

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

A critical incident, as defined by Tripp (2012), can be anything that is noticed by an observer, which then causes reflection into what was behind it, why it happened and what can be learned from it for future practice. Through this process, Tripp (2012) states, teachers can improve their practice, as they are constantly reflecting and amending their way of approaching tasks. It is important to view incidents through Brookfield's lenses (2017) as awareness of these will have bearing on how incidents are interpreted and reflected upon and counter, for example, unconscious bias.

The aim through this assignment is to learn how to notice critical incidents in the future and thereafter increase my reflective practice, as well as to consider one incident in particular which has been recently observed. Literature pertaining to this incident will be reviewed, as well as that relating to the importance of reflective practice in general. This increased awareness and knowledge will lead to the identification of how, as a critically informed practitioner, future teaching and learning methods can be planned appropriately and adopted (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012) with the aim of increasing children's achievement outcomes and self-esteem (Howard, et al., 2020).

The school setting was an English medium primary school in the local authority of the city and county of Swansea with 435 pupils (Welsh Government, 2022). 29% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. This is slightly higher than the average in primary schools in the local authority of 24.3% and the average of 23% across primary schools in Wales. 12.4% of the school's pupils were identified as having additional learning needs (slightly lower than the national average in primary of 16.1%) (Estyn, 2023).

The incident on which this assignment will be based relates to a child of lower ability who has 1-1 support from a teaching assistant. He is in a main stream Year 4 class of mixed ability, with nine girls and 14 boys and one teaching assistant and a class teacher. The incident relates to how the child contributes to the lesson at a particular time, and how the adults and his peers respond to his effort.

Learning theories which are to be looked at are Behaviourist theories; showing how children's behaviour and work ethic is determined and affected. Furthermore, theories regarding the importance of good relationships between children, their peers and adults in the classroom, such as Vygotsky's Social Constructivist theory (Kozulin, et al., 2003) and Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971) will be considered. Dweck's (2017) research into growth mindsets will also be discussed. One key educational approach which will be reviewed is Assessment for Learning (AfL), looking at the various strategies for formative assessment.

Literature Review

It is evident from Clarke (2014) that formative assessment, also known as Assessment for Learning (AfL) has a huge impact in many ways on children's learning. It enables misconceptions to be addressed quickly, achievement levels to be raised through children choosing their own challenges, and an increase in motivation, confidence, independence and resilience among other benefits. When compared to the old-school way of solely requesting hands up for comprehension checking and summative assessments, the contrast in impact on learning is outstanding (Clarke, 2014). Recent research carried out in a higher education context (Leenknecht, et al., 2021) shows how formative assessment was intrinsic to students' motivation levels. They

appreciated early feedback and help, which allowed them time to revise their answers. Expectations were clear and they had more autonomy and gained more satisfaction and became less frustrated, which in turn all led to increased motivation. Estyn (2017) describe as successful or good, those schools which use assessment for learning strategies to raise engagement levels and check for understanding, which in turn leads to effectively directed future planning.

According to Black and Wiliam (1998), the way in which the teacher replies to the child's response is crucial. If the teacher is inflexible, only looking for a particular answer and not being given it, and then either provides the answer themselves, or simply moves on, other students will be discouraged from contributing their own answers to future questions. The self-esteem of the child who tried to answer but also the others in the class will be lowered as this contribution has not been valued (Howard, et al., 2020).

Black and Wiliam (1998) developed this further, declaring it essential for adults to allow children sufficient time to formulate a response. This is because children may lack confidence to speak aloud while the whole class is listening. They also may not be able to process the request and be ready with an answer in the allotted time, which in turn lowers their self-esteem. Furthermore, this also results in the teacher not gaining knowledge of the whole class's understanding. However, as discussed above, if various formative assessment techniques are used, for example with children showing their answers on whiteboards, the teacher instantly receives feedback from every child and is able to support and guide where necessary. Black and Wiliam (1998) explain how this can be addressed, namely when scaffolding is provided for children, by giving

them time to develop their thoughts by discussing them with their peers. They can contribute their answer in a small group setting, and others can respond too with new ideas, jointly giving each other confidence and improving each other's self-esteem, by listening and valuing everyone's contribution to formulate an improved response.

This is supported by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist theory (Kozulin, et al., 2003), with his Zone of Proximal Development. This zone with available support of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) just outside their capability level enables them to be stretched and challenged to an appropriate degree, to aid their learning and progression. Children can increase their ability in this way to undertake more difficult tasks independently. This also demonstrates that children are hugely influenced by their social environment, and it enables them to learn from one or more MKOs, their peers in this instance. The process of peer learning and support enables children to remain engaged in the task through having the frequent opportunity to reflect and respond further. Vygotsky (Kozulin, et al., 2003) shows how vital is the role of the teacher as an MKO, who can scaffold support for the child and so progress their learning. Where it has been said that a child's peers can act as MKOs, it is the teacher who will have orchestrated the possibility of this, by choosing the specific seating plan to ensure that the children are able to act as MKOs for each other. However, whether it is better for children to be placed in single ability or mixed ability groups is still being debated (Wilkinson & Penney, 2022). An advantage of single ability groups is in order for support to be targeted and for the more able children to be stretched by working alongside their equals. This demonstrates that changing class layout whenever needed is entirely appropriate, depending on the teacher's aims of the lesson.

Furthermore, the teacher will have set tasks at the correct level, enabling children not to feel overwhelmed at the impossibility of the task. The teacher, through prior and formative assessment will also be able to introduce appropriately specific interventions and targeted support to the children.

It is evident from Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971), that children notice what happens to their peers and then, if they are motivated, decide whether to copy the behaviour to see if they can achieve the same results. For example, when children observe others putting their hands up in class and receiving recognition and encouragement, they are more likely to do the same. Furthermore, according to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is key, i.e. children having confidence in themselves and also autonomy over their own ability to succeed. This concept of self-efficacy is self-perpetuating, one of the factors which influences it is receiving constructive feedback – which in the current times where formative assessment is promoted, can help children determine their own success even more.

Brookfield (1998) stated that as critical practitioners, we should view incidents and therefore critically reflect through four lenses. The lenses enable us to remain aware that we should endeavour to view incidents from the eyes of the children, take into account the perceptions of our colleagues, carry out relevant research into theories and also recognise the potential influence and therefore bias from our own personal experience. These lenses need to be adopted prior to considering critical incidents. Without these lenses being used, the perceived outcomes would not be at all justifiable or as purposeful, due to our own unconscious bias, and lack of knowledge and understanding of the underlying situations (Brookfield, 1998). However, it is important

to note that too much personal critical reflective practice can be counterproductive and damaging for some people with insufficient resilience (Lishman, 2015).

Case Study

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (2018) have been adhered to in this report, ensuring anonymity for the children, staff and school observed as well as being carried out with an ethic of respect.

The critical incident viewed (Immersive learning space primary classroom video, 2023) and noted for this study took place during an early morning lesson at 9.30am, when the teacher would hope that they are in an alert state of mind for learning. The child being observed (child A) yawned repeatedly through the lesson, although it is thought this was due to tiredness due to lack of sleep or a good breakfast, rather than boredom as he was engaged in the lesson. The lesson was in the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning Experience (AOLE), and the children were working at progression step 3, "I can respond to others' points of view, seeking clarity, structuring arguments, summarising and explaining what I have heard, read or seen" (Welsh government, 2023). The learning intention: 'To make inferences' was very clear, written on the board and explained to the class. What made the incident significant in my opinion, leading to further reflection, was the fact that child A put up his hand to respond to a request for volunteers from the teacher, was subsequently chosen for a tricky job, and how he carried out the task. It is known that this task would be difficult for him as he had previously been observed volunteering, also chosen by the hands up method, and been subsequently asked by the teacher to read out his

inference from his white board. This was written after encouragement from the teacher to discuss and develop their ideas with talk partners. He was noted to be a slow reader, sounding out some of the words and being assisted by the teaching assistant.

Prior to volunteering for the task noted for the incident, child A was seen to confer with the teaching assistant sat beside him, and then with her encouragement, decide to put up his hand. The teaching assistant drew the teacher's attention to the child, indicating that he had worked out an answer, and the child was subsequently invited to the front to correct the mis-spelled word 'becose' on the white board. Collaboration was demonstrated here between the teaching assistant and the teacher, notably one of the professional standards for teaching and leadership (Welsh Government, 2019). The child did not ask for the stethoscope worn by others to be the 'sentence doctor', he focused straight away on the spelling. When he hesitates, the teacher supports him by quietly reminding him of the rhyme to remember the spelling, and tells the children watching that it is easy for your mind to go blank when in front of the class. The child corrects the spelling successfully and is pleased with his achievement. The teacher thanks him without giving him too much praise and he returns to his seat.

Dweck (2017) shows from her research that children should be praised for their effort, perseverance and improvement rather than their talent, if they are to develop a growth mindset. Therefore, it is evident that the way in which the teacher encourages and praises the child here is so important in building his resilience, rather than losing patience that he cannot answer immediately. Through this positive contribution, and how it is received by the teacher and his peers, I notice he feels motivated to participate and work hard as a valued member of the class.

The fact that the incident took place on 12th July, i.e. right at the end of the school year, is significant, due to the obvious positive relationships established between the child, the teacher and the teaching assistant. This enables him to feel safe enough to contribute in front of the class even though he is not totally confident with his answer. Estyn (2019) show in their report on children's health and well-being, how vital positive relationships within school are for children's ability to flourish and succeed. This is both between children and staff and also between themselves and their peers. Children feel supported and happy in their class if the adults there are positive and interact with them as individuals outside of class as well as during lessons. The importance of relationships is identified in one of the 12 pedagogical principles underpinning the new curriculum for Wales, namely "good learning and teaching supports social and emotional development and positive relationships" (Welsh government, 2023).

Teaching and Learning Methods

Building relationships with the children in the class is crucial for the teacher to be able to bring out the best of them in their attitude and learning. School trips and particularly residential provide an ideal opportunity for this. Dudman and others (2019) clearly showed this. With this in mind, I would take every opportunity to attend school trips and residential, and whilst in school spend time enquiring about every child's particular interests. Children need to feel valued and especially if they lack outside school support and nurture, a caring, interested adult somewhere else, for example in school is essential (Centre on the developing child, 2015).

It is essential that the teacher understands at what stage every child is with their learning at any one time, in order to be able to offer appropriate challenges and also scaffolded support. This is detailed by how the observed teacher reminds child A of a rhyme to help with remembering the correct spelling. The teacher should constantly plan, assess and evaluate the classroom set up too, in terms of the seating plan, in order to take full advantage of the learning opportunities offered by MKOs and in the ZPD, as explained by Vygotsky (Kozulin, et al., 2003).

In order for the teacher to keep up to date with each learner's progress, it is important to use a variety of assessment for learning techniques, allowing children time to discuss with their peers, and show their individual answers on whiteboards for example rather than calling out in front of everyone. I noticed in the observed class that some children raised their hands but were not picked to give an answer, so may have lost motivation to remain engaged, and the teacher would not have heard their contribution. The teacher needs to move around the class giving live feedback, clarification and encouragement. In the observed class the teacher was careful to give particular attention to the children who have English as an Additional Language (EAL), another important strategy ensuring their inclusion and understanding. When children have some autonomy, for example having a choice over their level of the challenge, and personal involvement in setting the success criteria, this leads to increased confidence, motivation, resilience and pride in their work, as they feel ownership and some control over their learning. Their self-esteem is also boosted and their academic progress is furthered (Clarke, 2014).

When preparing for teaching, it is self-evident that the four purposes embedded in the new curriculum for Wales (Welsh government, 2022) are adhered to and embraced and are certainly something I will adopt. The importance of healthy relationships discussed above is directly referred to in the four purposes, “healthy, confident individuals, who form positive relationships based upon trust and mutual respect” (Welsh government, 2022). The work they undertook in the observed lesson helped them to be “ambitious capable learners who can explain the ideas and concepts they are learning about” (Welsh government, 2022). Further examples of the other purposes are evident too.

As Lemov (2021) explains, in order for the teacher to maintain and demonstrate high expectations of the children, it is crucial that there is a difference between acknowledgement and praise of their achievements. What you absolutely expect, for example good behaviour, should be acknowledged, and praise saved for effort and out of the ordinary achievement. This is only possible when the teacher knows each child’s capabilities well, and is able to recognise what for some might be easy but for others might require great effort. Referring back to the case study, child A’s ability (with a little support) to correct the spelling on the board in front of the class, and subsequent praise by the teacher, exemplifies this.

The critical incident also showed how many of the pedagogical principles (Welsh government, 2023) were being followed. From this in particular, I will take forward in my teaching and learning, the need to maintain high expectations of all learners. The observed teacher recognised that child A struggled with spelling but showed bravery in having a go in front of the class, and yet the teacher did not provide the answer for

him, yet scaffolded support to assist him, so he could feel proud of himself. This would also enable him to be valued by his peers, and possibly help build good relationships there too – another method of teaching I would adopt.

Discussion

Taking an observational role rather than actual teaching has allowed me to step back and recognise how all of the pedagogical principles in the new curriculum for Wales (Welsh government, 2023) are fundamental in helping each child with their learning. For example, it was evident, in the critical incident, that child A was challenged to meet the teacher's high expectations, and took responsibility for his own learning by volunteering for the task. This will inform my future practice, in terms of adopting the pedagogical principles into my teaching, and from this incident, particularly of recognising the importance of building positive relationships with every child, and finding individually adapted ways of supporting them to make their best progress.

Remembering the importance of Brookfield's autobiographical lens (2017), using the critical incident methodology has enabled me to reflect back on my own experiences as a learner. When encountering a difficult task in the classroom, I can remember as a child feeling particularly encouraged and supported by teachers to attempt challenges out of my comfort zone. When I subsequently succeeded, this led to increased confidence and a willingness to challenge myself further in future learning. This positive experience has led to my decision to want to be a teacher.

Whilst Tripp's critical incident methodology (2012) has evident advantages, as discussed above, there are limitations. For example, any particular incident observed

only represents a small part of what is happening in the whole class at that time. Furthermore, there are obvious time constraints on how many everyday incidents teachers are able to reflect on purposefully. However, as I have learned about the advantages of using this method, I will endeavour to adopt it into my practice where possible. Furthermore, as encouraged by Tripp (2012), collaboration with my colleagues over compiling a critical incident file and reflecting on them together will increase best practice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research undertaken for this reflective practice on a critical incident observed led me to carry out much professional learning. This assisted with my teacher training journey and helped me to develop many of the professional standards required.

Through the study of literature, as well as personal observation and reflection I have been trained to have a critical eye and to value Tripp's (2012) critical incident methodology for my future practice. Brookfield (2017) devised the critical incident questionnaire (n.d.) which he recommended should be given to learners to complete anonymously, and at regular intervals. The learners are asked to respond how engaged or distant they felt from the learning, and also what, if anything they found to be helpful, confusing or surprising. The aim is for the anonymous results to be discussed as a class. This is a great source of aid to teachers in understanding how well the learners are responding to the teaching, and therefore provides evidence for the teacher's reflective practice. It also creates a feeling of trust between the teacher and the learners, and they feel involved in the reflective process (Brookfield, 1998). It is important to remember however, that although the practice of reflecting on critical

incidents is a useful one, it does only focus on a particular moment, and provides merely a snapshot of an activity at the time.

This has enabled me to interrogate my personal teaching methods through constantly watching, being aware and applying theories learned, ensuring it is child-focused education being delivered. However, as Tripp (2012) reminds us, even when one is routinely applying the critical incident methodology to one's reflective practice, one should at all times be open to new ways of looking at things and developing one's analytical skills still further. Tripp (2012) reminds us to create a file of critical incidents, which can be reflected upon at a later date, but also shared with colleagues, to produce more reflection. This also incorporates collaboration, another one of the professional teaching standards. Brookfield (1998) recommends collaboration with colleagues, sharing experiences of problems. Not only will a new perspective be gained of how to deal with it, but also reassurance that we are not on our own experiencing these situations, and we can gain positive critical feedback.

Methods observed and researched for formative assessment have been found to be relevant and will certainly be adopted for my future teaching, such as constantly moving around the classroom, live marking and offering in the moment feedback to children. This enables them to develop a greater understanding and make progression in their learning (Welsh Government, 2019). It is important to recognise that individual children react and respond in their own way, due to their preferences and abilities, to different methods of assessment for learning. A varied approach is therefore preferable, including many different strategies where they can show what they have learned to their peers, the teacher or the whole class.

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Appendix

Date and time, year group: 12th July 2023 9.30 am Year 4
Where and When: 23 children (14 boys, 9 girls), one teacher, one teaching assistant (TA). AOLE – Languages, Literacy and Communication Learning Intention: To make inferences. Mixed ability class, tables arranged in groups, it is inferred that they are arranged by ability level.
What happened: Earlier in the lesson, the teacher asked children to suggest inferences they have found. Child A puts up his hand and contributes his idea which the TA has helped him to write on his whiteboard. He reads it out with a little help from the TA and seems pleased to have been able to contribute. Critical incident – teacher asking for children to correct mis-spelled words on board. Child A notices a mis-spelled word, and checks with TA who gives him encouragement. TA then indicates to teacher that he would like to try. Teacher supports him when he is unsure at front of class, reminding him of a rhyme to help with the spelling and telling class your mind can go blank when at the front.
Areas of possible exploration: Significance of good relationship built up between the adults in the class and child A over this school year, inferred as the lesson is in July, giving him confidence to contribute in front of the class. Hands up as Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategy / other methods of AfL – pros and cons of different methods. Some children do not raise their hands. Inclusion – child A who has Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is able to contribute, with support which gives him confidence.
Notes: Lesson is early in the morning. Child A often fidgets and yawns, but does seem engaged in the lesson – kept on task by the TA who is sat next to him, it is inferred that she is there particularly to support him. Lots of support given by teacher.