

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.

Introduction:

The following is an overview of an observed critical incident observed whilst on placement in a primary school. It should be noted to the reader, that any incident deemed a critical one, is not necessarily a major or negative incident. Moreover, critical incidents should be discussed and thought of, as incidents that happen in a classroom, that offer the observer the opportunity to reflect upon them and develop their practice. We can look to Bruster and Peterson (2012) to realise that academic literature is amplifying the need for teachers to employ reflective practice within their work.

It can therefore be said that reflective practice must now be considered an integral part of the teaching profession. This document will aim to explain this notion to the reader, as well as help them understand why such a notion exists. Therefore, we will also see a critical analysis of both the benefits and potential drawbacks of using reflective practice of critical incidents in the classroom, in modern teaching practice.

The role of critical reflection:

If we look to Shandomo (2010) we can see a very enlightened view of the role of critical reflection in the education of teachers. The irony here being the discussion of the education of educators. However, Shandomo makes some excellent points about why critical reflection is key to developing the modern teacher. He tells us how critical reflection itself, involves us not simply reviewing our practice, but understanding the history and cultural overlays that drive it. From here, we can determine that critical reflection is an examination of the subtleties that have influenced teaching practice. By understanding these subtleties, a modern teacher can begin to grow their understanding and comprehension of their own unique teaching style, thereby discovering what changes can be made by them to improve their practice.

Harland and McCreedy (2015) talk of the importance of critical reflection in education, in particular with young men and boys. They discuss how some male students may find it difficult to engage with a teacher's lesson, due to personal issues they may be experiencing

away from the classroom. In order to effectively combat any lack of engagement from male students, Harland and McCreedy suggest the use of reflective practice to place such issues at the core of any learning and education afforded to these students. This concept is not limited to young men and boys' learning though.

The idea of using reflective practice to adjust the delivery of education and learning to better suit the audience of learners is something that can be applied to any gender of student. A teacher who is capable, and does indeed implement reflective practice on themselves, will no doubt notice and issues with engagement their students may be experiencing. Alongside this, said teachers will also notice what methods they have used that attained the highest levels of engagement from students, thus allowing them to change and adapt their practice accordingly.

Minott (2011) talks of how across the past two decades, education has come to think of teachers as 'reflective practitioners'. This definition shows the change in the way we have come to view teachers as a global society. Teachers are no longer there simply to facilitate the learning of a pre-set curriculum, rather they are there to educate themselves too. We cannot incorrectly presume the education teachers now undertake is one that mirrors the same knowledge quest as their students. Instead, we must view the learning of teachers as a journey of self-development through critical reflection. Realising and accepting that teachers learn throughout their careers allows us to better understand the key role that critical reflection plays in modern teaching.

Observation. School and class context:

As a part of this critical evaluation, an in class observation was undertaken, to observe a critical incident that could then be analysed.

From here on out, the name of the school will be referred to simply as School X. This is to protect the anonymity of the school, in accordance with BERA (2018). Alongside this, no staff or pupils from the school will be named either.

School X is located near the city and county of Swansea in South Wales. It is a primary school catering for children in years Reception to Year 6. They also have a Flying Start unit incorporated in to the school, however the unit is a self-contained entity whose attendees do not mix with the rest of the school. The observation took place across two days, within a Year 3 class, meaning all children were aged between 7 and 8 years. The class were of mixed ability children.

The most recent Estyn report available for School X is from 2020. The report will not be linked in this evaluation as to ensure the protection of anonymity. The report offered an

insight into the workings of the school, including the total number of pupils at the time being 427, and also that 30% of pupils have some kind of additional learning need.

The report summarised that the school was excellent in all areas of care and education being provided to the pupils attending.

The school has a strong stance on behaviour management that revolves around positive reinforcement, with many examples of this on display throughout the school for all pupils to see. The names of children maintaining 100% attendance are added to a board in the main reception area at the end of each term. They also employ the weekly Golden Leaf award, which rewards one outstanding pupil from each class a paper leaf with their name on, that is then added to a tree display at the start of the year 2 to year 6 corridor, allowing many pupils to see which of their peers have been performing and behaving well.

Critical Incident:

If we now look to Appendix (ii) we can review the incident that was observed.

During the last portion of the day, the children are gathered to sit in a circle around the class teacher. This is for an activity known as Star Time. Within this time, the teacher will read a predetermined book to the children. The children are then asked to respond to certain questions, as well as simply respond to how the story has made them feel. The book was already partially finished during previous Star Time sessions, this allowed for the teacher to ask their students to recall the information and their thoughts and feelings about what had previously happened in the story.

The book was entitled Silly Billy, and by the end of the story, Billy is able to sleep soundly thanks to the use of worry dolls. For this session, the children were shown two printouts from the book. The first showed Billy at the start of the book, where he was unable to sleep. Within the printout, we can see very dark colours in the pages of the book, and a very worried expression on the children's faces. The children were able to easily describe the worry and darkness they saw, allowing for the incident to reflect the 'ethical, informed citizens' purpose, from Donaldson (2015). This further exemplified the way in which the children were learning to be ethical and informed citizens with the change in experienced and shown by Billy. The second printout showed this, as we see a much brighter scene, with Billy appearing to sleep peacefully in a bright and colourful environment. Again the children were able to offer many valid opinions as to what differences there were between the two printouts. Across the feedback offered for both images, the children are asked how the images make them feel. The children were competently able to explain how they felt, often sympathising with Billy over his predicament. This allowed for them to amplify the purpose of becoming ethical and informed citizens.

During the feedback from the printouts however, we see another incident. One of the children was concerned with moving back to the sun on the Golden Time board. Golden Time is a session that happens on Friday mornings, that is essentially a free choice of activities for the children. Anyone not on the sun Friday morning, can lose some or all of their Golden Time, hence the desire of the child to move back to the sun. The teacher dealt with the disruption swiftly, informing the pupil they would not be moved, if they kept interrupting the learning, to ask. Whilst this is an example of the school's positive reinforcement behaviour management strategy having some downsides, it is yet another example of creating ethical citizens within the new curriculum. This is due to the child learning that respecting others and allowing them to learn uninterrupted, will result in a benefit for all.

Literature review:

From the observation undertaken, we can determine there are several overarching factors that have a deep impact on pupil learning. These factors then determine the type of learning possible for the pupils. One such method for learning tracks along the Constructivism theory. Constructivism is a style of learning pioneered by theorists such as Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky. It can be considered as a holistic approach to learning, as it draws upon the idea of learners drawing upon prior knowledge, and applying it to developing an understanding of new information.

Bada (2015) told us that:

An important restriction of education is that teachers cannot simply transmit knowledge to students, but students need to actively construct knowledge in their own minds. That is, they discover and transform information, check new information against old, and revise rules when they do not longer apply. This constructivist view of learning considers the learner as an active agent in the process of knowledge acquisition.

This is a viewpoint that offers a valuable and clear explanation of what a constructivist approach to learning is: learners actively being involved in the development of their knowledge. This is something seen plainly in the new curriculum, in particular during the four purposes. One purpose dictates the development of ambitious and capable learners. Donaldson (2015). The idea behind this purpose is that learners in Wales will be able to continue their education, far beyond compulsory schooling. Effectively it looks to create lifelong learners, something constructivism is able to aid in the development of. Learners who are able to drive their own development of knowledge, by using what knowledge they already have, and activating prior information. This is something we have already seen

within the observation, when children were asked to recall the events from their previous experiences of Star Time.

However, it would be naïve to think learners, especially younger learners, were able to develop their knowledge purely through constructivism feeding from solely their own learning around a subject. For example, a rugby player who has never seen or played football would have little to gain from their own prior knowledge when trying to learn to play the new sport. Therefore, they would need the help of someone else, thus leading to the social element of constructivism.

The benefits of using social constructivism are immediately apparent when placing the two words next to each other. To draw upon the age old saying of “A problem shared, is a problem halved” having multiple learners to draw upon when constructing new information into acquired knowledge is an invaluable resource.

Perhaps one of the most apt descriptions of the constructivism theory comes from Narayan et al (2013):

Learners are not blank slates, they bring prior cultural knowledge and/or experiences to learning situations that impact the new knowledge they will construct or modify. If the new knowledge emerging is not in agreement with their current schema, the learner can evaluate both and modify their knowledge and schema. Hence meaning making is interpretive and dependent on the learner's experiences and understanding.

The beauty of this definition lies in its acknowledgment that no learner is a blank slate. Instead it addresses the simple truth, that all learners will have some prior knowledge or experience, that they will build upon to develop new information into accepted knowledge. When we consider this, we know that learners are typically far more capable and adept and developing their understanding than first impressions may imply.

However, this does of course ring in some issues too. If learners are going to call upon pre-existing knowledge, in order to assimilate new information into their knowledge pool, it is to be expected they may have a bias towards how they develop this new knowledge. This can lead to complications within the learning process. If a learner expects the information to lead to a particular conclusion, influenced by prior knowledge, but ultimately ends up at a different and possibly correct conclusion, they may begin to doubt their findings. This would be a best case scenario, as it would lead to the learner either calling upon a teacher or fellow student for help, or at the very least starting over. There is of course a worst case scenario at the other end of this spectrum. That is one wherein the learner instead comes to an incorrect conclusion, and assimilates that as the correct knowledge. Thereby polluting the accuracy of their knowledge pool. To avoid this, assessment and reflection are necessary for both learner and teacher.

Reflection and Next Steps

My time on observation in School X allowed me to see multiple instances of how learning can be impacted within a real life classroom environment. These incidents can have either a positive or negative impact, and sometimes that can be determined almost entirely by the teacher's response. If we look again to Appendix (ii), more specifically at the interruption made by a pupil regarding being moved back up to the sun for Golden Time, this is a clear example of the negative side to behaviourism as a learning theory, and indeed the approach of positive reinforcement by the school. However, that does not mean the incident itself was a negative impact on the learning of the class as a whole. Whilst the interruption indeed broke the flow of learning at the time, the teacher's fair and swift response allowed for the interruption to have a positive impact on the learning of the student who interrupted. They chose not to ask again, and clearly understood that their current behaviour did not fall in line with the rules. Therefore, they were able to adjust their behaviour, and ultimately receive the move back to the sun at the end of the day.

As for the rest of the class, there was a minimal impact to their learning, again this is because of the teacher's handling of the interruption. Despite the jarring halt caused by the unrelated question, the swift way in which the situation was handled, meant the other children were able to quickly resume their learning mindset. This allowed for their responses to continue, and thus exemplified the aptitude of the teacher.

As a possible progression from here, I would suggest making it clear to the class as a whole, that questions that are off topic for the current lesson or learning opportunity, are held until the end of the session. This would happen at the start of a lesson to ensure the class know of my intention to not want to address off topic questions, or even add them to a sort of class charter, that adds in to the already set rules for the school as a whole. In School X, such rules are referred to as the Golden Rules.

We can also look to Appendix (iii), where one student despite demonstrating a competent reading ability, overran the words in their reading book.

The morning session was guided reading, allowing for children to demonstrate their reading ability, whilst also giving the teacher time to assess any progress made, and give feedback on the progress.

Guided reading sessions offer pupils a chance to learn through constructivism. Those reading the same book are able to listen and potentially learn how to pronounce new words from their peers. It also affords pupils the chance to reflect upon their prior knowledge of spellings and grammar and develop their own knowledge by solving any new formations of words they may come across.

For me, the way in which the pupil's overrunning was handled, was near perfect. The pupil was allowed time to slow themselves down, which they did, whilst also being allowed to continue to the same stopping point that had been predetermined. What this meant, is the pupil achieved a sense of fulfilment from completing the guided reading activity, and was also able to learn from the feedback offered by the teacher.

If I had been able to offer the feedback however, I would have preferred to stop the pupil whilst they were over running, in order to prevent any feeling of embarrassment that may have arisen. This way, the pupil is able to benefit from the same notion of learning from feedback, but avoids any further trip ups with their reading during the session. I would then suggest starting from the beginning of the section they had read for the session, to allow them to work through the original difficulties. However, given the short period of time afforded for guided reading, it is understandable and expected that being able to restart after making a mistake is unrealistic. This is especially true for large groups, as restarting would reduce the time allowed for the other pupils to read, and receive feedback.

Conclusion:

From reading this document, it is clear to see that the use of a variety of both teaching, and reflective strategies are key to being a modern teacher in Wales.

The Successful Futures document, and indeed the new curriculum for Wales call for the holistic development of children, as opposed to conditioned and distant instruction.

The use of learning theories such as Constructivism and Behaviourism allow for the called upon holistic development.

As mentioned previously, constructivism is perhaps one such learning theory that can be included in the modern Welsh teacher's arsenal. The basis of cohesive learning in social constructivism allows for pupils to engage with each other, as well as the information provided by teachers. This gives the children of Wales the opportunity to become lifelong learners, who are ethically informed and considerate towards others. From each other, we as a society learn new things. Those who have brought new religions and cultures to Wales, have in turn knowingly or unknowingly employed social constructivism to educate themselves and Wales.

If we also look to the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) standards, when reviewing this document. We know from reviewing the QTS standards alongside this document, that reflective practice can benefit teachers across several bands.

Within the pedagogy standards alone, we can see that teachers must encourage reflection from their students. In order to assess how well they have done this, critical reflection of one's own teaching must take place.

Similarly, in the way teachers assess pupil's work, critical reflection is key. Turning back to the success factors put in place for learning objective, will often govern how work is assessed. However, if work is assessed to a low standard, or if pupils are not seen to have made progress between learning objectives, a teacher's decision to reflect upon the success factors, and indeed their own teaching, may show the answer as to where the failings may have been. Being able to then move forward, and change or adapt teaching styles can lead to better attainment from all pupils.

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Appendices:

Appendix (i)

Date and time, year group: 22nd Sept, 8:45am, Year 3

Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context
First thing in the morning, inside classroom during carpet time. Greeting the children and starting the day with some Cymraeg.

What happened: to begin the school day, the teacher welcomed and greeted the students in Welsh. The Helpur Heddiws were then assigned using the register on the wall, so everyone knows who's turn it is.

The helpers then set up the daily board that shows the date, month, day of the week, weather for today and weather for yesterday. Once the board is set for the day, the helpers draw the names of their peers, written on lollipop sticks, from a pot. As each name is drawn, the corresponding pupil is asked a question in the order they appear on the daily board. Both the questions and answer are given in Welsh.

After all sections of the board have been covered, the teacher asks the class, how many pupils are in class today, if they know how many there should be maximum, and how many are off. This is again asked and responded to in Welsh, but also introduces numeracy into the setting.

Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be "under the hood" in these incidents?
What avenues of research could you consider?

- Reflective practice
- ZPD (teacher or other students play the role of MKO)
- Behaviourism (Dojo points)
- Welsh language standards
- Multiple pedagogies

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)

Appendix (ii)

Date and time, year group: 22nd Sept, 15:00, Y3
Where and When: Star Time: children sit in a circle during the last portion of the day to listen to the teacher read. On the carpet in front of star time wall.
What happened: children were asked to sit in a circle around the teacher. The storybook 'Silly Billy' was brought out by the teacher. Before reading any, the children were asked what happened last to show they remembered the previous session's learning. Once the reading was complete it was the end of the book, children were asked to respond to 2 different images the teacher then pinned to the Star Time board: Image 1 was of Silly Billy not being able to sleep, and being surrounded by hats. The image lacked colour and vibrance, and showed a visibly scared Billy. Image 2 instead shows Billy happy and sleeping in his bed. The image is notably more colorful. The children are then asked to point out the differences between the images. This happened without any sort of prompting from the teacher. During the session, one of the children asked a question regarding being moved up a peg, jarring with the flow of the session. Teacher dealt with situation by pointing out every time they asked about this at a time that disrupted learning, the answer would always be no because it was not showing "good listening"
Areas of possible exploration: - Constructivism - Reflective practice - Behaviourism
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)

Appendix (iii)

Date and time, year group: 23rd Sept, 9:00, Y3
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context Morning lessons, guided reading session
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident During this lesson, children were split into reading ability groups. From there some children would read to the class teacher, whilst others read to the teaching assistant. One of the children was enthusiastic about their reading, and got too excited and overran the words. This led to them having a jumbled sentence whilst reading aloud to the class teacher. The teacher stopped them at the end of the page, congratulated them on reading well, but reminded them to slow down a little, and use the punctuation in order to prevent the same happening again.
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be “under the hood” in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? - Reflective practice
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)