

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

Introduction:

Within the context of my assignment, to critically evaluate means to take my chosen critical incident and break it down into its component parts, before analysing the importance and effects my incident has on the progression of (i) the pupil; (ii) the class; (iii) the teacher and (iv) the course of the lesson. A critical incident in the classroom can be anything that happens that has a knock on effect on the rest of the lesson, or for a specific pupil/group of pupils.

Throughout this essay, terms such as “More Able and Talented” (MAT), differentiation, “Advanced Learner Needs” (ALN) and student centered learning will come up at several points, enough so that providing context at this stage is valuable to you as the reader. My observations took place in a co-ed state school in Wales, and as is typical with schools like this, pupils are assessed on their maths and/or English and then placed into sets. However, within these sets, there is still some diversity in terms of ability within the pupils. MAT students refer to the group of students on the higher end of the scale. The pupils who are on target to achieve the top grades, and who teachers know they need to push further when possible to keep the pupil engaged and on track to achieve these higher-level grades. ALN is a term which I feel has a lot of misconceptions regarding performance. A pupil with ALN does not necessarily achieve grades lower than other students, they simply require extra support. Some common examples of ALN students in the school I observed were literacy, numeracy and communication and the support offered ranged from laptops given to pupils, to teaching assistants (TA's) helping students with spoken and written communication. Lastly, student centered learning as an approach to teaching opposed to teacher centered learning is something that was observed and a topic that will come up later. ‘The approach refers to the different strategies and methods of learning that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students.’ *Student-Centered Learning Definition* (2013).

Observation:

As previously mentioned, the school I visited and observed lessons from is located in South Wales. The school is in the process of transitioning to the new Donaldson curriculum, and its humanities departments are – whilst linked, are still taught very separately. As previously mentioned, the school is co-ed, which means that both male and female students are present. The pupils range from 11-18 and during my observation day, I was placed in a year 8 class (12-13 year olds), where the pupils in my class had been set according to their abilities in Math. The pupils I observed were in the higher ability group based on their maths results in previous years. But there was some differentiation in the class based on their English and digital competency skills, which led to differences in teaching methods and class activities.

Methodology:

In this study, I used a case study methodology – this is to say, I did as much as possible in my design to not influence what I observed in the context of my study. I attempted this by trying to remain an anonymous, non-participant in the lessons I observed through the day that I was at what I will refer to as ‘School X’ from this point forward. I sat at the back and tried to draw as little attention to myself as possible to not disrupt the natural flow of the lesson or draw attention to the fact that the class was being observed. I was not introduced as someone who was observing the teachers/classes behaviour, but instead as a student teacher watching the lesson to get some experience. I felt this approach was the most suitable as it limited the chance of participant bias – the kids from what I could tell, acted as they would have if there was nobody but them and the teacher in the room (with very few exceptions which I go into some about detail during my reflection of my critical incident)

There are several advantages to using a case study methodology like I used, and the advantages are generally only applicable if the study remains uninfluenced by the researcher (myself). That said, some of the advantages include allowing observations to be recorded in more detail, and more natural – in depth observations can be made. Looking at my appendices, you can almost describe

them as typical incidents, and this is because another advantage of using a case study methodology is because there's an emphasis on reality in the observations, they are easy to relate to and understand. However, there are also several disadvantages of using a case study methodology. The two most important of which that relate to this study are that it is sometimes difficult to generalise the findings, and that observations and results may be biased. There are two types of bias in an investigation like this – participant bias - which in this study refers to the pupil(s) in the classroom – which refers to factors that can produce a false response e.g. A typically disruptive pupil being more attentive because there is someone in the class watching him, or a normally attentive pupil getting distracted by there being a stranger at the back of the classroom watching the lesson. The other type of bias is researcher bias, which looks at any factors that induce bias in the researchers recording of responses e.g. misconceptions about behaviour and age or gender.

A case study style of methodology was also the most suitable given the current COVID-19 situation. It was the best option to be at the back of a classroom and have little to no interaction with the pupils and staff I was observing to follow the recommended government guidelines for the pandemic. The COVID-19 situation probably made it easier to maintain a level of anonymity during the observation day, as pupils were also aware enough of the situation to not want to mix more than necessary too.

Donaldson and my critical incident:

Donaldson's curriculum has 4 key purposes; 'to create ambitious, capable learners; to create ethical, informed citizens; to develop healthy, confident individuals and to create enterprising, creative contributors.' Donaldson, G (2015)

For the purpose of this investigation, the term critical incident refers to 'an event or situation that caused a turning point in the lesson' Tripp (1997).



Figure 1) Donaldsons 4 key purposes (Donaldson, G 2015)

My chosen critical incident encapsulates two of Donaldson's purposes perfectly; the creating ambitious and capable learners and creating healthy, confident individuals who aren't afraid of admitting that they need help, or afraid of getting something wrong.

My chosen critical incident happened during the last period of the day with a year 8 class who were 'top set' according to their Math ability, and the lesson that I was observing also happened to be Math. The lesson was approximately three quarters of the way through when the teacher (who I shall refer to as 'Teacher A' to maintain anonymity) asked all of the pupils to place their heads onto the table and asked the children to anonymously put their hands up depending on how comfortable and confident they felt about the tasks that they had done so far through the lesson. This not only allowed to gauge how the class was doing efficiently, but the responses given by pupils were more likely to be more reliable as pressure from peers was taken away by the act of placing their heads down. The teacher then went on to set the next several tasks with different starting points for pupils who chose different options during the progress check – in a way that the anonymity could be maintained. This allowed students who were less confident to start at a place where they felt challenged but not overwhelmed, and allowed the MAT students in the class to start their tasks at an appropriate level for what they felt comfortable with.

This simple, 1-minute process of anonymously assessing pupils progress in the lesson had an overwhelmingly positive response on the rest of the lesson. It helped to reinforce the safe learning environment where students felt that they could confidently say or at least infer that they needed extra time or support with the tasks, and gave the teacher an appreciation for who in the class was more able, and those who needed that extra support without those pupils' peers. Additionally, the next tasks allowed for pupils to choose their starting points and gave all the pupils the opportunities to push themselves with the more challenging questions.

Literature review:

Formative assessment (AFL)

Formative assessment, also referred to as assessment for learning (Huhta, A. 2010) is the process where checking learning progress is a continuous process in

the classroom. (Jeri, 2018) It is widely used in schools because it allows teachers to check their pupils understanding and provides them with a self-assessment for how effective their lessons are going. (Kitchen, H et al. 2019) It gives teachers the ability to identify who in the class need the extra support, and who in the class are the more able students who need to be pushed further. (Huhta, A. 2010) Formative assessment gives teachers the ability to account for the progress of each individual in the classroom, and gives pupils a sense of control and the ability to self-assess their own progress in the class, and better see what they need to do to progress further. (Harlen and James, 1997) There has been much evidence that formative assessment as a method to check progress compared to summative assessment 'has a more substantial impact on raising a pupils achievement, and it also recognised as the best form of assessment to enhance student motivation in the classroom' (Cauley, Kathleen; McMillan, James. 2010). However, in (Dylan, W 2008), he suggests that there are some criteria that formative assessment must meet for formative assessment to be able to work to enhance student and teacher performance. These include; 'making the learning objectives for the lesson clear from the start; providing tasks in the lesson which promote pupils to demonstrate their understanding; the teacher must be able to give feedback that can be acted upon in the class; allow students the opportunity to peer-assess each other's work and lastly, encouraging students to take an active role in their learning.' In terms of understanding the learning objectives and success criteria for a lesson, (Pinchok, N. and Brandt, W.C., 2009) and many others illustrate the importance of not only setting out clear learning objectives and criteria for students to demonstrate to achieve these achievements, but for there to be opportunities for students to revisit the learning objectives to check off progress mid lesson. (White, B.Y. 1998) wrote that where students were given the chance to self-assess their own progress and their own work, there was a less of a gap between the pupils in terms of ability. The other most popular type of assessment is 'summative assessment.' Like the name suggests, summative assessment sums up what a pupil has achieved at the end of a period of time – in a school setting, this is normally the end of a module of work. It is used to evaluate a students' learning and a lot of pressure and importance is put on the results of these assessments. Too much of this type of assessment has been shown to have several negatives on students which is why AFL is becoming more and more popular amongst teachers and schools in the UK. The institute of education in the University of London published a paper reviewing the impacts of summative learning paying close attention to student motivation and test results

and found that summative assessment 'only tends to benefit students with certain learning styles, and the higher achieving students.' Harlen W, Deakin Crick R (2002) Also, students tend to dislike these high-stakes tests and tend to perform worse due to anxiety and stress. Harlen W, Deakin Crick R (2002)

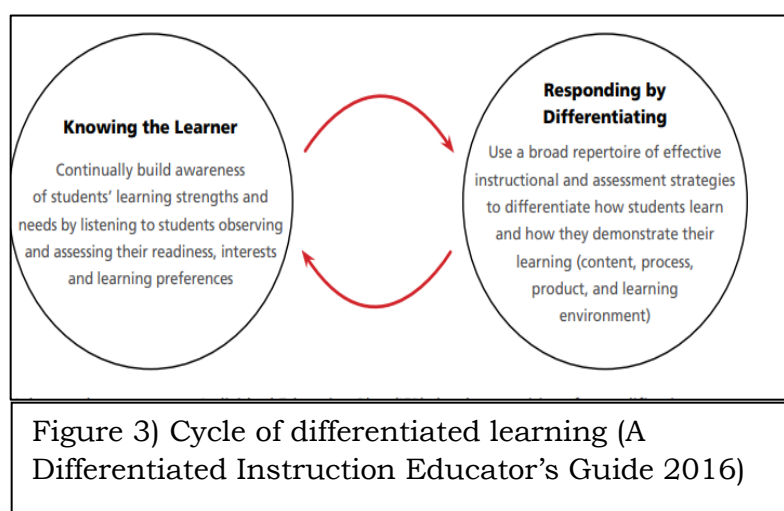
Differentiation

"Differentiation is an organized yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning to meet kids where they are and help them to achieve maximum growth as learners." (Tomlinson, C. 2001) In the classroom can be defined as a process of providing students a range of different methods and techniques for acquiring and understanding new information. 'These different methods allow students of mixed abilities to learn effectively whether they are MAT or have ALN.' (Tomlinson, C. 2001)

Differentiated learning has several benefits, some of which tie in with Donaldson's curriculum. Some of these reasons and benefits for differentiated learning include 'to increase student motivation and achievement so that each pupil feels appropriately challenged and supported', (Ikeogu, N., 2011) Also, by differentiating the learning, you can 'create strong connections between the subject being taught and the pupil, which in turn makes the pupil engage in tasks' (Dunne, M. et al., 2007) which would have a knock on effect on a students' subject knowledge and the grade a student is expected to achieve.

An underlying principle of differentiated learning is that it is a cyclical process of finding about more about an individual, and group of learners and then responding by differentiating. Figure 3 from A Differentiated Instruction Educator's Guide (2016) shows this cyclical process.

Differentiation has become a term more widely used



over the last 20 years, due to a number of different studies which evidenced that 'not all children learn the same way, and that the use of different teaching styles was a significant tool to understand the differences between students and help with their development' Strong, Silver, and Perini, 2001 'There are 4 different ways a lesson can be differentiated; through content – which looks at what a student needs to learn, and how they will be able to acquire the information; the process of how they will be taught and what techniques they will use to come to understand the information provided in a lesson; thirdly, the way a student presents their understanding and interpretation of the topic being taught; the learning environment which covers everything from things like seating plans, to the comfort a child feels in the classroom to ask questions and make mistakes'. (Tomlinson, C.A 2013)

Student centered learning, and humanistic approaches to teaching

Ivan Illich once said that 'Most learning is not the result of instruction, but from the unhindered participation in a meaningful setting'. Student centered learning refers to the 'wide range of programs, learning experiences and teaching strategies that are intended to address the specific learning needs of an individual, and the class as a whole' *Student-Centered Learning Definition* (2013). Some people call this approach to learning "personalized learning" as the student often has the choice on how they want to approach a set piece of work based on what they find best for learning new information. This kind of approach is the opposite of teacher centered learning, which is a more traditional/conventional approach to teaching whereby the teacher simply presents the information students need to learn without giving much thought to the differentiation of the class or to MAT/ALN students. (Schuh, K.L., 2004)

Student centered learning ties in well with AFL, and works best in schools where formative assessment has been made the priority. In Rogers and Freiberg (1994) they talk about how students are seen as active participants in the lesson rather than just passive receivers of information – and as stated above, AFL promotes students to take a more active role in their learning. Another reason why formative assessment is important in student centered learning is 'for the teacher to maintain a constant check on understanding and progress throughout the course of their lesson.' (Harlen, W. 2005)

There are three main types of approaches when it comes to learning that schools can approach, though they can be linked and intertwined, and schools tend to pick apart these approaches to come up with their own philosophies. One such approach is Constructivist, where learners construct their own learning. Schools that take a more constructivist approach believe that student learn by doing and being asked challenging questions which students apply to current understanding. They build this understanding through experiences. (Cooperstein, S.E. and Koccevar-Weidinger, E., 2004) The humanistic approach to learning puts the pupils first and aims to meet the emotional needs of learners. (Holt, J. 1964) Schools that adopt a humanistic approach believe that ‘the school and teachers are there to meet the needs of the individual learners – not the other way around.’ (Holt, J. 1964)

Reflection and Evaluation of next steps:

Multiple scholars have made links between reflection and learning. One person who demonstrated this idea that reflection in action requires people to think on their feet in real life situations was Schon (1983) when he created his model; ‘Reflecting In and On Action’. (Schon, 1983) In the second part of his model, ‘Reflecting on action’. In my assignment, this would be everything that happened after my critical incident, and in his model, it encompasses everything from what happened, why it happened and what happens next. What happens next is decided on what the incident was and the experience of the teacher, and the next steps are purposeful. Reflection is instinctive and immediate, and is done so that tasks can be understood better or to make sure that mistakes do not happen twice (Helyer, 2015) One of the issues with Schons model is that it doesn’t really go into the best way to reflect on critical incidents in the classroom.

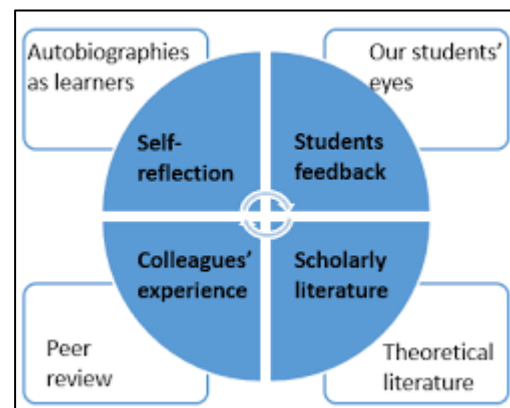


Figure 2) Brookfield's 4 stages of reflection model (Brookfield, 1998)

Another model of reflection is Brookfield's reflective model. 'This model is a tool that helps teachers discover the value and importance of their lessons through self-reflection'. Brookfield, S (1998) There are 4 main points that he believes that

teachers should use in order to develop their ability to critically reflect in the classroom and believes that teachers who become sufficient at doing this have the biggest impact on the development of pupils. (Ruch, 2009)

Looking back at my critical incident, I think the method 'Teacher A' chose when carrying out their formulative assessment was very efficient for acquiring an accurate response of student understanding. The approach that was used not only helped her but helped promote a safe class learning environment whereby the pupils felt comfortable to express themselves and say if they were struggling with the tasks set during the lesson. Additionally, the teacher had set a rough plan for herself and the lesson based on anticipated responses, which was not set in stone. This allowed for differentiation to take place in the class, and pupils of mixed abilities were able to proceed with the next task at the points most suitable for their confidence and currently self-assessed ability. One of the key features of Donaldson's curriculum is to promote ambitious and capable learners, and in my opinion 'Teacher A' really adopted this into her lesson plan. The task following the AFL contained different questions of various difficulties and 'challenge questions' which were used to push MAT students and keep them engaged and motivated.

If I were to take 'Teacher A's methods further, I would start to look into the possibility of adding a level of digital competency into the lesson. In 'School X' it is up to the teacher's discretion of how much they want to use technology, and how much technology they allow the students to use in their classroom in terms of mobile phones. This would fit into the development of digital competency, which is in the new curriculum, and would start to provide pupils with a link of how technology can be used as a tool to help with their learning pathways.

Conclusion:

Upon reflection of my approach to this study, and what I learnt from my day at 'School X', I think it was fairly successful. The case study methodology allowed me to get more realistic, unbiased observations, and beyond that, gave me more of an appreciation for the day to day life of a teacher in the classroom, and an idea for what I can expect over the course of my teaching career. There was a wide range of critical incident moments over the course of the day, and it made me challenge a misconception I had in regard to the amount of critical incidents that could be positive – that could have a positive effect on the rest of the lesson and on the

pupils. It would have been interesting to see other year groups and more lessons, but the observation opportunities were limited to the current COVID-19 situation going on and as such, was out of my control. Looking at Schons model and Brookfields reflective models (and even reflective models not mentioned above such as (Gibbs, 1988) has given me a greater appreciation for the importance of critical reflection in my teaching practice, and many of the methods I've read about referring to methods of differentiation will be invaluable when teaching mixed ability classes in the future.

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APPENDICES:**OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES****- CRITICAL INCIDENT 1 -**

(Questions adapted from Fletcher Wood (2016))

Date and time, year group: 30/9/20 - 8:45-10:45 - Year 8
Lesson details: (Context and focus -/AoLE/subject- is it near start of end of unit of study? Indoors/outdoors? Ability range? Any particularly relevant information). First lesson of the day. It is a history lesson, learning about Mary Tudor. Looking at nursery rhymes and good links to religion in the lesson. Lesson is indoor, ~30 students in the class Class is set in order of their math ability and are in the highest set of year 8.
Classroom culture (What is the classroom 'vibe.'? What do attitudes, dispositions, behaviours towards learning seem like at this point in time?) Classroom seems calm, behaviour is generally pretty good aside from a few chatty pupils. Pupils seem to be engaged and interested in the topic/
Objectives (What happens in the environment that communicates the purpose of the experiences? What can be observed regarding the way lesson activities relate to these purposes?) To learn about how the public opinion of Queen Mary Tudor changed during the short reign and why opinions may have been altered.
Direction (What can be observed that helps learners understand what they are engaging in? What in the environment helps them understand how to achieve well)? Lesson objectives were shown on the board at the start and have come back up as a way for students to check progress throughout the lesson. Some tasks have success criteria on them also

Access and challenge

(What can be observed in the environment that enables engagement of learners? What can be observed regarding levels of challenge?)

Each set task that the teacher puts on the board has a “challenge task” for higher ability students to attempt when they finish the regular task

- Other pupils were also made aware of this and everyone was encouraged to try it when they were finished

Specifics / Critical Incidents

(Are there moments which cause you to consider aspects of practice when you come across them in future teaching?)

Around half way through the lesson the class became very off topic and distracted. The teacher addressed this quickly by having the kids take part in a more interactive task.

- And asking the pupils some engaging questions which provoked further discussion.

- CRITICAL INCIDENT 2 -

Date and time, year group: 30/9/20 - 10:45-12:55 - Year 8
Lesson details: (Context and focus -/AoLE/subject- is it near start of end of unit of study? Indoors/outdoors? Ability range? Any particularly relevant information). Lesson is indoor, ~30 students in the class Class is set in order of their math ability and are in the highest set of year 8. Second lesson of the day, the pupils had a break around halfway through the lesson where they had the opportunity to get lunch This was an English lesson, where they were presenting work.
Classroom culture (What is the classroom 'vibe.'? What do attitudes, dispositions, behaviours towards learning seem like at this point in time?) The pupils are engaged and respectful of their peers who are presenting their own work that they have prepared, nobody was talking over each other and each pupil was given the same treatment when they were asked to present.
Objectives (What happens in the environment that communicates the purpose of the experiences? What can be observed regarding the way lesson activities relate to these purposes?) To present work that they had prepared at home related to "Why i'm proud to be Welsh"
Direction (What can be observed that helps learners understand what they are engaging in? What in the environment helps them understand how to achieve well?) Each pupil was given a success criteria for not only the written part of their presentation, but for the oral communication part too. Once they were done with their speech, they received further directions to improve on next time.

Access and challenge

(What can be observed in the environment that enables engagement of learners? What can be observed regarding levels of challenge?)

Each of the pupils responses were about something in Wales, and the class seemed interested in what everyone had to say.

In terms of challenge, the teacher highlighted on their specification sheets areas for improvement for the next time that they would present

Assessment

(Can anything be observed about how student's existing knowledge is used? Can anything be observed regarding the development of knowledge during or after the experience?)

Each pupil had a guide for what english language they should include to acheive the higher grades that were available.

The "DAFOREST" acronym was used by pupils to input specialist language into their presentations to acheive better grades.

Specifics / Critical Incidents

(Are there moments which cause you to consider aspects of practice when you come across them in future teaching?)

The teacher decided to put an interactive task on students desks when they returned from lunch to prevent students becoming bored with presentations and to prevent disruptions. When the pupils returned after lunch, they seemed to appreciate the change of pace and engaged with the task very well and were able to show the same level of respect to other pupils presenting later in the lesson.

- CRITICAL INCIDENT 3 -

Date and time, year group: 30/9/20 - 12:55-15:00 - Year 8
Lesson details: (Context and focus -/AoLE/subject- is it near start of end of unit of study? Indoors/outdoors? Ability range? Any particularly relevant information). Last lesson of Day Maths Lesson - pupils had break at 12:55-13:20 and then had 100 minutes straight. Lesson is indoor, ~30 students in the class. Class is set in order of their math ability and are in the highest set of year 8.
Classroom culture (What is the classroom 'vibe.'? What do attitudes, dispositions, behaviours towards learning seem like at this point in time?) Pupils generally more chatty and off topic - due to it being the last lesson of the day and starting the lesson straight off the back of a break. Eventually settled in and engaged in the tasks well, lots of class involvement and hands going up to answer questions. Most of the pupils in the class seem to enjoy Math.
Objectives (What happens in the environment that communicates the purpose of the experiences? What can be observed regarding the way lesson activities relate to these purposes?) The lesson started off by looking at the $\text{Speed} = \text{Distance} / \text{Time}$ formula and it's variations. Questions were put on the board through the course of the lesson with varying difficulties and students were taught how to re-arrange the formula to find the missing values.
Direction (What can be observed that helps learners understand what they are engaging in? What in the environment helps them understand how to achieve well?) Learning objectives appeared throughout along with formative assessment checks. There were "I do, we do, you do" tasks where the teacher would show them how to do a task, do the task with the pupils, and then let them try it for themselves on their own.

Access and challenge

(What can be observed in the environment that enables engagement of learners? What can be observed regarding levels of challenge?)

Many opportunities for students to answer questions, and the questioning felt very student centered - they were open questions which gave pupils the opportunity to figure out things for themselves rather than a simple 1-word answer.

The AFL tasks kept students engaged in what they were doing too.

Assessment

(Can anything be observed about how student's existing knowledge is used? Can anything be observed regarding the development of knowledge during or after the experience?)

Lots of questions throughout the lesson

Questions on board with degree of difficulty and plenty of challenge questions available for students to try throughout the lesson.

Specifics / Critical Incidents

(Are there moments which cause you to consider aspects of practice when you come across them in future teaching?)

About halfway through the lesson, the teacher held an anonymous progress check on the pupils to check how their confidence and comfort with the task was before moving on to the next task she had set. This gave pupils the confidence to say where they thought they were at. The teacher then had different start points for pupils on the next task based on what their responses was. This helped students stay engaged and challenged at whatever level they felt they were at up to that point in the lesson.

- CRITICAL INCIDENT 4 -

Date and time, year group: 30/9/20 - 12:55-15:00 - Year 8
Lesson details: (Context and focus -/AoLE/subject- is it near start of end of unit of study? Indoors/outdoors? Ability range? Any particularly relevant information). Last lesson of Day Maths Lesson - pupils had break at 12:55-13:20 and then had 100 minutes straight Lesson is indoor, ~30 students in the class Class is set in order of their math ability and are in the highest set of year 8.
Classroom culture (What is the classroom 'vibe.'? What do attitudes, dispositions, behaviors towards learning seem like at this point in time?) Near the end of the last lesson of the day, pupils were generally very chatty and teacher had to work hard to keep them on task. Pupils for the most part stayed on task but many started to turn around and chat to their peers between tasks which causes some disruption to the lesson.
Objectives (What happens in the environment that communicates the purpose of the experiences? What can be observed regarding the way lesson activities relate to these purposes?) This occurred post incident 3 - where students had chosen their starting points on questions about Speed, distance and time. Some students were assigned to try the challenge questions whilst others were set some easier questions to attempt.
Direction (What can be observed that helps learners understand what they are engaging in? What in the environment helps them understand how to achieve well?) "You do task" before the teacher went over some of the answers on the board. There were around 50 questions for students to attempt and a timer on the board which seemed to prompt students to work fairly hard and quietly and try to answer as many questions as possible.
Access and challenge (What can be observed in the environment that enables engagement of learners? What can be observed regarding levels of challenge?) Many opportunities for students to answer questions, and the questioning felt very student centered - they were open questions which gave pupils the opportunity to figure out things for themselves rather than a simple 1 word answer.

The AFL tasks kept students engaged in what they were doing too.

Assessment

(Can anything be observed about how student's existing knowledge is used? Can anything be observed regarding the development of knowledge during or after the experience)?

Pupils given the opportunity to share their answers before the teacher confirmed or corrected them. Questions on the board were based off of the subject knowledge they had learnt that lesson, and some questions were based off of prior knowledge too.

Specifics / Critical Incidents

(Are there moments which cause you to consider aspects of practice when you come across them in future teaching)?

Near the end of the lesson, a pupil did something that greatly upset another pupil and they started crying. The teacher noticed this straight away and moved the crying pupil to an empty seat next to another friend in the class, whilst asking the disruptive pupil to leave to class for a chat. It was done in a quiet and non-disruptive manner which allowed the rest of the class to quietly continue with their class. The student who was crying settled down and got back on task and the pupil who caused the issue was closely monitored for the remainder of the lesson.