

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

ECAD6007-C - Who am I teaching?

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.

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A critical incident in a classroom is something that makes you stop, think and reflect. It can be something minor, significant, negative or positive. A critical incident should lead you to reflect on teaching methods and underpinning pedagogy. The observed incident is not the area of critique, rather the impact it has on you to reflect, to further research and develop your own practice (Tripp, 2012). Tripp believed reflecting on a critical incident was an important part of improving the professional development. Through critical reflection, practitioners can delve deeper into the methods they are using in their classroom by linking them to evidence-based theories of learning, resulting in the holistic development of the learner along with the professional development of the practitioner. For a learner to receive the highest level of education the reformed Welsh curriculum places a strong emphasis on professional development and reflective practice for practitioners (Welsh Government, 2021). This requires practitioners to be able to reflect and to identify areas for improvement and to develop new strategies, inform their teaching and learning practice, to model reflective practice for learners, and to support learners to develop their own reflective skills (Welsh Government, 2019). Therefore, using a critical incident reflective model improves the skill of a practitioner. Many practitioners may have been using a traditional reflective model such as Dewey and Schön. It is important for them to explore beyond these and not to be restricted to one (Hébert, 2015).

The aim of this essay is to draw upon a critical incident observed using Tripp's critical incident methodology and review learning theory, methods and pedagogy linked to the observation that will further develop my future practice. Guidelines, confidentiality and anonymity have been adhered to throughout this assignment and consent was given for the observation in line with the British Educational Research Association (2018). The observation of the critical incident took place in a primary school setting. This was in a mixed ability, Year 4 classroom with approximately 30 children and a teacher and a Learning support assistant (LSA). The children were grouped by ability on tables. Tables were grouped as low ability with the LSA, high ability and more able and talented (MAT) table, and an English as an additional language (EAL) table. The child being observed was a boy sitting at the MAT table. There were two other boys sitting opposite and no one sitting beside. This child had his hand up for a long period of time at the start of the lesson, and this continued throughout the language, literacy and communication (LLC) lesson which lasted approximately 50 minutes. This made me

stop and reflect and led me to analyse peer support in mixed ability groups, as well as exploring assessment for learning (AFL).

Literature and theories will be discussed in this part of the essay to highlight and focus on areas such as peer support, mixed ability groups and AFL. Critical analysis will be applied to support and oppose and theorist such as Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, John Dewey as well as Benjamin Bloom, Howard Gardner and Carol Dwerk will be included. In a review of social learning theory developed by Albert Bandra, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Jean Piaget and his theory of cognitive development, John Dewey's philosophy of education and constructivism.

Peer support is described as learners coming together to support each other. It is argued that this can have either a negative or positive impact on the learner (Hallam, Ireson and Davies, 2002). Examples of this in a school environment would be when learners grouped in a class or lesson by ability or even friendship groups. It can be argued that focussing on ability groups such as low ability learners can be detrimental and in fact they may- be able to gain more knowledge and understanding learning alongside more able learners (Adey and Dillon, 2012). This is supported by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development (MacBlain, 2014). By putting learners into mixed ability groups this will help to get the learner into the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by using peers as the more knowledgeable others (MKOs). Vygotsky believed that the role of the teacher was to Scaffold the learner while they were in the ZPD with their MKO (Bates, 2023). Jean Piaget was a constructivist and believed that we are lone Scientists. Vygotsky did not support that view and thought that learners achieve more with an MKO. Although Piaget thought that we are all lone Scientists he did however believe that peer interaction was effective in supporting and assisting learning.

You could argue that the progression steps outlined in the new curriculum for Wales Successful futures support Vygotsky's theory that there are no general steps of development as the Curriculum is focussing on each learner having their own path and following their own pace of progression (Donaldson, 2015). Which somewhat contradicts Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development that there are stages at certain ages in which a learner will be ready to achieve certain things. Piaget's theory could be improved and more relevant for today's curriculum if the restriction of age in the stages was removed and a holistic approach to the leaner was applied. Albert

Bandura was also in favour of peer support and then in turn mixed ability grouping as he felt that a learner with low efficacy would learn much more from a learner with high efficacy (MacBlain, 2021). This coincides with Vygotsky and Piaget and could suggest that they were in support of mixed grouping of learners.

Whilst groupings can be very useful in a learning environment and peers can be benefited by these arrangements it is important that they are thought out strategically and with purpose so that they do lead to purposeful learning (Blatchford, Kutnick et al. 2003). To support purposeful learning the learner needs to feel included and the environment inclusive. This is important for the learner's mental health and Well-Being (Howard, Burton and Levermore, 2020).

This is supported by Benjamin Bloom who argues that the low ability learners become reliant on the higher ability learner and therefore have no need to think for themselves. In turn the high ability learner is then not getting challenged enough. The learners can have different learning styles and every learner needs to have an individual plan of learning to make sure they have mastered the subject matter (Bates 2023). Bloom felt that the teachers need to make sure that the mixed ability group and the learning objectives were thoroughly thought through before implementing. Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences also supports Benjamin Bloom with the downside of mixed ability grouping. He believed that different learning styles of the learners could get in the way of them reaching their full potential and it could then be hard for the teachers to provide the needs of individual learners within the group (Bates, 2023).

It is suggested that by putting learners into non ability groups this could have a positive effect on the behaviour of learners and increase engagement. It is also suggested that ability grouping has little mobility within it and learners do not strive when placed in them (Hallam, Ireson and Davies, 2002). Vygotsky, Piaget and Dewey followed a constructivist approach to learning which is why they all had a positive outlook of peer support and mixed ability groups.

Carol Dweck is concerned that grouped learners could be affected by a fixed mindset. Within the group they may become aware that they are at the lower end of the group, and this will lead them to feel like they are not as able (Bates, 2023). This supports the idea that there is little mobility within the groups. Dweck was also a constructivist

and believed learners achieved more when they were active participants in the planning of the learning.

There is a clear link between social and academic development, if a learner is not engaging and being accepted by their peers then they will likely find it harder to learn. By separating by ability this can affect a learner socially and academically. It could also affect their behaviour. By putting them in mixed ability groups it would benefit them socially as well as academically (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2013). It has been argued that labelling learners and putting them in to groups is restrictive to their learning and this can influence the teacher's expectations of that group (Hattie, 2012). It is suggested that by putting learners into non ability groups this could have a positive effect on the behaviour of learners and increase engagement. It is also suggested that ability grouping has little mobility within it and learners do not strive when placed in them (Hallam, Ireson and Davies, 2002).

Peer support and mixed ability grouping allow learners to take on different roles within the group and some are acting like a teacher. This can benefit learners as they are more able to explain to a peer quicker and use easier vocabulary that they will understand (Grigg, 2015).

AFL strategies that could support these views could be 'think, pair, share' and 'thumbs up thumbs down'. By incorporating these strategies, you could alleviate the need for the learners to have their hands up and therefore disengage with the lesson. Thumbs up, thumbs down could let you know straight away who understands and who doesn't. You can then address the learners who are struggling to understand. Think, pair, share would be a good tool to use as this will promote social engagement and improve self-efficacy.

Understanding the evidence and literature enables me to be aware of and meet the educational needs of this child and ensure this is not repeated. In this instance, the fixed grouped ability table in which this boy was placed may be the problem and this scenario could be rectified swiftly and appropriately.

The school was an English medium primary in Swansea. The Estyn report from March 23 states that 29% of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, 12.4% are identified

as having ALN and 10.4% of the pupils with English as an additional language. The critical incident occurred in a Year 4 class. There was one teacher and one LSA, who was supporting the ALN table. The learners were sat at their tables and were divided into groups. There were 5 tables: ALN, EAL, MAT, Low ability and high ability. It was an LLC lesson, and the learners were all sat at their tables while the teacher was talking. It was a whole class lesson. As previously stated, the learner observed is sat on the MAT table with no one beside him and 2 other children opposite. The teacher had a hands up hands done approach. Before the teacher asks any questions, the boy observed has already got his hand up. When the teacher then asks for hands up, his hand is already up. The learner does not put his hand down even when another learner has answered the question and hands haven't been asked to be put up again. Eventually after a long period of time having his hand up, he is asked to read the information of the board. He is clearly satisfied by this but moments later has his hand up again. When the teacher finishes delivering the beginning of the lesson and it is time for them to work with independence the learner straight away has his hand up again. The learners opposite him are communicating together and are engaged in their set work. The child could have low self-efficacy which is why he is holding his hand up frequently and for long periods of time as supported by Albert Bandura theory. The child is disengaged with the task and doesn't engage with the other learners for support. The learner obviously does not understand or has misunderstood the task. The learner is still with his hand up and is just looking around the room aimlessly. The teacher notices him and goes over to sit beside himself. The teacher scaffolds the learner and models what he should be doing. The teacher stays with the learner for 3 minutes before going off to another learner. The Learner carries on with work for a short period of time before again putting his hand up. The learner does briefly engage with the other learners on the table opposite but must stretch over and does not engage in conversation for long. The learner continues with his work independently whilst the learners opposite work together. Through the observation of this incident, you can clearly see that the learner would benefit from Vigotsky's, Piaget's and Dewey's theories that social engagement and that peer support within lessons is critical to learning. A sense of belonging and well-being is crucial to a learner if they are to become lifelong learners who have a growth mindset.

To overcome the critical incident observed I would adopt a child centred approach to learning. This could be an inquiry-based learning method that would be implemented within the classroom or school. Adopting a pupil voice in which they can be part of the construction of the learning within the classroom. This could encourage a peer supportive system and engage all the learners to have responsibility over their own learning. This will empower them to become confident and resilient individuals. If the boy had more of an input into what he was going to learn and had a clear understanding of how he was going to get to the point of learning, he would not have felt the need to hold his hand up on lots of occasions and could have looked to his peers for support. The strengths of this method would be that the learner is growing more independent with their learning, and they are taking responsibility. This is encouraging a growth mindset and a sense of belonging. This is supported by Carol Dweck's theory on fixed and growth mindsets. One of the drawbacks to this approach could be an imbalance and overreliance on the pupil's voice and the outcome of the learning could become confused. The practitioner is required to include the pupil voice into the learning and to guide the learners through an educational process to achieve successful learning.

Creating a collaborative learning environment in which pupils work together in groups or pairs to solve problems and complete tasks. This allows for the pupils to offer each other peer support and learn from each other in perhaps a more comfortable context in which they are more willing to share their ideas.

Employing a growth mindset approach in line with Carol Dweck and making sure that the learners are having lots of praise using positive language for the work that they are doing will discourage a fixed mindset. If the learner is finding it difficult then they must be praised for trying the work. If the learner hasn't been able to complete the work or has not understood the work then the fault lies with the practitioner and planning, therefore needing to go back and reflect on the lesson to see how it could be improved. If unsure of how to improve then practitioners should collaborate with colleagues and seek advice from others. This will benefit not only help learner but improve the professional development of the practitioner.

To overcome this child's need to hold his hand up and to rely on the teachers support when he is supposed to be working within his group or individually, changes to the

seating of the table could be beneficial. He does not have enough learners around him to communicate effectively. The learner is therefore finding it hard to use an MKO, he has no one sitting beside him and the learners sitting opposite him are too far away and are both discussing it between themselves, so he is therefore not included. This is not very good for the learner's well-being. If the learner was on a larger table where there were more learners closer by and more available, then this learner would have less need to encourage the teacher over. Vygotsky, Piaget and Dewey all support this view that the learners learn more through social interaction. This learner would benefit from a mixed ability table when he would also be engaged by helping a learner that has a lower ability therefore increasing his own self efficacy which is supported by Albert Bandura.

Moving forward from reflecting on the critical incident and trying not to use hands up, hands down as an AFL strategy incorporating a white board within the classroom so that all the learners become a participant in the lesson would improve engagement. This will again encourage the learner observed and the whole classroom have a sense of belonging within the class which will build confidence. Offering lots of different ways in which pupils can engage and participate during lessons such as using written responses on small whiteboards, small group discussions, using technology to allow pupils to respond in ways that they may feel more comfortable with to increase individual pupil engagement.

The learner observed in the critical incidence is getting distracted by the fact that he can get the teachers attention if he holds his hand up. If this was not available to the class then it would force the learner to take on another approach thus leading to the next steps, which could be think, pair, share. Think, pair share would give the learner confidence to achieve his goal. They can gain this confidence from the feedback of other peers. This will also build his resilience (Hattie, 2012). The learner would become comfortable asking his peer for their opinions and this would build a trust between the peers. If this approach was employed instead of having his hand up when he was unsure it would free up the time of the teacher, so they were able to be better utilised and improve collective and collaborative learning. The negative affect of think, pair, share could be that the learners would get distracted by each other and easily go off

task. There could also be a lot more noise in the classroom that could have a negative effect on some learners within the classroom with additional needs.

This critical incident has led me to further reflect about my own pedagogical choices. As a student teacher, being able to get the chance to observe and reflect is a great tool. As I progress throughout my career, I will make sure that I take a holistic approach with every child in my class to make sure that I am supporting them to achieve the four purposes throughout their lives: ambitious capable learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethically informed citizens and Healthy confident individuals (Donaldson, 2015). I endeavour to become a reflective practitioner who can work collaboratively with other practitioners and with outside agencies to carry on learning and furthering my skills through continuing lifelong learning. I will ensure I give enough time for all pupils to process what is being asked and give everyone the chance to formulate their own response consistently reminding pupils of the expectations of participation and modelling how this looks to the learners in the classroom. Praising pupils who participated to encourage other pupils to emulate this and providing specific feedback to highlight the positive way in which a pupil has participated would hopefully motivate other pupils to participate.

Taking time to work with learners who consistently have their hands up will give a better understanding as to the motivation behind this and lead the practitioner to establish necessary support for future learning. It is important to offer clear guidance to help the learner understand how this situation could be improved to support them better next time.

A peer assessment approach will encourage more thought to go into the learner's work. The learner will be aware that a peer will be looking over their work and able to comment on it that they will make sure their work is of a higher standard as they will want their peer to be impressed (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Thus, creating an inclusive, supportive classroom environment in which everyone feels valued, comfortable and confident enough to actively engage and participate. Encouraging good listening skills amongst peers and stress the importance of taking turns and listening to each other's views and opinions during group discussions. Questioning techniques where the

pupils can ask each other questions about the task would allow for peer support and more engagement in the learning.

By having a hands-free approach and adopting thumbs up thumbs down you will be able to clearly see who needs more support. This will allow me to apply Schön's reflection in action and reflection on action method. By reflecting in action, you can become a more effective practitioner which in turn will make the learner become a more effective learner (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

For my future teaching this critical incident has made me consider the positioning and grouping of tables along with the sizes of the groups I will have in my class. I will reevaluate my groups daily so if there are any absentees in the class it does not affect the learning of the other learners. The size of the group that the observed learner was in I felt had a detrimental affect to his ability to engage with his peers.

By observing the critical incident and being able to delve deep into it I have a clear understanding of the learning methods I could use going forward in my teaching career which can help me to put in place my own philosophy of education. I can understand now that it is good practice to reflect on my classes and lessons taken to further inform me of my next teaching steps for either the class as a whole or for the individual needs of a learner. I will have critical and reflective conversations with my mentor where we will reflect upon my lessons and observations. I will record this in my learning journal, this will then lead me to further reading and courses that will improve my knowledge and skills as a practitioner. I will strive to improve my lessons and will collaborate with colleagues and outside agencies to help the wellbeing and improve the learning of my learners. When planning my lessons, I will make sure that the success criteria is easily achievable for all and cater for the MAT if they need extra. I would also provide differentiated verbal instructions, approaches and resources to ensure all learners are given the necessary support to confidently complete tasks set.

I will also make sure that LSA's and any support staff are well informed within my classroom, so they are able to best support the learners and to support these colleagues to further their knowledge and ensure their well-being. This is in line with the five professional standards for teaching and leadership (Welsh Government, 2019). Although I feel I would like to adopt a mixed ability group setting to my classes, I will make sure that there are differentiations available to the learners within the

groups. I will continuously reflect on my choices of group selection by observing to continue to develop my professional judgement. I will make sure that all my learners have individual learning plans in place that I can refer to and track progress. I will make sure that I will give positive feedback to the learners for the effort they have made and what they have achieved. Establishing clear expectations and having a well-established classroom routine in place within the classroom from the on-set regarding how we promote respect, empathy and kindness for one another in the classroom by listening to each other, waiting our turn, not interrupting each other and being consistent will help to create positive behaviours and will help to motivate learners and help learners to feel safe and secure.

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