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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning Intentions and Success Criteria: learners' and teachers' views

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Learning Intentions and Success Criteria: learners' and teachers' views

It is generally accepted that Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies are effective in teaching and learning. Approaches within this framework include the use of formative feedback, self and peer assessment and setting and discussion of learning intentions and success criteria. There has been a great deal of research into AfL strategies, but perhaps less into the way that the use of learning intentions (LIs) and success criteria (SC) are actually perceived by teachers and their pupils. The purpose of the research described in this paper was to investigate teachers' and pupils' perceptions of AfL strategies, focusing specifically on LIs and SC within lessons. Findings showed that while both cohorts agreed on the usefulness of LIs and SCs, in practice they were rarely discussed in class. Teachers displayed a variety of understandings regarding their purpose and some learners, while appreciating their value for revision purposes, also expressed frustration at the tokenistic way in which they were implemented. The results of this study could be helpful in informing the wider education community about how learning intentions and success criteria are viewed by teachers and learners with a view to ensure understandings are consistent with research and policy through focused professional development courses.

Key words: Assessment for Learning; Learning Intentions, Success Criteria, Classroom practice.

Introduction

This paper addresses two features of Assessment for Learning which appear to have been extensively adopted in classrooms throughout the UK and increasingly in Europe: the use of learning intentions (LIs) and success criteria (SC). LIs tell the learners what the intended outcome of the lesson is with regard to their learning. SC provide examples of their expected performance as a result of the lesson, 'closing the gap' between learners' previous knowledge and their developing understanding (Glasson, 2009). While it is generally accepted that sharing and discussion of LIs and SC forms part of an effective overall AfL strategy, there appears to be little research into whether and in what way the use of these strategies are perceived by teachers and learners as helpful or otherwise. The small scale research described in this paper aimed to explore the views of teachers and learners in two secondary schools in the West of Scotland, in order to identify what both groups understood by learning intentions and success criteria and how, if at all, in their opinion, they affected what happened in the classroom. The research questions of the study, therefore, were focused on the meaning and efficacy assigned to learning intentions and success criteria by the participants:

- What are teachers' and learners' understanding of the purpose of learning intentions and success criteria?
- How useful do learners and teachers find learning intentions and success criteria?

LIs can also be described as Learning Objectives or Learning Outcomes, while some practitioners use the term Lesson Aims. While acknowledging there are differential nuances in these terms, the terminology used in this paper will be Learning Intentions, as this was the expression used in both schools in the study. Similarly, Assessment for Learning is

employed, although it is also categorised as Formative Assessment. Before discussing the role of LIs and SC, it is important to set them in the context of Assessment for Learning.

Background: Assessment for Learning (AfL)

‘Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there’ (ARG, 2002, p2-3). AfL has been defined as ‘provid[ing] information that teachers and their students can use as feedback in assessing themselves and one another ... the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs’ (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2004 p. 10). Black and Wiliam’s identification in their publication *Inside the Black Box* (1998) of the potential learning gains through the use of formative assessment strategies was a catalyst for teachers to re-evaluate an assessment system which, up till then, appeared to rely heavily on grades and ranking. A further publication, *Working Inside the Black Box* (Black & Wiliam, 2002), resulted in formative assessment practices becoming policy within classrooms throughout the UK (LTS, 2006; DCSF, 2008).

‘Learners must ultimately be responsible for their learning since no-one else can do it for them’ (Assessment Reform Group, 1999, p7). The emphasis in AfL is very much on involving pupils in their learning and providing opportunities for them to progress, through the use of open questions (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black., 2004), self and peer assessment (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006) and targeted feedback (Hodgson & Pile, 2010). Coffey et al. (2011), in their study of subject specific AfL approaches, underline the need for teachers to be able to ‘notice’ instances of learners’ thinking and exploit them to open up discussion, providing challenge and engagement. They cite Shavelson (2006) who talks about ‘teachable moments’ unexpectedly aris[ing] in the classroom” (p. 4), which the teacher can use to promote discussion, thus exploring and deepening learners’ understanding. In an AfL environment, teachers use the information provided by assessment to tailor their teaching to pupils’ individual requirements to ensure the best possible learning outcomes: ‘...pupils do not have the same abilities, nor the same needs or the same way of working, an optimal situation for one pupil will not be optimal for another ...’ (Perrenoud, 1998, p. 93-94). Perrenoud (1998) suggests that teachers should weave evaluative assessment through their lessons as part of normal classroom activities so that they are constantly reassessing and reacting to evidence of individual learners’ understanding, in an interactive and flexible manner, adapting tasks to promote learning for each pupil. Different strategies employed by teachers as part of AfL include learners’ use of ‘traffic lights’ to indicate their level of understanding, teachers’ use of higher order questioning and ‘three stars and a wish’ to highlight good work and suggest ways to improve as part of comment-only feedback, instead of merely grading a piece of work with a mark. In the AfL classroom, the learning culture reflects a socio-constructivist view of education (Vygotsky, 1978), with each child performing in his/her zone of proximal development, guided by a more knowledgeable other, who may be the teacher or a peer. Learners may contribute responses to open ended questions through the use of ‘think, pair, share’ discussion in collaborative dialogue, before

coming to a group decision about what their response will be. The Assessment Reform Group, (ARG) formed in 1996 in the UK and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, has been at the forefront of a number of important initiatives in assessment and has been instrumental in informing policy regarding AfL. They have produced a number of publications aimed at challenging teachers' and policy makers' perceptions of assessment practices and informing them of sound, creative ways of assessing pupils' work, so that the emphasis is on constantly looking ahead towards improvement in learning, rather than judging pupils' work retrospectively (2003, 2008, 2009). A large number of research studies and reports have highlighted the positive aspects of AfL (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Graham, Harris and Herbert., 2011; McDowel, Wakelin, Montgomery and King, 2011; Florez & Sammons, 2013). All have stressed the potential for, as well as detailing actual improved teaching and learning practices. It is important to mention, though, that the majority agree that there should be a synergy between assessment *for* learning, which is used in order to identify areas which can be improved, and summative assessment *of* learning, where the accent is on performance and accountability (Harlen, 2005).

In Scotland, AfL strategies are seen as integral to its curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence. AfL has been actively promoted by the Scottish Government through publications such as 'Assessment for Curriculum for Excellence: Strategic Vision, Key Principles' (Education Scotland 2009) and 'Building the Curriculum 5: A framework for Assessment' (Education Scotland 2010). Local authorities and individual schools have developed Teaching and Learning policies which encourage teachers to make use of AfL strategies and to engage learners in taking decisions about the direction of their learning. These policies also explain the importance of sharing and discussing the LIs and SC of the lesson with the learners and revisiting them at the end of the lesson to allow pupils and the teacher to reflect and assess whether the stated aims of the lesson have been met.

Bennett (2011) raises questions about whether some AfL strategies are as effective as claimed. While accepting that feedback appears to be effective in improving performance in simple tasks, he cites Kluger and De Nisi's research (1996), which indicated that the mean gains of students in the studies they reviewed were less than anticipated. He concludes that AfL is still a 'work in progress'. Shavelson (2008) concluded that there was still much work to be done to ensure that the majority of teachers become 'masterfully' proficient in its implementation. The Assessment Reform Group also warns that: 'Innovation may fail in the face of workload issues or in simply not being a convincing enough change for teachers to adopt' (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward and Stobart, 2008, p.4). Although teachers are able to identify the extent of pupils' knowledge and understanding, they may find it difficult then to adapt their teaching to meet learners' needs (Heritage and Chang 2012). Even Black and Wiliam, whose seminal study (1998) influenced attitudes towards assessment as a stimulus for learning, admitted that adopting effective AfL practices would involve teachers making 'significant changes' to their classroom practice and that improvement in pupils' learning would depend on how well teachers used assessment information to tailor their practice to fit pupils' needs (p.3).

Boyle and Charles (2010) identified a number of issues regarding teachers' understanding of AfL practices in the 43 schools they studied. A concerning feature of their study was the high proportion of teachers whose practice appeared very different from the AfL strategies they believed they were employing, particularly related to differentiation. It appears that, while apparently enthusiastically approving of AfL strategies, most teachers find them difficult to implement (Marshall & Drummond 2006,). In many schools AfL strategies could be said to be adopted in a tokenistic way, with the use of formulaic, predictable and rigid lesson plans with 'gimmicks' to assess learners' understanding and little opportunities for flexibility to address all learners' needs (Boyle & Charles, 2010). Teachers need 'substantial knowledge' to be able to take forward AfL practices meaningfully and effectively (Bennett, 2011: 20). The concerns expressed by many leading researchers about teachers' capabilities suggests that our study into their perceptions of the purpose and efficacy of LIs and SC may be timely in its contribution to current debates surrounding AfL.

Learning Intentions and Success Criteria

LIs and SCs are seen to be important features of AfL and feature in much of the research and professional literature. There is a plethora of websites and policy documents offering advice for writing effective LIs and SC. Most agree that LIs should focus on the pupils' learning during the lesson, rather than what they will be doing, and should be short, achievable and measurable. SC are linked to the LIs and tell the learners how they will recognise if they have been successful. SC can be used by the learners for self or peer assessment, promoting greater learner autonomy. Educationalists and policy makers advocate negotiation and discussion of LIs and SC with the learners, so that clarity of purpose is ensured (Stobart 2008, Hattie 2009, DfES 2007, Education Scotland 2010). Failure to do so, thus engaging in a 'procedural, ritualistic' process (Swaffield, 2009, p.4) may demonstrate a lack of understanding or will on the part of the teacher to facilitate learners' developing understanding. Didau (2015) echoes Swaffield's concerns about possible 'mechanistic' use of LIs. 'The use of learning objectives has, all too often, become a reflexive box ticking exercise with little or no thought behind it' (Didau, n.d). He also questions the effectiveness of SC: whether in fact, pupils learning in one lesson can be measured effectively by the teacher in order to adapt his/her planning for the subsequent one. Opinions have been expressed that the use of LIs and SC may inhibit creative thought and exploratory approaches to learning (Kohn, n.d) and inhibit dialogic discussion and 'students' deep engagement with the curriculum' (Hussey & Smith, 2003, p.358). This may be due to misperceptions about their purpose, possibly because their origins have links to behaviourist philosophies (Adam, 2006). It has been claimed that, 'There is no absolutely correct way of writing learning outcomes (Gosling & Moon, 2001, p.5). However, many examples of learning intentions are viewed as 'not learning intentions at all' (Dean, 2004, p.39). It appears that learning intentions are used by many teachers to convey what the lesson will be about, rather than what pupils will learn during the lesson. 'Teachers should remember that they are developing *learning* objectives, and not *teaching* objectives' (Dymoke & Harrison, 2008, p.115).

Another possible source of confusion for teachers is conflicting advice as to how to frame learning intentions. Dymoke and Harrison (2008), for example, suggest that when writing

learning intentions teachers should use expressions which relate to the cognitive domain such as ‘understand how/why’, ‘be aware of’, ‘know that’, while others advise that the use of such vague language should be replaced by measurable action verbs (NTU Centre for Professional Learning and Development, 2015). Recently, de-contextualised learning intentions, focusing on the process criteria to be learned, have been recommended as a way of enabling transfer, for example, ‘to be able to write clear instructions’ rather than limiting the learning to one particular context, ‘to be able to write instructions on how to change a bicycle tyre’ (Clarke, 2013).

Busy schoolteachers who complain increasingly of excessive workloads (Ballet & Keichtermans 2009, Brill & McCartney 2008) may experience difficulty or reluctance in taking time to read the literature on AfL in general and LI and SC formulation specifically. In view of the somewhat confused messages that appear to be transmitted concerning AfL practices, particularly concerning the efficacy of LIs and SC, it seemed desirable, therefore, to consider just what teachers and learners understood by LIs and SC and their effectiveness.

The Study

As stated earlier, this small scale exploratory study took place in two schools in the West of Scotland. Both schools could be described as ‘comprehensive’, that is, they both served a mixed demographic, which included a range of backgrounds, including owner occupier housing but with a significant number of pupils coming from social housing. Between fifteen and almost twenty percent of pupils in the schools were entitled to free school meals¹ (Scottish Government, 2015) Inspectors’ reports of both schools judged the teaching and pupils’ learning to be ‘good’. Both schools performed well in national examination results tables, with an above average percentage of pupils gaining more than 5 Higher² passes. Details of the schools can be seen in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here.

We selected the schools because we knew, as a result of previous visits as teacher educators, that both schools encouraged staff to use LIs and SC in every lesson as policy and pupils were expected to copy them into their exercise books. We approached both Headteachers, who gave approval for the study, with the proviso that learning and teaching should not be disrupted. For this reason, our initial intention to survey all staff and pupils, using questionnaires, in order to gain a clear understanding of issues and trends, had to be scaled back, as, after discussion, it was felt that gaining all the permissions necessary would be very cumbersome and place a possible extra burden on staff and pupils, in addition to the time involved in actually completing the questionnaire. We were also aware of possible ethical

¹ The free school meals data are widely used as a measure of school level deprivation (Scottish Government, 2015)

² The Higher examination is the Scottish post 16 national leaving certificate, sat after five years of study at secondary school and forms part of the qualifications for entry to university.

issues; if Headteachers directed staff to complete a questionnaire, although they had every right to refuse to take part, this may have led to tensions within the school.

We therefore decided to use semi-structured interviews with forty volunteers, 10 from the student and 10 from staff cohorts in each school. We were concerned that the interviews should be ‘a meaningful conversation’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p.301). Although we had prepared a series of questions it was essential that both teachers and pupils felt that they could develop points which appeared important to them, so that they could be confident that they had been able to construct a clear description of their view of the use of LIs and SC in the classroom. We were keen that the interviews should be ‘spontaneous, yet structured – focused within the loose parameters provided by the interviewer, who is also an active participant’ (Weinberg, 2002, p.121).

Staff were emailed about the study and asked if they were interested in taking part. Students were told of the study through the school intranet information system. From those who volunteered we selected as wide a range as possible of participants.

The Teachers

Participant teachers demonstrated a variety of experience, from newly qualified status to those with more than 30 years’ experience. Different levels of responsibility were also represented, although none of the management team was interviewed, partly because of their limited teaching responsibilities, but mostly because of their perceived alignment with school policy regarding LIs and SC. More detailed information about the teachers can be seen in Table 2.

Insert table 2 here

The teachers took part in individual interviews, either during their non-contact time or at the end of the school day. Each interview lasted no longer than 40 minutes and centred around their understanding of the purpose of LIs and SC in the classroom and how effective or not they deemed their use. Although the teacher interviews were considered very useful in providing evidence, the pupil interviews were viewed as equally helpful, since the teachers were aware of what, in theory, constituted good practice which could have perhaps influenced their responses. It was assumed that the pupils, however, would have no explicit knowledge of AfL theory and their responses, therefore, would reflect their experiences in classrooms. Thus it was intended that a balanced picture could emerge from both sets of data.

The Pupils

Pupils were divided into Broad General Education (Junior Phase) and Senior Phase³, as we wished to see if there was any difference in understanding between the two age and stage groups. Both groups took part in semi-structured group interviews of three to four pupils. Although there are advantages to group interviewing, the principal reason for interviewing

³ Broad General Education (BGE) refers to pupils in years 1-3 of the Scottish secondary curriculum, after which they enter the Senior Phase in year 4. BGE is roughly equivalent to Key Stage 3 in England.

the pupils in groups was time. It had been made clear that pupils should not miss any classes, so interviews took place during lunchtime, their 'study' period (Senior Phase) or their 'home room' period (BGE). Another reason for conducting group interviews was that it seemed likely that pupils would be more forthcoming and the talk would be more natural in a group of their peers (Lewis, 1992). Group interviews have been described as 'a group conversational encounter with a research purpose' (Lewis, 1992, p.413) and the aim was that the pupils should see the interview as a chat about classroom practices, rather than a formal interview. Nevertheless, it was also important to be alert to any negative effect of the group dynamics and take measures to avoid any suggestion of the imposition of any one person's opinions on the others in order to allow everyone's views to be heard (Frey & Fontana, 1991).

In both sets of interviews, the questions were as open and non-directive as possible to allow the teachers and learners to answer without feeling pressure to conform to any preconceived notions of what they might feel to be an 'acceptable' answer. The interviews were recorded, using an iPhone voice memo function and were transcribed as soon after the interview as possible. After each interview, field notes were also written up, noting non-verbal and para-linguistic features of participants' responses, so that as clear a picture as possible could be drawn from the data collected.

Validity, it may be argued by adherents of positivist methodology, cannot be assured in qualitative studies because the researcher is not divorced from the data collected to analyse them objectively and threats to validity are not minimised through strict controls. The interpretivist paradigm sets out, not to anonymise or take random samples, but to explore 'real world' situations (Patton 2002, p.39) with a view to providing clear description and possible explanations for what happens in those situations. It has been suggested that if there is transparency at all steps of the research process and justification for decisions is given which makes sense to and is accepted by the reader, then the study may be considered 'trustworthy' (Altheide & Johnson 1994, Hammersley 1992). Being aware of and attentive to any particular issues that might be raised in critique of the findings by practitioners in the knowledge community, that is, the field of AfL, helped us to address issues of validity in the study.

'Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis' (Patton, 1980: 306). Each researcher interrogated the data individually, also referring to the field notes, to identify key themes that appeared to be salient in each set of transcripts, before coming together to discuss and agree possible codes.

Both sets of interview data yielded interesting information, some of it contradictory, regarding perceptions of the use of LIs and SC. There seemed little difference in the data from both schools, as each group of learners and the teachers expressed their understanding of the use of LIs and SC. However, there seemed to be a difference in perspectives of the more experienced and less experienced practitioners. The findings are discussed below.

Findings

The Learners' Perspective

Learners in the junior phase all seemed to understand why LIs and SC were used and were able to provide clear definitions for both. *'What we're going to try to learn'*; *'What you should be able to do at the end of the class'* They reported some differences between class teachers – most used LIs but some didn't *'Some teachers would rather just get on with the work'*; some used SC although most did not appear to refer to them, according to the learners. There seemed very little discussion between the learners and the teachers about the LIs or SC *'It's something you write down – it doesn't really mean anything'*. However, the junior phase pupils appeared positive about the use of LIs *'I think it's a good idea – it's just not used effectively.'* *'Maybe explain it more. Teachers aren't always clear. We would understand more about what we're doing instead of just writing it down'*. The comments above indicate that the learners would have welcomed more time spent on discussion in order to make better sense of their learning. Unfortunately, it appears that teachers in both schools, endeavouring to comply with school policy, which dictated that LIs should be shared and recorded, did so as quickly as possible, perhaps in order to get on with what they perceived as the 'real' purpose of the class, their planned lesson.

Many of the Senior Phase students' comments echoed those of the younger learners; they were all able to provide clear definitions for both LIs and SC. They also stated that teachers rarely discussed them with the class: *'I've never discussed them with teachers. You just get told and that's it'*. However, the senior phase pupils demonstrated a clear understanding of how copying LIs and SCs could be useful for them, as they claimed the written record in their exercise books enabled them to focus their exam revision study. *'It keeps us all right, lets you know you're moving forward'*. *'Good to say, well I have achieved that'* *'At Higher and Advanced Higher level, the SC are your exam.'* Inevitably, Senior Phase students were very focused on national examinations. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, these students took a very instrumental view of how to prepare for them. Their comments indicate that the LIs and in particular SC which were recorded in their exercise books, were used as organisers for revision for summative assessment. This use by pupils of AfL strategies as a systematic, checklist-type support in preparation for formal assessment of their learning has been alluded to by Florez and Sammons (2013) in their review of international literature related to AfL, and might be considered a logical step, as many schools encourage the use of checklists as part of self-assessment within an AfL approach. The use of SC for revision purposes was not identified by teachers, whose responses are considered below.

The Teachers' Perspective

Although the teachers came from two schools, with a variety of experience, their responses were remarkably similar, the main differences being between the opinions of the more experienced teachers and those of their often younger, less experienced colleagues. All expressed approval of the use of LIs and SC, many citing them as helpful for planning, *'You*

can't plan a lesson without them'. More experienced teachers did not view them as a recent development, despite the fact that their schools had introduced their use as policy only in the last three years. *'I can't remember a time when we haven't used them, just under another name'*. They contrasted the less formal introductions that had formed an integral part of their lessons before and the time now taken for learners formally to note down the LIs before the class could start, although they appreciated the 'settling' effect that writing LIs in exercise books provided, particularly for younger learners. *'In junior phase, it's part of the settling routine'*. *'I can do the attendance, while they're writing them down'*. This usage of LIs was perhaps not envisaged by researchers like Black and Wiliam and the Assessment Reform Group, who advocate involving pupils in their learning through discussion of the LIs.

Almost all the teachers, apart from those qualified in the last 5 years said they were not very confident in writing LIs and SC: *'We've never been given training about how to write them. You're just supposed to implement it.'* *'We have been told to do this, and so we have to do it. I've received no formal training'* *'The school expects teachers to do it. It might be helpful to provide cpd'*. Although the pupils had seemed very clear in their definitions of what constituted LIs and SC, perhaps because of this lack of confidence and perceived lack of support, the teachers' definitions showed a number of contradictory understandings: *'For me it's just what I'll be covering that lesson, but the same LI could be used for a week'* *'The topic is the LI and the SC would mention specific skills'* *'LIs are specific to the skills; SC are more connected to the task'*. Their confusion seems to echo some of the issues arising in other studies regarding LIs and SC as part of an AfL approach (DfES 2007; Ofsted 2008, Absolum 2010) and definitions within AfL (Bennet, 2011).

The need for clear guidance for teachers regarding the implementation of AfL has been underlined, not just by researchers and theorists, such as Black and Wiliam and the ARG, but also in policy documents across the UK (DSCF 2008; Northern Ireland Curriculum Partnership Management Board 2007; HMIE 2009), to avoid the possibility that teachers will employ AfL techniques in a superficial manner (James and Pedder 2006). The teachers' comments seemed to bear out the need for more support. *'In some ways you are spoon-feeding them, rather than work out what they are learning and tell you'*. *'You feel that you can't deviate from the LI if something interesting comes up'*. The comments above, from those teachers with more than ten years' experience demonstrate a rather narrow, instrumentalist view of the purpose of LIs, which could, perhaps, be restructured with adequate training about the power of involving the learners in discussion of the LIs and setting the SC.

SC were not seen as a priority: *'If we don't fulfil the SC one day then it just gets added on the next'*. *'I don't always get back to the SC at the end. Time is always too short'*. The question of adequate time for their subject was one which arose frequently in the teachers' responses. Rather than seeing discussion of the LIs and SC as an investment in developing pupils' greater understanding in their learning, the teachers viewed them as taking up valuable time that could be spent teaching content. However, compared to classes they had taught before the introduction of LIs and SC in the schools, all the teachers remarked on a greater confidence in the learners. *'[The pupils] are definitely more confident, but we are spoon*

feeding them in a more systematic way'. Pupils' confidence may be attributed to a greater feeling of security, through having the purpose of their lessons articulated, even if this was not always discussed.

Conclusions

It was clear that both pupils and teachers were aware of the benefits of using LIs and SC. Pupils in the Senior Phase, in particular, appreciated the organisation that SC provided when revising for national examinations. Teachers stated that they were useful for planning lessons and that learners appeared more confident than before their use became mandatory in the schools. However, learners seemed frustrated by their lack of involvement through discussion of their potential learning gains as a result of the lesson and teachers expressed frustration at the time strictures that any potential discussion of the LIs and SC appeared to impose, often designating the time learners copied the LIs as a calming technique.

The variety of definitions of LIs provided by the teachers indicates that their understanding of their purpose and how to write them had not been fully deliberated. The impression was given that in each establishment it was assumed that teachers were familiar with the terminology and what it represented. Greater engagement with the literature would seem to be an obvious solution to gain a more precise understanding. However, in the light of increasing workloads (DfE 2014, Ballet & Keichtermans 2009), teachers may be reluctant to spend their free time reading relevant documents, particularly since they could articulate a definition, even if it might be considered flawed, with which they appeared satisfied. Nonetheless, all but the most recently (up to five years) qualified teachers talked of a perceived need for formal training sessions to make them more confident in the use of LIs and SC. Professional development courses could also underline the importance of discussion of the LIs and SC with the learners, in order to promote pupils' engagement in their learning, thus perhaps resolving the teachers' perceived dissatisfaction with the constraints of LIs and SC regarding time issues. A greater understanding of the role of discussion with the learners might also address the perceptive comments pupils made about the 'meaningless' nature of writing LIs, rather than being actively involved in setting and discussing them.

It seems to have been taken for granted by management teams in the participating schools that teachers' knowledge about the use of LIs and SC is sound. However, a recurring theme in the research literature is the concern that teachers may not fully understand the concepts behind the principles of AfL, thus preventing more than a superficial improvement in pupils' learning development. This study reinforces the findings from Boyle and Charles' study (2010) which found that teachers believed they were implementing AfL strategies, but in fact their understanding of the principles of AfL were poor and the strategies they used were reductionist and inhibited deep learning. Similarly, the teachers in this study believed they were complying with school policy, but were equally insecure in their understanding the principles underlying the use of LIs and SC and consequently did not employ them in an effective way. Implementing features such as LIs and SC in a tokenistic manner suggests that, despite their stated enthusiastic adoption of AfL procedures, many of the teachers did not fully understand how influential they can be for learning. Although this was a small-scale

study, with a limited number of participants, it poses questions as to whether teachers in other schools have similar perceptions about the use of LIs and SC. If this is the case, professional development courses by experts in the field could make a valuable contribution to increasing teachers' awareness of the power of LIs and SC in the classroom with the possible result that both learners and teachers become more proficient at identifying learning goals.

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Table 1: Schools' background information

	Number of pupils	Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals	Number of Staff	Percentage of pupils with more than 5 'Highers'
School 1	750	19.7	56	24
School 2	550	15.6	58	37

Table 2: Information about the teachers

School 1	Number of years' teaching experience	Level of responsibility ⁴
Teacher 1	2	Classroom teacher
Teacher 2	8	Acting Head of Faculty
Teacher 3	15	Classroom teacher
Teacher 4	Newly Qualified	Classroom teacher
Teacher 5	24	Principal Teacher of Guidance
Teacher 6	16	Head of Department
Teacher 7	3	Classroom teacher
Teacher 8	31	Acting Head of Department
Teacher 9	6	Classroom teacher
Teacher 10	22	Classroom teacher
School 2		
Teacher 1	14	Head of Department
Teacher 2	3	Classroom Teacher
Teacher 3	16	Acting Principal Teacher of Guidance
Teacher 4	12	Classroom Teacher
Teacher 5	1	Classroom Teacher
Teacher 6	6	Classroom Teacher
Teacher 7	5	Head of Department
Teacher 8	28	Head of Department
Teacher 9	15	Principal Teacher of Guidance
Teacher 10	5	Classroom Teacher

⁴ In Scotland, promoted secondary teachers may be designated Head of Department (responsibility for one subject area only) or Head of Faculty (responsibility for more than one subject area). The pastoral system designates promoted staff as Principal teachers of Guidance.