

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

In response to the given question, '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,' this essay will set out to present a clear demonstration of understanding of critical incidents and their implications in the context of a school setting. Tripp (1993) summarised in his book 'Critical Incidents in Teaching,' that 'a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event.' This indicates that a critical incident is a personal observation of an occurrence followed by a reflection of the incident. Richards and Farrell (2010, cited in Joshi, 2018) list an array of advantages to analysing critical incidents such as 'a greater level of self-awareness, 'can prompt an evaluation of established routines and procedures,' and 'it can encourage teachers to pose critical questions about teaching.' Tripp (2011, p.125) further emphasised the importance of being observant and how identifying critical incidents will help an individual adapt and learn. He claimed that the analysis of critical incidents within the teaching profession leads to an 'improved professional judgment.' Exploration of the New Curriculum (2021, 2022), Donaldson's (2015) four purposes, extensive research of critically acclaimed and empirical works, critical evaluation of different perspectives, along with an exploratory reflection will ensure a comprehensive response to the set question. This essay will

evaluate an observed critical incident through professional personal reflection that is supported by empirical evidence. Evaluation of the research found relating to the critical incident will allow for identification of next teaching and learning steps.

### The Role of Critical Reflection

The concept of critical reflection in the context of teaching professionals has significantly grown in prevalence in recent years. Deriving from Dewey (1933, p.118) in his book 'How We Think (Revised Edition)', reflective practice is 'the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it.' He goes on to emphasise the importance and value of having a questioning approach wherefore the teaching professional should consider the reason for certain occurrences within a school setting and how they could possibly be further implemented, improved, or changed. Zwozdiak-Myers (2018, p.4-5) particularises the framework of reflective practice in her book, 'The teacher's reflective practice handbook,' explaining the expectations of each of the nine dimensions. The framework of reflective practice is a valuable resource for student-teachers on route to achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The dimensions contain all the needed elements of critical reflection in teaching, and act as guidelines to develop professionally. These include but are not limited to 'Link theory with their own practice,' 'Question their personal theories and beliefs,' and 'Consider alternative perspectives and possibilities' (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2018, p.4-5). The value of critical reflection during the beginning of an individual's teaching career is supported by Slade et al (2019), who researched the level of reflection is necessary for 'teacher candidates' to 'make instructional decisions as well as become self-aware of their own

perspectives and attitudes in teaching.’ Results showed that out of 243 participants, that ‘classroom environment’ was most reflected on by teacher candidates and ‘instruction’ was the least noted. This indicates that teacher candidates have more thoughts, feelings and possibly more difficulties with the type of environment they want to create within their classrooms rather than the way they are teaching in their classrooms.

### Observation – School & Class context

The school, staff and the pupils observed will remain anonymous throughout this essay in line with BERA Guidelines (2018), who highlight that “the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered the norm for the conduct of research.” The observation took place in a mixed-gender Welsh medium Primary School within the local authority of Swansea. As of January 2021, there were 520 pupils between 3 and 11 years old (nursery, infants, and juniors) in attendance of the school. This number is inclusive of 91 part-time nursery pupils (My Local School, 2021). This information is publicly accessible. The data was corroborated by the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC, 2022) which is authorised by teachers, validated by local authorities, and published by the Welsh Government. The school’s most recent EstynHMI (2018) report documented that ‘pupils are divided into 17 classes, including one mixed-age class and two nursery classes.’ The report further noted that the main language spoken within the school is Welsh and that ‘ten percent of pupils come from Welsh-speaking homes.’ The school received a ‘Good’ rating on the four-point judgement scale (Excellent, Good, Adequate and needs improvement, Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement) for the inspection areas: standards,

wellbeing, and attitude to learning, teaching and learning experiences, care, support and guidance, and leadership and management. This rating concludes that the school has 'strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement.' Justifications for the rating are explained within the report, such as that teachers have proficiently planned modes of developing pupil's numeracy skills within mathematics lessons but that numeracy tasks in other areas of the curriculum are not always of the same high standard.

### Critical incident linked to Donaldson's Four Purposes

The observed critical incident took place in a school assembly that involved the whole school cohort minus nursery aged pupils. Members of staff present at the assembly consisted of one primary teacher and three teaching assistants. The whole cohort of student-teachers were also present at the assembly. The critical incident observed is the approach chosen by the teacher in charge for managing pupils' behaviour in an assembly.

The assembly promotes the development of students within the AoLe (Area of Learning & Experience) of expressive arts. According to Donaldson (2015, p.43), in his 'Successful Futures' report, the 'Expressive Arts' AoLe intends to 'encourage children and young people to develop their creative appreciation and talent and their artistic and performance skills.' This rationale was fulfilled within the assembly as pupils had the opportunity to witness the 'specialist expertise' of a musician (Donaldson 2015, p.44). A Welsh harpist played an array of famous, easily identifiable songs that the pupils were expected to recognise through an online Zoom call set up on a large projector screen on the wall of the large hall. Students were able to see the

harp being played live and were told by the teacher to use their listening skills to hear the sounds being played and identify the correct song. All pupils enthusiastically contributed to the task provided by stating the title of the songs when called upon by the teacher. This scenario is supportive of Donaldson's (2015, p.29-30) four purposes of the New Curriculum. More specifically, this scenario is supportive of the 'Enterprising, creative contributors' purpose as the pupils had to use their own initiative and imagination to associate the authentic versions of songs they know with the original sounding.

However, while the online live event progressed, pupils began to misunderstand the objective of the sessions and began to sing along to the musical depictions of song from 'The Greatest Showman,' 'Frozen,' and 'Harry Potter.' The teacher in charge calmly reminded all pupils that the aim of the session was to listen and appreciate the music rather than sing along, as the music would no longer be heard if everyone was to sing. The disciplinary action of the teacher is arguably supportive of Donaldson's (2015, p.29-30) 'Ethical, informed citizens' purpose because pupils were encouraged to 'understand and consider the impact of their actions when making choices and acting.' In receiving rules from the teacher, the pupils were reminded of their role within the room and within their school. Pupils seemed disappointed at this request but obeyed the teachers' instructions for a short period. With each new song played, many students attempted to sing the lyrics from memory along with the song being played. The teacher firmly reminded pupils to remain silent while music was being played and told pupils they were not to sing along. Pupils were visibly disappointed by this request as could be seen by many frowns across the room. When instructions were further disobeyed, the teacher proceeded to raise his voice at the pupils and threaten to shorten the duration of their upcoming break time. Pupils remained silent for much of

the assembly following this method of discipline. Understanding the importance of following rules from an authority figure and the repercussion of disobeying prepares and teaches pupils how to be 'citizens of Wales and the world.'

### Literature Review

Before beginning to discuss the chosen research areas relating to the critical incident, we must first better understand the role of reflective practice within a school setting. John Dewey (1933) is widely agreed to be the founder of reflective practice due to his strong beliefs that personal reflection is essential to develop professionally and provide the best standard of education for children as possible. His ideology is supported by many pieces of research such as that of Dervent (2015) who qualitatively researched 'The effect of reflective thinking on the teaching practices of preservice physical education teachers.' Through a combination of data collection techniques such as 'reflective journals, interviews, and video recordings of micro teaching sessions,' Dervent (2015) concluded that routine reflective thinking helped the preservice teachers to better apply their knowledge to the role and facilitated them in developing a conscious awareness of their professional development. This study supports Dewey's (1933) claims of the advantages and subjectively proves that frequent reflective practice in the teaching profession is beneficial for long term development. A disadvantage of this study is that qualitative data collection can only be assessed subjectively and not objectively, meaning the data was based on participants' thoughts and feelings which aren't always a reliable or replicable form of experimentation. For example, if the study was to be completed again with the same participants years later when they are service teachers, their opinions on reflective

practice may differ. However, conducting a quantitative study on reflective practice that produces objective data may be difficult due to the nature of reflective practice being a deeply personal process.

There are multiple models of reflective practice that can be used when considering a critical incident. The first notable model was named 'The Learning Cycle' and was formulated by Kolb and Plovnick (1974). They explain that the purpose of the learning circle is for adults to display a simplified description of their experiences that can be broken down into four steps. These four steps are drawn in the shape of a circle with arrows leading to each step that repeats. This means that the cycle is to be repeated for continuous learning and understanding. The circle begins with concrete experience, observation and reflections, formation of abstract concepts and generalisations, and with testing implications of concepts in new situations. Kolb and Plovnick (1974) clarify the aim of the model is to help adults understand how they interpret these experiences and transform them into concepts, that acts as a guide for new experiences. While this model was formulated many years ago, the experiential learning cycle continues to be the most widely accepted and used model within reflective practice, as discussed by Kolb and Kolb (2017). Kolb and Kolb (2017, p.8) noted the various areas their theories had been applied to in recent years, including competency-based undergraduate education, professional education, college programs for adult learners and prior learning assessment.

However, Gibbs (1988) formulated a reflective model and named it The Reflective Cycle. This model has similarities to that of Kolb and Povnick (1974) whereby the models steps repeat continuously for continued learning. In contrast, Gibbs' model consisted of six distinctive steps whereas Kolb and Povnick's model consisted of four. The Reflective Cycle's steps include: 'describe what happened', 'describe your

feelings and emotional responses', 'consider what was good and bad about your response', 'how do you make sense of the situation?', 'what general conclusions can you draw from the event?', and 'based on your reflection, what would you do differently in the future? Do you have an action plan?' (Gibbs, 1988). When comparing The Learning Cycle to The Reflective Cycle it can be observed that Gibbs' model contains more detailed steps that require deeper reflection than those of Kolb and Povnick. The Reflective Cycle outlines key questions whereas The Learning Cycle only briefly outline what should be reflected on.

Upon researching and understanding the various tools of reflective practice that are available, observation of the critical incident used a template that included the questions 'where and when?', 'what happened?', 'areas of possible exploration', and 'notes' (see Appendices 1, 2 and 3). Regarding the chosen critical incident (see Appendix 1), the area of possible exploration is Learning Theory in the context of the school setting. Schunk (2012) summarises 'learning as an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience.' There are many types of learning theory but some of the most researched and widely accepted types are Constructivism and Behaviourism, as will be further discussed below.

One of the most influential minds of Constructivism was Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development in children. He did not believe that intelligence was fixed, rather it was an ongoing process over a long period of time. Piaget (1936) theorised that there were four key stages of cognitive development i.e., 'sensorimotor (birth to 2 years),' 'preoperational (2 to 7 years),' 'concrete operational (7 to 11 years),' and 'formal operational (ages 12 and up). More concisely, each stage had a goal to be achieved until a child could move onto the next i.e., 'object permanence,' 'symbolic

thought,' 'logical thought,' and 'scientific reasoning.' These are the four key goals of intellectual development according to Piaget (1936). When reflecting on the critical incident observed (see Appendix 1), in the context of the theory of cognitive development, it could be argued that the variance in age groups attending the assembly meant that there were large variances in the number of children that could be associated with each stage. Consequently, this could mean that, in general, different year groups had a different understanding of the purpose of the assembly thus leading to the overall disruption within the school environment. This means that the single use of explanation and instructions from the teacher toward all pupils present, may not have been received by all the pupils as intended due to being in different stages of cognitive development and understanding.

Conversely, while Piaget focused more on the internal factors of child development, Vygotsky (1978), another influential constructivist focused more on the external factors that contribute to child development e.g., society, culture, and people within a child's life. More specifically, Vygotsky (1978, p.37-40) founded the idea of a 'Zone of proximal development (ZPD).' This term is used to explain the range of abilities a person can perform with guidance of another with some level of expertise but cannot yet perform them alone. He expands on this, exhibiting three categories for an individual's ZPD which are 'tasks a learner cannot accomplish with assistance,' 'tasks a learner can accomplish with assistance,' and 'tasks a learner can accomplish without assistance.' He notes that a teacher should be aware of a child's ZPD to promote the most effective development. Therefore, in the context of the observed critical incident (see Appendix 1), pupils present at the assembly could be associated with different categories of the ZPD; meaning to best understand and learn in the assembly, some students e.g., those in the category of 'tasks a learner can accomplish with assistance,'

may need to be regularly prompted to take part. The teacher in the critical incident may have used this methodology within the assembly as they achieved this goal and consistently relayed to the students that the task was to listen to the music only and not to sing along. The teacher was also successful at fulfilling the expectations of Donaldson's (2015) second purpose ('Enterprising, creative contributors').

Behaviourism is another learning theory popularised by that of Watson & Rayner (1921), Pavlov (1927, 2010) and Skinner (1948). Classical conditioning is a learning technique founded by Pavlov (1927), who conducted an experiment titled 'Conditioned reflexes: An investigation of the physiological activity of the cerebral cortex,' more commonly referred to as 'Pavlov's dogs.' This experiment successfully conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell ringing through a series of repetitive procedures, such as bringing food to the dogs and ringing a bell while doing so. The dogs' levels of salivation were measured throughout the experiment. After some time, the dogs had learnt to associate the sound of a ringing bell with food, as proven by salivating to the sound of a bell before seeing food, and therefore salivation was considered to have become a 'conditioned response.' Watson & Rayner conducted the infamous study 'Conditioned emotional reactions,' or more commonly known as 'Little Albert.' The purpose of the study was to condition a baby to display a fear response to several animals using classical conditioning techniques. In the context of the critical incident observed (see Appendix 1), potential results of classical conditioning are present within the school setting such as arriving to the assembly in an orderly fashion, obeying requests from authority figures and understanding behavioural expectations, are all conditioned responses to being classically conditioned prior to the assembly.

Alternatively, operant conditioning is defined as 'the study of reversible behaviour maintained by reinforcement schedules,' and that operant behaviour is 'behaviour

“controlled” by its consequences’ (Staddon & Cerutti, 2003). Skinner’s (1948) study on pigeons objectively proved the technique of ‘operant conditioning’ whereby pigeons were gradually taught to perform movements such as turning around clockwise and anti-clockwise to receive a reward; in this case the reward was food. The pigeons would learn what behaviours are rewarded and which were not and over time behaved desirably to be rewarded, a method known as ‘positive reinforcement.’ McLeod (2018) proficiently elaborate on Skinner’s (1948) theory of operant conditioning by explaining the four techniques used within. Positive reinforcement provides a pleasant response/rewards a desirable behaviour to encourage more of that behaviour. However, negative reinforcement removes a pleasant response/rewards when the desirable behaviour is not presented. McConnell (1990) expands on Skinner’s (1948) work by explaining the two other techniques used in operant conditioning which are positive punishment and negative punishment. Positive punishment is used to decrease an undesirable behaviour by adding an undesirable stimulus whereas negative punishment is used to decrease an undesirable behaviour by removing a desirable stimulus. In the context of the observed critical incident (see Appendix 1), the teacher was observed to use the technique of negative punishment i.e., the upcoming break time of all pupils was threatened to be shortened as an attempt of decreasing undesirable behaviour. This method appeared to work effectively as the behaviour of the pupils visibly changed after the use of this technique. Shults et al (2019) are supportive of the use of operant conditioning techniques in education by highlighting that when correctly implemented, it helps promote a ‘positive classroom environment’ and helps retain the number of teachers within the profession. However, Chu and Ready (2018) identified through data from a longitudinal study in New York City, America, that students who had been firmly punished by schools and had been

suspended consequently scored lower on test scores and attended school less than those who had not been suspended. This shows that punishment can sometimes have long term negative effects on students. These two contrasting studies indicate that there may be an optimal level of punishment that works most effectively.

### Reflection/Evaluation & Next steps

It is important to acknowledge the presence of extraneous variables when conducting research such as an observation (Baldwin, 2018). Baldwin highlights the most common effects of internal validity within research, namely the variables that are not directly related to what is being observed. Some of these variables could be location or subject characteristics but since the observation is uncontrolled, the risk of extraneous variables affecting the validity of the observation are difficult to minimise. Observations are subjective and could be interpreted very differently if someone else were to witness the same events. Observer biases may act as unconscious extraneous variable. Mahtani et al (2018) defined observer bias to be a 'systematic discrepancy from the truth' and highlighted that the use of a placebo, adequately training observers to be aware of potential prejudices and using a second observer are all adjustments that could strengthen the validity and reliability of observations. Alternatively, the surrounding environment may have played a role in the behaviour displayed by the pupils e.g., a high number of pupils present of multiple year groups or the presence of student-teachers. In the context of the observed critical incident (see Appendix 1), regarding the mix of many year groups within one assembly, this combination may have caused feelings of anxiety within pupils. (Burak, 2022) relevantly researched the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school

students and stressed the massive increase in anxiety levels of pupils. In relation, pupils may feel uneasy being in very close proximity with peers having not done so in so long and this could be an underlying contributor to the behavioural challenges observed within the assembly. Moreover, should differentiation have occurred, e.g., dividing the assembly into two groups of infants and juniors, overall behaviour may have been different.

In evaluating the observed critical incident (see Appendix 1) in the context of literature, the teachers chosen approaches of behaviour management has been supported by multiple sources. Contemplation of the theory behind behaviour management and other disciplinary responses to undesirable behaviour is necessary to form a comprehensive reflection on the critical incident. Canter and Canter (1976, cited in Charles et al, 1992) outlined three ways to respond to bad behaviour, which are non-assertively (surrender), hostilely (with anger), and assertively (calm insisting compliance). The teacher within the critical incident first attempted to discipline the children through assertive methodology i.e., by calmly requesting cooperation of the students with the task (listening, appreciating, and identifying famous songs while being played live on a Zoom call displayed on a large projector screen). When pupils failed to cooperate with the set rules of the assembly, the teacher opted for the use of hostile methodology by displaying anger through physical stance and raised tone of voice. As previously stated, the use of operant conditioning techniques (Skinner, 1948), more specifically negative punishment, by threatening to shorten the pupils' upcoming break time, proved to work well in conjunction with the hostile response. This could be observed from the almost immediate quieting of chatter and singing within the room. Results from interviews and a questionnaire with English specialist teachers by Maazouzi (2017) implied that 'respect between the teacher and student'

and 'the poor quality of teaching and teachers' negative attitude towards students,' acts as a catalyst for disruptive behaviour. This suggests that disruptive behaviour is, much of the time, caused by the teacher but can also be corrected by the teacher. Effective behaviour management is in the teacher's best interests as self-efficacy has been shown to evolve teachers into being 'effective classroom managers' (Main & Hammond, 2008). Therefore, this study could mean that the pupils respected the teacher as they followed the rules once the teacher had expressed a hostile response to the pupil's disobedience.

Upon reflection, I am now aware of, and appreciatively understand the intricate details and extensive theoretical applications within the profession of pedagogy. Reflecting on my own values, I believe I would have applied similar theories to those used by the teacher within the critical incident. The teacher's behavioural methods were highly effective in managing the behaviour of a large number of pupils. It must also be noted how common extraneous variables interfere with pupil's concentration and learning e.g., presence of student teachers, time of day, being uninterested, feeling hungry/thirsty, needing to use the lavatory, not understanding the learning objectives and such forth. I have learned that a personal observation is not always as it is first perceived, and that deeper reflection and considerations of other perspectives are vital to develop a comprehensive understanding and to develop personally and professionally rather than portraying judgment. As a result, I aim to incorporate all that has been discussed into my own career development and pedagogical practice. Being ethically aware and open-minded will assist me in my goal of adequately fulfilling the expectations and requirements of the New Curriculum (2021,2022), as influenced by Donaldson (2015, 2016).

### Conclusion (300)

In conclusion, it can reasonably be stated that the principles and methodology within the pedagogical profession are changing continuously, whereby researchers continue to support and criticise various theories and perspectives. Reflective practice arguably holds immense value for prospective teachers as it allows every individual to decide for themselves the theories and perspectives they most identify with and that align with their own values and ethics. Understanding the different types of learning theory and having the opportunity to trial what works in practice, not only theory, will immensely aid professional development over time. In reference to the title of this essay, the observed critical incident on a group of learners and the behaviour management strategies used by the teacher was widely reviewed and evaluated with reliable sources of literature, resulting in an evolved understanding of teaching, and learning strategies that are to be further implemented in future practice.

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