

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

A critical incident is not something that exists independently of an observer, moreover, it is an interpretation of the importance and the significance of a said event. An incident is something that occurs, but a critical incident is produced by the way we view the situation. Not only does the incident need to be identified, but there needs to be an exploration into *why* it occurred by looking further into it. The use of the term “critical” may sound as if it needs to be something highly negative or dramatic, however, it just needs to raise questions and often is a very mundane or everyday event. (Tripp, 2012)

Identifying and analysing critical incidents that occur in a classroom allow teachers to make sense of experiences that occur whilst they are educating. Since they hold the knowledge needed to look deeper into the occurrence, as they know the children personally and have experience in the role of the educator, they may be able to gauge why it may have happened the way that it did (Farell, 2013). After a critical incident is identified and explored, structured reflection can occur to be used to shape future teaching and classroom management behaviours.

Many potential “critical incidents” occur every day in the classroom, however, it is impossible to investigate all of them, so they must be chosen carefully (Mohammed, 2016).

In this essay, I will identify a critical incident that I have observed, explore the possible background of this incident, and then critically evaluate the next teaching and learning steps that may be able to come from my analysis.

The role of critical reflection

The skill to critically reflect is essential for any teacher. This is because teachers must be able to adapt their teaching styles and methods to students in different social, cultural and political contexts (Liu 2015, cited in Saric and Steh, 2017).

Not only this, but critical reflection is also necessary for teachers to develop professionally and can have an impact on educational standards, teaching performance and improvement planning for schools. Teachers need to be able to evaluate their

lessons and performance and to reflect on how improvements can be made both on pupil experience and the quality of teaching during lessons (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012).

Critical reflection is a way to allow teachers to create classrooms where students can have access to powerful and relevant content (Brill and Lowenstein, 2010). An example given by Sparks-Langer and Colton (1991 cited in Brill and Lowenstein, 2010) is a teacher looking at the seating arrangement that they have in place and considering what works and what does not work about the arrangement and then looking at how it can be altered to create a better classroom environment. The same can be applied for a teaching technique that has been used or a behavioural management method that has been implemented, or pretty much any other incident or occurrence deemed important by the teacher. The point of critical reflection is to learn from situations that have occurred, and continually be improving teaching practices and methods.

Critical reflection has enabled the profession of teaching to develop over time and will allow it to continually develop both now and in the future. According to Jenlink and Kinnuncan-Welsch (2001 cited in Avalos, 2011), an essential part of critical reflection learning is the sharing of ideas and experiences, participation in projects and becoming aware of problems that need solutions.

A study undertaken by Schnellert et al., (2008 cited in Avalos, 2011) looked at the effect of reflection on teachers who engage collaboratively with a focus to improve student learning. The study found that there were changes in school cultures due to the impact that collaborative teaching and reflection had, as a result of not only the collaboration itself but also of the increased focus on student learning and the recognition of the importance of teachers continually learning that came from it. Improvement in student learning was also reported by 8 out of the 11 schools used in the study, and the key factor that they believed that this resorted from was the fact that there was an increased commitment from the collaborative groups to meeting student learning needs.

The results of this study would suggest that teachers working and then reflecting collaboratively can have a major positive impact on the structure of a school and pupils ability to learn. This could potentially be because sharing ideas and reflecting on them together offers teachers different perspectives on their own teaching practice which they can then learn from. Thus showing the importance of critical reflection and collaborative teaching when used together.

Observation School & Class context

The critical incident which was observed occurred in a youtube video of a year 2 maths lesson, in which the pupils were learning about multiplication. The class was mixed ability, and notes on the video explain that the pupils had previously reviewed what they already know about the topic that was being discussed and that this lesson was used to fill in any gaps in the knowledge that the pupils already had. Since the video is online, it is not possible to divulge any more details about the situation in which the incident occurred, however in accordance with the BERA (2019) guidelines it is limited as to how much context would be permitted to be reported regardless of this.

The guidelines state that in research, where possible, participants' data should remain confidential and anonymous (BERA, 2019). This is particularly important when working with children due to the fact it is questionable whether their age prevents them from giving informed consent. Therefore, even if information such as the names of the participants, the name of the school and where the school is situated was available, working within the best interests of the participants and their safety, and adhering to the BERA guidelines would prevent this data from being reported.

Critical incident linked to Donaldson's Four Purposes

The incident that occurred that was deemed to be critical happened whilst the teacher was doing a numeracy demonstration on the board in front of the class, who were sitting on the carpet next to her. A child spoke out without putting their hand up, which disrupted the teacher's explanation. In response to the shouting out, the teacher ignored the child (despite it being very clear that they had heard them), and continued teaching, but did slightly raise their voice in order to drown out the sound of the child who was speaking out of turn. This then resorted to the child being quiet and continuing to listen to the instructions, and in the rest of the lesson that was shown, the child did not do it again (See appendix C for further notes). Observing this critical incident has urged me to look further into different behavioural management techniques that are employed in classrooms to deal with low level disruption, and how well they work.

This incident has links to a few of the Four Purposes, set out by Donaldson (2015). The first one it links to outlines that the Welsh curriculum should aim to ensure that children and young people should be ethical and informed citizens. One of the ways that should be achieved, according to Donaldson, is through ensuring that they are able to consider what the impact of their own actions could be. Another way it should be achieved is through them having the ability to understand the rights and the needs of others.

The teacher is helping the child to become an ethical and informed citizen because they are refusing to give them any attention when they are speaking out of turn, as it is

disruptive to the needs of the class, who need to learn and the teacher, who needs to teach. This is then resulting in the child not getting what they desired when they spoke out of turn, therefore having a potential to defer them from doing it again. The child is learning here that when they speak out of turn, they will receive a negative response, which in the future will help them to consider their own actions and what the consequences could be.

The incident also links to the purpose which highlights that children in Wales will be capable learners who are also ambitious. One of the ways that this should be achieved according to Donaldson is through ensuring that they can communicate effectively. The ignoring of the child speaking from the teacher is showing them that speaking out of turn is not an effective method of communication, as it is rude and disrespectful to others, therefore teaching them to communicate more effectively in future, in this case by putting up their hand.

Finally, the incident links to the purpose which outlines that children in Wales will become healthy and confident. One of the ways that this should be achieved is through forming positive relationships which have mutual respect. The teacher is teaching the child not only to have respect for the teacher, but the other pupils in the classroom, by not allowing the child to disrupt the lesson. In future, the child may consider not repeating their action because it is not fair to others in the class.

Therefore, just this simple interaction, is paving the way to ensure that students in Wales become ethical and informed citizens, healthy and confident individuals and as capable learners, as they are learning to respect each other and each other's needs, communicate effectively and politely and also what the consequences of their own actions may be if they decide not to do that.

Literature review

The highlighted critical incident brings to question what the best way of dealing with low level disruption in classrooms is, as what has worked for this teacher in this setting may not work for other classrooms or even other children in the same classroom.

Significant research has been undertaken into why low level disruption occurs in classrooms and what the best way to manage these instances are.

Lewis (2000) undertook a study in order to find out what styles of discipline promote greater responsibility, and therefore better behaviour in classrooms. The study involved 21 secondary schools and 21 primary schools in Australia, and involved students filling

out a questionnaire regarding their perceptions on discipline strategies used by their teachers and how well the students thought they behaved in those lessons. The results of the study found that in primary schools, there were reports of very frequent use of reward and punishment systems. Due to the fact that the observed critical incident involved the teacher ignoring the student who spoke out of turn, therefore punishing them by not giving them the attention they were looking for, it could be digressed that the teacher in said incident was using a similar reward and punishment technique to manage classroom behaviour as is described in Lewis' study. The results of the study show that there is a potential correlation with the use of reward and punishment strategies and greater levels of student responsibility and therefore, good behaviour. This suggests that reward-punishment techniques are a potentially successful means of managing low level disruption in both primary and secondary school classrooms.

However, there are potential issues with this study and it's reliability. Social desirability bias describes the event in which a participant gives a particular response because they believe that it fits in with social norms or expectations (Brown et al., 2016). It is possible that this could have occurred during this study, due to the fact students were reporting on their own behaviour, and may be more likely to say that they behave better in lessons than they actually do, out of fear of getting in trouble or because they are embarrassed to admit to bad behaviour.

Another issue with this study is that it may lack generalisability. As the research was undertaken in Australia, it could be questioned whether the results are generalisable to schools in other parts of the world. A study undertaken by Romi et al (2013), which involved surveying a number of students and teachers, found that in China, there was almost no relationship between productive management techniques (such as reward systems) and coping with disruptive behaviour in classrooms. The study also found that the main behavioural management technique that exists in China involves using harsh punishment and aggression, suggesting that students in China may respond better to different management styles. Although this does not mean that Lewis' findings were entirely incorrect, it suggests that children in China respond better to the punishment aspect of the system rather than the reward one. This could be due to cultural differences, however it brings to question how generalisable the results from Lewis' study are to countries in other parts of the world.

Therefore there is a suggestion that the reward/punishment method has the potential to work, however there is not enough evidence to suggest that it will work for every child or every class.

Another method of dealing with low level disruption in classrooms that has been highly researched is the technique of setting clear, consistent classroom rules. This method is

based on the idea that if clear rules are set, students know what is expected of them rather than having to fit in with whatever rule a teacher may come up with in a singular moment to fit a situation (Vijayan et al., 2016). Jones and Jones (2004 cited in Vijayan et al., 2016) also highlight the importance of self monitoring techniques, suggesting that rules should not be there in an attempt to catch students out for behaving incorrectly, but rather for aiding them in choosing appropriate behaviours for various situations. They also add that teachers should discuss what the child has done incorrectly, and find out the motivation behind this incorrect or disobedient behaviour, and what the impact of said behaviour is on others in the classroom or the learning environment.

A study undertaken by (Vijayan et al., 2016) involved observations of teaching practice and analysis of documents taken from classrooms. The observation occurred in a kindergarten class in a private, international school situated in Kuala Lumpur and looked at the impact that setting clear and concise rules in a classroom and introducing self monitoring of behaviour can have on children's behaviour. The study found that rules are able to provide security for children in the classroom setting, and also that the use of self monitoring resources, such as behavior reflection sheets did reduce misbehaviour as it encouraged students to think through the potential consequences of their actions in the classroom.

However, there are potential issues with this study and its validity. Due to the fact that only one kindergarten class was observed, there is reason to question whether the results of the findings can be generalised to other age groups and different classes. Research shows that different aged children have different maturity levels and may respond differently to different techniques, for example a very young child may respond well to a sticker chart, however an older child is less likely to respond well to this technique as they may be too mature for it and a different type of reward may work better (Morin, 2021). Therefore, just because this technique works well for kindergarten aged children, it does not necessarily mean it will work well for older children and so they may need to be dealt with in a different manner, and this needs to be considered.

Others believe that the systematic approach to regulating children's behaviour is more effective. This approach is another area in which has had extensive research invested within it. This approach involves getting to know a child on a personal basis, and then investing time to find out what could potentially be causing their misbehaviour, whether it be their home circumstances or their close friendship group. As well as this, it involves trying to find a way to make their school situation as comfortable and productive as possible, therefore putting time into finding out what lighting, colour schemes and environment are most helpful for the child, and adapting the classroom if possible to fit these needs. It is also important when using this method to avoid doing things such as

having arguments with parents in front of the child, even if as a teacher it is thought that the parent is causing some problems. (Welsh Government, 2012)

This approach is important because evidence shows that a child's environment outside of school, most notably their relationship with their family and their home life, can have an impact on their behaviour within class. An analysis of the Chinese Family Panel Studies' 2010 baseline survey (CFPS, 2010 cited in 2018), undertaken by Li and Qiu (2018) found that the background of a child's family can impact their learning behaviours and their habits. If a child's family has a high socio-economic status, it is suggested by the report that this may result in the child's attitude to learning being less enthusiastic towards learning (and therefore may be more likely to misbehave) than if their family has a low socio-economic status. As well as this, if a parent participates with a child's learning, research shows that this can result in the child having a more positive outlook on school and learning, than a child with a parent who does not participate in their learning may have.

Furthermore, a study undertaken by NHS, (2012 cited in Holt, 2015), found that children 28% of children who had experienced domestic violence in their homelife showed aggressive behaviour towards staff in school, therefore not only putting the staff at risk of emotional and physical harm, but also having a disruptive impact on the classroom environment and the learning of other children (Yuan, 2012). Also found in this study, was that almost 83% of the children affected by domestic violence did not achieve their full potential in school, in terms of not achieving their predicted grades and some having a lower than average reading and language ability for their age group (Holt, 2015). Other behaviours these students repeatedly presented including; having a short fuse, having poor self image, bullying other children and fighting with other students.

Therefore, this suggests that in order to control low level disruption in classrooms would be to find out whether there are any external factors having an influence on the child's behaviour. However, it is clear that further research needs to be done in this area to suggest *how* exactly to help children who are experiencing disruption in their home lives, and how exactly to ensure their behaviour is up to standard in school. Therefore, despite this method giving the potential to find out why a child behaves how they do, it needs to be considered what the next steps are and as a result of this, this method can not be used on it's own to control low level disruption, it needs to be used in partnership with another behavioural control strategy.

Reflection/evaluation & next steps

The critical incident which was evaluated is important because it brings to question the best method of dealing with low level classroom disruption, as this can have an impact on the learning of the entire classroom of students if it is not dealt with in the correct way. It also highlights that the reasons for disruptions can be deeper than surface level and that it is important to consider the challenges individual children are facing and what impact this might be having on their behaviours.

Next steps in this incident could be to try out a different method of behavioural management, such as the systematic approach - i.e. looking deeper to see if there are any beyond surface level reasons or problems in the child's home life affecting their behaviour. This could involve just having a conversation with the child or asking other staff in the school whether they are aware of any issues the child may be facing at home. The teacher could also ensure that the children know the rules within the classroom, and decide whether they are clear enough in regards to the fact that shouting out will not be tolerated. It would be a good idea for the teacher to test out other methods other than the punishment and reward system that they have in place, and see if they are more effective at deterring shouting out in class in the future. It is important to remember that what may work for one child, may not work for others, so a mixture of these techniques would have the potential to be more effective when dealing with low level disruption.

Critical reflection can be employed after trying out these different techniques and can be used to decide whether or not the behavioural management technique that has been employed was successful or not, with an individual pupil or with the class as a whole. If it has been successful then it can be used in the future, but if not it needs to be decided why it didn't work, for example maybe a child with underlying behavioural issues will not respond to rules in the same way another child will, and it needs to be altered to fit in with the specific child.

This insight into this particular critical incident and the literature review I did in accordance with it will have a big impact on my future practice. Before researching different behavioural management techniques I would've most likely just written out class rules and expected the children to listen to them, and spoken to them if they did not. However, now after looking at what other behaviour management techniques there are, I would be sure to employ each of the 3 methods that were discussed in the literature review, when they seem fit and when they suit the individual needs of each child or the needs of the class as a whole. In future practice I would also ensure to be constantly critically evaluating my own practice and how I deal with disruption, and be

constantly looking for further behavioural management techniques, past the ones highlighted in the literature review, where it is appropriate and where it is necessary.

The critical incident has highlighted to me that things are never black and white or simple in a classroom, you have a room full of individuals with different needs, and different backgrounds and personalities, and it is not a case of one size fits all for managing their behaviour. So, my practice will involve continually critically reflecting on how I've managed the low level disruption that has occurred and continually improving upon my own responses to how children are behaving, in order to ensure my classroom is a safe, productive and healthy space for children and their learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, critical reflection is an essential part of improving the classroom dynamic and learning environment for teaching, as well as the quality of education being received by pupils. Research has found that there are a number of different ways to control low level disruption in the classroom, and that what may work in one area of the world, or for one age group or even just for one specific child, may not work for others. This is why it is important to critically reflect on the way that a situation has been handled, and decide whether or not it could be handled better in the future or altered to suit individual children. If I was to do this assignment again, I would look into other behavioural management techniques that can be employed in order to manage low level disruption in the classroom and reports of their effectiveness with primary school children, in order to give me more ideas when I go on to practice myself.

There are links here with the Professional Standards, as one of the key standards is leadership and creating a positive relationship with children. If I can encourage the children to respect me, through implementing strong behavioural management techniques which are effective, it means that I will have a positive relationship with my students based on mutual respect and understanding and that all my pupils can get as much as possible from my lessons and feel safe and comfortable in my classroom.

Word count: 4078 words.

Appendices

OBSERVATION / FIELD NOTES

Record 1

Date and time, year group: Year 6. August 2013.

Where and When: Context of the observation - subject/AOLE, general classroom context
History lesson. Students are sat at tables and the teacher is at the front of the room. Mixed ability class.

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident(the more detail the better to refer to in your later work)

The teacher asked for no talking and began explaining the lesson

A child talked out of turn and in turn was ignored by the teacher (no verbal response) and given a stern look. Did not shout out again in the rest of the observed lesson.

Later on in the session, children were answering questions and the ones with their hands up waiting patiently were called on and praised for waiting in silence.

Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be "under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider?

Behaviourism? - operant conditioning - positive punishment - behaviour caused a bad thing to happen

Respect for authority? - is there anything behind the child not respecting authority? Does the class have specific rules regarding shouting out?

Does the child have anything going on at home that may impact their behaviour in the classroom?

Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here)

Could be a lesson after lunch so the child could be excited?

There were no distractions, the rest of the class were sitting in silence. It was clear therefore that they knew what was expected of them from the teacher and that the child was acting out.

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Appendix A

Record 2

Date and time, year group: Year 6, 2015

Where and When: Context of the observation - subject/AOLE, general classroom context

Maths lesson. Mixed ability. The children are working in groups at their tables. They each have an envelope with maths questions in it in front of them and are instructed to open it by the teacher.

The teacher is then going around the class and speaking to individual groups.

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident(the more detail the better to refer to in your later work)

The teacher goes around the class and asks individual groups for an answer to one of the questions in their envelope. When the child answers, the teacher asks **why** that is the answer to the question and gets the children to explain their reasoning behind their answer and how they arrived at that conclusion.

Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be" under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider?

Why is the teacher asking **why** that is their answer? - is it to get them to explain their thought process because that helps them to learn better? Does it help with student confidence with their own answers if they are able to repeat it back to the teacher? Is it a way of encouraging children who got the answer wrong to realise that they have made a mistake by going through their calculations out loud? A way of not embarrassing them if they have the answer wrong?

What is the benefit to asking the children **why** they got the answer they did? Is there reason behind this?

Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here)

Directions are made explicit to the children, it is quite a busy environment as they are all speaking to their groups so there is considerate noise in the classroom.

Different groups were likely given different questions based on their ability level but this can not be said for sure due to the fact this observation was done through watching a youtube video.

Record 3

Date and time, year group: May 2016. Year 2.

Where and When: Context of the observation - subject/AOLE, general classroom context

Numeracy lesson. Teacher was at the front of the classroom writing on a whiteboard, and the children were sat on the carpet in front of her so that they can all see the board.

What happened: a detailed description of the critical incident(the more detail the better to refer to in your later work)

A child spoke without putting their hand up, which resulted in disruption to the rest of the lesson. Rather than acknowledging the child speaking, the teacher simply carried on with the lesson in a slightly louder voice in order to drown out the sound of the child who was shouting out.

The child was then quiet and continued to listen to the teacher, and did not shout out again during the rest of the observed lesson.

Areas of possible exploration: what you think could be" under the hood" in these incidents? What avenues of research could you consider?

Different behavioural management techniques - this technique worked for this child, but would it work for others? What else may work for different children? What other methods of behavioural management are there? Why do some children respond better to some types of behavioural management techniques and others do not?

Notes: any details you can note (is it a busy environment, is it after lunch, are there lots of distractions, are directions made explicit - the more you can refer to the better here)

The environment is quiet and all the other children are listening intently.

It is clear that the other children are aware what is expected of them, as if they have something to say the others put their hands up, however they are not explicitly told at the beginning of the lesson not to shout out.

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