Beyond Private Reflection: Addressivity in Critical Incident Writing

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Abstract

"Critical incidents" (Tripp, 1993) in educational practices are not necessarily dramatic events but often small, seemingly routine moments whose significance emerges through reflection and reflexivity. When engaged with reflexive writing, these incidents can become powerful catalysts for professional growth. Aligning with the assumptions of pedagogical case writing (Biffi, 2014; Bove, 2020; Riva, 2007), this approach stresses the need to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical experience, *episteme* with *phronesis*, contextual insights with an awareness of broader and systemic issues.

By reflecting on specific moments from their professional experiences, educators can critically examine their practices while interrogating underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and professional identities. A personal example illustrates how critical incident writing fosters deeper awareness, transforming abstract or superficial understandings into more grounded and embodied professional knowledge.

Beyond private journaling, this paper highlights the transformative potential of writing with an intended audience in mind. For educators, writing deliberately for others – whether real or imagined – intensifies the "addressivity" (Bakhtin, 1986), as they anticipate responses, negotiate meaning, and position their experiences within broader professional and theoretical dialogues. This externalisation of thought is not merely a form of expression but of re-encountering one's own insights through the lens of an interlocutor. Critical incident writing can thus become both a site of critical inquiry and a means of professional development.

Keywords: critical incidents, teacher development, reflexivity, critical reflection.

First submission: 06/03/2025 accepted:10/06/2025

Educational Reflective Practices (ISSNe 2279-9605), 2/2025
Doi: 10.3280/erpoa2-2025oa20507

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Introduction

"Critical incidents" in education, as Tripp (1993) suggests, are not always the big, dramatic moments we expect. Sometimes, they are small, almost unnoticed, woven into the fabric of daily life, their true significance unfolding only as time grants us perspective. It is only when we turn our attention to these moments, when we *choose* to reflect on them, that they take on their "critical" status and become catalysts for professional reflexivity and development. Sometimes these events are subtle, sometimes more disrupting. At times, they act as "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow, 1991), challenging our perceptions and prompting us to rethink and reshape our understanding. Even when less overtly disruptive, they can still have a profound emotional impact, shaping our perspectives.

For me, one such moment arrived in a small, peripheral town in northern Italy on an autumn day in 2018. At that time, I was a university student, volunteering a few hours a week in a second-grade classroom at a local primary school. My role, as a volunteer, was to support children struggling with the Italian language, particularly those who were not native speakers. Luna[1], the main teacher, was in her early forties and had a natural warmth that made her instantly approachable. She was always impeccably dressed, her gentle smile never far from her face, creating a welcoming energy in the classroom. From the moment I met her, I had the feeling she was someone I could truly learn from.

However, as the weeks went on, a subtle discomfort began to take root in me. I began to notice a discrepancy in the way Teacher Luna interacted with her students. It wasn't overt – there were no loud accusations or obvious mistreatment – but a consistent pattern emerged: certain children, particularly those from migrant backgrounds, appeared to receive the brunt of her disciplinary attention. Luna applied stricter rules to them, reprimanding even minor distractions, while more disruptive behaviour from Italian students was handled with a noticeably lighter touch.

At first, I dismissed it, telling myself it was merely a coincidence. Luna – I reassured myself – knew exactly how to handle her class. She had built relationships with these children, and I was just an outsider with limited understanding. But, as the days passed and I observed more closely, the pattern became harder to ignore. What initially seemed like isolated incidents began to feel systematic—until, one day, it became unmistakable.

It was an ordinary day in class, marked by the usual mix of focus and distraction among the students. In the front row, a 7-year-old Pakistani girl

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twirled her pen between her fingers, lost in thought. Something about the moment caught the teacher's attention, pulling her focus toward the child.

With a chilling smile, and without concern for whether the students could overhear, the teacher looked at me and casually remarked, "This child… I would send her back to Egypt on a rubber boat!" (originally, in Italian: "Questa bambina… La farei tornare in Egitto in gommone!"). I stayed silent.

The casual cruelty of this comment was deeply unsettling. Teacher Luna, who had always appeared warm and welcoming, was making a disparaging remark about one of her students. The reference to a rubber boat evoked the perilous journeys associated with clandestine immigration, images often portrayed in the media. Such journeys symbolise extreme hardship and danger, which rendered the comment particularly dehumanising. Moreover, the girl in question was not from Egypt – she was from Pakistan, a nationality that constitutes roughly 20% of the non-Italian population in the town, according to local demographic data.[2] The teacher's conflation of entire regions and cultures revealed not only a lack of understanding but also an alarming disregard for the individuality and identities of the children in her care.

Looking back, that moment was a turning point – one of those connect-the-dots events that linger in your mind, reshaping the way you see things. It sparked a deep personal and professional reckoning.

First, there was the immediate emotional impact: a mix of disbelief, discomfort, and guilt.

Then, in seeking a closer understanding of the moment, I had to ask myself: *What exactly had happened in that classroom? How had I not seen it coming, despite the small signs I had already noticed?*

Expanding the lens further, I had to consider the significance of this incident in its wider social and institutional context. *Was this an isolated case, or did it reflect deeper, systemic issues within the school environment, the community, and the education system at large?* In other words, *to what extent the "hidden curriculum" of that classroom was reproducing social prejudices, discriminatory attitudes, subalternity and even, maybe, racism?*

I found myself confronting an even more difficult question*: Why didn't I speak up? How does silence contribute to the perpetuation of injustice? And what does ethical responsibility look like in the face of microaggressions and structural discrimination?*

I realised that what unsettled me about the incident was not just the

[2] For ethical reasons, specific demographic data and the name of the town are not disclosed.

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teacher's words but my own (non) reaction to them. Perhaps I expected that "racism" would look different, that it would belong to someone else. The charming well-dressed teacher did not fit the image I had unknowingly associated with it. The incident forced me to confront both my own assumptions and broader systemic issues, engaging not only intellectually but emotionally. It marked a shift for me – from a theoretical, abstract understanding of classroom inequities to an embodied, value-laden awareness, one that could no longer remain at the surface. In hindsight, I believe this moment played a role in shaping my own professional path, reinforcing my commitment to education and my desire to better understand and challenge the persistent inequities within schools and learning environments.

Creating Criticality: Finding Insights in Personal Experiences

Scholarship on teacher and educator professional development consistently highlights the importance of examining specific moments from educational practice – both extraordinary and routine – as catalysts for deeper understanding. Educational researchers argue that reflective and reflexive inquiries anchored in "incidents", "cases", or "pedagogical micro-cases" (Bove, 2020) serve as powerful vehicles for personal and professional growth. Pedagogical-case writing (Biffi, 2014; Bove, 2020; Riva, 2007) rests on two fundamental premises. The first is that every educational interaction holds potential for meaningful reflection and development, also aligning with Dewey's (1933) fundamental insight that meaningful reflection must remain grounded in concrete experience, creating a dynamic loop between theory and practice.

These micro-cases emerge from daily practice, selected through specific criteria including relevance, recurrence, and their ability to challenge established assumptions (Bove, 2020). The second assumption is that writing can enhance and support reflexive and reflective practices. It encourages educators to engage in "thoughtful pausing" (Bove, 2021) – moments where practitioners deliberately examine their practice and reconstruct their frames of reference in response to new experiences. Anecdotal narrative, in particular, can illuminate "praxis" and "lived-through-life" (Van Manen, 1997), offering an epistemological pathway to micro-pedagogy (Demetrio, 2020) and self-inquiry: to examine a situated interaction and analyse one's own positionality. Through combining scientific rigor with emotional sensitivity, educators can harness the

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affective dimensions of specific interactions and events to deepen their professional understanding.

Critical incident writing can be considered an approach or methodology to frame (micro-)case writing. Within this strand of theories and reflection models for educational practitioners stemming from very specific experiences, Tripp (1993) developed the idea of "critical incidents", drawing from Flanagan (1954). Critical incidents are events which for one or more reasons have special significance and can prompt a deep reflection, promoting professional development. What is critical is our approach to the event, rather than the event itself being critical, dramatic or particularly disturbing (Bolton, 2010). For this reason, these incidents can vary significantly based on the individual's social, cultural, and emotional contexts. What may serve as a critical incident for one person – a comment, an interaction, or even an observation – may pass unnoticed or hold a different significance for another. "Criticality" stems from a subjective viewpoint, intertwined with the broader fabric of an individual's personal history, emotional engagement, and situational context. As Tripp (1993) emphasised, critical incidents "are produced by the way we look at a situation" (p. 8), they stem from a judgement of significance we attach to the meaning of the incident. What makes them critical is the process of uncovering their underlying meaning, assigning significance to them, and engaging in further interpretation and analysis.

While experience is foundational to professional learning, as Dewey emphasised, not all experiences are inherently educational. From an epistemological standpoint, the identification and analysis of *critical* incidents requires deliberate intellectual engagement. The "critical" quality of an incident emerges not from the event itself, but through intentional reflective and reflexive processes that facilitate questioning, doubt, and meaning-making. This suggests that the transformative potential of critical incidents is fundamentally contingent on a practitioner's reflexivity, enabled by a pre-existing epistemic framework – an habit of examining and questioning experience. Dewey's early insights on reflective thought, which stress the active and persistent examination of one's beliefs, underscore this point: without an intentionally cultivated habit of critical reflection, some experiences may fail to engender meaningful and sustainable learning. The key, therefore, is not the event itself but the way it interacts with the individual's values and worldview, compelling them to re-evaluate their understanding and positioning.

Critical incident creation, analysis, and writing emerge as particularly valuable strategies for supporting reflexivity. This approach has been widely used in the educational field for various purposes, including the

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training and development of teachers' cultural competencies (Damini & Surian, 2012), enhancing cultural awareness (Collins & Pieterse, 2007), training inclusive practitioners (Ianes, 2020), and supporting critical reflection among prison-based educators (Salerni & Zanazzi, 2018).

Critical incidents can be so pervasive as to resonate with the idea of "disorienting dilemma", as conceptualised by Mezirow (1991). In his pedagogical theory, Mezirow identified the disorienting dilemma as the first step of perspective transformation, a paradigmatic change, "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 98). A disorienting dilemma that begins the process of transformation can result from any major challenge to an established perspective, such as an eye-opening event, discussion, book or social encounter. It often calls into question deeply held personal values, resulting in an "inner disequilibrium in which the harmony of the self is disturbed yet the problem is neither understood nor satisfactorily named" (p. 103). Changing those beliefs can be an uncomfortable process: "The whole idea of systematically searching out assumptions is often deliberately avoided for fear of where it might lead. No one likes to discover that ideas they have lived by for much of their life are distorted and invalid" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 57). A critical incident, however, is often a more specific and immediate moment, potentially less disruptive to one's overall worldview but still *emotionally* significant.

Both critical incidents and disorienting dilemmas resonate with Dewey's foundational understanding of reflection. John Dewey defined reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, p. 6). As in the Deweyan sequence of reflective thinking, critical incidents and disorienting dilemmas spark perplexity, confusion or doubt. In both these conceptualisations, the emotional engagement is crucial in catalysing a deep and critical reflection, promoting professional reflexivity.

The first step, in critical incident analysis, is to connect with the emotions tied to the selected incident, acknowledging their role in shaping our perceptions and responses. Recognising the weight of emotional experience helps clarify the significance of the event and, consequently, its "criticality".

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Writing as Inquiry: Engaging with Critical Incidents

Critical incidents in educational settings offer powerful opportunities for self-inquiry, prompting both reflection and reflexivity. A critical incident can function as a "form of storytelling" (Babione, 2015, p. 86), supporting professional development by encouraging educators to analyse their own experiences. Writing, in this context, is not merely a tool for recording reflection but an active process that *constructs* meaning, shaping how practitioners engage with their experiences and develop professional insight.

Critical incident writing is not just a specific technique, but an approach or methodology. It can be integrated into various reflective and analytical frameworks to deepen professional learning. More structured approaches guide educators through systematic analysis, helping them break down an event into its key elements, providing a scaffold to ensure that reflection moves beyond description to critical interrogation and potential transformation. Drawing from other approaches, we can also emphasise more open-ended, exploratory engagement with experience. Personal narratives, freewriting, or visual methods such as reflective photography (Clarke & Bautista, 2017) encourage a less linear, more intuitive form of meaning-making. These methods foreground the emotional and embodied dimensions of professional experience, allowing educators to surface underlying beliefs, tensions, or contradictions that structured models might overlook.

Whether through structured reflection, narrative reconstruction, or multimodal expression, critical incidents can play a formative role in professional development. Different forms of expression (i.e., text and drawing) can be combined to provide reflective opportunities that text alone may not fully capture.

According to Thompson's analysis (2022, p. 27), there are some recurring features in the most popular models of reflective practice that can be seen as key principles to support critical incident writing. Reflection:

- usually relates to an experience;
- raises awareness of events;
- provides the opportunity to view different perspectives;
- may involve acknowledging and examining feelings;
- makes senses of experiences;
- may lead to further investigation and learning;
- increases self-awareness;
- provides a basis for change;
- considers alternative actions.

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One of the defining features of reflective practice is, therefore, its close connection to lived experience – typically adopting a "micro" approach that centres on specific events or interactions. This focus on the particular is significant, as "small facts speak to large issues" (Geertz, 1973, p. 23), meaning that seemingly minor moments can illuminate broader patterns, structures, and tensions. In addition, by drawing attention to the emotional dimensions attached to experience, reflection not only fosters self-awareness but also has the potential to provoke meaningful change, as emotions serve as both catalysts for insight and bridges between personal experience and larger social dynamics. Some approaches also incorporate personal or small-group reflection based on written and oral narratives, centring on a peer-to-peer exchange (Ianes, 2020).

Reflection on critical incidents remains a necessarily retrospective and interpretative process (Mortari, 2015). It does not offer an objective or exhaustive reconstruction of experience but rather a meaning-making act shaped by selectivity, perspective, and evolving understanding. In this perspective, storytelling is not merely a descriptive device but an epistemic tool that actively shapes reflection. By constructing an incident in narrative form, the practitioner does not simply record an event but engages in an act of subjective, symbolic interpretations of our lived experiences.

Beyond Private Journals: Individual Writing as a Dialogic Practice

While immediate journal entries, spontaneous writing, and quick sketches can help educators process the emotional impact of an incident, deeper reflection requires refinement and structure. As Dewey (1933) argued, reflection is not merely a sequence of ideas but a consequence. The act of revisiting and reinterpreting key moments in professional practice fosters a heightened reflexivity, transforming initial insights into structured, meaningful contributions.

Writing for others is inherently relational, inviting dialogue and critique. While even our inner thoughts are shaped by multiple voices (Bakhtin, 1981), public writing extends this dialogic process into professional and scholarly communities, compelling the author to articulate the transferable value of their insights and to situate their personal experiences within broader frameworks. Rather than confining reflection to private journals, educators can benefit from crafting critical narratives for a broader audience. Preparing reflections for public engagement – whether in an academic article, a professional forum, or another discursive space –

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demands a heightened awareness of addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986). Writing with an audience in mind is not just an act of polishing expression; it reshapes the reflective process itself, requiring the writer to re-encounter their own experiences through a dialogic lens. As a text is reworked for external consumption, implicit assumptions are surfaced, conceptual boundaries are tested, and meanings are clarified in response to an anticipated readership. Anticipating critique and engagement sharpens reasoning, fosters self-awareness, and deepens professional understanding.

This shift from private to public discourse entails more than rhetorical clarity – it marks an epistemic shift. Translating personal, often ambiguous reflections into structured narratives demands a higher level of abstraction, synthesis, and critical engagement. Educators seek to narrate and make sense of their experiences while grappling with the complex task of holding together their own perspective on the incident and the anticipated viewpoint of the reader or listener (Ianes, 2020). In doing so, educators do not merely externalise experience but actively reconstitute it within the shared language of professional discourse. Public writing is not only an exercise in self-inquiry but an entry into a broader, collective conversation about educational practice. it can support professional agency development within an ecological framework (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015), promoting a heightened awareness of the systemic influences shaping educators' experiences. By making reflective practice an intentional and habitual process, educators can more effectively navigate these complexities, engaging with their work as both an intellectual and an ethical endeavour.

Reflecting on My Critical Incident

To illustrate how the "critical incident" mentioned above prompted me to critically examine my perception, I will reflect on how that experience forced me to confront my own prejudices. In the following subsections, I will break down the key meanings I associate with this critical incident to exemplify the use of critical incidents in fostering reflexivity. However, the central argument of this paper remains the meta-reflexive insight: the relevance of the critical incident approach in teacher training and development, which is discussed throughout.

Figure 1 visually illustrates the process of critical reflection on my personal anecdote, following the inductive approach typically used in critical incident reflection. It progresses from a contextual description to gradually expanding the implications of its inferences and reflections. The

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diagram breaks down the incident, its explanation, broader implications, and the subsequent critical reflection, highlighting the sense-making journey that made the incident "critical". It listed key insights, particularly its meta-reflexive insight which have broader implications, beyond the specific event and setting.

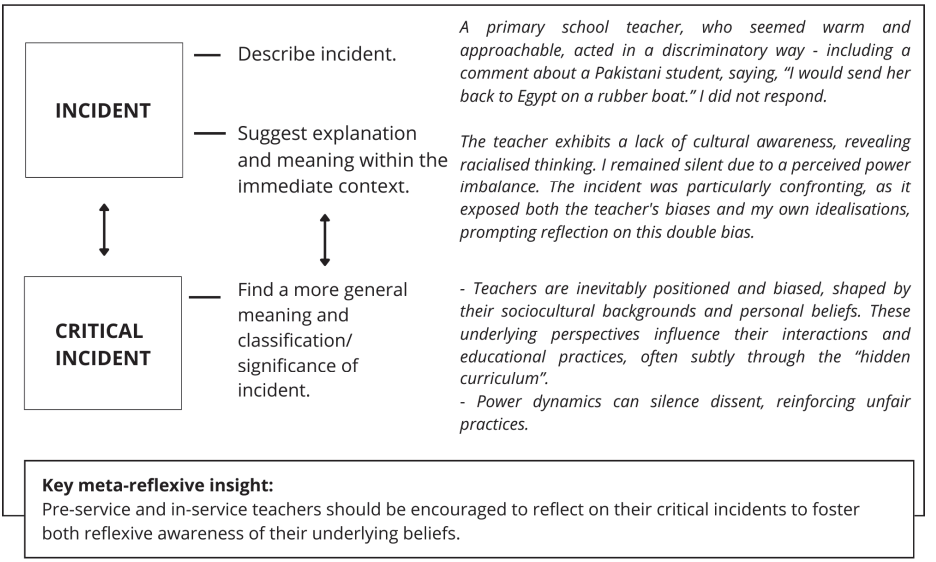


Figure 1 - Example of critical incident creation and analysis based on my anecdote

My Idealisation of Teachers

What struck me was not so much the teacher's racist comment itself – having encountered far worse throughout my life – but rather the fact that it came from a relatively young, trained teacher who, at first glance, seemed both kind and professional. At the time, I had unconsciously assumed that someone who presented as warm, friendly, and university-educated would not harbour such prejudiced views or discriminatory attitudes. The teacher's comment, as jarring as it was, offered an opportunity for deeper reflection. In this moment, I was forced to confront the gap between my expectations and the reality of the teacher's beliefs. My assumptions about the teacher, based on her outward appearance and professional demeanor, reflected a relational dynamic between us, influenced by the social context in which we both existed. In this moment, what I had interpreted as a harmless or neutral characteristic – a warm and friendly persona – became imbued with an expectation that she would embody progressive values.

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This incident provided me with an opportunity to critically examine not just the prejudices of the teacher I observed, but also my own assumptions, ideals, and response. This allowed me to "make the familiar strange" and explore the dynamics of the situation from a different perspective. This event challenged the narrative I held about teachers at the time; disclosing an idealised lens through which I was seeing her actions – an expectation that teachers, by virtue of their position, should be exemplars of equality, kindness, and professionalism. Having immersed myself in the study of Italian policies and pedagogical scholarship, I had developed an admiration for the country's progressive stance on inclusive and intercultural education, seeing educators as agents of inclusion and social justice.

This idealised image of education and its practitioners, however, was challenged in a profoundly unsettling way by the teacher's attitude and comment. Until that moment, I had unconsciously assumed that trained professionals – particularly those working in a system that outwardly values intercultural education – would naturally embody these principles. This assumption was not merely naïve; it reflected a broader tendency to equate institutional affiliation, formal training, and professional demeanour with ethical alignment and progressive values. This disorienting realisation felt like a rupture in my understanding of the profession. It highlighted the gap between the theoretical ideals promoted by policies and pedagogical discourses and the lived realities of educators' attitudes and behaviours in practice.

Moreover, this moment prompted me to consider the limitations of my own perspective as a young, university-trained volunteer. I had viewed the classroom through the lens of academic ideals, expecting the reality to mirror the scholarship I had studied. My reaction to the teacher's comment revealed my own bias: I was not only idealising school professionals but also oversimplifying the complexities of their roles, challenges, and individual limitations. In doing so, I was failing to account for the ways broader societal prejudices can influence even well-intentioned educators, despite the training and resources available to them. This confrontation with my own idealisation made me see the importance of recognising educators (including myself) not as static embodiments of policy ideals but as dynamic, situated individuals.

Caught in the Hierarchy

I was also grappling with a profound sense of guilt for not standing up in the moment. This prompted me to reflect on ethics and power dynamics. I recognised the injustice of the situation but felt paralysed, caught between

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my personal convictions and the constraints of my role. This sense of powerlessness was not simply a matter of inexperience; it reflected the structural dynamics of the classroom and my position within it. As a young, volunteer university student, I occupied a subordinate role. My presence in the classroom was predicated on the assumption that I was there to support the teacher, not to question or challenge their authority. The hierarchical nature of this relationship weighed heavily on me, shaping my actions – or lack thereof – in that moment. The teacher, as an experienced professional, was positioned as the figure of expertise and authority. By contrast, I saw myself as an outsider, a temporary presence with no formal standing or influence.

This hierarchical dynamic created a powerful sense of inhibition. I hesitated to intervene, fearing that doing so would be perceived as overstepping boundaries. Speaking out might not only disrupt the professional relationship but also undermine the implicit trust and authority vested in the teacher by the institution. In this context, my silence was not merely a product of fear but also a reflection of the unspoken norms governing the roles of volunteers and professionals in educational spaces.

At the same time, my guilt for not speaking up was compounded by a growing awareness of the moral stakes of the situation. The comment was not just a passing remark; it was emblematic of a deeper issue of prejudice and exclusion within an educational setting – a space that should, in theory, embody principles of equity and inclusion. My silence felt like complicity, even though I knew my capacity to act was constrained by the circumstances.

Reflecting on this moment, I began to question not only the power dynamics at play but also the broader implications for professional development and ethical responsibility. How do we navigate situations where our values come into conflict with our roles? What structures need to be in place to empower individuals in subordinate positions to challenge injustice effectively?

Meta-reflexive Insight: Implications for Teacher Education

This paper highlights and exemplifies the value of documenting and critically engaging with critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) as pathways to deeper understanding and meaningful change in professional practice. They can allow practitioners to spiral upward through increasingly deeper levels of understanding of their practice, context and positionality. The goal is to

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develop not just better technical skills, but a deeper capacity for ethical and critical engagement with the complexities of educational practice.

In the provided example, the encounter with Teacher Luna served to deconstruct idealised views of teachers, revealing them as situated practitioners shaped by their personal experiences, biases, and contexts. This critical incident provided an opportunity for examining the intersection of personal beliefs, professional practice, and systemic challenges. Its analysis bridged theoretical understanding of abstract concepts such as the "hidden curriculum" (Snyder, 1970) with experience-based insights, revealing how reflexive practice can transform abstract knowledge into embodied understanding.

While private writing serves as a valuable tool for capturing intimate and unfiltered reflections, writing for an audience adds other affordances: addressivity creates a "dialogical" space that invites critique, alternative viewpoints, and opportunities for collective learning. Through this process, practitioners can bridge the gap between theory and practice, connecting *episteme* (theoretical knowledge) with *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Critical incident writing can also be used in teacher education and in collaborative setting, to support reflection and discussion within groups (Mortari, 2005, p. 118).

The transformative potential of critical incidents does not emerge straightforwardly from events themselves but through practitioners' reflexivity, which can be trained. In this frame, critical incident analysis should not be understood as an episodic activity in isolation, but as a potential tool within a broader strategy, a potential gateway to developing a broader reflexive and reflective mindset.

While acknowledging that writing is not the only pathway to reflexivity, it can be considered a powerful tool for cultivating a sustained reflective and reflexive stance that becomes integral to professional practice—one that continues to operate even when formal documentation is not possible. Continuous written reflection may not be sustainable in the demanding context of daily teaching practice, but the analytical skills developed through these structured exercises can become internalised as habitual ways of thinking. The ultimate goal is not to provide occasional opportunities of insight, but fostering an enduring reflexive mindset that enhances all aspects of educational practice. For in-service teachers, in addition, reflecting on these moments can also strengthen their connection to the profession, reinvigorating their sense of purpose and engagement with their practice. By incorporating critical incident writing into teacher education – supported by both private and public writing practices – we can better

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prepare educators to navigate the complex realities of classroom life while maintaining a commitment to continuous professional and personal growth.

Acknowledgments

This article draws inspiration from a workshop for change-makers in education that I attended in November 2024. Organised by Ashoka Italia in partnership with Teach For Italy, the workshop invited participants to reflect on the transformative *Aha!* moments that have shaped their commitment to and approach toward education.

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