

**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 term 'critical incident' within education stems from the historical term by the same name used to describe a significant, society-changing event. The term does not exactly carry the same weight within teaching practice but rather refers to seemingly mundane incidents that could potentially indicate a critical concern (Tripp 2011). These concerns aren't necessarily serious, or even guaranteed, but minor observation that is worth further investigation to ensure the child's wellbeing and to improve future practices. The context of the case study is a mainstream class of 20 mixed-ability year 4 children during a literacy lesson, on the Wednesday before they break up for the summer holidays. They are seated according to ability, with the teaching assistant seated on the table with the additional learning needs boys. The critical incident explored will be a student dropping their hand after raising it to answer a question, then appearing to be disengaged for the remainder of the answers. The overall aim of this case study is to explore the possible explanations for this incident and to evaluate the teaching method in question. Literature will generally be looked at through the lens of didactic or participatory approaches, with the exception of discussing potential concerns on a personal level. The remaining sections eventually all lead to the conclusion that upon reflection, the teaching methods that would most likely address the critical incident stem from assessment for learning principles, as well as taking inspiration from the humanist perspective by pushing for a greater focus on pupil wellbeing.

**Case Study**

The incident used for this case study will be concerning hands-up as a classroom question and answering strategy. As previously mentioned, there is a teaching assistant seated at a table of 6 with lower-ability boys at the front of the classroom. The classroom seating plan appeared to be well thought through, as those with additional learning needs were grouped together near the front of the class so that the teacher is able to accommodate their similar support needs (Hodgson et. al, 1986). Across from the teaching assistant, one of the boys appeared to be attentive while the teacher was talking. The teacher asked a simple question checking students'

existing knowledge, and finding out what they know about the topic before continuing with the lesson. The vast majority of students in the class shot up their hands, which in itself is interesting because the teacher hasn't allowed any time for students to process the question, (Shanmugavelu et. al, 2020). The lack of a pause after asking the question runs the risk of the more able and talented children being able to answer quicker than the other students, leaving some children feeling like it's not worth competing to answer (Clarke, 2005). The importance of time to think before answering questions is supported by Black et al., (2011), who argue that limited time to process an answer leads to a low-quality or absent response. One of the boys on the lower-ability table was one of these students who eagerly shot up their hands to answer a seemingly simple question, even stretching out of his seat presumably to make himself more visible. However, after two students had provided their answers, he subtly lowered his hand despite the teacher still choosing hands around the classroom to gather further responses. After lowering his hand, the student slowly brought it to his cheek and began leaning, he appeared to be disengaged and disinterested in any of the further responses. It is worth noting that in this particular round of questioning, even though not every student raised their hand in response, this pupil was the only one who lowered their hand before the teacher moved on with the lesson.

Those who raised their hands were from all ability groups, from this as well as the lack of processing time, we can make a realistic assumption that the students had class-wide prior knowledge, meaning the question asked was intended to be an easy, low-order question to engage fast responses from the pupils. The first two who answered were from higher-ability groups, there didn't appear to be an obvious strategy as to who the teacher chose to answer as he would continue to gather responses from all tables within the classroom. Following the incident, the pupil continued to appear disengaged until the class were shifted into group activities, he did raise his hand again for the rest of this specific whole-class teaching segment. The previously mentioned classroom context is worth further discussion, as it could hint at potential disengagement, particularly the timing. The lesson is the first the students have had at 9:30 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, two days before the school is due to break up in July for the summer term. Students are significantly more likely to struggle with motivation within school unless explicitly encouraged towards the end of the term (Reeve and Lee, 2014), meaning that this particular pupil could already be susceptible to a lack of motivation to answer questions. The motivation of this pupil could have also been tied to the question itself, engaging questioning techniques have been shown to improve motivation in students to respond with

higher-quality answers (Shanmugavelu et. al, 2020). If the question was unmotivating for the pupil, he could have quickly lost interest and no longer wished to answer.

### **Overview of Literature**

Teaching methods tend to fall within a spectrum, one end is the didactic approach which is traditional and teacher-focused, and on the opposing end is participatory, the student-centred approach. Those who favour a student-centred approach believe that the associated agencies should work for the pupil, rather than the historic educational hierarchy with the students situated at the bottom (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986). Each approach encompasses different teaching methods, and teachers usually favour an approach but this doesn't necessarily restrict teaching methods. Student-centred or participatory classrooms will gear towards teaching methods that encourage children to speak spontaneously as opposed to hands-up, rich discussion beginning with smaller groups or pairs and creating an encouraging and welcoming learning environment. The key feature of participatory teaching methods is alluded to with the title, each student is completely responsible for their own learning and participation (Branses and Ginnis, 1986), the more they involve themselves with the lesson, the greater their progress will be. This is a particularly inclusive approach, with the aim of involving every student. Talking with partners or small groups especially aids children with shy tendencies who would be less likely to share their ideas with the whole class, as well as teaching self-control and turn-taking to naturally confident children (Clarke, 2005). The main critique of the participatory approach is that it's difficult to implement, especially in British schools. Budget cuts resulting in limited resources and larger class sizes make it nearly impossible for teachers to effectively embody a fully individualised approach (Croll and Hastings, 1996). Another concern that arises with a student-centred approach is that it can be counterintuitive, many of its associated methods revolve around highly social interactions, such as classwide discussions, think, pair, share activities and peer assessment. Social skills such as active listening and eye contact are integral to successful group work, with minimal interruptions and patience in between speaking turns (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986). These are traits that tend to be lacking in neurodivergent children, which is problematic, to begin with but is enhanced when these children are all placed together on the same table. One of the more commonly diagnosed forms of neurodivergence is ADHD, with symptoms typically including, but not limited to, poor attention spans, hyperactivity or dazed states (Hudson, 2015). Naturally, with an average of nearly 4% of children in the United Kingdom eventually going on to receive a diagnosis for ADHD (Hire et. al, 2015), the teaching methods associated with this approach exclude a large chunk of the student

population, and this is without taking into account other social difficulty forms of neurodivergence such as autism, developmental disorders or trauma response disorders.

The opposing didactic approach is more traditional, encompassing the more stereotypical teaching methods such as hands-up, textbook work and lower-order questioning. Lower-order questioning can be defined as simple recall questions with the intention of getting learners to recall previously taught facts as a test of their understanding (Wragg, 2001). Due to the most recent curriculum change in Wales being heavily student-focused, and overall changing attitudes, it's not common for teachers to solely take this approach. The Welsh curriculum was designed with the input of students and has the overall intention of developing ethical, informed and well-rounded citizens rather than training children to pass tests (Hwb, 2023). It is quite clear that the current government intends to shift away from didactic approaches within classrooms. It's also notable that many teachers will tend to slip back into some of the teaching methods associated with this approach, such as hands up, even if they intend to run a participatory classroom. This is because some teachers find it difficult to allow students to learn on their own accord as opposed to direct teaching, and can display concerns around respect and classroom management (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986). It could be argued that although generally seen as outdated, this approach still has merits that could be implemented in the class today. The most relevant strength is that this directly addresses concerns around neurodivergent teaching mentioned in the previous paragraph. Short attention spans and poor aptitudes for highly social group work as mentioned by Hudson (2015) become less detrimental with quicker, low-order questioning. There's also evidence to suggest that approval-seeking behaviour can hinder participation (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986), meaning voluntary involvement associated with participatory classrooms can have the opposite intended effect, making standardised and direct teaching a viable alternative. The behaviourist side of education swings closer to this side of the pendulum as the general assumption is that learners are passive in school, they learn by responding to the stimulus that they are presented with and alter their knowledge and behaviours based on what they are presented with. Within education, the stimulus can come in the form of operant conditioning, enforcing behaviours through the use of praise and discouragement. When successfully implemented on school children, undesirable behaviour decreases which allows the teacher more time to continue with their direct teaching (McAllister et. al, 1969). The key strength of operant conditioning is that it makes traditional teaching easier, and more viable for classes that lack the resources to support fully student-centred values.

The relevance of student profiles isn't exclusive to either of the previous approaches but warrants attention in its own right. The most visibly obvious factor in the case study is the that pupil in question presents as a boy. There are many separate debates as to an explanation, but the prevailing fact is that there is a continuous attainment gap between genders in primary schools, with the most recent study testing student's literacy found that boys were in a 7% deficit with their attainment (Gov.UK, 2023). This is not a new phenomenon, with a study by Skelton (2001) finding that boys had the self-awareness to begin labelling themselves as either success or failures by key stage 2. Another factor, which is indicated by the class seating arrangement and presence of the learning support officer, is that the pupil is sat on an additional learning needs table. While we do not know the exact nature of his additional needs, some of the more common possibilities can be explored. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) directly presents problems with activities such as the one used in the case study. Those with ADHD tend not to have issues with grasping ideas or understanding the question initially, but they struggle to retain their thoughts long enough to give sufficient answers during class discussions. This pattern of behaviour means that it's common for students with this condition to lack confidence in their own ability, and in turn will contribute less to class-based discussions (Hudson, 2015). Other plausible disorders, for example, autism, mirror these issues around class contribution as this disorder often presents with difficulties with focus and eye contact (Clarke, 2005), which could also lead to a reluctance or mind change while answering a question.

### **Methods to Address the Incident**

Assessment for learning could be argued to be the strategy that most famously encompasses the participatory approach, as well as directly addresses the issues associated with 'hands-up' as a classroom tactic, as well as critiquing the style of questioning associated with the incident. This approach was first described in 'Inside the black box' (Black and Wiliam, 1998, revisited 2011). The elements of this paper most relevant here are the quality of questioning and discussions and strategies of formative assessment. Before delving into how this theory contrasts the approach taken by the teacher, it is also worth noting that parts of the practice are actually supported by assessment for learning. Most notably, the type of question the teacher asked allowed him to gather information on the class's existing knowledge, making it a form of formative assessment, which this theory deems vital to a pupil's progression. However, its main conflict arises with the questioning and answering form. The questions themselves should be rich, meaning that they require extended thought, that is best explored and shared through peer

work. Snowballing ideas as opposed to immediately answering them allows students to develop and peer assess each other's ideas. This strategy is advantageous when addressing students who lack motivation or confidence, students who believe they are naturally at a lower level are likely to disengage to protect their self-esteem unless they are prompted or encouraged (Black et. al 2011). The revisited work by Black et al. (2011) critiques its own previous work, suggesting that too much pressure may have been placed on teachers to implement the necessary changes needed for effective assessment for learning given their limited resources and the requirement for personal change by the teachers themselves. Despite the drawbacks, this has been found to be an extremely effective teaching method and could be applied to a classroom context to address the case study's critical incident. It has been found in a study conducted in secondary school, quality used assessment for learning strategies throughout the year yielded an average of  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a GCSE grade improvement, with lower-ability students benefiting the most (Black et. al, 2011). The heavy involvement of the students makes them explicitly aware of what they are learning, creating a deeper level of understanding of what they are being summatively assessed on. Assessors should be in touch with the needs of those that they are assessing to ensure they get the most out of education (Hopfenbeck, 2018). Further benefiting lower-ability students, despite the drawbacks previously mentioned associated with this method poses to neurodivergent children, overall, it encourages maximum participation that simply couldn't be achieved to the same level with traditional, hands-up style teaching. When pupils talk with partners before sharing their ideas on a wider scale, this improves their overall participation and builds upon their confidence. The caveat is for formative assessments to work, the pupils involved need to feel confident and safe enough to ask and answer questions (Clarke, 2005), for the teacher to effectively check students understanding, they need to have created a learning environment where learners are comfortable sharing what they know, and what they don't.

A strategy that was implemented in the classroom already that could be further improved to address possible concerns with the pupil is the strategised seating plan. As we already know, the teacher has arranged the class into ability groups and genders, as well as stationing a learning support officer on the table of the pupil in question. This is a strategy designed to increase participation, with similar-ability pupils being more likely to engage if they're surrounded by like-minded pupils (Hodgeson et. al, 1986). However, the supporting staff didn't seem to notice the incident at this particular time. While this child could have had a mundane reason for lowering their hand, support staff can enable the classroom teachers to move lessons along at a regular pace without leaving children with additional learning needs behind

(Hodgeson et. al, 1986). A simple solution could be a request for her to keep a lookout for, and check in on pupils in a similar situation. In a similarly humanist lens, the pupil could be pulled aside for a brief discussion about his well-being as opposed to waiting for a similar incident to arise in the future. Flagship humanist Holt (1964) described 3 key reasons why children fail at school, all three can correlate with previously discussed points. The first reason stated is boredom, which is a possibility given the simplistic questioning strategy in this scenario, he may have simply disengaged. The second reason is confusion, which may also be a possibility as his hand was lowered after other children had answered, so there is the possibility for him to have done that after hearing other answers that weren't on the same track his intended answer was. The final reason listed is fear, as previously mentioned boys begin to label themselves as failures at his age (Skelton, 2001), as well as students with additional needs often lack confidence, the incident could have occurred if the student felt like his answer wasn't worth offering anymore.

### **Discussion and Reflection**

Ultimately, the core of the discussions surrounding the incident can be boiled down to three main points. The first and most prevalent is that hands-up as a teaching method was ineffective in the case of this pupil, and potentially for the rest of the class. The reasons for this have varied, it could have been the lower-ordered questioning styles associated with this method (Wragg, 2001), or it could be the method itself leaving some learners to feel like it's not worth their energy to participate in classroom discussions (Clarke, 2005). For each explanation, the fact remains that there are drawbacks to using hands-up following a simple question. The second point is the student's well-being, with him having the potential to draw in insecurities from his gender-based attainment (Skelton, 2001) or those associated with whatever additional learning needs he may possess (Hudson, 2015). The final discussion point is alternative approaches and classroom strategies that may address this incident, with assessment for learning, one could argue, being the most heavily supported as an alternative to the method applied in this practice.

Following this case study, I will take this experience to reflect on my own philosophy of teaching and my pedagogical principles. Pedagogy is defined as a deliberate mixture of one's own educational values, principles and philosophies which are used to influence that individual own unique teaching practice (Soler et. al, 2001). Following on from the previous description of the

incident and a review of relevant literature, I am going to briefly complete the other four steps in Gibbs' reflection model (1988) starting with personal feelings. I would be quite keen to avoid this incident as much as possible as it led me to feel rather disheartened, there's a sense of unease knowing that a learner has an idea but for whatever reason, felt like they were unable to share it with the rest of the class. The purpose of this work is not to evaluate the practice, but for the sake of reflection, one can acknowledge that the class as a whole were engaged while the incident happened, suggesting that any concerns arise on the micro, as opposed to the macro scale. The primary conclusion that will be later expanded upon is that this particular student may need a subtle welfare check and the classroom may benefit from assessment for learning strategies in the future. The associated action plan would be putting these strategies into practice.

The most relevant professional standard (Hwb, 2023) associated with this case study would be professional learning, as this in-depth evaluation has allowed me to develop my own practice in the future based on its findings. I have had the opportunity to explore relevant teaching methods and theories and critique their potential usefulness, which has influenced my mindset in a constructive manner. In a closely related segment, my pedagogy has also been developed, I have a much greater understanding of educational principles, which in turn will lead me to have a practice more guided by principles such as assessment for learning and behaviourism. As mentioned, pedagogy is a blend that makes an individual's practice, I have taken this fully on board and in future will consider using methods associated with both participatory and didactic approaches. The pedagogical principle most applied by the teacher in this study would be 'employing a blend of approaches that includes direct teaching', the classroom layout and activity is a strong example of this principle. However, the principle I would argue most directly addresses the critical incident in question is 'employing assessment for learning principles' as an alternative to the hands-up method, which would eliminate the potential for an exact repeat of the incident.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude the teaching methods that would be most beneficial in addressing this context would be those associated with assessment for learning (Black and Williams, 1998), heavily focusing on their stance on group work as opposed to hands-up in the class. An equally important conclusion is that the student's well-being needs to be greatly considered. It is not a guarantee that the teaching methods in question were the cause of the critical incident but

instead could allude to personal concerns associated with the learner, particularly feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. In terms of personal pedagogy, however, it is vital to understand that none of the previously mentioned methods are one-size-fits-all, they all display merits and drawbacks in their own rights. A personal pedagogy should be built up as a jigsaw of theoretical knowledge and practices and not act fully based on a single theoretical approach.

In relation to personal practice, the key takeaway is the importance of professional standards, in particular those associated with professional development. Critical incidents such as this are going to be commonplace in teaching practice, so it is vital to continuously reflect, ideally through a reflective model such as the one developed by Gibbs. Upon these reflections, anyone in the teaching practice will be able to partake in a continuous state of professional development.

The recommendations that stem from this are to apply the previously mentioned assessment for learning strategies, but it is important to acknowledge the potential for future concerns to arise as a result. Possible issues such as a lack of staff and resources to effectively implement it or anxieties presenting themselves for children with less developed social skills if they are required to do paired or group work, would need to be closely monitored. The final, and lowest-risk recommendation would be simply to check on the student's well-being. Not necessarily in an intense intervention, but just a simple conversation with either the teacher or assisting staff to ensure that any underlying anxieties are understood and addressed.

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## **Appendix**

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| Date and time, year group: Mainstream primary school, year 4, 9:30 a.m.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Where and when: Wednesday in July on the week before they break up for the summer term. Literacy lesson, beginning with a class discussion. Mixed ability class with a seating plan influenced by ability and gender. Tables to the front right and left were additional learning needs, with the one on the right seating all boys and an LSO, the left had mixed gender and two children who use English as a second language. Directly in front of the board was a table of higher ability mixed gender children, with the pupil closest to the board seated next to an aid due to a visual impairment. The remaining two tables are at the back of the class, one for girls and the other for boys |
| What happened: Teacher asked a quick-fire question to the class, requested their responses through hands up and appeared to be choosing responses at random. Two children answered, one high ability boy and girl. Boy on the ALN table at directly opposite the LSO was engaged during a questioning session, put his hand up to answer the question, but put it back down after the two answers. He didn't put his hand back up for the rest of the response time. He rested on his hand and didn't appear to be interested                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Areas of possible exploration: Engagement and motivation and their associated strategies, challenges and support of children with ALN, hands-up and questioning strategies, sorting into ability groups                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Notes: Timing of the lesson could be an issue, nature of the questioning was very simplistic, rest of the class generally appeared to be engaged. Noone else repeated the incident in this particular session of questioning                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |