner” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020). A possible link or explanation to Child A’s lack of focus could have been their dislike of the carousel classroom system that rotates groups and exercises. The learner may have been struggling to “lead and play [the] different roles” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020) in the classroom, having previously enjoyed the digital task the day prior. Therefore, research is necessary to potentially look for an explanation to get Child A to be a more “enterprising” and “creative [contributor]” in differing classroom contexts. It was unclear whether the student was conscious of the “impact of their actions” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020) when disrupting their group, and thus, research may help me as a practitioner consider how the pupil can better work towards the purpose of being an “ethical” and “informed [citizen]” of “Wales and the World” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020). Finally, with the help of the teaching assistant, the child did, in fact, “face and overcome” the “challenge” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020) of their lack of focus. Critically evaluating this incident with the “healthy, confident individual” (*Developing a Vision*, 2020) purpose in mind may help me as a practitioner discover methods to aid pupils in overcoming challenges in the classroom with more independence.

Due to my chosen critical incident, one focal point of educational research I considered was the use of technology and laptops within the classroom. This is because Child

A was distracted from their task and fixated upon the other group's devices. Thus, an exploration of the positives and negatives of digital education was necessary.

It is common knowledge that technological evolution and digitisation of the modern world would result in technology “reshaping the nature of learning in the classroom” (Singh, 2021). It is transparent that “that digital competencies play an increasing role” (Lindroth, 2010) in the learning process. An issue regarding the subject is the lack of research regarding the “digital classroom” is limited by its “recent origin” and “fast [evolution]” (Singh, 2021). Moreover, much of the research available has a strong focus upon “student perceptions” (Fried, 2008) and “often lacks objective measures of learning or a non-laptop control group” (Fried, 2008). Moreover, my position as a prospective primary school teacher and the prevalence of data related to technology in higher education juxtapose one another.

Mayengbam Nandakishwor Singh's 2021 journal *Inroad of Digital Technology in Education: Age of Digital Classroom* offers a balanced perspective on technology's apparent drawbacks and benefits in the classroom.

Firstly, technology in the classroom has a higher potential than traditional paper learning for “Capacitating the flow of knowledge outside” the classroom and aiding the students to become “active participants” (Singh, 2021) in their education outside of school. To add to this, learners unwell or far away from school could be “provided with the opportunity to attend class in a digitalised classroom”, thus broadening the “scope of interaction between the teacher and students” (Singh, 2021). Moreover, Singh states that technology in education “opens up the scope for wider and transparent sharing of knowledge and information”, whether that be between students or practitioners. Finally, the potential for digital learning could potentially one day lead to a more sustainable and “eco-friendly paperless and penless classroom” (Singh, 2021).

Conversely, possibly the most considerable possible drawback to technology in the classroom is the lack of a “guarantee that students will use” technology, such as laptops and iPads, for “academic purposes” (Singh, 2021). He suggests that it could “slow down the learning process” because such vast access to a wide array of information could “derail their thirst for the quest of true knowledge” (Singh, 2021). Singh illustrates the impacts upon students and teachers warning that technology “may push students to give full attention” to their screens and disconnect from practitioners (2021). Furthermore, “inadequate facilities” or a single “technological glitch” could hinder learning significantly if not fixed quickly.

Overall, based on an evaluation of this research, it is clear that when the foundational and structural organisation has taken place, technology can provide a myriad of benefits for the learners and educators. When managed to a high standard, the digital classroom could be deployed to supply the students with multitudinous sources of knowledge to expand their learning.

Chrystalla Mouza’s 2008 article in the *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* uses data from a study, producing qualitative and quantitative data explicitly relating to laptop use in a disadvantaged primary school setting. The main conclusion from the study was that “laptops” could allow “disadvantaged students to engage in powerful learning experiences” (Mouza, 2008) when used correctly by teachers. Likewise, after extrapolating the qualitative data, Mouza indicates that the studies’ “laptop program” resulted in “academic gains in writing and mathematics” for the students who were given access. Furthermore, unlike some of the findings from Mayengbam Nandakishwor Singh’s aforementioned 2021 journal, the teacher feedback was primarily positive for Mouza. Each class teacher successfully created “a variety of sustained projects that integrated laptop computers” (Mouza, 2008) in various subjects.

A possible disadvantage is that the teachers had to “reworked [their daily schedule’s” (Mouza, 2008). To add to this, one teacher also said they found themselves often acting as a “guide-on-the-side” (Mouza, 2008).

Based on this article, it may be concluded that once the time and resources have been spent integrating technology, it can benefit many learners across a variety of curriculum areas.

The next area of research correlated to the critical incident was reviewing the efficaciousness of group work. Due to the carousel setting of the classroom observed, studies regarding collaborative group work and cooperative group work were analysed. Each pedagogical methodology is frequently deployed in the observation class and therefore requires an analysis of their effects. Moreover, despite differing in terms of the practical tasks set, both educational strategies share an emphasis upon “horizontal knowledge” instead of “vertical knowledge” (Tolmie et al., 2010); and thus, comparisons can be drawn.

In the 2010 journal article titled *Social effects of collaborative learning in primary schools*, the journal Learning and Instruction Tolmie *et al.* reveal collaborative work’s social and educational impacts.

The most significant potential benefit of collaborative work is the “dual impact” of positively helping academic “achievement” and “social integration” (Tolmie et al., 2010). Moreover, it was revealed that this style of group work could help develop learners’ “conceptual grasps” of topics and their “application of skills” (Tolmie et al., 2010). Pushing students out of their usual social circles to perform tasks many pupils to obtain “more positive social relations” (Tolmie et al., 2010) overall.

Despite these findings, Tolmie *et al.* do suggest that the advantage of the “dual impact” (2010) is more likely to be an outcome of a “cooperative learning context” where the teacher is required to more stringently structure the lesson and “[implement] more extensive

resources” (2010). Moreover, when teenagers between the ages thirteen to fourteen were studied, collaborative work was such a “sufficiently negative experience” that a “substantial hostility” was felt towards other group members, despite the success in learning outcomes. Research also highlighted the disparity between results when then group choices differed. There was a connection shown between strong “pre-existing social relations” and the “[optimisation]” of the collaborative process (Tolmie et al., 2010). Finally, the positives of this group work methodology were stipulated with a need for preparing the activities to “manage” learners’ discussion and warn students that the “acceptance of disagreement” is a prerequisite when collaborating (Tolmie et al., 2010).

After critically evaluating the evidence, there are many latent advantages to be gained from collaborative work in the classroom. When group composition and task structure are diligently composed by the practitioner, learners can simultaneously gain the binary benefits of social and academic improvement.

Buchs et al. deploy a different perspective during their research on cooperative work. Their journal, *Challenges for cooperative learning implementation: reports from elementary school teachers*, concentrates upon the practitioner-based consequences of this educational method. The research paper lays out the “well-established benefits of cooperative learning” (Buchs et al., 2016) whilst elucidating the “implementation challenges” (Buchs et al., 2016) for teachers.

The collaborative strengths are outlined, as cooperative learning is believed to provide “learners with opportunities to build knowledge together” (Buchs et al., 2016). Furthermore, Buchs et al. state that cooperative group work can effectively “enhance social, motivational and cognitive outcomes” (2016) for each member of the assemblage. To add this, the majority of the teachers in the study found “relative ease” incorporating cooperative tasks

within the curriculum and acting as a “facilitator (Buchs et al., 2016) of knowledge during said lessons.

Regardless of the aforementioned myriad of benefits to deploying cooperative group work, some teachers struggled to find the necessary “time required” (Buchs et al., 2016) to plan the lessons. Moreover, there is a clear dichotomy between teachers’ interpretations of the ease of implementation. More significantly, the findings found that “the more teachers” who proclaimed “difficulties in embedding cooperative learning into the curriculum” (Buchs et al., 2016), the less they actually implemented the strategy - thus possibly causing a dangerous negative cycle that could eradicate the use of cooperative learning in a classroom altogether. Finally, it was found that there is a lack of use of the strategy in schools, as only “only one third” of respondents in the study used the cooperative group method “routinely” (Buchs et al., 2016).

In closing, this research once again clarifies the social and academic benefits of collaborative group study. Issues arise when practitioners are unclear or unequipped with the time and resources necessary to plan these lesson styles within the curriculum guidelines. However, once these foundational issues are solved, cooperative group work has the potential to become a staple in every classroom that can aid in increasing overall attainment and engagement levels.

As previously mentioned in the chosen critical incident, Child A repeatedly stated their excitement towards playing outdoors during the first break. However, due to the weather conditions, the learner was unable to go outdoors. Therefore, an assessment of the holistic and overall advantages of outdoor teaching was applicable.

A 2010 article by Sue Waite for the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* titled *Losing our way? The downward path for outdoor learning for children aged 2–11 years* directly correlates to the primary school area of practice that this essay aims to

explore. The paper uses findings from three “related empirical studies in the South West of England” (Waite, 2010).

A significant extrapolation from the three studies was the notion of the “squirrel moment” (Waite, 2010). These are where the natural world causes something unexpected and inspires the learners. When harnessed effectively, studies show that these moments, which are exclusive to outdoor learning, can further “[engage] children” and “support their learning” (Waite, 2010). Similarly, the “unpredictability” of nature can be used in a pre-meditative way to ignite enthusiasm and increase “curiosity” in learners, eventually acting as an “experiential” stimulus for “further curricular development and environmental attitudes” (Waite, 2010).

Despite this, outdoor learning’s effectiveness is very child dependant. Particular learners will “prefer the security of the classroom” whilst others will thrive with the “stimulus of experience” (Waite, 2010). An example of this disparity in efficaciousness is that being away from the classroom may aid “children who struggle to maintain concentration in more formal classroom settings” (Waite, 2010). Moreover, issues of a lack of “training [in] the use of the outdoors”, lack of funding from the government, and external forces, such as the weather”, would all need to be rectified before a school sets out to develop a mass outdoor learning program.

It was also concluded by Marchant et al. in 2019 that outdoor learning can help learners in pupils in “achieving their academic potential” and “improving educational experiences and attainment” (Marchant et al., 2019). Eventually, this led to “[improved] future health outcomes and employment pathways” (Marchant et al., 2019). It was found that the outdoors could provide students with an “escape from the uncomfortable and restricted conditions of the classroom” and “increase their exposure to the environment and their engagement with nature” (Marchant et al., 2019). In contrast, some staff reported that they

felt outdoor learning was “an added pressure” and that “varied access to local natural environments” (Marchant et al., 2019) significantly impacted the strategy’s effectiveness. Consequently, a profound dependence upon the “personality” and “enthusiasm” of the practitioner delivering the lesson was acknowledged by “both pupils and teachers” (Marchant et al., 2019) who participated in the study.

In summary, both research papers suggest that outdoor learning can provide students with a unique stimulus and environment for learning. When implemented correctly and planned according to personalities in the class and local weather conditions, the strategy has can greatly help learners in their quest for knowledge.

All of this essay’s areas of research and findings will have perpetual effects upon my future practice as an educator.

There are many considerations I will now take when planning a lesson using digital technology. As a practitioner, I will need to accept that the traditional classroom structure of a singular source of knowledge is no longer relevant. I must see myself as a figure that can guide and provide knowledge to the students. Back up paper-based lesson plans should also be in place to account for any technological faults. When planning, I need to ensure extra time is considered to master the deployed educational software. Furthermore, when planning, I must remain cognizant of the number of resources available in my school, and differing levels of ability in each class, in order to achieve the maximum effects of the digital classroom.

I discovered many implications for my future use of any group work methodology types during this research. The first finding was that the technique must be used frequently to ensure the benefits are felt. Continually planning group work based lessons aids the students in progressively developing their collaboration skills, as they will then get valuable practice working in this more untraditional style. The lessons must be planned to cater to the levels of

differentiation in each group also. Furthermore, when choosing non-ability based groups, I will analyse the students' personality types and friendship groups. This will enable me to group a mixture of louder and quieter students and familiar and less acquainted pupils to work in conjunction and elevate each others learning. I will have to dedicate more time as an educator to plan each lesson of this type stringently and maintain honesty with my class about the possibility of conflict.

This research was enlightening for me as a practitioner with little experience in an outdoor classroom setting. Due to the Welsh weather conditions, my outdoors lessons or lesson blocks will have to be primarily based in the summer. To add to this, alternative plans will still need to be put in place in the event of the weather disrupting any potential outdoor teaching. Finding an appropriate natural environment to teach in is vital as a practitioner. If I am able to use areas of rich greenery, then more "squirrel moments" (Waite, 2010) can be capitalised upon to improve engagement during future lessons. In order to address a possible lack of funding, the potential of outdoor learning must be seen by authority figures. Therefore, perhaps initially producing a schedule of enticing outdoor lessons in environments already within a school could inspire the higher up figures to invest in facilities such as a complete outdoor learning complex.

Overall, each subsection of my pedagogical research will have significant and long-lasting impacts on my future practice. The findings from my study and consequent reflections will enable me to better educate many prospective students in various subjects and use different pedagogical methodologies that include and go beyond the three main areas of investigation in this essay.

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Observation Notes

Record 1 – Child A is turning around in chair looking around the classroom.

Date and time, year group:

23/9/2021. Year 5.

Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context

The lesson between first break and lunch. It was in a year 5 class of 12 learners. The classroom had been split into three groups. One group with a teacher and with a TA. Child A was sat in the group closest to the teacher. Break had just finished but it was a wet play. 10-20 minutes into lesson.

What happened:

Child A was restless and disinterested in a lesson about numbers being greater than numbers. The learner was restless. The teacher had just set the task and was helping a learner on the other side of the table. Child A looked around the classroom and became fixated on the table next to him. Not doing task and clearly distracted.

Areas of possible exploration:

This lead me to research into why the learner was distracted. I reflected on Reality Therapy – Glasser (1965) and felt that the learners need for fun was restricting his behaviour. The child had been looking forward to playing football at break, and then was not able to get on a laptop during wet play. Others avenues of research I could consider might be the effectiveness of technology in the classroom.

Notes:

Rest of class were reasonably settled. Within groups used three different chilly challenge sheets to differentiate. Thought that was effective as the teacher emphasised it didn't matter if a learner was a different level to other learners.

Record 2 – Child B and Child C fight

Date and time, year group: 23/9/2021. Year 5.

Where and When:

On the playground just before eating at lunch time. Busy playground football game had been played for 5-10 minutes.

What happened:

Child A and Child B fighting over the ball pushing and trying to punch each other.
Teaching assistant had to get in between and physically hold them away from each other.

Areas of possible exploration:

Analysis of the incident lead to research into the pros and cons of physical education in primary schools. I found the many benefits of sports in schools far out weighs the small negatives of an occasional argument. Other avenues to consider could be behaviour management techniques and perhaps consider the use of restorative practice (getting pupils to talk to each other – putting students in other students shoes – e.g., after a fight – asking pupils how actions made others feel) to resolve the conflict.

Notes:

Later found out that the two learners had been told that they were not allowed to be on opposite teams as they fought so frequently during lunch time football games. Also in the same class.

Record 3 – Child D hands out pens

Date and time, year group: 23/9/21

Where and When:

In a year 5 classroom. During a maths lesson. After lunch.

What happened:

Maths lesson was just beginning after lunch time. Children sat down ready to work. Class split into three. Class teacher at front. Asks for a volunteer to hand out pens to the rest of the class. Child D volunteers and hands out pens to others. Only male students volunteered to hand out pens. Male and female students in group concentrated well for rest of lesson. Group based on ability, highest set.

Areas of possible exploration:

Impacts of group work / set work. Impact of giving measured levels of responsibility to learners. Links between gender of teacher and impact on learning for different gendered students.

Notes:

That set is composed of six boys and five girls.