

Critical evaluation 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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***Core studies:* The learner: who am I teaching?**

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A critical incident can be described as any significant event that may occur in the classroom. This was modelled after Tripp's Critical Incidents Theory, a pedagogical theory which allows for further development and an opportunity to reflect on teaching practices. In the opinion of Tripp, "a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event" (Tripp, 1993.) Despite the preconception of the word "critical", the incidents are not always negative. Instead, they can be deemed as a reflection on what can be identified as having an impact on learners' behaviour, engagement and learning as a whole. These incidents can typically be general, mundane events that may often go unnoticed until it is taken upon ourselves to analyse and reflect on our teaching practice. To reiterate Tripp's thoughts, a critical incident is a valuable reason we have to make as teachers, so it is crucial to utilise analysis and reflection in practice to help us to improve our informed studies in the future.

This essay will begin by discussing the importance of critical reflection, in both the role of teachers and also with teaching practice. To follow, there will be an exploration of the context of the school and class and the possible environmental factors that may have impacted behaviour and learning in the observation. Moving on from this, the next section will further discuss the critical incident, a link will be identified concerning "Donaldson's Four Purposes" (Donaldson, 2015) which are defined in the new Curriculum for Wales (Curriculum for Wales, 2021.) This will then lead to a literature review that should highlight areas of research that may exist, offering similar or differing perspectives and points of view. Through the process of critical reflection and the use of reflective models, this essay will examine the different theories, concepts and approaches that can affect a child's well-being, development and learning. To bring to a conclusion, there will be a reflection which will confirm an understanding of the role of critical reflection. This section will relate to the structure of reflective models and will show a sense of direction in how reflective thinking will inform the next steps in professional and personal development in teaching.

According to John Hattie, “the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching” (2009, pp. 22.) This being said, teachers must be critically reflective throughout their practice. Reflection can be deemed as a process of exploration. It can allow for the opportunity to examine our concepts and ideas, our actions or choices and to reflect upon ourselves. The importance of reflection in teaching is that it can provide insight, can give suggestions as to how to move forward and through critical thinking, it can help to improve future performance.

It was John Dewey (1933), “an American philosopher and educationist, who proposed three reflective attitudes that should embed in a quality teacher”(Nurfaidah, 2018, pp. 40.)

He argued that to be deemed a reflective teacher, they must be open-minded, and possess responsibility and wholeheartedness by doing this reflection would help us “deliberately grow as practitioners through thoughtful engagement with our practice”(Greenberger, 2020, pp. 463.) A reflective teacher is said to be open-minded by considering problems in new ways, welcoming opinions from others and accepting to listen to contrary views. Formulating the virtue of wholeheartedness could require the teacher to become absorbed in the subject matter and to maintain interest. The last reflective attribute is a responsibility, where teachers can act independently and be accountable for their actions.

The role of the teacher is to be open-minded, to have the willingness to reflect on their decisions and to have confidence in their evaluation. Evidence to support this states that “reflection is a process of self-examination and self-evaluation, in which effective educators regularly engage to improve their professional practices” (Shandomo, 2010, pp. 103.) Let us focus on the use of the word “regularly.” For critical reflection to be successful in the teaching profession, one must be in tune with their reflective thoughts frequently. It is essential to know that to be an “effective teacher,” (pp.104) it can be acknowledged that the duty of teaching needs the practitioner to be constantly and frequently engaging in classroom

observation and evaluation. Relating to the importance of reflection, it is simply not sufficient to solely reflect on what is happening inside the class environment. Instead, one should dig deep to understand the question of the hows the what if's and the why's. Sharing similar views, Ash and Clayton state that "critical reflection is an evidence-based examination of the sources of and gaps in knowledge and practice, with the intent to improve both." (2009, pp. 27-28.) To summarise the importance of critical reflection in teaching can be further explained by Farrell (2012.) Farrell suggests that they see "reflective practice as a compass of sorts to guide teachers when they may be seeking direction" (pp.7.) This comparison of using reflection as a metaphor can propose that to further develop professionally, the reflective practitioner needs to stop what they are doing, become aware of where they are at during that moment, and then decide on the next steps forward into the future.

School X had approximately "347 pupils" aged three to eleven years (Estyn, 2014) and nearly all pupils were of White British ethnicity. The school had 11 classes and around "21% of pupils" were eligible for free school meals, which is close to the national average of "22.5%" (*UK Government*.) These figures show how free school meal eligibility "continues to increase," representing just under "1.9 million pupils"; the figure has increased from "20.8% in 2021" (Estyn, 2014.) Most pupils had English as their first language, and no pupils spoke Welsh as a first language. Whilst it is an English medium school, the Welsh language was still regularly encouraged by greeting the students in Welsh and using the specific Welsh vocabulary in lessons. Furthermore, the Welsh language was implemented orally, used in reading and writing activities and through displays of Welsh heritage. The school found "that around 26% of pupils as having additional learning needs" (ALN.) Many contextual and social factors can impact both learning and behaviour in the classroom. This means there should be an awareness of temperature change, exposure to light, acknowledging how much or less food and sleep they have had and the effect of lunch and break time. It is beneficial to note that school X followed a holistic approach to their learning. A holistic

school approach emphasises focus on working with the child as a whole. For example, showing concern for the development of every child's emotional, social, physical, spiritual and creative potential. Following a holistic approach to education, ensures that students can become happy and well-rounded adults, thus correlating to Donaldson's Four purposes in the Welsh Curriculum.

On the 26th of September 2022 at 10.00 am, the observer identified their first critical incident in the classroom (see Appendix A.) The critical incident relating to teaching practice was the use of positive reinforcement and rewards of Dojo points for rewarding good behaviour that was expected from the pupils. Donaldson created six AOLE: "Expressive Arts, Health and Well-being, Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, and Science and Technology" (Donaldson, 2015) and the AOLE established was Expressive Arts. Donaldson encourages that by focusing on the Expressive Arts area, "schools and teachers can encourage children and young people to develop their creative appreciation and talent and their artistic and performance skills" (pp. 43.) Being creative can provide "opportunities to explore thinking, refine, and communicate ideas, and imagination. " The pupil's task was to create one replica drawing of one of Claude Monet's paintings, a famous French artist. All pupils had a choice of what image they wanted to create and the teacher set out a learning objective to recreate a drawing of Claude Monet's work. The children spread out and sat in four small groups, successfully grasped the lesson objective and indulged in creative activity.

Midway through the lesson, the teacher walked around the classroom to check how pupils found their assigned tasks. The teacher approached pupil X and instantly praised their work. The observer noticed that the teacher asked for all the pupil's attention on pupil X's work, and the teacher held the art piece clearly in the air so all pupils could see the book. The teacher said how they loved how pupil X did their shading and mark-making and then

proceeded to tell the class how they were awarding pupil X with a Dojo point. The observer noticed how some pupils were eager to also be rewarded for their work. Pupils began to replicate not the images they were given of Monet's work but instead aimed to copy pupil X's work. This is where the observer established their critical incident relating to the effects of positive reinforcement on learning, behaviour and engagement of assigned tasks.

It is beneficial to note that this observed critical incident closely links to Donaldson's four purposes. Donaldson created the four purposes so that all children and young people will be: "1) Ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives. 2) Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work. 3) Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world. 4) Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society" (Donaldson, 2015.) As the established AOLE was Expressive Arts, the critical incident can be related to encouraging pupils to be "enterprising, creative contributors." As discussed, all pupils wanted to be positively rewarded for their work and interpretation. It can be argued that this incident highlights the importance of students' well-being and confidence, and how teachers could acknowledge the effect rewards can have on children. As pupil X was given a reward (positive reinforcement,) this can provide a platform for them to be more confident in their ability and fuel their ambition for future learning. Although those students who have not been positively reinforced perhaps may not hold a sufficient amount of self-confidence or self-belief, this reinforces the importance of the four purposes in the classroom for every child.

Overall the teacher had achieved a positive outcome of behaviour and learning, and the pupils identified the positive reward given to pupil X. This then reinforced pupil X's behaviour and also the behaviour of other learners. It can be suggested that the teacher could have rewarded all pupils with a Dojo point as art is a subjective topic, and perhaps instead every learner could be praised for their art as "creative contributors."

The critical incident observation saw that through the use of positive reinforcement, the behaviour of the class changed as they wanted a reward for their efforts. This observed outcome can be further explained through the study of Burrhus Frederic (B.F) Skinner and his learning theory of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning can be further explained as a method of learning where behaviour which is either positively or negatively reinforced, the response is likely to be repeated in the future. This form of conditioning involves reinforcers, both positive and negative and are management “procedures commonly used to influence student behaviours” (Skinner *et al.*, 2022.) Another key aspect of operant conditioning is the concept of extinction, this is when behaviour declines because reinforcement has not occurred. Recent evidence from Skinner *et al* suggests that “reinforcement procedures can enhance the probability that students engage in behaviours that cause or are associated with learning.” This supports the concept that children can learn more through being rewarded, and this shows a link to the critical incident that positive reinforcement can impact behaviour and learning.

Sharing similar views on the beneficial use of reinforcement in the classroom on learning and behaviour is justified by Scott and Landrum (2020, pp.67-68.) It is stated “that the evidence is clear that positive student outcomes in terms of both dignity and behavioural success are maximised by the use of positive reinforcement” (Scott and Landrum.)

Nevertheless, Scott and Landrum express that the “effectiveness of reinforcement” is reliant on factors. Ensuring reinforcement is successful could rely on factors such as the history of the student, how difficult the task is delivered, and how often the reinforcement is frequently distributed.

Offering a different perspective, Skinner identifies that positive reinforcement in the classroom could come with challenging obstacles. When rewards are distributed in the classroom thus means the students are able “to determine who earned the rewards” (Skinner *et al*), this could lead to personal information on their classmate's performance

being distributed inadvertently. As these figures are openly shared amongst the class, it could potentially cause “desired and undesired social side effects.” An example of this may be that if a child or children earn a reward in class, they will often praise each other’s behaviour. However, if some children happen to fail or do not get a reward, they may be teased or belittled by their peers. In addition, theorists Skinner and Watson, (2000) claim that if a teacher considers “lowering the criteria for earning rewards”, this too perhaps could “reduce expectations of all students” potentially influencing some pupils to limit their endeavours to the minimum in hope of earning a reward.

Regarding the critical incident, this evidence provided by Scott, Landrum and Skinner could provide an insight into why the reward was given to pupil X. Perhaps this could suggest that pupil X required more support and who needed “stronger reinforcement to influence them to expend the necessary effort “(Skinner *et al*) and to maintain engagement in the activity.

What can be drawn from this discussion relates to the importance of the implementation of the four purposes, and ensuring all learners can be the best they can be. There should be mindfulness when positive reinforcement is distributed to pupils. This can be done through acknowledgement and awareness of how rewards could affect the child or children's confidence dignity, self-worth and health and well-being.

Offering a different perspective and area of the controversy lies on the question, does reinforcement inhibit creativity? Although Scott and Landrum (2020) highlighted the positive aspects of reinforcement, they also address the “oft-heard criticism of reinforcement is that it inhibits creativity.” They continue to discuss that if students are limited to being rewarded for only one way of using their problem-solving and analytical skills “then their abilities to conceive of or produce alternative solutions will be less likely to develop and be effectively utilized.” As opposed to inhibiting creativity, Scott and Landrum again emphasise that rewards and positive feedback are “essential components of shaping student responses that demonstrate critical thinking and creative solutions.” Due to these overlapping thoughts,

there seems to be a lack of informative information to support and clarify the statement that reinforcement does limit creativity. From this evidence, it can be inferred that there are some gaps and weak areas in the literature on the subject of reinforcement inhibiting creativity in the classroom. Despite this, it has provided insight into how reinforcement could impact the creative minds of the students. Concerning the observed critical incident, are we limiting all of the pupil's creativity by rewarding one child (pupil X)? Similarly, would pupil X's creativity be inhibited in the future from positive reinforcement? This interrogation could be resolved through further observation of the class and pupil X, however, it can be assumed that reinforcement could inhibit intrinsic motivation and contribute to counterproductiveness in the classroom.

Reflection models can help teachers reflect on their profession and personal development throughout their practice. Both theorists John Dewey (1933) and Stephen Brookfield (2005) created their models based on reflection and they provide a basis for an analysis that sees beyond. Dewey placed great emphasis on the learner being involved in the process of reflection. He believed that our "experiences shape us" (Dewey, 1933), and "when reflective practice is part of learning, meaning and relevancy is created, which initiates growth and change." John Dewey believed in deep, pensive and reflective thoughts and saw them as a significant element of our lives that can allow us to learn and develop our experiences. He trusted that reflective thought started when we "found ourselves having an experience that raised some difficulties or dilemmas, which he referred to as a "felt difficulty" (Slessor, *What is Reflective Practice?*) From this experience, Dewey then stated we begin to reflect about the situation and ask ourselves what could be happening. He considers professional development as an evolving spiral "where learning from one cycle stimulates the beginning of another and so on," allowing us to rebuild and develop our skills and pre-existing knowledge.

Some critiques have stemmed from Dewey's thoughts on reflection. Although he is a theorist who is "often cited as the founding figure of reflective practice;" (Hébert, 2015, pp. 362) his model has been "criticized for its overreliance on rationalism and adherence to technical rationality" (pp. 363.) Whilst Dewey's work is credited, his method can also be found to fault that "(1) it exists in an ends-based model initiated by a problem that must be solved; (2) it privileges rational knowledge over practical knowledge." Despite this, I feel that in my teaching profession, I will relate to Dewey's model and acknowledge the reflective spiral when there may be difficulty. I will stop, have time to internally think about my thoughts, and then reflect upon this to guide me in my next direction and approach.

Another reflective model teachers can use in their profession can be scaffolded by Stephen Brookfield. Brookfield developed his model and based it around the focus of reflective lenses. Unlike Dewey, his concept lay with teachers gaining higher awareness of their teaching but from various perspectives. The following four lenses are: "1)The autobiographical lens, 2)The student's eyes, 3) Colleagues' experiences and 4) The theoretical literature" (Janse, 2022.) The lenses relate to the processes of "self-reflection, feedback, peer review and consultation of scientific literature." Through the continuation of aiming to improve each of these lenses, a foundation can be built to become a better learner and teacher overall. Brookfield's lenses can also be applied to reflective teaching. To summarise, this reflective process is made up of the following steps: "1)Teaching, 2) Assessing the effect of teaching on student learning, 3) Considering new methods that could improve the quality and 4) Repeating the process." According to this, Brookfield's model of reflection should be implemented in every teacher's professional practice. To critique this, it can be noted that neither Brookfield nor Dewey take into consideration the explicit link of reflection in future actions. In addition, perhaps there could be the incorporation of the fifth lens in Brookfield's reflective model. Based on the socio-cultural aspect, Brookfield could take into account informal settings and contexts in which the reflection takes place. Instead

of seeing all teaching and learning taking place in the classroom, this could develop reflection further. I will confidently use Brookfield's reflective model during my professional practice, as the main advantage is that it links closely with the holistic approach to teaching. This model offers an opportunity to see the student's perspective as a whole, along with the colleague's remarks, providing the teacher with a developing awareness of their teaching practice.

Upon reflection, I feel I have learnt a great deal about professional teaching standards and teaching pedagogy and how they can relate to my teaching experience. Throughout my experience in school X, I had a great insight into seeing how positive reinforcement can influence learning and behaviour, and how to take a step forward in shaping students to be the best learners they can be. From this experience, I have a better comprehension of behaviour management in practice, and how it can create opportunities and obstacles in the teaching profession. I have also developed my understanding of classroom management, how to be mindful of the effects rewards can have on children and the educator's role in the classroom. I feel I will utilise behaviour management in my teaching practice, as positive reinforcement can impact children positively and as findings show by Skinner there is a link between reward and behaviour. As Dewey quotes "*we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience*" (John Dewey, 1933.) I feel this quote is important to remember when in a situation of difficulty, and I will carry this quote into my teaching practice in the future.

In this assignment, I have critically evaluated research and theories focusing on the observed critical incident and group of learners, and presented a personal stance on the role of the teacher. The curriculum reform in Wales means that change in the teaching profession is inevitable. This reform is created to modify the professional standards for teaching in Wales and to provide structure for new and reflective teachers. With the role of the teacher also changing in Wales, it is crucial for teachers to contribute to becoming reflective

practitioners and to actively shape a child to become the best they can be. Positive reinforcement can impact a child's learning through rewards of desired behaviour. Every child should be taught in a holistic teaching approach, seeing every child as a whole and motivating them to have the freedom to be creative. I feel it should be acknowledged that through positive reinforcement, creativity should be rewarded in every child, along with expanding their creative minds and supporting their health and well-being. Furthermore, I have expressed my understanding of how reflective practice models are important and should be utilised in professional practice. Both reflective models from theorists Dewey and Brookfield will influence and guide my reflective thoughts, and the next steps taken in the classroom in the future.

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