

A critical evaluation and the learning steps focusing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

Introduction

The aim of the essay is to analyse a specific critical incident and to reflect on this daily routine activity, using Tripp's (1993) critical incident methodology, to establish a culture of ongoing development (Dylan Wiliam) with continuity. By being critical to these daily activities and applying learning theories, then educators are able to improve teaching and learning methods to tailor students' needs and enhance their teaching deliveries. Through observation and discussion with classroom-based experiences, this approach will 'compass' the direction to the next future teaching steps.

I believe a critical incident could be a particular event that is unplanned during a lesson that could be used as a reflective model to improve one's educational practices, which is also stated by Tripp (1993). According to Tripp, an incident may also become a critical incident upon when one asks questions such as "What happened?" and "What allowed or caused it to happen". Once the incident has been diagnosed and disassembling piece by piece, the 'symptom' of the cause of the incident can enable teachers to understand the rationale and to use their own knowledge and expertise to understand and adapt their skills to use for future practice.

In this essay, I will discuss the incident I observed in a video in a mixed gender Primary School. The class in context was in Year 2. The critical incident involves a pupil who was initially unconfident and shy to participate and share his answers, but through careful scaffolding by the teacher, the practitioner was able to extract the correct answer from him. I will further talk about the critical incident more in-depth and learning theories placing more emphasis on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Most Knowledgeable Other, Positive Reinforcement followed by the teaching and learning methods used with a discussion of the case study to the critical incident as well as my own reflection on future pedagogical methods and choices.

Overview of relevant literature

The observation of a teacher prompting and encouraging a learner to reach the correct answer through hinge questioning can be associated with several education learning theories, which I will outline and explain below.

According to the social constructivism theory developed by Russian psychologist Vygotsky, he believes that knowledge and learning come from social interactions with people in their environment, for example, peer groups, Most Knowledgeable Others (MKO), rather than within the individual itself. An important concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which has three zones: The inner zone is what you already know and can do independently, the outer zone being too hard to succeed even with help and may have lasting impact on confidence and the sandwiched zone where the material is complex but achievable through guidance and encouragement from an MKO. The middle ZPD can be applied to the critical incident as it emphasises on the role of the instructor in an individual's learning. Pupil X was unassertive and quite reluctant to offer an answer so that suggests with the help of the teacher through guidance towards the correct answer with hints and tips, the pupil is able to understand and master the knowledge and skills of the topic inference that they would not be able to on their own. Once the pupil has mastered the skill by remembering how the teacher got to the answer step by step, then they are able to answer questions about the topic independently later on. The theory therefore implies that the instructor plays a crucial role in the pupil's acquisition of knowledge through scaffolding the answer. Theorists such as Bruner and Rogoff have also emphasised the importance of scaffolding in learning as the pupil is allowed to stretch skills and knowledge by observing someone more advanced than they are to progressively extend this zone. However, it could be argued that Vygotsky's theory is reductionist as it focuses on too much of social interaction and neglects the role of individual factors in development such as biological and genetic factors. It could be that those who answered correctly may be solely due to higher innate intelligence levels which can be backed up by Dweck's Mindset theory (2006) that the fixed mindset suggests intelligence is pre-defined and we are born with certain abilities regardless of learning.

Moreover, Dweck's mindset theory which I briefly mentioned above can also be associated with this observation. According to Dweck, people can have either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset about their abilities. People who have a fixed mindset see their own intelligence as innate and fixed, so they would tend to avoid challenging tasks as they do not want to fail as a result of their intelligence. Thus, getting wrong or negative feedback on how to improve is seen as negative as it focuses on something outside of their control. This could be applied to Pupil X who they may have a fixed mindset about their ability in this teacher's class, as a result, they may lack active participation and may not try hard enough on the basis that they will never be good at this subject and there is nothing they can do about it. However, it is important to note that mindsets are not necessarily permanent and can be changed. Blackwell et al.'s (2007) study on mindsets and maths ability concluded that those who were taught that intelligence is flexible had significantly higher scores in their maths test and increased

their motivation and achievement in maths. If the teacher hadn't positively encouraged and prompted Pupil X to answer and decided to leave him with his initial wrong response, it could have reinforced the pupil's idea that they are simply not good at this class. On the other hand, Dweck argues that teachers praising (and recognising effort) allows Pupil X to think and react a different way, believing that even if they get things wrong, it is usually part of the learning experience, and they are able to grow and improve. Such practice allows them to be more persistent and resilient (Rutter, 1995), and by showing support, it could help Pupil X develop a growth mindset. However, it is easy to criticise Dweck's theory for having a narrow focus on just nurture. He believes learning experiences can positively impact on children's development, but if it is more a product of nature, then learning experiences cannot be accounted for. This could be backed up by Piaget's theory of cognitive development where children's brain development follows fixed stages picking up specific skills at each of the four stages. Although children develop naturally, they still need the opportunity to explore and investigate and sensory play is an integral part in a child's development as they are bridges to developing social, problem-solving, and emotional skills. If Pupil X was not exposed to a lot of stimulating toys at home, it may slightly hinder his ability to grasp certain concepts such as inference that may require a bit more imagination and the ability to picture something from another angle.

Furthermore, the teacher in the video often praises the class and awards 'Dojo points' for participation. This is a classical conditioning observed in Pavlov's dog experiment which suggests that behaviours are directly motivated rewards that could be attainable. This is called positive reinforcement which means a reward for the "correct behaviour" that is participation in class gives pupils the incentive to participate more in order to get more Dojo points.

As can be seen in the incident where the class worked in pairs, engagement was high, and everyone participated (social inclusion), it's student-owned which can lead to deeper learning, oral communication, self-management, and leadership skills. Therefore, learning must also attend to student's emotional as well as cognitive state according to Madsen & Wilson. Clearly, the teacher understood the student's anxiety as they did not want to share his answer. The teacher empathizes and recognizes the student's emotional states, taking steps to alleviate negative emotions that might distract them from learning by creating a supportive, scaffolding learning environment

It is fundamental that we, as practitioners, understand how children learn to meet the diverse needs of differentiated pupils such as those with Additional Learning Needs

(ALN), Intersectionality, and pupils with learning difficulties. As such, it is also vital that we gain an understanding in basic learning theories to further recognise needs such that future teachings can focus directly on student needs and aptitudes. As Donaldson Review stated 'Without such clear and agreed purposes', it implies that if we don't even know the reason behind doing this, then how can we know what to do and how to improve teaching as a whole.

Explanation of Case Study

The observation made is from a video where the school is of an English medium, mixed-gender school in the Swansea Local Authority, with less than 500 pupils on school roll. The last Estyn Report, 2023 identified Free School Meals (FSM) as 29%, (National average over a three-year average in Primary is 23%). The number of pupils identified having Additional Learning Needs (ALN) as 12.4% (National average 16.1%) and English as a Second Language (EAL) as 10.7%.

The school's last Estyn Report was extremely positive reporting that the pupils enjoy coming to school and are proud to be a part. They feel safe and being listened to, pupils are reported to be well-behaved and actively engaged with the varied range of learning experiences and opportunities. Also, a statement about ALN pupils making good progress in their learning and improving their well-being. This shows the school's commitment where all teaching and learning are directed to achieving the four curriculum purposes.

It should be noted that the observation made within the Key Stage 2 was in accordance with BERA Ethical Guidelines. The identity of the school and pupils remain anonymous. The chosen incident occurred during a recap lesson about a topic they just learnt in a year 2 class. There were about 22 mixed-gender pupils with one male class teacher and a teaching assistant (TA).

In context, the clock on the wall showed 9:30 a.m. Four pupils were sat at front row and side tables between the teacher around four pupils each and a couple of back tables. A female TA was present to the right of the teacher. I am unsure if there is a seating arrangement in place. The teacher was finishing up teaching a topic called inference where the projector showed silhouettes and shadows of daily objects and animals. He instructed the pupils to make an inference of what the object could be from the projection and write three inference guesses in their books. He went round the class encouraging pupils to participate. The pupils who had their hands up were chosen to share their answers. They did not shout out the answers. On inspection, this seemed to be a routine in which the class had adopted when answering questions. For the final

round of asking pupils, the teacher said he wanted “un, dau, tri, pedwar, pump” pupils for their answers. He circulated around the room, encouraging other pupils to participate by praising their answers with “I like it” or “Amazing effort”. He would ask questions like ‘have I missed anybody out’ and was extremely encouraging awarding a “Dojo mark” for effort. It was within this context that the incident was observed. I noticed that Pupil X sitting in the front row kept on looking down at his answers in his book whilst biting his fingernails suggesting he was unsure whether his answer was correct. Whilst other pupils' hands were shot up high in the air, he had put only half his hand up. The teacher quickly noticed his hand and approached him saying “Pupil X, I am so glad you put your hand up”. This could imply that the pupil may be quite shy and doesn't often participate as eagerly as his other classmates. The child replied, “Sir I don't really want to share but I did my third one and it is a short one.” It appeared the pupil was reluctant to give an answer as his tone was low and seemed uncertain. Nonetheless, the teacher asked if he could read it out loud, and after approval, he read, “I can infer that on the left there is a light.” The teacher then pointed at the spot of light and said, “Do you mean this light?” to which the pupil quickly answered “Yes”. The teacher then directed him towards the answer by further hinge questioning him “Why do you think there is a light there?” and Pupil X responded with “I don't really know.” With further prompt by the teacher saying, “It's not the sort of light you expect to see underground...”, the pupil replied, “Maybe the light is actually projecting a house”. The conversation ended with the teacher praising him with “Da iawn Pupil X, we got there in the end!”

So, the lesson continued with teacher transitioning to a physical object inference exercise. There was an excited chatter around the class when given some outdoor footwear to investigate. This proved to be successful as engagement was high. The delivery of the lesson met the four purposes together with ‘ambitious capable learners’, and ‘healthy and confident individuals’ (Donaldson, 2015) as can be seen the promotion of the Welsh language ‘un, dau, tri’ and ‘da iawn’ being incorporated into the lesson.

Teaching and learning methods

In the daily practice of a teacher, one needs to be armed with a repertoire of strategies and techniques to enable the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to students.

In the critical incident, pupils were given outdoor footwear and to make inferences. This is an inquiry-based learning. Rooted in Lev Vygotsky's idea of MKO, pupils are already in their table groups of three to four. Here learners rely on one another to brainstorm ideas that they would otherwise not be able to complete individually. The idea is that pupils work together in their table group of three to four on making inferences with

regard to whose shoes they think it belongs to. However, Vygotsky's sociocultural-cultural theory disregards the role of an individual, but regards the collective, either theory does not recognise the individuals can rise above social norms based on personal understanding (Liu & Matthew, 2005, p392), for example, the gifted. There is inequality for each learner. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) or pupils with learning difficulties may not take away the same meaning from group interaction as were those without learning difficulties. Despite the fact some pupils may be more domineering and contribute more to the task, nonetheless group work activity would encourage discussion with regards to the ownership of the shoes developing leadership skills in terms of reciting their inferences and gathering information and developing higher-level thinking. On the whole, pairing and sharing works efficiently, making it a student-centred activity. Pupils will have autonomy towards their learning and this activity will develop higher level thinking and increase confidence as well as self-esteem (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs) and assertiveness on the pupil given time and experience.

Vygotsky and Dweck's theories are both very relevant to this critical incident and their philosophies can be adopted across all lessons by all teachers. By linking theories with everyday teaching in classrooms, allows educators to be reflective in their practice and recognising the best way to deliver and teach skills to students. However, it must be understood that all learning theories are useful to some extent as they cannot be solely used on itself, and one must adapt their teachings according to their differentiated learning methods.

On the whiteboard was projected silhouettes of animal shapes and bright lights which can infer that the learning style is visual. Pupil X did not want to share his answer even though he had written his inference in his book as he was unsure of the answer. The teacher used Instructional scaffolding as a strategy for supporting these types of learners using Vygotsky's learning concept of ZPD to provide a support structure to get the pupil to the next zone or level (Raymond, 2000). Since Pupil X was reluctant to share his answer and had low self-esteem and not much confidence, the teacher used words of praise and encourages (Positive Reinforcement) as well as hinge questions such as 'What do you think that light is?' and 'Would you find a light underground?', so by carefully scaffolding, Pupil X finally gave an answer and was praised for his effort. Although Pupil X relied on the MKO, however, this scaffold has offered him confidence, lessened his anxiety, and ultimately improves well-being by not applying too much pressure. This enables the teacher to identify the level of understanding from each individual student at early stages of learning new content, thus formatively assess the progress of each student. However, criticisms of Vygotsky's scaffolding are the

possibility of providing too much help. This could cause the student to rely on the teacher too much for answers and thinking that he will always be there for help, thus causing the student to be a passive, instead of active learner which actually reduces the amount the student learns. Again, this strategy is temporary assistance and once knowing the pupils' current level of knowledge the practitioner will be able to adjust the progression step, for example can inform them for group work or individual tasks. Also, at what ZPD stage and teacher may have an informed decision to the next learning stage or revisit. This method of scaffolding is seen throughout my school placement where the daily lesson routine is started with 'I Do'. This is where the teacher models an example of the task, then the teacher models another question but this time it is 'We Do' and finally 'You Do' where pupils will be expected to work individually without help. So, with careful scaffolding, the practitioner is able to introduce a new topic and develop fluency into the subject. It is hard to tailor individual needs as sometimes some pupils may be ahead of the activity whilst others may lag behind.

During my placement the school has a policy of a seating plan arrangement. From observation it is a boy girl arrangement. I think the power of a seating plan is underrated. The lesson observed in the critical incident showed a high level of engagement, pupils were positioned strategically so there were minimal distractions to enhance focus. The student interaction was good and with deliberation quieter or shyer students will be positioned to more outgoing or supportive classmates'

The critical incident as observed in the Immersive Room video highlighted many pedagogical strategies used such as Assessment for Learning (AFL), scaffolding, hinge questioning, Red Amber Green (RAG) collaborative work etc. In this literature review, one can link some main learning theories in a typical lesson from rewarding and praise (Positive Reinforcement), to scaffolded methods used in schools such as 'I do', 'We Do' and 'You Do' and 'Pairing and Sharing' (Collaborative Pedagogy). Thus, with this foundation of Learning Theories, it will prepare you and equip you with the theoretical knowledge in education.

Discussion

Being reflective in our teaching experience does not only provide (Thomas S. C. Farrell's metaphor) us a compass by seeing what stage we are at but also informs future steps. Good teaching (BERA 2014, p20) comes from understanding the actions performed and outlining the underlying presumptions and principle. Educators (Dewey) is concerned that practitioners are becoming prisoners to routine, driven by their own habitual thinking, and acting on impulse, custom, or authority. It is designed to imply that

educators consider their experiences, go over and analyse them in light of the evidence they can gather from their work, and then decide what steps they wish to take in response. Building on Dewey's work, Boyd, Keogh, and Walker (1985) classified reflective thought (experience, reflection, and consequence) that prioritises emotion. Pupil X is identified, seated in the front row, in front of the teacher whilst other pupils were in small-group table (Wheldall and Glynn 1989) setting. Pupil X sitting in front is closer to the board, under the eagle-eye of the teacher whereas pupils in groups in a small table clustered the room provide the opportunity and encouragement to socialise for effective learning to take place (Wheldall and Glynn, 1989).

The teacher wants to be inclusive and keeps asking "Anybody I may have left out?" Pupil X is unassertive, his hand half up. He has not contributed but wishes to participate. In terms of inclusive practice (Blackley et al, 2021) states that inclusive practice must be based on the teacher's professional judgement. Pupil X states that he is unsure of the answer, teacher reads out his work with his permission. Research has shown that pupils with low self-esteem (initially defined in 1890), (Carr, 2011) will inevitably affect a child's learning as it is 'fight or flight' situation meaning they may give up easily or not try at all. According to Crocker & Park's (2003), students that want to strive for success and avoid failure may resort to aggression to achieve their goals. In line with the Four Purposes, Rosenberg's viewpoint when considering the importance of self-esteem in education states that pupils should be able to set their own goals in lessons. This can be seen in the routine of self-assessment at the end of the lesson where pupils perform 'RAG' and note in their books goals for subsequent lesson to achieve success. However, Kristjansson (2007:260) low self-confidence is often wrongly interpreted as low self-esteem though the two may integrated into each other. It is through asking questions (Dylan Wiliam) cause pupil X to think and scaffolding (Bruner) that Pupil X derived an answer. The teacher praises (Positive reinforcement and Operant Condition) him and said "Da iawn, we got there in the end!" The routine of praise is seen as simple but powerful as awarding 'Dojo marks' which had the whole class engaged and motivated. A survey conducted on February 4, 2022, by the NAHT union has found there is an increased prevalence of mental health issues both in primary and secondary, 86% in low self-esteem, 76% in depression, 68% in sustained feelings of anger. Of secondary schools, 72% increase in self harm, 61% in suicidal thoughts, and 56% eating disorder. This is shocking, yet after post COVID-19, pupils have to pick up the trail of learning so one needs to identify and understand student's anxiety level and negative emotions that might postpone the speed of learning by establishing a supportive, scaffolding learning environment.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that fostering a sense of belonging, having an understanding and being empathetic in a classroom environment, feeling of competence, promoting engagement and self-efficacy, praise, and rewards, well

thought out seating plan are some of the ingredients at the forefront where learning and developing learning can take place harmoniously. By identifying, reflecting daily, and implementing these strategies will guide student practitioners in their teaching practice.

Conclusion and recommendation

It is recognised that teachers play a significant role in students' learning interlinking with Vygotsky's learning theory. The process of scaffolding is powerful in itself, and this could be impactful to all teachers in all classrooms. While the method is useful, it is hard to identify and categorise all students into the stages and consequently adapt their teaching as it would also be very time-consuming and unrealistic. Thus, it could be recommended to place a teacher assistant in classrooms to address those who need extra help in my future teaching practices.

In education, it is especially important for teachers to develop a good rapport with their pupils to not only communicate better but also establish a trusting relationship that can motivate and impact pupils positively. Dweck's mindset theory, where a simple praise or subtle action can greatly influence how a student thinks which I think is the most significant and impactful of all. A particular mindset can greatly alter how a student views their abilities and having a fixed mindset throughout education could lead to pessimistic views which could increase chances of giving up and thus lead to failure. This theory can be greatly used everywhere however it is valid only when using it with other approaches. It is important to consider the individual as a whole and take a more holistic approach to multiple factors that work together that affect a child's learning such as their emotional state, family upbringing, standard of education and genetic inheritance. This will be taken forward when I teach such as considering their mental wellbeing on the day and allowing for individual differences.

Practitioners would have accumulated a repertoire over time, critical incidents when enlarged, provide insights into specific facets of teaching and learning. Through developing these nuanced yet potent insights, one can eventually learn, reflect, and advance their practise. Through this case study, we have learned to "look under the hood" and discover that, despite appearances, many teaching tactics are already in place. This is something that only experienced practitioners can naturally uncover.

Critical incidents are excellent in focusing on classroom action, research and reflecting on pedagogical methods, to improve practice and professional judgement for future practices to take the next step forward in order to take this forward and to do we need

to have a continual AFL, build a tool kit of critical incidents, need to self-evaluate, self-reflect, and self-improve and through an ongoing process of professional reflection and inquiry

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Appendices

Appendix A

Date and time, year group: Monday October 10th in a Year 2 class at approximately 9:20 a.m.

Where and When: Pupils are seated behind their tables during Language Literacy and Communication lesson. The subject is inference.

What happened?

In context, the clock on the wall showed 9:30 a.m. Four pupils were sat at front row and side tables between the teacher around four pupils each and a couple of back tables. A female TA was present to the right of the teacher. I am unsure if there is a seating arrangement in place. The teacher was finishing up teaching a topic called inference where the projector showed silhouettes and shadows of daily objects and animals. He instructed the pupils to make an inference of what the object could be from the projection and write three inference guesses in their books. He went round the class encouraging pupils to participate. The pupils who had their hands up were chosen to

share their answers. They did not shout out the answers. On inspection, this seemed to be a routine in which the class had adopted when answering questions. For the final round of asking pupils, the teacher said he wanted “un, dau, tri, pedwar, pump” pupils for their answers. He circulated around the room, encouraging other pupils to participate by praising their answers with “I like it” or “Amazing effort”. He would ask questions like ‘have I missed anybody out’ and was extremely encouraging awarding a “Dojo mark” for effort. It was within this context that the incident was observed. I noticed that Pupil X sitting in the front row kept on looking down at his answers in his book whilst biting his fingernails suggesting he was unsure whether his answer was correct. Whilst other pupils' hands were shot up high in the air, he had put only half his hand up. The teacher quickly noticed his hand and approached him saying “Pupil X, I am so glad you put your hand up”. This could imply that the pupil may be quite shy and doesn't often participate as eagerly as his other classmates. The child replied, “Sir I don't really want to share but I did my third one and it is a short one.” It appeared the pupil was reluctant to give an answer as his tone was low and seemed uncertain. Nonetheless, the teacher asked if he could read it out loud, and after approval, he read, “I can infer that on the left there is a light.” The teacher then pointed at the spot of light and said, “Do you mean this light?” to which the pupil quickly answered “Yes”. The teacher then directed him towards the answer by further hinge questioning him “Why do you think there is a light there?” and Pupil X responded with “I don't really know.” With further prompt by the teacher saying, “It's not the sort of light you expect to see underground...”, the pupil replied, “Maybe the light is actually projecting a house”. The conversation ended with the teacher praising him with “Da iawn Pupil X, we got there in the end!”

Areas of possible exploration

- Why was the child initially hesitant to answer? Scared of getting it wrong? Lack of understanding? Emotional wellbeing?
- Looking into scaffolding as a technique from the teacher
- Promoting independent learning

Notes

- Students were well-behaved and seemed very engaged in the class with high levels of participation