

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

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Aim, focus and understanding of the critical incident

According to Mohammed (2016), a “critical incident analysis is a pedagogical theory developed by Tripp (1993), whose analytical approaches allow reflection on teaching situations“. A critical incident can be a positive or negative moment in a classroom, where learning and reflection can take place. The critical incident this essay will explore takes place within a year 5 classroom. The teacher of this class was introducing the topic that the children would be learning about before she introduced that morning's lesson. She did this by using a hook to get the children interested and excited about the activity, resulting in the children being chatty and willing to discuss their current knowledge and thoughts on the topic. As the children were excitedly trying to share, one little boy put his hand up to answer one of the questions but became overwhelmed. He then turned to the teaching assistant beside him and checked that his answer was correct before putting his hand up again and answering the question.

This essay will explore how learning theories such as social learning theory, metacognition and social cognitive theory can be applied to this critical incident. It will then consider external factors such as the boy's well-being, the way he transitioned into the classroom and additional learning needs and how they could provide a deeper understanding of the situation. Finally, it will explore teaching and learning methods that could mitigate the effect of these external factors and provide support for the boy. In the midst of constantly evolving pedagogy, this essay analyses teaching and learning strategies using a reflective lens to provide inclusive and effective learning environments.

Overview of relevant literature

Social learning theory is a concept popularised by Albert Bandura (Bandura and Walters, 1977). It bridges the gap between behaviourist psychology and cognitive psychology by considering that learning could be influenced by both cognitive processes and environmental factors; ultimately, shaping behaviour (McLeod, 2022). This theory suggests that there are three processes which take place when learning occurs: observation, modelling and imitation. By observing behaviours, a person learns what is acceptable and modelled by people similar to them, in turn, imitating these behaviours (Sutton, 2021). Furthermore, a person is more likely to emulate a behaviour if there are advantages or incentives connected to the action they are seeing. For example, children who have witnessed positive behaviours such as parents reading to them, engaging mathematics demonstrations, or someone displaying bravery in the face of fear are more likely to emulate these behaviours after seeing the benefit it brings. Likewise, aggression and hostility can also be emulated if the role models observed are seen to be violent or aggressive (Nabavi and Bijandi, 2012). This was clearly shown in Bandura's Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961).

When applying this theory to the critical incident, we can see that the boy who raises and lowers his hand has been influenced by the behaviours of his classmates who also raise their hands to answer a question. He is aware that it is a desired behaviour within the classroom and strives to emulate that behaviour. However, the boy also seeks external validation as he lowers his hand

to check his answer with the teaching assistant. This shows that the boy wants to ensure that his answer reaches the standard and aligns with the norms he has observed in the classroom. This behaviour is then positively reinforced when the class teacher calls on him and praises him for his answer. This critical incident highlights the core ideas of the social learning theory, however does not consider the role that internal motivations or emotions play in causing the boy to doubt his opinion and hesitate to answer the question.

Metacognition, however, provides insight into these motivations and emotions. Metacognition can be defined as “awareness or analysis of one's own learning or thinking processes” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023). There are three phases of metacognition. The first includes monitoring and evaluating one's current state and planning to achieve goals. The second includes monitoring one's own cognitive processes and learning. The third uses reflection to consider the standards and reactions to one's actions and uses this to improve for next time (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1998). Ultimately, this process enables a person to reflect on their knowledge, identify gaps in their understanding and plan to improve learning outcomes. This is particularly helpful when applied to an educational context as effective metacognition helps pupils to recognise their strengths and limitations, choose their learning strategies thoughtfully, and develop into more adaptive and self-directed learners. A learner can better support their own intellectual growth and decision making when they can observe, control, and evaluate their thought processes and approaches to problem-solving (Isaacson & Fujita, 2006).

In relation to the critical incident, we could suggest that the little boy began to monitor his cognitive functions when he hesitates and lowers his hand to check his answer with the teaching assistant. This suggests that he is evaluating the current state of his knowledge and has made a plan to verify or confirm his understanding with the teaching assistant. This shows that he has recognised his uncertainty and uses this self-awareness to determine his actions. The boy then engages in self-reflection by confirming his answer with the teaching assistant, in turn solidifying knowledge before sharing it with the class. Finally, by seeking approval from the teaching assistant, the boy reflects on his understanding and finds positive reinforcement that will encourage him to continue this metacognitive learning process and increase his participation in class in the future. This cognitive process allows us to consider learning and thinking processes, however, does not consider if there were negative motivations to cause the boy to lower his hand; such as a fear of failure.

The achievement motivation theory was developed out of studies conducted by McClelland and Atkinson (Moore et al., 2010). This theory “attempts to explain and predict behaviour and performance based on a person's need for achievement, power, and affiliation” (Lussier and Achua, 2015, p.42) Ultimately, this theory suggests that as humans we are driven by our need to succeed; or more importantly, our need to avoid failure (Rabideau, 2005). Furthermore, it proposes that the way an individual attributes their failure or success can influence their motivation and drive in later scenarios (Singh, 2018). For example, if an individual attributes their success to an internal factor such as consistent practice and effort, this will increase their motivation to be successful. However, motivation may be undermined by attributing success to an external factor such as chance (Graham, 2020). It is also highlighted by Krista De Castella et al. (2013) that whether we are “failure-fearing” or “success-oriented” at our core determines how long our drive to succeed will last.

Achievement motivation theory explains what caused the boy to hesitate and lower his hand, however, it is not possible to identify whether this was a 'failure-fearing' or 'success-oriented' motivation. His hesitancy may be explained by his fear of failing, which might make him reluctant to take risks in front of his peers out of concern that he won't live up to their or his own standards. On the other hand, he could have been driven by his motivation to excel in the classroom and wanted to ensure his answer met his usual standard.

Social learning theory, metacognition and achievement motivation theory offer different explanations for what we might observe in this crucial incident. Together they consider the behavioural and social norms, cognitive reflective processes and internal motivations that could be taking place. These theories do not, however, take into account external variables that could be impacting the events we witness in this critical incident, such as transitions, the boy's wellbeing, or whether the boy has additional learning needs.

Explanation of case study

Transitions can be defined as "a change from one form or type to another, or the process by which this happens" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Most commonly, a transition is regarded as a large life event that takes place over time. This could include environmental, social, individual, relational, or developmental changes (Kralik et al., 2006). While these transitions are a normal part of life that every child and adult must go through to develop, these periods can often result in instability and difficulty as individuals and family units adjust to their new normal (Cowan, Hetherington and Institute, 1991). On the other hand, a horizontal transition refers to smaller everyday transitions that can still affect an individual; especially children. For example, transitioning from home to school, from the classroom to lunchtime and then back again, to after-school activities and then home again. These horizontal transitions are essential for a child to live their life. Though these transitions are not as life-changing as moving countries or schools, they still impact a child's emotions, confidence and readiness to learn (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007).

When considering the boy in our critical incident, he may be going through a transition in his home life that has caused him to lack confidence in his abilities. He could be tired from moving houses or perhaps has lost a family member and is struggling to understand his emotions. It is also possible that he is still adjusting to the horizontal transition from his home into school. The boy has no control over these transitions and how they make him feel, therefore, this could explain why the boy sought reassurance from the TA so that he could be confident and in control of his answer before it was given.

The boy's well-being could also impact his performance and confidence in school. As this was the first lesson of the day, the boy may not have eaten a highly nutritious meal. A study by Kleinman et al. (2002) investigated the impact of nutrient intake on academic performance. They found that nutritionally vulnerable Children showed more behavioural problems in addition to significantly lower attendance, punctuality, and results in school. After introducing a free school breakfast programme, they found "significant improvements in student academic performance and psychosocial functioning and decreases in hunger" (Kleinman et al., 2002,

p.24). This was supported by Taras (2005) who also found that school breakfast programs increased cognitive functioning and academic success. Additionally, if the boy slept poorly the night before, this may have harmed his well-being. According to Dewald et al. (2010), the main factor preventing academic success is tiredness. Being tired can also harm an adolescent's ability to deal with stressful situations, and their confidence and tolerance to frustration (Short et al., 2013). If the boy is hungry and tired, he is not able to perform to a high standard academically with confidence. Therefore we can understand why he sought reassurance and extra support from the teaching assistant.

Finally, it is unclear if this boy has any additional learning needs. According to Halliwell (2012), up to 20% of students are predicted to have additional learning needs that require special assistance. All schools are required to have an ALN policy and a plan as to how they will provide additional support so that children can fully participate in their lessons along with their peers (Halliwell, 2012). The new curriculum in Wales emphasises inclusive education and takes into account each student's unique requirements. This curriculum has removed the idea that children should understand a concept by a certain age. This allows teachers and teaching assistants to meet pupils where they are and provide tailored support without worrying that they are falling behind, but instead knowing that they are exactly where they are supposed to be (Conn & Hutt, 2020).

The teacher, ALN coordinator and the teaching assistant may have worked together to formulate a plan to support this boy. By having this teaching assistant sit next to the boy, she can provide tailored assistance to support him and accommodate any needs he has. She can ensure that he understands the topic of discussion, answer questions and identify any misconceptions the boy may have, while also making plans for intervention. Furthermore, it is clear that she also provides emotional support and encouragement as he sought reassurance from her before he answered the question. By doing so, she empowers the boy to take ownership of his learning and be involved in an inclusive learning environment. It is possible that having an understanding of the boy's well-being, the transitions he experiences and potential additional learning needs can help us to have a deeper understanding of this critical incident. Practitioners must consider the wider issues around an occurrence to handle it effectively through teaching and learning practices.

Teaching and Learning Methods

It is our job as practitioners to reflect upon our practice and critical incidents such as this one (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010). It is important to highlight that the boy's hesitation to answer the question is not a bad thing; however, we can evaluate how we can better support the boy so that he feels confident in his response next time.

Firstly, to support positive transitions, music can be used to improve moods and focus students. Allen and Wood (2013) explain how music can affect us physically, psychologically and emotionally. They discuss how music is used in shopping centres, gyms, advertisements and even after surgery to promote a desire to shop, to work hard or to help heal. They conclude that teachers should use music to control the mood, energy levels and productivity in their

classrooms. This is supported by Hallam & Price (2003), who found that having music playing during a maths test improved behaviour and mathematics performance. To support the boy as he transitions from home into school, I would play calming music on YouTube to set the tone of the day, followed by some yoga stretches and some happy music to uplift the mood and create an atmosphere of excitement to learn. This creates a positive learning environment and helps me to support them as they transition into the classroom.

However, this strategy relies heavily on the use of the internet and technology to be successful. Therefore, I would also check in with the class by asking them how they are feeling. This allows me to personally discuss their well-being needs, such as a lack of sleep, hunger or if they are struggling with something at home. By identifying any emotional issues in the class and showing that I care, I am reducing the risk that this will interfere with their learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Moreover, fostering an environment in the classroom where children feel appreciated, included, and acknowledged while having fun encourages creativity, problem-solving, and coping mechanisms (Roffey, 2012). It is easy to recognise the significant impact that teachers have on the lives of their pupils, but we must recognise that teachers play only one part in the larger, multidisciplinary team that surrounds a child.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) identified how vital a child's support system is in all areas of their development. He believed that five levels of influence surround a child, each one intertwining with one another. The first and closest is called the microsystem. This includes all of the people who have direct access to the child within their environment, such as their parents, family, friends, teachers and classmates. The next level is the mesosystem. On this level, all of their direct relationships connect and interact with one another. How these key people interact with each other will have a great impact on how a child develops. The third and fourth levels include governments, healthcare, their parents' friends and education. These influences have an impact on the child's development even though they are not in close contact with them (Cherry, 2023, Guy-Evans, 2022). This method highlights that providing for a child's needs involves more than just parents and teachers; rather, it involves a support network made up of a complex web of relationships that work together to support a child as they grow and develop.

Having a support system around this boy that is working together and keeping up to date with his progress is vital; especially if he has additional learning needs. As his teacher, I would ensure that I was working with the boy's parents, an ALN coordinator in the school and the boy himself to make an Individual Development Plan (IDP). According to Snap Cymru (2022), this is a plan that outlines the support they need, how this will be provided by all members of the team surrounding the child and records their progress. By working together as a team with the child, we can put strategies in place to optimise learning and emotional support.

Strategies could include "think, pair, share". This is a discussion strategy that is used to encourage active participation. It does this by first providing each student with an opportunity to independently consider their own thoughts and ideas in response to a question. The students then discuss their ideas and perspectives with a partner, allowing them to bounce ideas off of one another and discuss ideas they may not have considered. They then share with the rest of the class, highlighting their key points and conclusions while also hearing what other groups thought. When this technique was used with student nurses, they found there was an increase in critical thinking skills (Kaddoura, 2013). This was supported by Sri Sumarni (2016), who found

an increase in academic achievement. This is due to the fact that every student can comprehend the question and assist one another. By employing this tactic, the boy will have the chance to clarify and debate his response, which will boost his confidence when he presents it to the class. Furthermore, the boy could be sat with a group of children and provided the opportunity to discuss questions as a group. This is supported by Wu et al. (2013) who found that collaborative discussions generated higher levels of interest and involvement from students compared with teacher-led discussions with the whole class. By providing the boy with support from his peers, they are able to learn and build confidence together.

Discussion and recommendations

The dynamics of the classroom and student involvement will be greatly enhanced by implementing teaching and learning strategies such as "think, pair, share" or collaborative group tables to encourage peer discussion and support. Numerous advantages have been demonstrated by studies conducted by Wu et al. (2013), Sri Sumarni (2016), and Kaddoura (2013). Specifically, these strategies enable children to interact with one another and with concepts they would not have thought of, make sense of what they're learning, and develop critical thinking abilities. Ultimately, academic achievement and student engagement will increase by utilising strategies that support peer interaction and student-centred learning. Classrooms will become inclusive and effective learning environments when these techniques are applied by educators who are flexible and capable of taking into account each student's specific requirements.

Furthermore, understanding critical incident methodology has expanded our understanding of theories of learning and child development. We may take a more holistic approach by exploring how theories and external variables might be utilised to explain student behaviour and classroom involvement (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). Working with a multidisciplinary team to give emotional and well-being support and encourage inclusive learning environments can help to further improve this.

In reflection, I can see the importance of considering the mental processes surrounding a child within a critical incident, as well as the external experiences that could be influencing their behaviour or decisions. No child is the same and neither are their experiences. I would like to improve my practice by taking the time to address each student's individual demands for learning and well-being. Practically, this could be done by implementing the teaching and learning methods discussed, as well as working together with mentors, experienced teachers and the pastoral teams within my schools. Together we can identify key strategies to support pupils and to create a learning environment that fosters confidence and inclusivity. This adopts all five of the professional standards as I am collaborating with others to develop my practice and pedagogical methods to lead a class effectively using innovative methods (Hwb, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has investigated a critical incident where a boy hesitates to raise his hand and checks his answer with the teaching assistant before answering the question. This critical incident within a year 5 classroom has provided us with a greater understanding of the motivational, cognitive, and behavioural factors that influence student involvement. By applying theories such as social learning theory, metacognition and achievement motivation theory, we are able to make suggestions as to what is taking place at this moment. The essay then discussed the possible external factors such as transitioning into the classroom, his well-being and potential additional learning needs. These external variables are often intertwined with a child's experiences, emotions, and personal struggles, and therefore, have a significant impact on students' confidence and ability to participate fully in class.

By gaining a better understanding of the potential causes of this critical incident, we can propose teaching and learning strategies which could support the boy and improve inclusivity and student engagement. The essay then discusses the importance of working together as a part of a multidisciplinary team together with the child and family. This ensures that everyone is aware of the situation and the plans made to provide support and increase learning, such as an IDP. Furthermore, checking on students to understand their mental and physical states helps educators to know the type of support to provide. This could be a conversation to work through emotions or ensure they have eaten some breakfast. Finally, using teaching and learning techniques such as 'think, pair, share' and table groups to increase discussion and class collaboration. This allows pupils to use critical thinking skills, to learn from one another and to solidify their own knowledge.

By researching the causes and explanations for this critical incident, this essay showcases the complexity of human emotions, thoughts and feelings. This emphasises the necessity of a flexible, diverse, and empathetic approach to education. If successful, educators will pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive, and adaptable future.

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