

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 critical incident methodology was established by Tripp (1993). This pedagogical theory takes an analytical approach to 'critical teaching incidents' and allows professionals to reflect and accordingly develop their professional judgements and practices. A critical incident (CI) refers to a 'typical, everyday event'. It is the interpretation of the significance of the event which renders the experience to be a 'critical incident' (Tripp, 2012). The CI methodology enables critical reflection as it involves exploring if the CI is supported by learning theory. Therefore, this assignment will use Tripp's critical incident methodology to critically reflect on an observed CI. Critical reflection is a key skill I will use in my teaching profession in order to improve the quality of my teaching practice and professional judgement.

This assignment will focus on a CI that I observed during a two-day observation at a local primary school. It will consider the context of the school and discuss the importance of reflecting on this CI before reviewing relevant literature. I will then conduct a literature review to compile relevant research and explore how reflective practice can aid personal and professional development. I will discuss the importance of utilising critical reflection in the development of the professional standards required to obtain qualified teacher status. The assignment will conclude with a summation and evaluation of the literature review findings and discuss relevant learning theories which contribute to the holistic development of children and young people, to ensure pupil progress.

Role of Critical Reflection

Reflective practice refers to the process of self-examination and evaluation. Effective educators will reflect and analyse their actions or decisions to evaluate how effective they were in practice (Stenhouse, 1975 and Reagan, *et al.* 2000). This provides the opportunity for teachers to engage in autonomous self-development by reflecting on aspects which need improvement and conducting evidence-based research to potentially formulate new strategies to address these. Orchard and Winch (2005) also agree that teachers should be reflective and take on an active role; not just by delivering a set curriculum but by considering which strategies are most effective for each individual learner. It could be suggested that in order to become a successful practitioner, teachers should be reflective with the aim of improving their situational judgement by applying learning theories into practice. Nevertheless, it is important to critically reflect on any material and conclude your own personal ideas and beliefs on the subject before applying learning theory into practice. Therefore, the role of critical reflection can be deemed as a vital skill as it requires complex cognitive skills in order to formulate new ideas which are reinforced by learning theories.

Brookfield (2017) argued that without reflection, teachers can assume that students have perfectly interpreted the teaching content and may continue to plan and teach using the same methodologies and practices. Consequently, children may not receive the most effective teaching practice to best suit their needs. Additionally, differences in experiences may influence what the problem is and how it is seen. Schon (1988) described the ability to frame and re-frame as the most important aspect of developing reflective practice as it shapes the subsequent actions in practice. Inability to shift your mindset to consider another person's view or situation (cognitive reframing) can lead to rationalisation of practice and can fail to highlight existing problems. Therefore, when reflecting, it is important to consider the student's point of

view to highlight potential issues that are inhibiting their learning and subsequently organise strategies to address these.

Whilst reflection is important in various professions, it is vital to improving teaching practice. It is important to highlight that proficient teachers demonstrate the same experience and skill level in the classroom as doctors will to diagnose, prescribe and assess the most effective treatment to improve the patient's health (Tripp, 2012). Just as a medic should be able to justify their clinical reasoning and support their decision for providing a specific treatment with research, a teacher should be able to articulate the knowledge behind their professional judgement and support their teaching methodologies with evidence. Ultimately, the skill of justifying your decisions and the ability to enhance their knowledge through reflective practice is what differentiates professionals from craftspeople. This idea challenges previous ideas of Lawlor (1990) who viewed teaching as craft that can be established by watching and learning from a skilled practitioner. Although, observing teaching professionals is useful to draw ideas and gain experience, many have argued that teachers should take on the role of reflective practitioner, rather than a craftsman (Schon, 1988). It could be suggested that whilst observing teachers in practice is useful to observe different pedagogies and techniques, it is the skill of how we reflect and evaluate the success of these methods which makes a truly effective practitioner.

Context of Observation School and Class

Before exploring the CI, it is important to establish a brief background of the observed school. Specific measures will be taken in order to adhere to the (BERA 2018) guidelines and to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the school, staff and pupils. Anything referenced will remove key information that could jeopardise their anonymity.

The observed school is located within a multi-diverse community, covering various economic, social and ethical backgrounds. The following statistics were provided by the school. There are 582 pupils on roll between the ages of three and eleven. The school also provides nursery facilities for three and four-year-olds who attend school on a part-time basis from September onwards. The school is a designated Communities First area. 10% of pupils are entitled to free school meals. A significant proportion of pupils (32%) speak English as an additional language. 18 pupils in the school have statements of special education needs. 4 pupils have an individual development plan, and 6 pupils have a school action plus plan.

Critical Incident Linked to the Four Purposes of the Welsh Curriculum 2022

The observation used as a CI for this assignment was taken from one of the three year 1 classes, consisting of 30 pupils. There was a total of 73 pupils across the three classes. During the two days observation, three CI's were recorded and although one will be studied in detail, the others are noted in the Appendix. The selected CI was observed during the morning literacy session. All three classrooms had inter-connecting doors, allowing the pupils to flow between each room. In each classroom there were several literacy tasks of differentiating ability. The teacher explained to the pupils which tasks were set at each 'station' and gave the children the opportunity to select which task they wanted to complete. The teacher explained that they use a child-centred teaching approach to encourage children to pilot their own learning and become ambitious, capable learners. This critical incident is an example of where progressive teaching methods are used in classroom, specifically active learning which will be the focus of the Literature Review.

It is argued that children learn best through 'active' experiences. With regards to the curriculum, a child-centred teaching approach concentrates on the child as an individual learner. It allows the child to explore and learn through different experiences and connect their

body of knowledge and skillset to different contexts to solve problems. In turn, these experiences will help children understand how their learning can be applied to real-life events (Piaget, 1980).

This CI directly links to the four purposes of the new Wales Curriculum outlined by Donaldson (2015), specifically the first of the purposes: "Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives". One key aspect of becoming an 'ambitious, capable learner' is the ability to ask questions and enjoy problem solving. The study by Prince, (2004) concluded that introducing active learning into problem-solving tasks is likely to help students to retain information for longer and perhaps develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, it could be possible that active learning is successful in achieving one of the targets set out by the Welsh Government and so it should be used in practice to some degree.

Another aspect of becoming an 'ambitious, capable learner' is to set high standards and to seek and enjoy challenge.' Prince, (2004) also concluded that although active learning is unlikely to improve test scores, it could have a positive influence on student attainment and study habits. This could suggest that education cannot be reduced to just progressive teaching methods, implying that active learning cannot solely be relied on to solve education problems. Therefore, it could be proposed that there is still a need for traditional teaching methods in order to improve test results. However, the literature is broad in supporting aspects of active learning in the classroom. Therefore, it could be concluded that children-centred, active learning strategies are successful to achieve the targets set out by the Welsh Government to create 'ambitious, capable learners.'

Literature Review

Following the isolation of the critical incident, this literature review will discuss the relationship between active learning and how it is theorised to influence a child's learning experience. The review will then examine studies within the literature as well as the potential positive impact active learning has on a child's learning experience.

Despite there not being a universal definition for active learning, there is some agreement in the literature that a key aspect of active learning is that it tends to be child centred and focused on the individual (Spring, 1970., Tanner and Tanner, 1990) and focuses on the importance of independent learning. Child centred learning considers how pupils facilitate their own progression through taking a leading role in their own learning. Teachers should use their understanding of how children develop to shape learning experiences that assist a child's learning through play and discovery. Therefore, children become 'active learners' who independently explore, away from adult supervision, to make sense of the world around them (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005) This type of pedagogy follows Froebel's belief that play is the core of learning in a child's early years. It is thought that a child's understanding of the world is built through authentic experiences as it enables them to connect their knowledge to real-life contexts (Froebel, 1995).

The concept of active learning has origins from different strands of progressive education. Progressive education aims to move away from traditional teaching methods to make education more flexible. It aims for pupils to play a more active role in their own learning compared with traditional methods where they tend to be more passive players (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005).

Supporters of progressive education such as Dewey (1956) have suggested that traditional teaching and assessment methods can be impersonal and therefore can slow the progression of some learners. Spangler, *et al.* (2016) go further to suggest that traditional teaching methods can potentially lead to shorter educational careers for children who become

disengaged from their learning. This could highlight that active learning is important in helping to create life-long learners, one of the aspects outlined by Donaldson (2015) in the Curriculum for Wales 2022. If independent learning is embedded from the Foundation phase; as observed from this Critical Incident; to higher Progression steps, pupils will possibly get used to working independently from a young age, helping them to develop the skills required to be a life-long learner. Furthermore, active learning is highlighted by the national examination board for Wales (WJEC 2019) who recommend that children should have freedom to explore their own interests and should partake in planning activities to drive their learning.

Whilst this essay has so far considered the theory that could potentially underpin the CI, the essay will now pivot its focus to consider potential barriers which may inhibit this teaching strategy, specifically the potential impacts of deprivation.

There is literature that suggests active learning, centred around the child, may not favour working class children due to contextual factors such as lack of resources and space. Bernstein (1990) argues that a lack of accessible resources can be detrimental to the success of progressive education. Progressive learning styles require more staff, more resources and more indoor and outdoor space than traditional teaching styles. When these factors are not available, it is possible that progressive education can become restricted which may negatively impact on learning experiences.

Power, *et al.* (2018) found that there was a variance between institutional scores when measuring child-centredness in schools located in deprived areas compared to those in affluent areas. They go further to highlight that between schools from deprived and affluent backgrounds, there are perhaps differences in the depth and scope in how the curriculum is implemented. This could potentially have a significant impact on the effectiveness of learning experiences of individuals in those settings. Whilst there were little differences in the core areas of learning, Power, *et al.* (2018) found that schools in more affluent areas put more emphasis on areas such as social and personal development, wellbeing, creative development, cultural diversity and Welsh language development. This could suggest that schools in disadvantaged areas reduce the scope of their curriculum to focus on the core subject areas. Therefore, it is likely that children in advantaged schools are exposed to a more enriched curriculum. This is further supported by Bernstein (1990) who suggests that disadvantaged schools place more emphasis on staple subjects such as Maths and English than creative subjects. It is therefore possible to conclude that child-centred active learning can contribute to the holistic development of a child when there are more available resources, but that this is caveated by socio-economic factors.

It is also worth noting that the study by Power, *et al.* (2018) highlighted that in schools in deprived areas, there were notably less interactions and collaboration between peers, as well as between staff and pupils. Any interactions between staff and pupils were described as 'neutral' and often included instructions rather than encouragement or praise. Interactions between peers and teachers in advantaged schools were deemed more likely to be 'warm.' These observations could emphasise the importance of self-directed learning through curiosity, expressiveness and motivational aspect of child-centred settings. Taking the assumption that there is less interaction between pupils in schools in deprived areas, there is a possibility that utilising progressive learning methods extensively will further disadvantage children because their classroom interaction may mean they feel less able to work independently. Whilst they might lack teaching resources, they might also experience less support from teachers and so child-centred approach might not provide children with the adult support required for progression and so it could potentially be argued that these methods may not be suitable for all settings.

Therefore, it could be recommended that the implementation of a new child-centred curriculum in Wales will be effective however, funding may be required to help disadvantaged schools receive the same provisions as affluent schools. Alternatively, it is worth stating that the interaction between staff and pupils is perhaps not always linked to deprivation and could be more tied to the school's vision and curriculum focus. There is conflict in the literature regarding the impact of a child-centred approach possibly highlighting that this is both an interesting and important field of research to engage with.

In the past, the debate on the most effective way to educate young children has been central to the competition between progressive and traditional visions of schooling (Semal, *et al.* 2016). These debates have resulted in regular curriculum reforms as a child-centred approach to teaching has become more popular in comparison to more teacher-centred models. The introduction of the new child-centred curriculum in Scotland and Wales is evidence of this. However, there is a contrast with national curriculum for England tends to focus more on traditional teacher-centred models (Gove, 2013).

Whilst there is a debate in the Literature between those that advocate for progressive and traditional methods, both fields of literature are similar in the sense that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the methods (Maton, 2013). Maton (2013) also highlights a lack of empirical evidence from the benefits of child-centred teaching. This means that the results of some studies tend to be based on the teacher's perceptions and potential unconscious bias towards the benefits of a child-centred approach, which may be subjective as opposed to being guided by empirical data. However, Maton highlights that the benefits of a child-centred approach yield benefits, such as improved pupil confidence, can be small-scale and so may be difficult to measure empirically. It is also worth noting at this stage that one of the problems in the literature arises from the fact that as educational policy is determined by the political environment and can change relatively quickly, it is difficult to distinguish the outcomes that are derived from a child centred approach from those of more traditional teaching strategies (Power, *et al.* 2018).

Child-centred learning is the focus of the constructivist learning theory in the classroom. Constructivism refers to learning as a physical process by which children 'learn by doing.' It is based on the idea that understanding is the result of 'mental construction,' meaning that children construct their own meaning for learning by making connections between new and existing learning. A key principle of constructivism is that children must direct their own learning to make sense of what they are learning to apply to real life contexts. Numerous historical studies have emphasised the importance of constructivist theory, Dewey (1929), Piaget (1980) and Bruner (1961). There is agreement in the literature that there should be focus on developing and connecting knowledge through a 'construction process' by doing authentic tasks. Despite this, there is research to contradict those studies. Driscoll (2000) describes constructive theory to only exist in the mind and so does not relate to reality.

To conclude, there is literature to suggest that active learning is an effective pedagogy to encourage a child's learning attainment, therefore creating a more enjoyable learning experience. There is literature to suggest that active learning is limited by the resources available and so may not be the most effect pedagogy to adopt if resources are limited.

To conclude, there is mixed evidence of the impact of active learning on a child's learning experience. However, the main theme that arises in the literature is the difficulty to empirically measure the direct effects of active learning. This literature review has found that whilst there might be benefits of active learning, there is currently no clear agreement on the influence that this pedagogy will have on learners. It has also been highlighted that active learning can be effective, however learning provisions can be limited by socio-economic factors.

Reflection and Evaluation

Using Tripp's CI methodology has highlighted some thought-provoking fields of research in relation to active learning and a child-centred teaching approach. It has allowed me to explore opposing ideas and viewpoints in the literature review section of the assignment. Having only had experience working in key stage two, I had assumed that after the foundation phase, pupils were more likely to be sat at desks as opposed to actively exploring the classroom. But after exploring the research in the literature review, it has allowed me to question whether an active learning or 'foundation-phase style' teaching approach should be implemented throughout all the progression steps and not just in Nursery and Reception classes.

Whilst I consider active learning to be a successful way to engage pupils and stimulate their learning, I realise that it may not be suitable for all individuals. Reflective practice has allowed me to evaluate how successful the teaching strategies are, and whether they are appropriate for each individual learner. It also allows me to challenge any unconscious bias that I may have had but been unaware of. At times, it can be difficult to understand and connect learning theories into real-life practice. However, Tripp's methodology refines information from classroom observations and directs investigation into interesting research. Using this methodology has furthered my understanding of how the material discussed in lectures can be applied into my teaching practice.

It is important to note that reflective practice should be a cycle (e.g., Kolb's reflective model) where you continually evaluate your practice. Although Tripp's methodology has been beneficial for this assignment, it is not the end point for a reflective practitioner. Following the observed CI, I could then investigate this further by using an active learning approach myself to see first-hand if there is a positive effect on a child's learning.

The core element of Kolb's reflective cycle in teaching is that the tested strategies are founded on theory. These strategies can then be evaluated and altered where needed. Theory can then be revisited to see what improvements can be made to enhance the practice. Active learning is a key component of the constructivist learning theory and although this may suit some learners, I believe I could enhance my teaching practice by researching and drawing ideas from other behavioural theories to suit other learners.

I can use this form of analysis to support my personal development as I could utilise this framework to identify personal targets and areas of improvement. For instance, one area that I am apprehensive about is how to manage behaviour in the classroom. Using Tripp's reflective methodology, I can conclude what areas of behaviour management I am worried about and research strategies to use in practice. I can then test these strategies in practice and decide which methods work best and highlight the potential for any improvements to be made.

With regards to my professional development, reflective analysis can be used to evaluate lots of aspects of my teaching practice. One area being my lesson plans. After delivering these lessons, I can use this model to reflect on which aspects of my lesson were successful and areas that warrant improvement. These improvements can be implemented into future lessons to ensure learners are receiving the most effective lessons and that I am providing learners with the best resources, knowledge and skills they need to holistically develop. With regards to my development for the professional standards required for QTS, reflective methodologies could be used for improving skills, such as leadership, as it will help highlight which areas I need to improve on and allow me to research strategies to improve on this.

Conclusion

To conclude, this assignment has used Tripp's methodology to reflect on a CI observed in practice. A literature review was undertaken to further investigate the elements of active learning and to consider the evidence of where it has been executed in practice. There is evidence to suggest that active learning can make the learning process more engaging for some learners as it allows them to explore their own interests, however the literature suggests that a more reliable study must be completed in order to have more confidence in this statement. The literature review has also highlighted that there are potential barriers to a progressive learning approach, one being socio-economic influence, as the cost of resources to provide continuous and enhanced provisions can impact the quality of the learning experience. Whilst the findings of the literature review can be applied to a school context, this assignment has enabled me to investigate the importance of critical reflection as a teacher and how I will use it to obtain my QTS standards.

Tripp's Critical Incident methodology has allowed me to evaluate a CI and opened a window for further research into this event. In terms of my personal development skills for the professional QTS standards, a reflective methodology such as this has proven to me that reflection is a vital tool that should be used to enhance my teaching practice. By reflecting on aspects that worked well and areas which need improvement, I am enhancing my professional judgements and professional 'tool box.' Reflective methodologies will aid my self-development during my PGCE year and prepare me with the skills to regularly reflect on the Welsh Curriculum's four purposes so I can ensure that they are being addressed in my lesson plans. Such as a skill will ensure that I become a reflective practitioner.

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Appendix**OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES**

In this section are the notes made of the three critical incidents that were recorded on the two days of school observation.

Record 1

Date and time, year group: 26/9/22 Morning session. Year 1.
Where and When: Context of the observation – subject/AOLE, general classroom context The incident occurred in a morning literacy session. In the classroom were several different ‘stations’ all focusing on implementing literacy and communication skills. Stations included; literacy games on the i-pad and interactive whiteboard, spelling games (splat the letter) and outdoor glitter writing.
What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work). All three classrooms had inter-connecting doors, allowing the pupils to flow between each room. In each classroom there were several literacy tasks of differentiating ability. The teacher explained to the pupils which tasks were set at each ‘station’ and gave the children the opportunity to select which task they wanted to complete. I found this set-up like a foundation phase classroom. This was very interesting to me and therefore warranted further investigation to assess the effectiveness of this strategy.
Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be “under the hood” in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider? Research avenues to consider could be... • Research into the effects of active learning in promoting learning in young children. • The potential barriers to active learning. • How active learning is promoted in the new curriculum. • Whether progressive learning methods, such as active learning, are more effective than traditional teaching methods.
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) More independent children were more comfortable with choosing their own activity than others. Some children required guidance as to which activity to use. Additionally, some children refused to leave specific stations to let others have a turn.

Record 2

Date and time, year group:
26/9/22 Morning session. Year 1.

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

At the end of the first morning session, the children re-grouped on the carpet with the class teacher to discuss what they had learnt in the previous literacy session.

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work)

Following the literacy session, the teacher re-grouped the class onto the carpet to discuss the key concepts they explored during the morning session. The teacher then awarded 'dojo points' to children whom she saw working hard and that were on task.

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

Research avenues to consider are...

- The effects of a points reward system on reinforcing good behaviour and hard work.
- The effects of a points reward system on motivating pupils. Does it positively or negatively affect their motivation?
- Does rewarding points lead to positive or negative reinforcement?

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)

Most children were eager to be rewarded a point. Many children began to highlight things that they did during the session to impress the class teacher in attempt to be rewarded a point. However, some children did not seem to care whether or not they were awarded a point. Therefore, this could suggest other methods are needed to motivate some children and awarding 'dojo points' is not effective for every child.

Record 3

Date and time, year group:

27/9/22. Year 1.

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

After play, the children re-grouped onto the carpet with the class teacher to focus on Welsh phrases.

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident (the more detail the better to refer to in your later work).

After play, the class teacher used songs to reinforce Welsh phrases such as ‘Pwy wyt ti?’ and ‘Syt wyt ti?’ Each song had corresponding actions and gave the children to opportunity to answer these questions in Welsh to a rhythm. After coming in from play, the teacher recognised that some children were excitable and so played calming music as they re-entered the classroom.

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

Research avenues to consider are...

- How effective are songs in helping memory retention in early years.
- The impacts of singing in developing vocabulary and language skills.
- How does this relate to the four purpose of the Curriculum for Wales.
- The effects of music therapy in calming children and getting them ready for learning.

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)

After play, the children took a while to settle. The teacher recognised this and began to play calming music to help them settle. This seemed to help the children become less excitable and get them ready for learning.