Critical Incident Analysis Technique to Examine the Issues Faced by the Individuals with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the relevance and significance of critical incident analysis technique to examine the issues faced by the individuals with learning disabilities. For this purpose, a narrative incident experienced by a teacher for individuals with learning disability has been examined and evaluated to address the identified research aim. Based on the overall findings and the examination of the incident, it has been concluded that the core issues aggravating the social exclusion of the children with learning disabilities are the prejudices and stereotypes attached by the people with such students, which not only restricts their social freedom and independence and acceptance in the society but also prevents their personal and social growth in the society.

Keywords: learning disability, critical incident analysis

1. Introduction

According to Goffman (1959), "*During the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their activity*" (Appelrouth and Edles, pp. 208). These words highlight that the interactions between people in the social world are a manifestation of our images and impressions. In the perspective of Farrell (2013) teachers can reflect upon their pedagogy and related practices by exploring and articulating the incidents they believe to be critical to themselves or others. Discussion and contemplation of these critical incidents allow teachers to make a clearer sense of the seemingly random experiences that occur in their pedagogy because they hold real knowledge in the form of personal expertise, experience and intuitive knowledge sourced in the accumulated years of teaching in schools and classrooms (Farrell, 2013).

Critical incident analysis is applied as a method for this research because it gave access to personal experience and facilitated a deeper understanding of the personal narratives of the participants. Presenting the personal story facilitated the reflection on the issues encountered by disabled people during their transition from study to work and enabled me to empathise with their emotional experiences and reactions and thus developed a deeper association with the research problem (Tripp, 2011). As this research demands a more in-depth understanding of the social, behavioural, cultural and professional environment as encountered by the people with learning disabilities, the critical incident analysis served as a crucial technique to associate me with the research problem in a holistic manner (Cottrell, 2017). Examination of critical incidents from personal experience from the past related to working with people who have learning disabilities is aimed to explore the impact of the most influential factors affecting the transition of those individuals.

This technique also facilitated the understanding the perception of people with learning disabilities towards the factors, attitudes, and support offered by the government, supervisors, specialists, people, and their parents in aggravating their exclusion from the society. It also allowed a chance to be a part of the life of disabled people and observe the attitude of people towards persons with learning disability.

2. Narrative Reflection on Critical Incidents

In the perspective of Farrell (2013) teachers can reflect upon their pedagogy and related practices by exploring and articulating the incidents they believe to be critical to themselves or others. Discussion and contemplation of these critical incidents allow teachers to make a clearer sense of the seemingly random experiences that occur in their pedagogy because they hold real knowledge in the form of personal expertise, experience and intuitive knowledge sourced in the accumulated years of teaching in schools and classrooms (Farrell, 2013; Hernandez and Endo, 2017). It emphasises that teachers can reflect on their teaching practice and abilities by articulating their experiences to themselves or others because they have the potential to shape the knowledge, perspectives, ideas, experiences and understandings and facilitate them by guiding their work. This practice of contemplation over personal and professional experiences as a teacher can also serve to be a rich source of teacher-generated information that enables teachers to reflect on their career paths, conduct practice, their underlying assumptions and problem-solving abilities along with the beliefs and values that have ruled the practices of the past and the present (Farrell, 2013).

In addition to that, in the perspective of Farrell (2014) the incorporation of narratives for self-reflection serves as a viable alternative for the teachers that can be used as a safe and unbiased support system to share the emotional stresses and isolating experiences in the classroom and attaching a deeper introspection and analysis to it.   The literature further states that the use of such stories can allow the teachers to reflect upon their experiences and use such experiences to explore strategies that can be applied to deal with the problem experienced by the students and the teachers in respect of their pedagogy or management. The application of such reflective practice through the articulation of their stories to others or themselves can serve to be highly useful for their teaching practices because such narratives and experiences reveal perspectives, ideas, understandings, knowledge and experiences that usually guide their work (Farrell, 2014; Ramsey, 2006). Narration of stories and incidents also enable the teachers to make better sense of the random experiences from everyday teaching practices because it enables them to explore and realise the inside knowledge held by them, particularly, the experience, expertise, personal intuitive knowledge that is based on the knowledge accumulated by them for years while working as teachers. Such self-contemplative stories can form as a rich source of teacher-generated information that enables them to reflect upon the ways in which they conduct their teaching practices, the process and direction of their thinking, underlying assumptions and beliefs and problem-solving practices that have ruled their current and past teaching practices (Hernandez and Endo, 2017). According to Gremler (2004), a critical incident can be envisaged as any observable activity or experience that manifests itself as a significant personal incident and provides a key basis for analysis. It is both open-ended and constrained because of its freedom to choose critical events and agendas and requirements for training, respectively (Gremler, 2004).

In the perspective of Harrison and Lee (2011) stories and discussion regarding teaching can help in exploring relevant strategies to deal with the problems that many novice teachers encounter. It emphasises that such teacher specific experiences can be captured most effectively in the critical incident analysis. The critical incident in this respect can be any unplanned and unanticipated event that might arise during or outside the class but is remembered in detail. In this context, the literature states, '*incidents only really become critical when they are subject to this conscious reflection*' (Harrison and Lee, 2011, p. 212). It highlights that such incidents can help in uncovering a new understanding of their teaching practices.

Gremler (2004) explains introduced 50 years ago, the critical incident technique (CIT) is one of the methods used in the social sciences, focusing on human behaviour in order to collect, analyse and classify behavioural observations (Gremler, 2004). The critical incident technique (CIT) has since become very popular across a number of disciplines, allowing researchers to investigate specific incidents or events, assessing their significance with the help of qualitative interviews. One of the key features of these qualitative interviews is the ability to access interviewees' perceptions, evaluating the personal accounts in terms of cognitive and behavioural elements (Cottrell, 2017; Ramsey, 2006).   The critical incidents, in this case, are defined as the human activity, which is observable, significant and informative, enabling the observer to draw inferences. In the perspective of Cassell and Symon (2004) in practical service studies, the necessary data from critical incidents is collected in the form of narratives from respondents, followed by content analysis with the aim of identification of underlying patterns or factors affecting the phenomenon under investigation (Cassell and Symon, 2004).

Cottrell (2017) further explains with interpretivist research, relations and interactions between people create knowledge, and this assumption reflects the unique use of critical incident analysis to observe and explore further in order to obtain insights, as the researcher becomes a participant in this observation (Cottrell, 2017). The literature further explain that the nature of this technique involves the researcher and participants in the same fieldwork, assists

the researcher to collect facts or perceptions, by using some methods such as unstructured interviews or observations. For instance, when the researcher engages with participants and is a part of his/her study, he/she can draw information and observe their feelings, thoughts, and acts (Cottrell, 2017; Hernandez and Endo, 2017). Gremler (2004) highlights a number of relevant advantages of this method and states that the critical incident technique offers multiple advantages. The major advantage of this method is that it provides access to the experience and the private worlds of the researcher and provides richer data for evaluation. Another foremost and most important advantage offered by this technique is the ability to access value-rich and most relevant information through the means of respondents' words, describing their perspectives (Gremler, 2004). Tripp (2011) explains that the critical incident technique (CIT) is inductive in nature, meaning that rigid frameworks or hypotheses for development of the research process are not required. This leads to the third key advantage of CIT, offering an initial understanding of a phenomenon, in terms of event records, that can guide the future research. This makes radical contributions towards the subject matter, supporting the development of new theories or concepts (Tripp, 2011). The final advantage offered by CIT is that it is a 'culturally neutral method', which offers content-rich data in the form of verbatim stories. These stories offer an in-depth insight into personal experiences of the respondents, contributing towards a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Farrell, 2014; Ramsey, 2006).

Nevertheless, there are some limitations also associated to this method (Gremler, 2004). In this regard, Schwester (2014) opines that the critical incident analysis method is associated with issues such as potential lack of data reliability, recall bias and low response rate. Misinterpretation of the respondent accounts is likely in this technique, resulting in flawed categorisation or coding and compromising the data validity (Schwester, 2014). In addition, the inability to remember precise details of the critical incident under investigation can also affect the outcomes of this technique, resulting in the misrepresentation of the event by respondents or by the auto-ethnographer (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Lastly, the respondents may not be available or willing to offer the detailed accounts of critical incidents, which are required by this technique. This can result in a lower overall response rate, in turn, affecting the data reliability (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015; Farrell and Baecher, 2017). Nevertheless, despite these disadvantages, the merits of CIT are clear and overpower the shortcomings. Critical incident analysis thereby provides an extended review and evaluation of the experiences thereby providing an effective opportunity to contemplate and plan the teaching activities and pedagogy more successfully (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015).

The real incident for this paper has been selected on the basis of three major criteria. The first criterion specifies that the incident needs to be based on the subject of the research. Secondly, the incident needs to form the actual basis for the collection of the data with respect to the research. Thirdly, the real incident needs to present the discussion on the application of the critical incident technique in the research (Gremler, 2004). Further, in the context of this research, the incidents need to be rooted in my own lived experience, given the autobiographical context of this element of the study. In this paper, the McCabe's (2002) framework has been applied to analyse the narrative from which the critical incident was originated. The framework includes four key sections namely: orientation, complication, evaluation and the result (Farrell, 2013; Hernandez and Endo, 2017). Among these sections, orientation sections seek to answer the questions pertaining who? what? When? and where? thereby attempting to introduce the case and its key elements. The next section, titled, complication, presents an outline of the events relating to the incident and the problem that took place with the aim of highlighting the key issue. The third section, evaluations aims to present the implications of the incident on the key participants in the case thereby highlighting the ways the identified issues influence them (Schwester, 2014; Ramsey, 2006). The last section, result, outlines and explains the ways and measures that were taken to resolve the identified issues and crisis. Each of these sections has been discussed below in respect of the narrative case study (Schwester, 2014).

3. Narrative Case Study

3.1 Orientation

In this respect, I would highlight one of the most significant incidents experienced by me during my career as a teacher in primary school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The school in which I worked was required to be inclusive, and the students with learning disabilities were not taught in separate classes. As a consequence, I experienced some difficulties with social behaviour while teaching the students. Moreover, the absence of an obvious plan to increase the social skills further made it difficult for the students to develop social communication skills.

In respect of this identified issue with the students, I implemented some initiatives that were designed for the teachers of the students with disabilities. It was identified that the students were quite upset because they were not allowed to communicate with the other students who were non-disabled and that made them feel isolated and lonely

in the school. To address this problem, the teachers went to the head-teacher and explained the issue and how it could be addressed by allowing the students with the disability to spend the lunch time with the students without the disability. On its implementation, it was identified as an initiative with positive outcomes as the students with the disability felt happier and were able to make new friends with other groups, which generated confidence to communicate and socialise, among them. However, a serious setback arose when the supervisor asked me to stop the process because the parents of the non-disabled students complained about harassment from the students with learning disabilities. While receiving this information was highly disappointing, other plans to inculcate the social skills among the students were also explored. One day, one of my students said to me, '*why didn't you keep your promise*?' *You told us that we could join all the other students during their lunch time and sports activities and still we could not*', which not only sounded as a challenge to me but also made me realise and ponder over my own abilities and potential as a teacher and mentor for these students.

3.2 Complication

Secluding the students with learning disability, keeping them confined to the narrow spaces in the schools and forbidding them from being included with the other students in all the school activities was generating a strong feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration among them. With the course of time, this feeling deepened among the students, and they started believing that nobody at the school respected their wishes and needs. I often heard some of the students complaining to me and saying, '*even in our homes our families imprison us in our rooms; we feel that we are from another world*', which broke my enthusiasm of taking up the task of teaching such students with special needs. It made me feel very miserable for not being able to do anything worthwhile for these students.

3.3 Evaluation

All the while I kept reflecting upon my pedagogy and my understanding of the psychology and psyche of these students in an attempt to provide them exclusive rights and enable them to develop behavioural and social skills. Reflecting upon these events and evaluating the role of various entities associated with the schooling of these children, I realised that it was the problem of exclusion from school activities, and lack of adequate reforms and initiatives from the Ministry of Education that caused hurdles in the growth and development of the students with learning disabilities. With critical reflection on these aspects, I was compelled to visit the Ministry of Education, where I sat with the supervisor and endeavoured to explore relevant solutions that could help in improving the state of affairs for the students with disabilities studying at the school. I realised that these problems formed the larger parts of the social phenomena surrounding the students in the form of pre-school, skills, education and society.

3.4 Result

This contemplation also enabled me to discover alternatives to increase the satisfaction of the students and their social skills, so I contacted other teachers teaching students with such disability in different cities of Saudi Arabia. Although this served to be quite beneficial in enabling me to explore suitable strategies to inculcate social skills among my students, I knew the students were outraged with the school authorities for keeping them secluded from the other students. This experience thus served to be a highly significant learning experience for me which not only helped me in generating a broader understanding of the school administration and the role of Ministry of Education in facilitating the schooling of the students with disabilities but also enabled me to reflect upon my own pedagogy and understanding of the psychology and needs of such students. In this respect, I examined that the key problem, which was the absence of behavioural and social skills among the students with learning disability and was primarily the result of their exclusion from their peers in the school activities and a lack of representativeness in the school. This made me realise the importance of increasing their participation in the school activities with other students to help them overcome the feelings of isolation, inferiority and disappointment.

In addition to that, these students were also required to be prepared adequately for a smoother and more effective learning process so that they can work and socialise well with the non-disabled students. Another major lesson for me through the reflection on my teaching experience with these students was the impact it made on my consciousness. It enabled me to understand that the solution to this problem could be a combination of a range of factors including the need for full inclusion, education of the community about disabled students, development of the curriculum, teaching strategies and social skills.

Delving deeper and reflecting more critically on this problem I came across in the school also made me realise that the absence of opportunities to interact and socialise at the primary schooling level is one of the fundamental causes that hinder these students from finding suitable employment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The lack of attention and interest from the Ministry and the schools has aggravated the problem and increased the suffering of the students

because of which these students have to suffer from communication problems when they look for opportunities to work. I also discovered that given an opportunity and a stage from a primary level for the social and behavioural development of the students can be only possible through assistance and support from the parents, community and the government.

Among these, while the ministry can play the fundamental role by initiating the policies to implement the comprehensive inclusion of the students with learning disability in all school activities, the families and the community members also play a major role in shaping the behaviour and abilities of these students. It is essential that the parents of such students allow them to encourage their children with disabilities in increasing social interaction, widen their abilities to develop social and behavioural skills and adapt themselves with the society so that they find themselves an integral part of the society and economy at large.

4. Discussion

The examination of these incidents has played a highly significant role in developing my understanding regarding problems, issues, challenges experienced by people with a learning disability because of the social, political and cultural environment in Saudi Arabia, which also plays a key role encouraging their exclusion from the society. This incident highlight that such obstacles come into play in their lives in childhood, as the incident highlighted the ways in which children with a disability are kept secluded from children without a disability in the school premises and are excluded from every opportunity to develop social skills for effective communication and interaction. They begin to face social rejection and non-acceptance from the society at every level from an early age, as manifested in schools and even homes, where they are locked up in rooms (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015). Despite the hard effort made by them in studies and academic performance and attempting to fulfil their responsibilities in the best manner, they are judged by stereotypes and preconceived prejudices, which restricts them being able to enjoy their freedom to maximum potential and capability but are compelled to suffer exclusion. Sometimes they are treated with rude language, gestures, discrimination from the teachers, supervisors and school mates while at other times their skills and abilities are taken for granted without any relevant acknowledgment and gratification. However, in addition, this incident also highlights the underlying issues, which form the fundamental causes for a stark lack of opportunities given the poor understanding of the Ministry towards people with disabilities (Farrell, 2013; Hernandez and Endo, 2017).

However, in addition, this incident also highlights the underlying issues, which form the fundamental causes for a stark lack of opportunities given the poor understanding of the Ministry towards people with disabilities. Neither have they understood the problem at the school level, nor at the level of homes or in the society at large (Hernandez and Endo, 2017). They completely fail to understand and ignore the need for the development of inclusive learning opportunities at the school level, the need for well-developed training opportunities and facilities at the vocational rehabilitation centres, workplaces and communities. Instead of turning a blind eye, it would require them to take a more realist approach with more worthwhile measures to bring about an actual change in their lives. This means not only focusing on the trainers and training equipment and facilities and mandating their employment at workplaces but also making the managers and community aware about their behaviour towards them (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015).

Therefore, on the basis of the incidents examined in this chapter, the core issues suffered by the children with learning disabilities because of social exclusion can be clearly examined along with the identification of the measures that would be required as a solution to the problem.

5. Recommendation

Based on these findings, some recommendations can be proposed. These are:

- Undertake a more rigorous self observation to obtain a detailed understanding of the events occurring in the classroom and practice writing detailed descriptions to understand what happened

- Inculcate the practice of self awareness and self awareness to understand the cause of the incident and how it influenced the teaching practices and highlights a change in it

- Reflection and deep contemplation can also be promoted among the teachers to gain a more profound understanding of the issues to explore more appropriate ways for their resolution (Kumaravadivelu, 2012)

- The teachers can also be recommended to use the plus, minus and interesting strategy, while using critical incidents. This strategy implies to the clarification of good and bad aspects relating to an incident experienced by a teacher, along with the ones that are do fit within either of the categories and identify them as interesting aspects. The first strong feeling associated with an incident is primarily associated with

negative, however the reflection with this approach enables the teachers to widen their perspective and focus beyond the given settings (Mohammed, 2016).

- Another useful strategy to use critical incident analysis in educational context can be the use of dilemma identification to deal with a situation in a clearer manner. It implies that while examining the significance of an incident, the incident can be identified with numerous dilemmas, out of which at attempt is made to draw some meaning (Mohammed, 2016). Posing question along with introspection can be used as relevant tools to facilitate a clearer understanding of the ways in which a student can be made an independent thinker and learner.

6. Conclusion

Based on the overall examination and discussion of the literature and case study, it can be identified that critical incident analysis enables the researchers to draw from their own experiences to gain a detailed understanding of a particular phenomenon or cultural context. It displays multiple layers of consciousness and helps in connecting the personal to the social and cultural dimensions. This practice of contemplation over personal and professional experiences as a teacher can thus serve to be a rich source of teacher-generated information that enables teachers to reflect on their career paths, conduct practice, their underlying assumptions and problem-solving abilities along with the beliefs and values that have ruled the practices of the past and the present.

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