

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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Introduction

Critical reflection allows individuals to examine their own practice from multiple perspectives and provides an opportunity for identifying and solving possible problems. Teachers can use critical reflection to analyse their teaching practices and consider any necessary changes to improve the learning experience for pupils. This reflection process can be framed by focusing specifically on a critical incident. Tripp (2011, p.8) defines a critical incident as “an interpretation of the significance of an event”. This suggests that it is not about witnessing an important event that appears fundamental to the learning experience, but rather that critical incidents can be created from seemingly insignificant events based on the way we view them. In this way, teachers can reflect on specific events or incidents that occur in their classroom and through critical reflection, use these to inform future practice.

This essay will demonstrate how critical incidents can be used as a form of reflective practice in teaching. Firstly, the role of critical reflection in teaching will be outlined. Its importance in the teaching professional standards will be highlighted and one reflection model will be described. Then, an example of a critical incident observed in the classroom context will be explained. This will be discussed in the context of relevant research and literature following the themes of assessment for learning and scaffolding. Finally, the outcomes of this critical reflection will be discussed, and next teaching steps will be proposed.

The role of critical reflection

The idea of reflection in educational literature originated in the work of Dewey (1933). He defined reflection as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (ibid, p.16). The Welsh Government identifies reflection as important in teaching, as it features multiple times in the professional standards for teaching and leadership. Specifically, the professional learning standard states that teachers must show how reflection informs professional learning, with the purpose of developing pedagogy. The Professional Learning Passport is referred to here as a document to support critical reflection. Reflection is also necessary for the innovation professional standard. Teachers must evaluate the impact of changes in practice, which requires reflection both individually and with others. Furthermore, the collaboration professional standard requires teachers to reflect by discussing their developing expertise with colleagues. Thus, reflection is not only a requirement for qualified teacher status, but a fundamental part of teaching practice.

It is important to note, however, that mere reflection may not always achieve the intended outcomes of improved practice. Being critical is necessary because without challenge or critique, reflection results in a reinforcement of existing behaviour, which can cause teachers to become stuck in routine (Dewey, 1933; Tripp, 2011). Thus, teaching practice will only be improved, and professional growth achieved, if issues are highlighted through critical reflection and appropriate changes are made.

There are many possible approaches to critical reflection, based on different models of reflective practice. One example is Brookfield’s four lenses. Brookfield (1998) proposed that four points of view could be used during critical reflection: the autobiographical lens, the lens of the learners’ eyes, the lens of our colleagues’ eyes, and the lens of theory and

literature. This enables an individual to be critically reflective by viewing their own actions from a wider perspective, rather than solely relying on the process of introspection.

One way in which the autobiographical part of critical reflection can be approached is through the analysis of critical incidents. This involves identifying and analysing a classroom event that the teacher views as significant. Critical incident analysis provides a framework on which teachers can base their critical reflection, enabling them to “learn more about their teaching, their learners and themselves” (Richards and Farrell, 2010, p.114).

Teacher professional development can be facilitated by analysing critical incidents because this process increases self-awareness, promotes the use of critical questioning, and encourages teachers to evaluate their beliefs and established classroom routines (Richards and Farrell, 2010). The process of critical reflection can also result in better knowledge application and new practice possibilities (Hess, 1995), along with an improved ability to respond appropriately to change and uncertainty (Fook and Napier, 2000).

It must be acknowledged, however, that the process of critical incident analysis involves individualised reflection, making generalisation to other settings or people difficult (Fook, 2015). So, whilst critical reflection can result in improved practice in the individual context, application of these changes to other situations is limited. Additionally, the personal nature of this process should be considered. Challenging one’s practice and assumptions can be unsettling and the threat may counteract learning potential (Fook, 2015). Critical reflection should, therefore, be approached as a positive opportunity for professional development rather than a method of identifying weaknesses.

Observation context

In accordance with BERA guidelines, the name of the school this observation took place in, and the names of staff and pupils involved, will remain confidential and anonymous (BERA, 2018).

This observation took place in an English medium community primary school in the Pembrokeshire local authority. There are approximately 650 pupils on roll, aged 3-11 years. The school consists of 23 classes, with additional nurture provision rooms for those children requiring time out from the main classroom setting and more specialised support. Almost all of pupils are white British with English as their first language, approximately 25% have additional learning needs, and 30% are eligible for free school meals, which is above the national average (Estyn, 2016; My Local School, 2021).

The school is well-equipped with a range of quality resources, including technology, and teachers stimulate learning in real-life contexts to meet the needs of all pupils (Estyn, 2016). It is a health and wellbeing pioneer school and regularly holds open days to showcase excellent practice to other schools around Wales and beyond.

The critical incident discussed in this essay was observed in a year 2 classroom, during a two-day observation period. This class consisted of 28 pupils and was led by one teacher, with the support of one Learning Support Assistant (LSA).

Critical incident

The incident took place during a maths lesson, first lesson in the morning following registration. All of the children were sitting on the carpet, with mini-whiteboards and pens.

The teacher stood at the front of the class, explaining how to partition 2-digit numbers using a PowerPoint on the interactive whiteboard. Part-whole models were shown on the screen and children were asked to write the missing numbers on their whiteboards, then hold up their answers. For the third example, 74 was shown at the top of the part-whole model and children were asked to partition the number.

Teacher: How many tens do we have?

Child X: 70!

Teacher: Not 70 tens!

Child X: Oh no, that's 7 tens

Teacher: Good, and how many units?

Child Z: 4!

Following this whole-class input, the children sat at their tables to start the 20:20:20 rotation. The group of eight children working with the teacher were completing part-whole models in their maths books. Multiple children, including child X, demonstrated the same misconception: instead of partitioning 52 into 50 and 2, they partitioned it into 5 and 2. Some children were observed saying 50 aloud but then still writing 5 in their books. The teacher noticed this mistake in child X's book.

Teacher: 5 tens are...? Get your polishing pen out please.

(The teacher underlined the 5 in green highlighter. The school's marking policy says 'green for growth'.)

Child X: 50

Teacher: Okay, so what have you missed?

Child X then added a zero so the part whole model showed that 52 partitioned is 50 and 2.

The teacher marked this as correct in front of him, with a tick.

The other children in the classroom were either practising their times tables with the LSA or completing an independent challenge in the role play area. It is possible that the children working with the teacher were distracted by those children in the role play area. The teacher did have to remind the independent group multiple times to keep their volume down.

The critical incident in this observation was where child X answered the teacher's question during the lesson input and the teacher asked for a different answer. The observation of child X demonstrating the resulting misconception in his written work has been provided to illustrate how this interaction affected his understanding of the task.

This critical incident links to the 'ambitious, capable learners' purpose of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). From the start of the lesson, children were encouraged to work independently on their mini-whiteboards and fill out each example, demonstrating their ability to be 'capable learners'. The partitioning task allowed children to practice 'using number effectively' and continue 'building up a body of knowledge', by encouraging them to think about place value and how 2-digit numbers can be broken down into tens and units. Pupils had the opportunity to experience 'solving problems' by filling in the gaps on part-whole models and tried to 'communicate effectively' by answering the teacher's questions about the value of each number.

Literature review

Formative assessment is defined as "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to

modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p.8, as cited in Wiliam, 2018). Thus, whereas summative assessment refers to assessing what has been learned at the end of a topic or unit, formative assessment involves assessing progress during learning in order to improve the classroom experience.

One specific approach to formative assessment is assessment for learning (AfL). The Assessment Reform Group (1999) used the term AfL to refer to formative assessment and assessment of learning to refer to summative assessment. Therefore, the terms are often used interchangeably. However, Stiggins (2005) highlighted some small but important differences between the two: formative assessment is frequent and provides teachers with evidence about who is and who is not meeting standards, whereas assessment for learning is continuous and informs the students themselves about what progress they are making, when there is still time to act. There are multiple definitions of AfL but central to all are that it involves both teachers and pupils taking an active role in seeking, reflecting on, and responding to classroom evidence in order to improve ongoing learning (Klenowski, 2009; Assessment Reform Group, 2002, as cited in Schellekens et al., 2021).

Although AfL is recognised and used internationally (Birenbaum et al., 2015), and despite the research evidence suggesting that AfL can be used to improve learning outcomes, there is some literature that questions its effectiveness. For example, a meta-analysis by Hendriks et al. (2014) found that most studies assessing the effect of formative assessment on student achievement found little to no effects. Furthermore, Coe (2013) reported that despite the widespread adoption of AfL in England, there were little effects of this approach on national learning outcomes. It is possible that this is due to unsuccessful implementation of AfL strategies (Bennet, 2011). Schools can claim to be using AfL strategies in classrooms to enhance learning, but unless these are used consistently and to their full potential, they are unlikely to have the desired effect. Additionally, a literature review by Heitink et al. (2016) identified multiple prerequisites for effective AfL. They found that it is crucial for pupils to be engaged in the assessment process, there should be specific, constructive feedback provided, and the teacher should be able to interpret AfL information instantly. Consequently, it is important that the principles of AfL are being implemented effectively if positive results are to be expected.

One component of AfL is questioning. Questions are asked constantly in the classroom, by pupils and by teachers. The quality, frequency and responses to these questions can all influence the learning that takes place in the classroom. Questioning can be used to assess where children are with their learning and where they need to go next (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Teachers should consider the types of questions they use in the classroom, to elicit the richest information from learners and inform future learning. For example, Smart and Marshall (2013) observed middle school science lessons in the USA and found that teacher talk and questioning predicted pupils’ cognitive engagement in the lesson. Specifically, there was more cognitive engagement when open questions were used, which required higher-order thinking and put a greater focus on the students rather than teacher explaining. This illustrates how teacher questioning can enhance classroom learning, by assessing what the children can do and extending their understanding further.

Teacher questions usually require a response from students and these responses can be an indicator of the learning that is taking place. Aziza (2021) found that in a year 7 maths class, asking open-ended questions elicited a variety of responses from children. Oral open-ended questions asked by the teacher created a rich discussion in the maths classroom with

pupils offering more than one answer to each question. The responses to these questions varied in their accuracy, which gave the teacher an opportunity for AfL. Correct responses to the teacher's question could be offered praise, incorrect responses could be met with corrective feedback and incomplete responses could be met with a more specific question. Thus, it is not only the types of questions a teacher asks that can be a useful tool for AfL, but also the types of responses each question elicits. If a teacher can gauge by children's responses what they understand and what misconceptions have arisen, it will put them in a better place for modifying the teaching and learning activities.

Another component of AfL is feedback. This can take many different forms in the classroom: oral, written, in-the-moment, reflective, and also can be based on behaviour as well as academic progress. Central to AfL is the involvement of student and teacher, so feedback provides the opportunity for students to understand where they are with their learning and what the next steps are. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2002, as cited in Briggs et al., 2008) identified that feedback is most effective when it is regular, provided when the information is still relevant, and used to stimulate error correction. Although, feedback must not give children the answers, rather it should encourage them to think for themselves in order to solve problems and enhance learning.

The effectiveness of feedback on learning outcomes may vary, however, due to student understanding. For example, Van der Kleij and Adie (2020) found that in secondary English and Maths classrooms, teachers were more positive about the feedback they were providing than students were about what they were receiving. Students reported feedback not being useful or relevant, which might explain the discrepancy in perceptions of feedback frequency found. If students are not finding feedback useful, or frequent enough, then what the teachers think they are providing is not effective. Furthermore, this research highlights how important it is for both pupil and teacher to be involved in AfL strategies such as feedback.

Once teachers have used AfL to assess how children are progressing with their learning and what the next steps are, they can challenge pupils and push them to complete more difficult tasks and promote cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the term zone of proximal development (ZPD) to describe the gap between what children can do independently and what they can do with guidance from adults or more able peers. He believed that social interaction was linked with cognitive development and that it was important for children to be supported to achieve things they could not do alone. In the classroom, the ZPD theory can be used as a method of challenging children to work collaboratively in order to complete tasks.

Scaffolding can be used in order to support working within the ZPD. It is a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood et al., 1976, p.90). Van de Pol et al. (2010) identified three characteristics of scaffolding: it is contingent support, adapted to the individual child's level; it is gradually withdrawn or faded; and it is internalised by the child as they take responsibility for their learning. In the classroom specifically, scaffolding could include adapting or simplifying the task, providing a demonstration or modelling the skill required, or emphasising the important aspects and providing hints that can be used to solve the task (Wood et al., 1976; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Therefore, this is a simple way for teachers or more able peers to support a pupil to work in their ZPD and promote their development by providing access to more difficult tasks.

Scaffolding within the classroom can have positive effects on children's learning. In their literature review, Van de Pol et al. (2010) discussed experimental and correlational scaffolding studies and concluded that it is effective in improving pupils' cognitive and metacognitive activity. Furthermore, Simons & Klein (2007) found that pupils receiving scaffolding performed significantly better in a group science project, whereby their work included more relevant information and was better organised. However, in their experimental study, Van de Pol et al. (2015) concluded that the effectiveness of scaffolding depended upon students' time for independent work and their task effort. Thus, the effectiveness of scaffolding may vary depending on situational variables and student engagement.

It is important that the type of scaffolding provided for children must not hinder their ability to problem-solve independently or encourage them to rely on others for answers. For example, Bruner (1997) suggested that teachers could provide hints and aids to support learning, and Vygotsky (1978) referred to directions and leading questions. Although these scaffolding strategies may be effective in supporting children to work in their ZPD, they need to be used with care. If a teacher constantly provides a child with hints, they may prevent deeper understanding or if a teacher uses leading questions, it might stop students thinking for themselves (Zaretskii, 2009). Therefore, scaffolding needs to be used with care, and a process of collaboration should be promoted rather than influence.

Evaluation and next steps

The critical incident outlined in this essay involved child X replying to the teacher's maths question with an answer different to what she was looking for. Child X corrected himself, showing he really did understand the concept, however, he later demonstrated misconceptions in his written work. It is possible that because he was asked to give the number of tens rather than the value this represents during the teacher's explanation, he thought that he should always write the number of tens in part-whole models.

AfL strategies are used in classrooms to assess the progress pupils are making with their learning and what their next steps are. The teacher in this observation may have been using questioning as a method of AfL, in order to assess what the children understood about partitioning. As discussed earlier, there has been mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of AfL, and it is important that strategies are implemented effectively. In terms of questioning, this means open-ended oral questions should be used which promote higher-order thinking. These enable teachers to receive multiple, rich answers from pupils and provide the necessary feedback.

During this critical incident, the teacher was looking for one specific answer to her question, and child X did not provide this first time. Thus, he corrected himself which could have caused him to doubt his understanding of the concept or lead to misconceptions later. Based on this observation and the research evidence outlined in this essay, I will aim to use questioning as a method of AfL in the classroom. Specifically, I will try to use as many open-ended oral questions as possible in order to assess the pupils' learning, as these will provide a better picture of progress and avoid children thinking there is only one answer or only one way of working problems out.

This critical incident resulted in child X demonstrating misconceptions in his written work, which was picked up by the teacher. The teacher provided corrective feedback, whereby she encouraged him to think about what the 5 tens were representing. Feedback is

another AfL strategy, in which teachers can support children with their current learning and provide guidance for how to progress. Research literature suggests that feedback is most effective when it is used to stimulate correction, provided when the learning is still relevant, and involves the pupil as well as the teacher.

During this observation, the teacher provided verbal feedback to child X once he had completed the first question in his book, enabling him to correct his mistake and preventing him repeating it. If his misconception was fully addressed during the lesson input, child X or any other children might not have made this mistake at all, however, most importantly, child X corrected his work and did not leave the lesson misunderstanding the concept. As a result of this observation, I shall use feedback in the classroom as an AfL strategy. I will make a specific effort to ensure that any feedback I provide is timely and involves the child correcting their mistakes themselves, rather than being given the correct answer. Generally, when implementing AfL strategies in the classroom, I will regularly reflect on whether these are working effectively and if there are any improvements which can be made.

Through his interaction with the teacher, child X showed that he understood the concept of partitioning numbers, however, he came away from it with a misconception about how to put this into part-whole models. A possible way to have solidified child X's understanding of this topic could have been to use scaffolding. Maybe if there had been some more demonstration from the teacher, or some hints provided by more able peers, child X would have had a deeper understanding of the process. Even some time to discuss with peers could have been beneficial, based on Vygotsky's theory of social interaction enhancing cognitive development.

Due to this observation and the related literature, I will provide opportunities during my lessons for pupils to interact with each other and discuss tasks. Using mixed-ability groups might enhance this even further because scaffolding could be provided for pupils working in their ZPD by a more able peer. Furthermore, I will try to ensure that any scaffolding I do provide for pupils does not prevent them thinking for themselves. I may provide helpful resources or give another demonstration but will try to avoid using leading questions or giving hints that prevent deeper understanding.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed how critical incidents can be used as part of reflective practice in teaching. The professional standards for teaching and leadership highlight the importance of reflection in teaching practice in Wales, thus, regular critical reflection is essential to effective teaching and learning.

The purpose of this essay was to critically evaluate an observation and discuss relevant research literature in order to identify next teaching steps. I have outlined the importance of reflection in teaching practice, identifying Brookfield's four lenses as a possible reflective model. Then I described a critical incident I observed in the classroom context and reflected on this in order to identify relevant literature. Next, I discussed research into assessment for learning and scaffolding in the classroom. Finally, I used this literature, as applied to the critical incident I had observed, in order to identify the next steps I shall take in my own teaching practice.

By following this systematic approach to critical incident analysis, I have been able to reflect on a classroom observation in a way that has informed my own future teaching. Although critical reflection is an individualised process, and application to other contexts is

difficult, this opportunity for reflection has enabled me to consider general teaching practices such as assessment for learning and scaffolding and learn how best these can be implemented when teaching myself. Therefore, the insight gained from this reflection is applicable to the future teaching and learning I will be involved in.

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