Introduction

Formative assessment (FA) has been given prominence in national education policies after it was shown to be useful for supporting students’ learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998), although its implementation (in the guise of Assessment for Learning/AfL) has emerged as complex and sometimes problematic (Torrance, 2007). Particularly where high-stakes summative assessment is linked to accountability processes, practitioners can struggle to achieve the ‘spirit’ of assessment for learning (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). Elwood (2006) also highlights that current understandings of AfL do not support practitioners’ engagement with equity issues such as social class or gender. Socio-cultural approaches to learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Engeström, 2001) may have more potential to do this, because of their greater recognition of learners’ social histories and more broadly of the social context and social nature of learning.

This paper reports on initial findings from case study research into the interaction of FA and ‘collaborative challenges’, a combination felt to be interesting from the perspective of socio-cultural learning theories (Crossouard, 2009). Challenges are part of a set of practices proposed within the ‘Critical Skills Programme’, an approach which evolved from the perception that schooling was not responding well to the complexities of the wider world (see www.criticalskills.co.uk for more details). The Critical Skills (CS) approach includes teaching pupils ‘thinking tools’ (e.g. brainstorming, how to listen and contribute effectively in group work, where it makes an active attempt at classroom ‘community-building’). It can also involve ‘challenges’, these being problem-solving tasks typically tackled by groups of learners. After setting the challenge, teachers mostly adopt an observer role, leaving the task resolution in students’ hands. Within pupil groups, the task is broken down or ‘chunked’ and the pupils may take on different roles, for example as resources manager, facilitator, timekeeper, or recorder to complete the challenge against a deadline. After the specified time has elapsed, each group presents its work to the class and the teacher for collective review, thus creating opportunities for self, peer and teacher formative assessment.

In an evaluation of assessment for learning (AFL) in the States of Jersey (Crossouard and Sebba, 2006), challenges were found to be engaging to students and provided useful opportunities for peer and teacher FA. The evaluation data on the interaction of challenges and AFL were later theorised through Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Crossouard, 2009) building upon Pryor and Crossouard
(2008). Of particular interest was how the challenge task could constitute the construction of a complex, shared object for the different groups of learners, as well as how a challenge saw teachers moving between different subject positions as task designers, observers and assessors in mediating their formative assessment during the different collaborative and plenary phases of the task. Similarly, the chunking of the task and the use of task roles seemed to create the potential to address power relations and social aspects of learning, allowing ‘meta-social’ discussions. Using the continuum elaborated by Torrance and Pryor (1998), a challenge was seen as fertile for allowing both convergent and divergent assessment, where convergent assessment addresses the successful completion of the task in hand, and whether students can do a specific thing. It relates to normative criteria with a primary concern for the relay of the curriculum. Divergent assessment involves a more open engagement with what the student can do, addressing the learner’s agenda with a more dialogic, conversational form of language.

Funding was secured from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (Grant 08-0406) to conduct in-depth research on their interaction and this paper reports on that research. Although not all aspects of the study can be reported in this text, which also represents an initial stage of the reporting, the research addressed the following questions:

- What formative assessment practices does this approach facilitate?
- How do these affect learner attainment and learner dispositions?
- What are the implications for curriculum design and assessment?
- What issues would merit further research and development?

The research was located in primary schools in Scotland. The Scottish context was of interest partly because of its approach to testing, where in contrast to the English educational system, standardised national testing is not used; pupil attainment is instead judged through teacher assessment which can be confirmed by drawing on a national test bank. This aspires to avoid assessment for accountability dominating assessment for learning. Social equity is also an acknowledged concern in Scottish contexts (Hayward, 2007; OECD, 2007). In characterizing Scottish culture, Hayward (2007) invokes the metaphor ‘ah kent yir father’, which she sees seen as discouraging pretence but also having an element that sediments social positioning, discouraging people from ‘getting above themselves’. Alongside this, Issayakan et al (2009) suggests a Scottish cultural heritage which views education as serving a ‘public’ role, ‘rooted in and defined by civil society rather than the state’ (p.3), although recognizes tensions arising from pressures from UK and wider sources for system modernization involving performance monitoring and target setting, with the wider objective of ensuring education serves the needs of the knowledge economy.

The ongoing development of a ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ (CfE) by the devolved Scottish government can be seen as an illustration of this, and adds further interest. In a reversal of many current trends in curriculum reform towards more centrally prescribed curricula, teachers’ professional autonomy in the enactment of the curriculum has been stressed in these reforms, as well as the desire to move towards a curriculum that is relevant and ‘decluttered’ of content, and to provide a ‘coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18’. Within this, pupils are to be supported in developing four broad ‘capacities’, of being successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009). The desire for a coherent and just assessment system is integral to this. The development phases have included several public consultations. From a complex insider/outside perspective of earlier policy inquiry processes, Allan (2003) suggests these have provided ‘a new productive space for policymaking which disrupts the usual forms of closure’ (p. 289); the influence of UK and OECD policies in these more fluid spaces is not to be ignored however (Issayakan et al, 2009).
In considering the emergence of CfE in light of Scottish education policy history, Cassidy (2007) stresses the strong child-centred tradition that has informed its educational policies since the mid-1950s. Within this, a running thread has been a dislike of rote learning and an emphasis instead on a child’s engagement with meaningful, experiential activities, supporting their development towards maturity along a ‘structured continuum’. In recognising the influence of Rousseau, Dewey and Piaget in these priorities, Cassidy shows how this nevertheless involves manipulating and controlling the child’s experiences so that they achieve particular objectives. Thus, although stressing the agency and interests of the child, an overarching concern of institutionalised education remains the integration of the child into society. In reviewing CfE, she finds a continued emphasis on child-centred learning, but also a strengthening of normative dimensions, noting the statement that one of the ‘prime purposes of education is to make our young people aware of the values on which Scottish society is based’ (SEED, 2004, p.11). She finds it a 'large claim' that Scottish people share the same values, and a 'yet further jump' to suggest that pupils should learn about and develop them (Cassidy, 2004, p.29). Underpinning the curriculum therefore, there remains a tension between the significance attached to the agency of the child and the normative intentions of state education which seek the production of a particular kind of citizen.

The implications for assessment in this wider curriculum are also considerable, given the policy intention to aim for a broad understanding of learning that embraces wider social aspects of the learner’s self. Hayward (2007, p.264) notes that traditional assessment has addressed only one of the CfE capacities (the successful learner) and recognition of the achievements of the others presents ‘significant challenges’. She sees the risk of this becoming overly bureaucratic (as with Records of Achievement), but more problematically of unintentionally reinforcing social class divides, given the wider opportunities afforded to children of middle-class parents. It also seems important all the same to recognise that traditional assessments of the ‘successful learner’ are not free of social class positioning, this risks perpetuates rather than creating equity issues, making reproduction of social advantage seem objective and legitimate.

Having successfully resisted standardised national assessment in the 1990s, the mood in Scotland remains largely against any extension of testing (Kirkton et al, 2007, Croxford and Cowie, 2008). A national consultation on assessment found support for minor but not major change, although unanimous support for professional development on teaching, learning and assessment (Hayward et al, 2000). Since 2002, efforts have been directed towards developing formative assessment, as Assessment is for Learning (AiFl), distinguishing between Assessment for Learning, Assessment is Learning, and Assessment of Learning, with the desire that these be seen as symbiotic and supportive of each other, rather than working in opposition. Professional development support has attempted to include policy makers, researchers, pupils and parents; Hayward (2007) suggests that this is producing ‘quite significant changes’ in assessment practice. In evaluating an early FA professional development in Scottish primary and junior schools lead by a team from King’s College, Kirton et al (2007) found the initiative to be bringing many benefits, for example supporting pupils in taking more responsibility for their learning and contributing to improved motivation, confidence and classroom achievement, especially for lower attaining pupils. At the same time, they critique AiL for not attending to sociological assessment literature, or the ways in which social class, gender and ethnicity are embedded in assessment processes; this also fell outside their evaluation brief.

The approach to professional development in the AiFl initiative has involved teacher action research as well as the aim to develop communities of practice and this is felt to be appreciated by teachers; indeed Kirton et al (2007, p. 623) depict participants as ‘active creators of policy’, in the ways they were able to work alongside researchers, academics and policy-makers. Hayward and Hedge (2005) provide a more critical account of these complex and often ‘fractured’ relationships, although all the
same see the model for developing AiFL as ‘attempting to travel a new road where policy is grown from, and for, research and practice’ (p.56).

Theoretical framework

The research also drew on socio-cultural learning theories. These see learning as going beyond knowledge construction or acquisition, and instead an ‘integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world’ (Lave and Wenger 1991:35). They see learning as a process of becoming, where the learner increasingly identifies with a particular community and learns to participate more fully in its practices. Learning is thus seen as involving processes of identity construction, rather than just the acquisition of facts. Formative assessment from this perspective becomes more complex, for example in suggesting the importance and relevance of the social and cultural environment of the classroom, as well as the social and cultural backgrounds of the learners themselves. However, in a schooling context, the notion of legitimate peripheral participation seems rather problematic given the hierarchical social positions embedded in teaching and assessment relations. Lave and Wenger do not study schooling contexts; they also pay little attention to power relations.

In contrast, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) seems more helpful in this respect, as it views community as always involving contradictions and tensions in the ongoing cultural mediation of object-oriented activities (Cole and Engeström, 1993). It uses the concept of an activity system as a unit of analysis, where this entails an ensemble of mutually-shaping elements, including subjects (i.e. human agents) who are both shaped within but also shape a community which has evolved over lengthy periods of time. Activity systems evolve with collective rules and divisions of labour, as well as their particular cultural artefacts or tools, both material and symbolic. An activity system is constructed around a shared object (it is object-oriented), although its processes involve constant contradictions and tensions, as well as multiple points of view (Engeström, 2001). Although activity systems are seen as relatively stable, the contradictions in an activity system are nevertheless seen as a possible locus of change, and ‘expansive transformations’ (Engeström 2001).

All the same, a difficulty of CHAT is its lack of a theory of language or communication, which is surprising given it sees language as the ‘tool of tools’. Activity theory is also open to post-structural understandings however (Vianna and Stetsenko, 2006). These helpfully recognise that meaning is constructed through difference, such that instead of assuming a one-to-one relation of correspondence between a signifier and what is signified, meaning-making arises through the play of oppositions or the relations of difference between signifiers within historically contingent practices that coalesce in particular discursive formations to form a regime of truth (Foucault, 1980).

This is productive for developing a more historicised and critical perspective on assessment, and on educational processes more generally. When considered sociologically, assessment emerged as a social practice associated with the needs of industrialised economies for a workforce with more developed competences along with the need to legitimate and accredit these competences (Broadfoot, 1996). However, although ostensibly providing an egalitarian means of selection, dominant cultural groups still control the social base of what is assessed, so that assessment continues to privilege particular social groups over others (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). A further implication of a poststructural understanding of assessment is the problematization of the meanings derived from assessment criteria; simply stating these do not give rise to shared understandings or transparency; their meanings will be slippery and still often implicit. This tension will also be at work across curricular frameworks which aspire to allow comparability of outcomes across different contexts. Aspects such as encouraging learners to judge themselves also become less benign, as through the learner’s acceptance of hierarchical systems of grades, targets and criteria, the normative frameworks of the more powerful become internalized as legitimate. In this way,
assessment functions not only as a means of legitimating selection, but also as a mode of social control. Finally, from poststructural perspectives, identities are not seen as ‘possessed’, or rooted in a fixed way in individual characteristics (Gee, 2001). This does not entail the ‘death’ of the subject, but rather a recognition of the historical contingencies that have shaped the emergence of a particular kind of subject, in particular the Enlightenment notion of the independent, rational actor that has been privileged in western contexts, and also within institutionalised education.

With this more poststructural slant, Activity Theory is seen as a useful resource for considering the historical production and conditions of emergence of particular practices such as schooling and assessment, as well as for considering and theorising the shifting identity positions of teachers and students when sociocultural learning theories are put to work in formal learning contexts (Pryor and Crossouard 2008; in press; Crossouard 2009), or for understanding ongoing practices of schooling.

Methodology and methods

Within this theoretical framework, the study used an in-depth case study approach. Since its origins in ethnographic research, case study has been taken up within different disciplinary traditions, making clarification of the research design important (Stark and Torrance, 2005). Here it entailed close-up longitudinal data collection that privileged depth rather than coverage, using a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods selected on a fit-for-purpose basis. The advantages of case study are particularly for allowing in-depth analysis of social processes and their location within wider structures and contexts. The particularistic nature of the research and its richness aims to draw on the power of the good example (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and to allow naturalistic generalisation by its readers (Stake 2005), as opposed to generalisation arising from sampling coverage.

In more detail, the research entailed a close-up investigation of formative assessment within challenges in two primary classrooms (P6 and P7) in two different schools. CS Ltd was requested to identify schools which were felt to integrate CS well in their teaching, and which were located in contexts of social adversity. In other words, this case selection sought instances which were felt to be particularly good in one dimension, and particularly critical in another. Publicly-available data on nine proposed schools were examined by the researcher (e.g. school reports, postcode, attendance, expulsion and free school meal data, obtained from school websites) and two schools were selected from different local authorities. These were approached for consent to research in their schools and this was granted. The head teachers of the selected schools were approached with the request that one classroom be selected for researching the formative assessment within an extended challenge and this was agreed. Criminal record clearance to work in Scottish schools was also obtained from Scottish Disclosure.

After an introductory visit to each school, each case study involved four research visits each taking nine days in total. The research design involved lesson observation coupled with a series of interviews with teachers and with pupils that allowed the researcher to develop a shared trajectory with the respondents in which texts arising from earlier visits were reviewed together in later interviews (Kvale 1996). Permission to record and transcribe interviews was requested and granted. The first visit included interviews with the head teacher, the teacher of the class and a focus group with selected pupils to explore initial perceptions of challenges and their FA potential. The second visit included observation of an extended challenge, lasting around 6.5 hours over 3 and 4 days. One group was observed with observation notes supplemented by audio recording. A video recording was made of a second group; this was also supplemented by an audio recording. A teacher interview and three pupil focus groups were conducted immediately after the challenge to gain their immediate perceptions of the challenge.
Transcripts of the audio and video observations were developed. For sections of lesser interest, transcripts involved a mix of quotations of speech and a running narrative commentary on the interactions. For sections judged to be of greater significance, they entailed a detailed transcript of the speech, with a commentary alongside this that integrated analysis of linguistic and embodied aspects of the data. Critical incidents were then identified in the transcripts and key excerpts from the video data extracted and used to stimulate reflections on the classroom interactions in a further series of interviews during Visit 3. This again involved three pupil focus groups and a teacher interview. The use of video excerpts with participants was intended to provoke additional reflection on the recorded events, not necessarily similar to those of earlier experiences or accessing any true ‘reality’ about these, but adding a further textual layer with new complexities (Lemke 2007). Extracts were identified from the transcripts to elicit commentary about the challenge processes, including such aspects as the divisions of labour between teacher and pupils, and between pupils themselves, moments that had provoked strong pupil reactions (e.g. excitement or anger), and the experience of plenary presentation, and their feedback processes. These interviews also probed how challenges had been integrated with further classroom activities. Pupil questionnaires were completed before and after the challenge, exploring perceptions of challenge processes in general, and of the particular challenge that was observed. In one case study school, a further questionnaire probed teacher perceptions of the interaction of challenges and formative assessment.

Quantitative data (e.g. statistical data on socio-demographic composition of each class, school attainment and attendance data) were requested and integrated with the final analysis. A detailed research report was shared and discussed in a fourth visit, aiming to share and interrogate the researcher’s interpretations and refine the analysis.

Case study contexts

Both schools were large primaries in areas that qualified for European Structural Funds to support economic regeneration, having been affected by the decline in heavy industries and coal mining as a source of employment. Eastbrae (EB) Primary School included pupils from areas of high deprivation, in the bottom vigintile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)\(^1\). The area fell in the ‘other urban areas’ category of the Scottish Urban Rural classification scheme\(^2\). The school was extensively involved in multi-agency support work with pupils and parents. EB HT stressed the importance of providing a safe, secure and structured environment given that pupils’ home backgrounds often did not provide this. Over 30% of pupils were entitled to free school meals (FSM) compared to a national average for 2007/8 of 16.9% (Scottish Schools Online, 2009). The school intake was affected by re-housing of vulnerable families; this did not involve pupils from ethnic minorities or pupils with EAL needs. New housing in the area was also bringing some pupils from more affluent backgrounds.

Westburn (WB) Primary’s catchment area was described as very mixed, including some very poor and some more affluent areas. It was categorised as a ‘small accessible town’ in the Urban Rural Classification. FSM entitlements were slightly lower than the national mean and the school did not benefit from additional educational funding or support. The wider community was stable, with families often living in the same area over generations. The school was almost entirely white British in its

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1. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2006 reflects current income, employment, health, education, skills and training, housing, geographic access and crime. It combines 37 indicators across these 7 domains. See http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/SIMD/BackgroundMethodology for more details.

2. This means it was situated an area with a population of 10-125,000; a ‘small accessible town’ is a town with a population of between 3-10,000 and within 30 minute drive of a settlement of over 10,000 (See Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, http://www.sns.gov.uk).
ethnic composition. Although alcohol and substance abuse within the local community, multi-agency involvement to support pupils and their families was infrequent.

The EB class which was researched was a composite Primary 6/7 with 25 pupils (15 boys and 10 girls, all of white ethnic origin, with the majority in Primary 6).\(^3\) Pupils’ attainment levels ranged from A to C. Six pupils (24%) were entitled to free school meals. Seven pupils qualified for learning support, or 28% of the class, against a national average of 4.7% (SEED, 2009). Two of the Year 7 pupils had learning support needs. Attendance rates ranged from 55-100%, with a class mean of 90%. Several pupils had exclusion histories, relating to behaviour and attendance issues. Multi-agency interventions were ongoing. The postcode data for pupils was requested and used to generate a socio-economic profile for each of the classes researched, and provides further evidence of the underprivileged socio-economic character of the research contexts. From the Scottish Neighbourhood post-code look-up facility, the mean SIMD ranking for class postcode data was under 1700. Figure 1 below gives a profile of the class by SIMD decile, showing a significant percentage in Decile 1.

The WB class was a Primary 7 with 29 pupils (18 boys and 11 girls), all of white British ethnic origin. Five pupils received learning support. Five in the class qualified for FSM (17%). Two male pupils had been excluded during the year, the more persistent of these (involving 3 exclusions of 2 or 3 days) was now receiving behavioural support from external agencies (as well as qualifying for learning support and FSM). Attendance rates ranged from 82.7% to 100% with a class mean of 95%. The class had a broad spread of attainment levels, spanning Level A to Level E; around two thirds of the class had attained Level D in at least one subject when the research commenced. Over half of the class postcode data fell within Deciles 2 and 3, with the remainder scattered across Deciles 4-9 (Figure 2). The mean SIMD ranking was around 2400.

\(\text{Figure 1: Eastbrae Class Composition by SIMD Decile}\)

\(^3\) In 2008, 51% of P4 to P7 pupils were in classes of less than 25 pupils, with 33% in classes of 25-30. 27% of Scottish primary pupils were in composite classes. The average primary class size was 23 (See [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/TrendClassSizes](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/TrendClassSizes)).
Overview of formative assessment design

In these difficult social contexts, challenges proved highly engaging to pupils, although their processes were complex, emotionally charged and reflected powerful pupil hierarchies. Teacher FA within challenges is seen as implicated in the following overlapping areas: constructing key discourses that contribute to the classroom culture, the design of the challenge and its integration into the wider curriculum, and finally the different subject positions of the teacher during their interactions when the challenge is taking place (i.e. how they took up different stances as either observers, critical commentators, or sometimes learners).

Aspects of discourse and classroom cultures

In keeping with the tradition of child-centred education described above, class cultures sought to be constructively supportive. Thus EB HT stressed the importance of providing a safe, secure and structured environment given the nature of many pupils’ home backgrounds:

*The children come to us with very limited learning and very limited capacity to learn because of the situation they live in. [...] They come into school, basic things, they’re hungry, they have lack of sleep, they’re unclean, and they’re traumatised by whatever is going on in their home and in the immediate community around them.* (EB HT)

The concept of community was stressed, so that in her class WB T would prioritise *establishing a safe community with known rules*. Teamwork and collaborative skills (*sharing, cooperating, caring*) were part of this culture. At the same time, competitive elements were also implicated in challenge work (working against a deadline, presenting as teams). WB HT felt this helpful for disengaged pupils, particularly boys (*the minute you put a competitive element in it you engage the boys*). In both classrooms, feedback practices were also shaped by the importance attached to a safe community, so that pupils were encouraged first to provide positive feedback before starting to offer more critical comments. In WB, both HT and T stressed this would be done with ‘no put-downs’; teachers
modelled giving positive feedback as in this example, which also illustrates how collaboration and teamwork were valorised:

_I thought that was absolutely super. I learned a huge amount about solar energy. The thing I particularly liked was your collaboration from the start of the challenge, right to the end when you were still all huddled round, working out what your final question would be._ (WB T)

Pupil comments in plenary sessions were also mainly positive; critical comments were confined to written texts. As shown below however, this did not mean that classroom cultures were always supportive. In both schools, the teachers had had CS training as well as in-school development on AiFIL and their assessment language drew on terminology from both. Although not using standardised testing as in England, observation and focus group data suggested that EB pupils were conscious of and sometimes anxious about their attainment levels, although talk about these did not overtly emerge during the challenge.

**Challenge and formative assessment design**

The teacher’s design of the challenge and its integration with the curriculum is considered a macro-level element of FA and one that requires considerable skill. Each challenge involved an open-ended task to be tackled jointly in groups, followed by group presentations of their work. In EB the challenge involved pupils forming a political party around campaign issues that they identified, writing a manifesto, and then presenting a one minute broadcast for their political party in media which could include art, drama or dance. In WB it involved each group developing a presentation on different forms of renewable energy using a variety of media. Both lasted around 6.5 hours, over three and four days.

Although questionnaire responses confirmed that designing challenges could be time-consuming, teachers rejected the statement that they were difficult to integrate with the curriculum. In WB, HT stressed the school policy of ensuring challenges targeted particular skills (It’s got a real solid base for why they’re doing it. They’ve got a real reason and can identify that). EB HT also stressed their integration with ongoing work, saying ‘there has to be progression and where the challenges come in those are in the daily plans’. A challenge remained a ‘structured environment, [pupils] still have a very clear role and a very clear standard of expectation within that’. Both teachers felt that designing challenges became less time-consuming with experience. Some flexibility in timetabling was helpful in allowing challenge activities to be fitted into the school day.

In both classrooms, challenges were framed by written task instructions and criteria. CS vocabulary distinguishes between product and process criteria, where product criteria address what pupils produce for their presentation, and process criteria address the social aspects of their interactions. When probed about the distinction, WB T saw them as being often implicated together and used the terms quite loosely, for example referring in a written sheet and during classroom discourse to the criteria as ‘product criteria’, although combining both product and process aspects (e.g. be informative, work well together). All the same, the distinction serves to normalise the understanding that the social aspects of learning are to be evaluated, as shown below.

Examples of EB product criteria included that their broadcast was not to last longer than one minute; the manifesto had to be a written document; issues and the reasons for choosing these issues were to be explained clearly and a persuasive argument put forward to encourage people to vote. Process aspects focused on the skill of ‘communication’, with the criterion for this being ‘when communicating be honest and specific’. The term ‘specific observable behaviours’ (abbreviated to ‘SOBS’) was used in EB classroom language, explained as ‘what will I see or hear that shows me that you are doing this’. Pupils were asked to identify SOBs for ‘honest and specific communication’ in their group. Observation and focus group data suggested uncertainty about the term itself, while criteria identified
by pupils were wide-ranging (e.g. 'always on task', 'teamwork', 'cooperation' and 'maturity'). The term was also used within WB teacher interviews, but not with pupils.

WB classroom language included WALTs and WILFs (acronyms for 'we are learning to' and 'what I'm looking for'), with WALTs being Work in teams to produce a renewable energy topic in different forms; gain knowledge of all the different forms of renewable energy and WILFs being skills of collaboration, responsibility, confidence and problem solving; make a product which will clearly explain about a type of renewable energy. In addition to learning about their own form of renewable energy, pupils' presentations are thus constructed as a source of learning for other groups. Pupils elaborated their 'product' criteria themselves in groups and in discussion with the teacher (e.g. make it eye-catching; ensure everybody is cooperating; make it unique; put in accurate information; keep the audience interested).

Overall therefore, although an open-ended task, both challenges were mapped out using a mix of CS and AfL terms, encouraging assessment of aspects that are traditionally evaluated, but also normalising assessment of relational aspects of individual and group performances, some of which seem highly diffuse and whose complexity seems to be in some tension with the notion of ‘SOBS’.

Challenge design also involved consideration of specific points for plenary FA such as ‘debriefs’ at the end of each day, and in WB in particular, use of written peer assessment sheets during and after the challenge (see below). Both teachers and head teachers felt that embedding FA in challenges maximised pupils’ learning.

Teacher subject positions

Having set up the challenge, teachers became observers of pupils’ activities, although their practices differed. EB T stood back from groups, observing, note-taking and photographing their activities. Her interventions were rare and mostly silent, inserted as written queries on post-it notes, for example prompting a group to reflect upon an aspect of their task management. In contrast, WB T moved from group to group, sitting in pupils’ midst at their tables and intervening with questions, prompts and suggestions, occasionally correcting behaviour. This is seen as involving different movements between convergent and divergent assessment, where EB T took a stance that privileged divergent assessment more strongly, leaving pupils space to elaborate the task themselves, while WB T punctuated their activities by providing groups with her convergent evaluative commentary during the challenge elaboration. These practices reflected different positions of authority therefore, ranging from one that reflected a ‘knowing’ standpoint informed by authoritative judgement, to a position that was ‘unknowing’ and reflecting a wish to know. EB T saw herself taking a position as an ‘unknowing’ enquirer, which involved some toleration of uncertainty:

you’re sitting watching them and thinking what are they doing! And I’ve gone away and observing another group and then come back, and then think mmm, now I’m beginning to see what they’re doing. You can see someone getting really animated about something, but have no idea what road they’re going down. (EB T)

This positioning defers to student agency, giving space for tasks to evolve in unpredictable ways or as EB T described it, ‘put their own twist’ on a task, although this freedom takes place within wider boundaries and expectations:

what they’ll come up with to do is maybe nothing that I’d even considered. The road I was going down was completely different, which, as long as they’ve tackled the challenge and learned what they’re supposed to learn, that doesn’t matter. (EB T)

Although WB T intervened more directly, and sometimes authoritatively, her interventions were nevertheless restrained and sought to leave space for student agency:
you’ve got to be very careful that you don’t say, ‘right you, you and you will do this’. So it’s observing, and noticing that they’re not quite on task, what can I do to help them get on task without telling them what they should do. (WB T)

At the same time, in the FA flowing from these different approaches to observation, interventions that were underpinned by rapid observation and intervention could give rise to misplaced teacher commentary. WB T recognised an instance of this however, and brought it into her feedback to the group and the class as a whole. As reported below, pupils in both classrooms saw teachers as giving them more control over their activities, and appreciated the more distant teacher positioning.

Overall, the construction of the challenge and this more distanced form of teacher surveillance seemed to succeed in making pupils responsible for the task execution. EB T repeatedly stressed pupils’ involvement in the challenge design (e.g. you made up the challenge.. you made it up more or less yourselves; Remember you were the ones that decided what we would do a challenge on and how we would do it). In interview, EB T also spoke of this:

And the responsibility for .. this is your task, and you’ve got this long to do it. How are you going to do it, what are you going to have to do .. all of that they have to plan out, and they have to take the responsibility for getting themselves from point A to point B (EB T)

The teacher’s presence and gaze remains however, and pupils in both classrooms showed awareness of this. EB T’s observation also included taking photos for later feedback in plenary session, adding a powerful dimension of surveillance, under which pupils from challenging social contexts were largely self-disciplining. The research added an additional layer of observation, of which pupils also showed awareness.

The teacher positions adopted during plenary feedback on group presentations also differed, underlining how different practices emerge in response to the same initiatives. In EB, there were many rounds of peer assessment although little verbal teacher commentary; EB T did not want to make judgements on group processes that she had not been part of, so explicitly refrained from commenting on these. Each presentation was followed by a short group consultation, then each group commented on what they had liked about the presentation. One person from the performing group also commented on what they would do differently. When all presentations were over, pupils sat in a circle and responded individually one by one to three questions about challenge processes (what surprised or delighted them about the challenge, what was the most challenging part, and what they had enjoyed most). EB T made positive comments herself in response to these questions, in which difference was valorised (I was surprised and delighted by how creative all the groups were, how different the broadcasts were in the end, and the different approaches that everybody took to it). Pupils’ comments included comments on group relations and processes (e.g. well I was surprised overall about how good we all worked together); [we were] ‘getting carried away at the beginning; the most challenging thing was practice, because everyone had their own ideas); although useful openings about the social processes of their learning, no further dialogue ensued from these.

Teacher feedback on challenge processes was provided through a ‘slide show’ from photographs she had taken during the challenge, many with captions reflecting pupil dialogue noted during her observations, often reflecting a language of facilitation or commentary on group processes (e.g. What job do you want to do; let’s brainstorm our ideas; do you need any help?; I don’t want it, that’s cheesey; Listen!), something she described as ‘trying to make a bit of a story about them’, although also validating a particular language of facilitation. Pupils were then asked in another round robin what this made them think about the challenge. Pupils again spoke of working well or working well together (e.g. I thought that a lot of the pictures said that we worked well); also their emotions (I can’t believe how stressed we were) or sometimes personal appearances (e.g. looking at the pictures I thought I had a silly look; they showed I had a big cheesy grin on my face). In one instance, EB T reprimanded a pupil for making a
joke about another’s personal appearance. Finally, pupils wrote an individual ‘reflection bubble’, answering prompts on what they had liked best, what they found hardest, and their individual next steps.

On the whole, while creating multiple opportunities for reviewing pupils’ experiences, these rounds of peer assessment involved positive comments, and although touching on aspects raised in the challenge directions (e.g. reference to creativity above), were not often explicitly related back to task instructions or criteria. Teacher judgements provided through her selection of photos was also relatively implicit; T did not comment herself when showing this. She later reported that she sometimes used photos to prompt class discussion; when commenting on a video excerpt showing strong, angry emotions in a group discussion she saw found it very useful for this (that would really get them thinking). All the same, she reported seeking to be ‘non judgemental’ in her engagement with pupils, particularly in relation to group processes in which she had not participated, making the pupils’ views more important than hers. The round robin format of plenary assessment meant that the voices of all pupils were incorporated.

In WB, T’s commentary mingled with peer assessment. After each presentation, she began by commenting on what she had liked, referring to the group’s criteria (see above), then asked for a positive comment from each group in the audience. She frequently extended pupils’ comments, often with reference to the group’s criteria. T asked various questions of the performing group, e.g. what they might do differently, had they met their criteria, had they enjoyed it. After the presentations, each pupil filled in a ‘self-assessment’ sheet which was returned to the teacher. This assessed their group’s work, inviting comments on what had been done well and might be done differently, with the final section inviting individualised peer assessment of each team member’s contribution. At later point some completed a further individual reflection sheet on what had been done well, what could be done differently. Most comments on these sheets were positive; a small minority voiced critical evaluations of peers.

During the challenge WB T also introduced two written assessment activities which were completed collectively within each group, the first involving rating their ongoing activities against their product criteria, and the second rating the performance of individual team members in their challenge ‘skills’ (two chosen from collaboration, responsibility, confidence and problem solving), using the ratings of not yet, getting there, or at strength. These were completed by pupils with little dissent; at one point a pupil used this language to evaluate their group (e.g. we’ve been working well as a team and people that were ‘getting there’ are now ‘at strength’), suggesting an internalization of this language and the assessment process.

Overall, in this FA regime the teacher takes up stronger evaluative positions, making her judgements more explicit, and relating these back to task criteria. Multiple rounds of formative assessment were constructed, although by orchestrating comments group by group, not all pupils had a voice in plenary FA. Positive rather than critical comments were again encouraged. Peer and self assessment was strongly legitimized, including critical commentary on group processes.

**Pupil responses within this assessment regime**

Overall, pupil engagement in their tasks seemed strong. Given the socio-demographic context of the school and the profile of the class, this seems valuable and even remarkable. The importance of pupils being able to put their ‘own twist’ (EB T) on a task was echoed in pupils’ comments, although often contrasted with routine classroom division of labour:

*I thought the challenge went really really well. […] in fact it was much funner because it was a challenge that we had created and it wasn’t the teacher that had decided to have this challenge. It was us that actually came up with all the criteria and everything for it. […] you*
feel much more in control of your challenge like because usually the teacher’s in control but we did really really well and we worked well as teams and it was just a brilliant challenge all round. (Kate/WB)

Most pupils (83% and 93% in EB and WB respectively) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the challenge gave us a lot of responsibility for our work’ (Appendix 3, Q17). Many pupils reported feelings of pride or satisfaction after doing their presentation, sometimes relief that it had gone well. It was clearly a powerful experience for many. The challenge also seemed to engage those who had records of misbehaviour from by their own accounts and those of others:

he didn’t disrupt anything, he worked really hard and he was eager to do something and eager to learn and it was really really good that he just come in and he was hard working and I just give that to him. (Roxie/WB)

Having a greater sense of agency in the conduct of the challenge seemed important, so that pupils' ideas could count (even if peer relations also put limits on this). Pupils often described their challenges as ‘fun’. This included an element of experimentation (you get to try out different things), even if this sometimes went wrong, as well as an element of differentiation from others (when you’re working [in normal school work] you’re just basically doing the same thing). Their interactions seemed charged with high emotions. In addition to being able to converse more freely on topics around their task (or sometimes completely outside it), the challenge sometimes seemed to allow issues of high relevance in pupils' worlds to become the central task focus e.g. when discussing their manifesto topic (which included bullying) pupils in an EB focus group spontaneously recounted stories about aggression in their wider environments and their concerns about this. In WB, illustrations of renewable energies included local examples, while the drama about wind energy was located in a local radio broadcast.

The challenge also gave freedom to work with peers (as opposed to working alone) and to interact with peers in more flexible ways, although as shown below, this still had boundaries and hierarchies. Many spoke of working as a team, which also had implications for learning, in ‘getting more help’, where for example ‘if someone doesn’t know, or if someone thinks reading’s hard and someone else is really good at it you can help each other’ (Michael/EB). Working in newly-constituted groups was reported in both case studies as contributing to some reconstruction of pupil relations:

you get to work with people that you don’t normally work well with in a challenge and it’s really good to work in a challenge, it’s really fun. [...] We don’t really play with each other outside but yesterday we got on really well with each other and I thought it was really good and was surprised about it. (Larry/EB)

In EB, the teacher formed new groups for each challenge, aiming for mixed attainment groups although wanting pupils to see these being constructed randomly. WB T set up challenge ‘home teams’ for the year, seeking to construct a stable, safe community. However pupils themselves had requested new groups for this challenge and although WB T had some reservations, many valued the opportunity to work with different people. Gender aspects were raised in this i.e. being able to have one’s opinions heard in a more balanced gender group, rather than being the only girl in a group.

Although pupils readily accepted the notion of teamwork, teamwork and its division of labour spanned a great variety of practices, only some of which seemed supportive of others’ learning. The extended nature of the collective task allowed pupil FA across a range of different dimensions. At the level of instructional discourse, peer interactions intermittently included queries about spelling, pronunciation, the meaning of different words, or serendipitous exchanges arising from task evolution, e.g. about colours produced when paint mixing, or arguments about wider social issues, such as whether one could argue in a manifesto that other schools should get less resources. Peer FA also addressed
behaviour, where pupils disciplined each other to stop inappropriate talk, or to be seen to be on task. Pupils were aware of and responded to the teacher’s presence, sometimes also drawing upon teacher power to produce disciplinary action within their group. The research and its audio and video recorders added to pupils’ self-policing. Its presence was sometimes included as part of pupils’ corrective comments e.g. other people are going to be listening to this; or Camera, camera., as a reminder when language strayed from acceptable classroom discourse.

Peer assessment was also implicated in the allocation of task roles (e.g. as materials manager, facilitator). Peer hierarchies were salient in this, with some pupils immediately recognised within their groups as having more authority than others. While there was an example of task roles being allocated randomly by drawing straws, task roles were more often decided by those with authority in the group. Questionnaire data and focus group data were slightly contradictory here, with 34% in EB and 66% in WB disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement ‘The same people always get the best roles in challenges’, although a WB pupil felt that in practice habitual pupil relations took over (say the person who’s quiet is the facilitator, somebody else who’s used to being a facilitator they’d probably end up taking over anyway); this was what happened in the group who drew straws. Focus group comments on who might do particular roles also produced strong evaluations of peers (e.g. George wouldn’t be a good facilitator, wouldn’t be a good recorder wouldn’t be a good chippie driver), again showing the importance of peer hierarchies in determining who could do what.

In WB, task roles had been slightly renamed so that instead of a facilitator, one group had a ‘team leader’; a ‘team manager’ was suggested in another, although resisted. When asked what the difference was between a facilitator and a team leader, pupils suggested bossy; telling you to do something different than you actually did; just basically commanding you about, although one also commented that pupils acting in ‘bossy’ ways might not be aware of anything problematic. This also seemed true within the wider classroom. Teacher interventions sometimes consolidated the power of particular pupils within their teams, for example through accepting a pupil’s judgement about others in their group, or directing a question to a pupil in ways that authenticated their position as group leader (Vic, does your team like that?). At another point, a male pupil who had resisted being ordered around by a female in his group was then reported for this to a teacher trainee, who immediately queried his ‘non-collaboration’, saying ‘George, are you not a member of this team?’ So some pupils were able to have their judgements circulate within teacher assessment.

Task ‘chunking’ was mostly organised so that those who were perceived as the better writers did the writing associated with a task (such as texts for a poster or a manifesto), while others attended to presentational or artistic elements. This could sometimes mean that some pupils were engaged in tasks that may not have been particularly challenging from the perspective of the privileged literacies of schooling, although potentially allowing creative (and enjoyable) engagement with other modes of expression. Questionnaire data also suggested that this was the way that tasks were allocated. So the division of labour from ‘chunking’ a task both allowed and restricted peer collaboration, in some cases ‘extending’ each other (a phrase used by a pupil about the way she interacted in a challenge) but in other cases possibly not.

Somewhat contradicting a depiction of pupils as constructively supportive of each other, pupil discourse was sometimes highly authoritative, conducted in a way that replicated ‘teacher’ talk and power relations. For example, in the EB composite P6/7 classroom, a male P7 pupil deployed an authoritative tone and manner, where he over-ruled others’ ideas (we’re not doing that), took a pencil to others ‘texts, saying well, take out all that’, or drew on the P6/7 differential to refuse a task role to another pupil (Amber, you’re only a P6). Although provoking outrage from the ‘P6’ in question, on the whole the group accepted his authority, although this was also helped by the conciliatory interventions of another female pupil in the group.
Gendered aspects of these interactions were also salient; in discussing the initial draft of the research with EB HT, she pointed out the importance of the wider community history, traditionally involving strong masculinities against which women could be ‘underdogs’. Group ‘facilitation’ was sometimes carried out using strongly authoritative language, while commentary on peers’ activities included femininity being used to deride (e.g. George stop scrunching like that, you’re scrunching like a lassie). In two of the observed groups, facilitation practices orchestrated by girls involved greater negotiation, using the language of requests and volunteering rather than direct orders. At other points, girls who had become group leaders were authoritative e.g. ordering the boys in their group to rehearse and stop clowning around, particularly when coming closer to presentation deadlines, although distinct resistance emerged at one point when a female used an imperative tone to a male pupil. In discussing these differences in pupils’ language, WB T also highlighted the importance of their family backgrounds.

Division of labour also involved gendered aspects. In two observed groups a clear division of labour emerged with girls doing ‘writing’ and ‘information’ aspects, while the boys made models, or attended to art work, creatively and enthusiastically. In commenting on a video excerpt of this, a girl facilitator portrayed this as a strategy to secure the boys’ engagement, and on the whole, despite including two male pupils who had exclusion histories, this was successful. She acknowledged that she and the other girl in the group would have enjoyed painting, but gave this up to get the group working productively. So these facilitation processes were less authoritarian and self-assertive, even entailing some abrogation of self-interest. However, despite the ambivalent nature of some of the exchanges, male rather than female pupils were singled out by their different teachers as facilitating or supporting other pupils’ learning in helpful ways, suggesting that the masculine aspects of their conduct might seem normal, with more facilitative moments attracting attention and praise, while in the case of female pupils, their facilitation could be seen as unexceptional.

Peer assessment arising within plenary presentations seemed particularly powerful. Pupils are made highly visible in plenary presentations. Some pupils reported enjoying doing presentations, including male pupils who did not normally engage with routine classroom work. Many chose this aspect to draw in the focus group activity, representing themselves at the front of the class. Some pupils’ ease performing in front of their peers came partly from music, drama or dance performance experiences in other contexts:

I really like doing presentations and I don’t really get nervous doing presentations because it’s just in front of people you’ve been in the same class with for 7 or 8 years and it’s because of being in front of big crowds (Holly/WB).

Others reported intense nervousness about presenting, where being in front of peers one had known for years intensified the power of their evaluations:

when you have to speak out in front of everybody sometimes you stutter, and you can’t pronounce a word right, and you shake […] like Daisy when she’s holding the posters, you can see her hand shaking, cos like the paper shakes (Florence/WB).

Several EB pupils used the word embarrassed to describe how they felt about presentation performances. EB observation data included pupil arguments that exemplified aspects of this. For example, an EB female pupil suggested as a manifesto slogan ‘walk to school, be cool’; a male pupil ruled this out as ‘cheesey’, objecting ‘I’m not saying that, that just sounds stupid’. This was repeated for another slogan, where another male pupil rejected ‘Walk along, with your friends, till you get to school’, saying ‘I’m not saying that, that’s cheesey’. The objection ‘I’m not saying that’ shows pupils’ awareness that they would later perform these texts before their peers; texts that were acceptable to some seemed incompatible with others’ sense of self. From one perspective, it seems valuable that pupils have space for dialogue that brings out these conflicts, although for their performances to be
acceptable both within the privileged discourses of the classroom and within wider peer cultures, some pupils are making much more accommodation than others.

Focus group data suggested that peer assessment could be more powerful than teacher assessment and that this could involve more biting criticisms than the public discourse of positive critique. In reporting how it felt to receive feedback on their presentation, some expressed fear of peers’ evaluations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Scary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olly</td>
<td>Just in case somebody has something bad to say about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>Aye, in case people are sitting whispering to the people next to them like ‘oh look at her, look at her’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olly</td>
<td>I ken… I hate that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>You can shake. When you’re at the front, you can shake.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In EB, pupils’ visibility was prolonged through having each pupil comment one by one around the room, and by providing photographic feedback, which provides a visual, embodied and public display of their conduct. Differences were visible in the extent that EB pupils were comfortable with being photographed, where some posed and smiled when they were aware of the teacher’s camera, while others shunned it, ducking or hiding behind pieces of paper. This was also apparent in response to the research video camera. When asked how they felt when the slide show was being shown, reactions again included ‘embarrassed’, and ‘stupid’, although as a mode of feedback it was also ‘better than [the teacher] shouting in our face’, as ‘you actually make decisions yourself because you decide ‘well we shouldn’t have really done that’. This seems to involve an element of public shame, which facilitates the internalization of the judgement so that the pupil becomes self-disciplining.

The data from both case studies suggest that part of the power of peer assessment for some is a fear of peer derision, where pupils are again positioned very differently in relation to each other, whether within assessment hierarchies, where lower attaining pupils are vulnerable to the evaluations of higher-attaining pupils, or within wider peer cultures, which invoked evaluations of pupils’ embodiments. WB video data showed silent but embodied derision from male pupils during a presentation and laughter from a female pupil; criticisms were overtly expressed in later focus group comments. Focus group data on EB presentation video excerpts included comments that would have been unacceptable within classroom contexts, such as remarks about pupils’ personal appearance, their hair and clothes, sometimes involving gendered aspects. In one focus group, comments on each others’ appearance provoked a bout of name-calling (e.g. that a boy peer looked like a girl, or like a monkey).

This suggests some disjuncture between official classroom discourse of teamwork and collaboration and the antagonisms of peer cultures, so that part of the fear of presenting can arise from being ‘laughed at’ by others in the class. Pupils’ backgrounds and classroom histories also seem likely to play a significant role in the extent to which they are comfortable in presenting in front of their peers. Alongside social class and gender intersections, those with higher attainment in reading will be advantaged, given that typical presentations involved reading from a script, sometimes with little involvement in its elaboration.

In both case studies, teachers and head teachers saw challenges as contributing indirectly to attainment outcomes, in their current form. Central guidance on assessment change was still awaited at the time of the research. All the same, some reservations were expressed about how assessment of the four capacities might take place. WC HT raised the difficulty of producing ‘concrete evidence’ of these aspects, and finding the process would be ‘very subjective rather than objective’. When
discussing interim reports on the research, teachers and head teachers themselves related some of the data to gendered and social class dimensions of their school contexts, although found the language that I used ‘tough going’. On the other hand, the language of specific observable behaviours does not seem to do justice to these complexities.

At the same time, both in group facilitation and in focus groups some pupils showed they were developing some useful awareness of social and power relations, as in these focus group comments:

I think the most important thing about challenges is trying to expand your patience because sometimes you’re like ‘this should be done, why isn’t this done?’ and you think other people are slower than you, you have to expand to them.. you can’t just do it. (Eleanor/EB)

It’s sometimes a bad thing but when we’re doing challenges I like to like be the decision-maker kind of thing, like I like to share my opinion really big and make it like change a lot of things and in lots of challenges I get asked about the work, when my opinion wasn’t, was just one opinion, but because I actually, like I make sure my opinion does something. (Nathan/EB)

Again however, the differences in these positions raise issues about whose agency is privileged in a challenge, even if it suggests that these pupils were thinking about such issues and had a language to talk about them. The facilitation of some observed groups also showed some social awareness and sometimes self-restraint. The focus groups’ conduct varied, but some were largely self-organising in their turn-taking; others had to be reminded that ‘they were all talking over each other’ although produced the response that they could ‘do one of those circle things’, so this is also suggestive of emerging awareness of more facilitative social organization of their talk. When discussing the draft findings, EB HT commented ‘I think quite often that what they’re learning is social. [You] get them in a position in which to be able to learn, and work with others. Social aspects are impregnated in everything we do, for them to survive. Process is the most important thing’. The social aspects of learning are often underestimated, so particularly in such difficult circumstances, this seems valuable. However, although a classroom discourse that revolves strongly around the concepts of community, collaboration and teamwork might seem positive, more ambivalently it could make it more difficult to discuss the relational life of the classroom and potentially contribute to injustices, rather than bringing in some of the conflictual relations into plenary discussion, recognising these more and exploring their complexities. This does not suppose that there will be easy answers here, but acknowledging that educators don’t always have answers can also be valuable.

Reflections
Scotland was chosen for the research location because it has tried to avoid a test-driven education system and to develop a broader curriculum that is not overloaded with ‘content’. A Curriculum for Excellence (ACfE) is ‘encapsulated in four capacities - to enable each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor’ (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009). In its Principles for Curriculum Design, LTS lists eight aspects that they see as central, these being challenge and enjoyment, breadth, progression, depth, personalisation and choice, coherence, and relevance. Teachers and head teachers felt challenge work was very appropriate for meeting the wider demands of such a curriculum. However it is also important to stress the skill of the teachers in these case studies in mediating the curriculum and designing interdisciplinary challenges that allowed pupils to develop across the broader range of curriculum outcomes that are now envisaged.

The approach to task design of a challenge is also seen as significant for attending to student agency. Pryor and Crossouard (in press) highlight the value of an open-ended task design in which students’ task elaborations are not pre-defined, so that teacher responses to task elaborations still
mediates institutional or disciplinary norms. This was also the case here, and pupils reported their strong appreciation of this. In terms of formative assessment, this task design subverts a typical teaching pattern of teacher-initiated discourse to one in which they are responding to pupils’ task-in-hand. This involves an initial convergent move i.e. the construction of an open-ended task boundaried by criteria, within which divergent assessment can take place, within the freer space for pupils to elaborate their products. As happened in WB case study, Pryor and Crossouard (2009) also see it important to ensure that the teacher engages in dialogue over the task criteria, otherwise these will remain implicit and recognisable only to those pupils with more ‘feel for the game’, in Bourdieu’s terms.

In terms of assessment, although details of how this was to be changed in CfE were still in flux at the time of the research, the study suggests how contentious assessment of highly qualitative and value-laden aspects such as ‘responsible citizen’ or ‘effective contributor’ could be. There were clear social class dimensions in what supported the ‘confident individual’ while gender dimensions are also implicated in what can be given recognition and praise for male pupils, but may simply be accepted as natural in female pupils, suggesting the complexity of assessing aspects such as ‘effective collaborator’. The study also suggests the inevitable limitations on what can be perceptible to teachers, and how misattributions might be made.

The insight of Sadler (1989) that any assessment judgement is underpinned by the qualitative judgement of experienced professionals is important for highlighting the culturally specific and interpretative nature of such judgements. As Stobart (2008, p.173) puts it, ‘we must reject the notion that it can stand outside society and make culture-free and objective judgements’. Although FA is often seen as benign, thoroughly justifiable for supporting pupils in raising their attainment and becoming self-regulating, the ‘symbolic ruler’ being constructed through formative assessment practices in the study included a readiness on the part of pupils to accept the possibility of rating their peers on dimensions such ‘collaboration’ or ‘confidence’. It was quite startling how unproblematic this seemed to be, suggesting the power of schooling to normalise surveillance and hierarchical judgement. This makes me wonder about the wider implications for society of cultivating a highly evaluative citizenry through the generalisation of such formative assessment. Ironically, it may be that sociocultural learning theories (which illuminate the wider relational aspects of learning, rather than only the cognitive dimensions) might seem to justify the overt extension of assessment towards aspects of the learner’s self which have been more implicitly implicated thus far. Hayward (2008) suggests this could perpetuate social inequalities. In this study, the reluctance of EB T to become directly involved in assessing group processes and the reservations expressed by other practitioners in the study are signs of discomfort about extending assessment. The data from the study also suggest that there are strong grounds for their discomfort.

An alternative direction to take in response to sociocultural learning theories would be to develop a more critical awareness of the cultural biases within assessment and to consider carefully what can legitimately be assessed. Such arguments have already being put forward in some circles. For example, Stobart (2008) sees it important to limit assessment ambitions, and suggests it should focus on achievement. This is not wholly satisfactory however, as what counts as ‘achievement’ remains a culturally-specific thing so this approach may just fudge the issue. In addition to developing a more critical awareness of the cultural biases within assessment within policy and academic circles, it is suggested that such issues could be discussed and acknowledged more openly within pedagogic encounters with pupils and students. This is the ‘meta-social’ discourse proposed in Pryor and Crossouard (2009), this being a critical commentary about the practices of assessment with students themselves, rather than leaving this to be understood as a neutral process. This is not intended to wish away the power of assessment; indeed in Pryor and Crossouard (2008) it seen as important that
the teacher visibly takes up the position of assessor, as well as bringing out the quality of task required through dialogue with pupils during task elaboration, so that task criteria are brought into this and judgements are made more explicit. As Pryor and Crossouard (in press) point out, the norms of an educational setting need to be brought into play or the student has nothing to engage with. Teachers are seen as having a responsibility to represent or embody these norms, and to create opportunities for pupils to engage with them.

From conversations with the teachers and head teachers in the study, it would seem useful to support practitioners through allowing them to draw upon wider theoretical resources, particularly in relation to the complexities that are evident in the group processes in this data, and ongoing critique of theories of personality type or learning styles (see Stobart, 2008). The theoretical frameworks of the research all stress the social dimensions of learning, rather than assuming this is purely an individual and primarily cognitive process. They also recognize the cultural dimensions of learning, so that both the process of learning and the judgements about learning involve situated acts of interpretation.

In contrast however, what had been proposed to practitioners in their previous professional development seemed to privilege a more individualized view of learning (e.g. Piagetian theories that stress cognitive development) or that deny the importance of interpretation and agency (e.g. as implied by the use of the term 'behaviours', as if learners' actions were not meaningful or agentive). When considered closely, the term 'behaviour' removes a key element of interpretation, which in turn removes the inherently political nature of institutionalized learning, i.e. in its objective to produce citizens of a particular kind. This is become increasingly explicit in formal educational curricula, including CfE, making space for critique and critical engagement all the more necessary. The term ‘behaviour’ also only weakly recognizes student agency. It is clear that the challenge process attends to student agency, and pupils in turn expressed appreciation of this. In several ways therefore, I see a disjuncture between the theoretical resources and discursive concepts that practitioners have been encouraged to draw upon and the processes that a collaborative challenge engenders.

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