Assessment *for* learning in the Maltese state primary classroom: The Blue Creek College case study

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Abstract: This research paper investigates how and to what extent is assessment *for* learning (A*f*L) being used and what is influencing its integration in the teaching and learning process in the Maltese state primary classroom. This study presents the teachers' viewpoints and perceptions, and provides insights into possible implications that A*f*L could have on the teaching and learning phenomenon. Data was collected through a series of one-to-one interviews and classroom observation. The research found that some A*f*L strategies such as the sharing of the learning intention, effective questioning techniques and the provision of quality feedback are generally being employed in the classroom. However, this study also revealed that crucial strategies such as the sharing of the success criteria and self-and peer-assessment were very rarely implemented. The data analysis also revealed that many teachers did not pass responsibility to the learners during the learning process. Possible implications for the development of formative assessment practices that enhance the child's learning experience and progress are finally discussed.

Keywords: assessment *for* learning, formative assessment, primary education, classroom assessment

Introduction

Assessment for learning is one of the most powerful educational tools for promoting effective teaching and learning (ARG, 2002). As a Head of Department, Primary (Assessment) within the Maltese educational sector, the researcher was interested in exploring first of all how teachers actually perceive the impact assessment *for* learning has on teaching and learning, and secondly, to what extent is assessment *for* learning (A*f*L) being used and what

is influencing its integration in the teaching and learning process in the Maltese state primary classroom.

Defining Assessment *for* Learning

Assessment and learning go hand-in-hand (Taylor, 2011) in a symbiotic relationship (Decoff, 2008). Assessment *for* learning or formative assessment is the process of identifying aspects of learning as it is developing, using whatever informal and formal processes best help that identification, primarily so that learning itself can be enhanced (Klenowski, 2009). Black & Wiliam (2003) specify that 'when assessment is formative, it shapes learning' and when assessment for learning is implemented, "information about learning is evoked and then used to modify the teaching and learning activities in which teachers and students are engaged" (p.122). A*f*L can be seen as a journey in which learners need to know where they are at present, where they are going, and how to get from one place to the other in their learning (ARG, 2002). To maximise the benefits of A*f*L, assessment data at the diagnostic level should ideally reach the teacher as early as possible in order to allow educators the opportunity to utilize the data in their decision-making and practice (Militello, Schwied & Sireci, 2010). However, there is danger here as the constant pressure on teachers to use data may drive them to use the data that is easily accessible rather than the feedback that can best serve individual students. Such potentially misfitting data can lead to pedagogically unsound practices.

A*f*L can be defined as an evaluative practice within the regular flow of teaching and learning with the purpose of informing and improving student learning to enhance learner autonomy (Willis, 2011). This is closely in tune with the definition developed at the Third International Conference on Assessment *for* Learning, that A*f*L is 'part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance on-going learning' (cited in Klenowski, 2009, p.268). The everyday evaluative procedures that were considered as A*f*L practices within this research inquiry included formal checks for understanding such as quick quizzes; questioning; peer and self-assessment; and feedback against shared success criteria (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Black and Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis of over 500 classroom assessment research studies that were conducted around the world between 1987 and 1997 found that when teachers implemented formative assessment strategies, there were considerable learning improvements of the students in these classes. This study also concluded that where pupils are given better quality support and feedback, and are encouraged and empowered to take more responsibility, they learn more effectively.

Following this research, Black et al. (2004) spent the next five years investigating the practical applications of Black & Wiliam's findings through their own research on formative assessment with groups of teachers in England. This work targeted specifically how teachers could use formative assessment to improve student achievement. Their main strategies involved refining questioning techniques, using grading to provide feedback to students, self and peer assessment, and using summative tests in formative ways (Black et al., 2004, p.11). They assert that "expectations and classroom culture can be changed … by sustained attention to and reflection on ways in which assessment can support learning" (Black et al., 2004, p.20).

However, a distinction has to be kept between formative assessment and 'routine classroom assessment'. Black et al. (2003) argued that the concept 'formative' should extend to the functions assessments serve in reinforcing learning and providing evidence by which teaching is adjusted to meet learning needs. In rather similar vein Biggs (1995), writing about the changing paradigm of educational assessment and the increasing emphasis on assessing for learning, perceived this new form of assessment as the sum of assessments that occur between summative tasks to promote student learning. Unlike assessment of learning, which can be seen as a one-off assessment exercise, A*f*L utilises an integrative approach in which assessment, learning, and instruction are paired to encourage focused and meaningful learning (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010).

Nevertheless, in spite of the brave new world that A*f*L is promising, the way forward is fraught with difficulties and a prevailing culture among teachers nurtured on summative assessment. Indeed, research in UK primary schools showed that, while formative assessment is desirable, it is not easy for teachers to implement it inside their classroom (Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Hall & Burke, 2003). This is especially true when considering that all teachers have to undertake some summative assessment practice and a healthy balance between the two contrasting practices has to be reached.

Whichever form A*f*L takes, its effective implementation requires a radical transformation in culture, in the teaching and learning process and in the curriculum. However, it is not just a question of a cultural or attitudinal change. Teachers need to be trained so that they can be equipped with the knowledge, skills and processes that the implementation of A*f*L requires. Wiliam & Thompson (2007) identify five strategies through which the process of formative assessment can be effectively carried forward. These strategies include:
- Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success;

- Constructing effective classroom discussions, questions, and tasks that elicit evidence of learning;
- Providing feedback that moves learners forward;
- Activating students as instructional resources for one another;
- Activating students as the owners of their own learning. (p.64)

These strategies suggest practical activities, which promote A*f*L that can take place in the classroom, thus making it more possible for teachers to visualize and implement A*f*L. Teachers need to have a very clear view of how A*f*L can be practised in the classroom. A*f*L is not just an attitude; it is also a series of techniques that need to be practised regularly so that teachers can build up confidence in these new strategies.

This view of A*f*L bears a striking resemblance to the ten principles developed by Cambridge University Assessment Reform Group's for formative assessment practice. The Assessment Reform Group (2002) believes that A*f*L should:

- be part of effective planning,
- focus on how pupils learn
- be central to classroom practice
- be a key professional skill
- be sensitive and constructive
- foster motivation
- promote understanding of goals and criteria
- help learners know how to improve
- develop the capacity for self-assessment
- recognise all educational achievement (p.2).

These characteristics of A*f*L place the learner at the very heart and centre of teaching and the learning process and present A*f*L as a strategy that lends itself admirably to promote learning and act as a catalyst for the development of crucial skills such as self-evaluating skills. However, no assessment in support of learning can take place if the teacher fails to establish a respectful and good working relationship with his/her students. This essential condition was articulated by Roger Higton, a science teacher and collaborator in Black et al.'s (2003) study:

> A*f*L has given me a greater insight into the interactions between myself and the students … there developed a partnership between myself and the students, based on mutual respect and trust, one where all felt comfortable with being challenged and where we could all make mistakes (p.89).

These words/phrases help to identify the climate that needs to be nurtured and the practices that need to accompany efforts to implement A*f*L inside classrooms.

The Maltese Context

The amendment to the Education Act of 2006 adopted by the Maltese educational authorities introduced devolution of authority to the school site through the introduction of the College network system. The ten colleges that form part of this system include a number of primary schools which feed students into secondary schools within the same college. The subsequent elimination of the 11+ examinations has meant that all students automatically move to the secondary school within their college, irrespective of their performance in the new benchmarking type of assessment.

In one of the latest policy documents, the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2012), assessment is identified as one of the seven key components, it is proposed that it should make an essential contribution to learning and progress at all levels. This document highlights the importance of formative assessment and suggests that:

> [I]t should be seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning process, providing students and their parents with, continuous, timely and qualitative feedback about children's progress, giving teachers information about their practice, and providing schools and colleges with information about their curriculum planning, learning and teaching (NCF, 2012, p.41).

The framework considers A*f*L as a process that should be carried out as learning is taking place. It also advocates that learners and their teachers should use the outcomes to find what learners know and are able to do in relation to learning. The NCF maintains that if learners are fully aware of what is expected of them and the success criteria against which their learning will be evaluated "they will then develop the self-evaluation skills which will help them become self-directed learners" (2012, p.42). The development of an assessment policy by the colleges and schools that addresses the quantity and quality of assessment practices as well as reporting to parents and other stakeholders is also recommended. In a nutshell, the NCF (2012) considers the cultivation of A*f*L in Maltese schools as crucial for the improvement of the quality of education and raising the level of student achievement.

In spite of this ideological shift, research in Maltese schools shows that assessment practices within the local setting are 'still very much embedded within a traditional culture of examinations and testing' (Grima & Chetcuti, 2003, p.90). Grima and Chetcuti (2003) remarked that formative assessment was understood to mean 'continuous assessment' and teachers perceived 'the

use of monthly tests and examinations *per se* as formative even when no feedback is given or only marks are recorded' (ibid., p.90). Further findings from this study showed that schools that have an assessment policy still represent a minority.

Similar results again emerged five years later with Buhagiar and Murphy's (2008) study concluded that due to the Maltese examination-oriented culture, assessment and teaching procedures still tend-to-be dominated by summative assessment. According to this study, teachers' knowledge of what their students are learning is fairly limited. Teachers' identified the preparation of students for the final examinations as their main priority. Student-centred learning was not indicated as an area of importance. This tends to be a conflicting situation for Maltese teachers (Grima & Chetcuti, 2003) since they understand that A*f*L can support the teaching and learning process but their current practices are still largely influenced by the culture of examinations and testing to go beyond summative assessment.

The reforms are still under way and so many policies and practices have been introduced. Yet, since the commissioned work undertaken by Grima and Chetcuti (2003) and the study by Buhagiar and Murphy (2008) hardly any research has been undertaken. The study that I have undertaken aims to do address this lacunae. The next section will present the methods used.

Methodology

Research Design
This educational case study (Bassey, 2002), carried out at Blue Creek College, was structured around the following research question: 'How and in what ways are teachers at Blue Creek College using assessment *for* learning in the teaching and learning process?' This study, involved collecting data through semi-structured interviews with fifteen Year 4 teachers; and a non-participant observation of a lesson with all of the fifteen teachers. The analysis of the qualitative data identified the issues that emerged and themes were elicited accordingly (Walker, 1989). This then led to the development of a coding framework according to which transcripts and notes were categorized into themes which allowed for a better analysis of the data. Patterns, links and similarities were then established between categories as well as differences among the cases.

Participants
Back in 2011, the Assessment *for* Learning Unit within the Department of Curriculum Management appointed a number of Heads of Department, Primary (Assessment), to disseminate A*f*L practices in the Maltese Primary schools. Their main role includes the delivery of demonstration lessons incorporating A*f*L, co-ordinating curriculum sessions related to pedagogical developments in A*f*L and participating in the development of a college-wide

A*f*L policy. These services offered by the A*f*L Unit are currently on a request basis. Blue Creek College was selected because the College Principal was the only principal (when the study was about to commence) that requested A*f*L support. The Principal invited the Education Officer A*f*L to meet the Heads of School during a Council of Heads meeting and to explain the role of the Unit and how it could assist the College in developing an A*f*L policy. Moreover, the fact that the researcher works in that college, made it more easily accessible.

This study was carried out in the primary schools within Blue Creek College. This College incorporates six primary schools and three secondary schools. All fifteen Year 4 teachers from five of the primary schools were selected for this study. It should be noted that the remaining primary school was not selected as it is an 'A' school and does not cater for Year 4 students. Year 4 was selected because the learners were going to experience summative assessment (Half-Yearly and Annual Examinations) for the first time.

The intent behind this study was not to draw generalizations of the entire population of teachers. This method was chosen to serve the intended purpose of exploring views and practices of classroom assessment and related leadership practices (Mertler & Charles, 2005). However, while the findings are not statistically significant and generalisable to the whole population, they provide meaningful information through rich anecdotal detail about classroom assessment and views about teaching and learning in one particular College. This could allow opportunities for reflection on practice amongst other groups of teachers and an important form of teacher development.

Data Collection
One-to-one interviews
Semi structured one-to-one interviews were held with the fifteen class teachers to enable cross-comparison between what was declared during interviews and the actual classroom situation observed. Interviews enable a researcher to question participants about their attitudes, feelings and other issues which cannot be directly observed (Burgess, 1984). Consequently, by enabling the researched to portray multiple views of a situation, the interview becomes "the main road to multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p.64). On the other hand, the researcher was conscious of the constraints that are inevitable when using a set of standardised questions in interviews as naturalness and relevance of questions and answers undermine the potential for the interviewees to be more flexible in their reponses. Another quandary is that the respondents can violate the social norms in terms of communication exchanges and thus they are able to deviate from the subject and still appear co-operative by manoeuvering the interview with voluminous irrelevancies (Berg, 2007).

Observations

Data was collected by means of non-participant observations in the interviewed teachers' classrooms. According to Becker and Geer, observation offers 'first hand reports of events and actions' and direct knowledge of matters that, from interviewing, we could know only by hearsay' (1960, p.264). During the observations, the researcher was able to deepen his understanding on the A*f*L strategies practices applied by the teacher, to what extent A*f*L was being using as a tool in the classroom and how A*f*L was being experienced by students. To ensure nothing was overlooked, an observational schedule was prepared in advance. This schedule included the evidence of the main A*f*L strategies to be observed. This helped the notes to have the same uniform structure throughout the observations for the data to ensure a large measure of objectivity.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' views and experiences of AfL in the classroom

The class teachers interviewed were asked to explain what they understood by A*f*L. All teachers showed positive reactions to the concept of A*f*L and they all had a clear idea of what it entails. This is an important issue since evidence exists that teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, and curricula influence strongly how they teach and what students learn or achieve (Pajares, 1992; Thompson, 1992; Calderhead, 1996).

> A*f*L occurs when you assess during learning and so you would know where the students are. Through the techniques you use you can gather evidence of what they have understood and where you need to take them. (Teacher 3)

> A*f*L is when [y]ou use different types of assessment during the year…. it helps you identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individual students and then act upon the evidence gathered. So A*f*L is not giving the students a test and giving the students a grade. With A*f*L you get a clear picture of where students are in their learning. (Teacher 5)

This view on A*f*L was aired by all the teachers who believe that students are the main beneficiaries of the successful implementation of A*f*L:

> A*f*L is very useful and I think that children learn better. They are experiencing learning more. (Teacher 8)
> The student is guided better through the utilization of A*f*L techniques in the classroom. (Teacher 14)

Moreover, as Teacher 10 pointed out, 'A*f*L, besides helping the students know where they stand in their learning and if they are in the right direction or not,

helps the teacher plan according to the evidence gathered during the lessons.' Black & Wiliam's (2001) study concurs with this research as all teachers acknowledged the important, beneficial role of A*f*L in the lesson planning process. Teacher 2, who employed A*f*L extensively, pointed out that A*f*L helped the teacher evaluate practice and plan according to the evidence gathered during the teaching and learning process:

> When you are preparing for a lesson, assessment helps a lot. Through the evidence gathered in the lessons I prepare different hand-outs and activities for the different abilities. Usually I prepare on three levels. A*f*L also helps me revise my teaching continuously. I always have to adapt my teaching according to the students' needs. (Teacher 2)

The use of A*f*L to inform the teaching methods and adapt them to suit students' learning styles and abilities, as affirmed by the ARG (1999), was also highlighted by several Year 4 teachers teaching at Blue Creek College: 'I revise my teaching continuously … I always have to adapt my teaching according to the students' needs.' (Teacher 4), 'If I realise that most children haven't understood a concept, I revise the teaching method I used during that lesson' (Teacher 5), 'Through A*f*L you revise your work and teaching methods.' (Teacher 9)

Convergent with Hagstrom's (2006) conclusion that it is in the differentiated classroom that effective learning takes place, Teacher 2, strongly believed that besides helping the teacher understand where students are in their learning, A*f*L, also helps the teacher to differentiate effectively in the classroom and give a structure to the lesson:

> A*f*L helps you understand where the students are in their learning. There are students who arrive at step 3, others at step 4 whilst others who arrive at step 5. A*f*L also helps you to differentiate in the classroom and it also gives a structure to your lesson (Teacher 2).

Not all the participants in the study thought that the current emphasis on the way A*f*L encourages differentiation was bearing fruit. Indeed, in a similar vein to what the head of OFSTED reported in 2013 (Wilshaw, 2013, online), Teacher 15 stated that '[i]n our classrooms we tend to cater for low-ability and average students. We have to keep in mind the high-ability students as well.' Although admitting that differentiated teaching in the classroom is "hugely difficult", Sir Wilshaw (2013, online) believes that schools have to start catering for the needs of gifted and talented children as well, as he is convinced these are not being challenged to their full potential. However, this claim is not substantiated by the findings of the NIESR research carried out by Whitburn in 2001 which indicated that average or high ability children seemed not to suffer from mixed-ability teaching and that their aptitude for more independent learning might be to a certain extent responsible for this.

The strategies being/not being utilised in the classroom

Tasks

Wiliam (2006) maintained that tasks enable the teacher to gather evidence of learners' understanding. All teachers revealed that they assigned classwork in every lesson although it was not necessarily always written. These teachers opined that in some lessons they thought that the learners' response to the oral questions asked and the discussions in small groups provided enough evidence of where the students were in their learning. However, the majority agreed that in some lessons such as during Mathematics it was impossible not to assign written classwork.

With regards to homework, most of the Year 4 teachers teaching at Blue Creek College said that it is not a reliable source to collect evidence of student learning since many parents may do the homework for their children.

> I don't think that homework is very reliable to know if the students have understood the lesson or not. I also never give creative writing to be done at home since it is generally done by the parents (Teacher 8).

This is major concern in the Maltese educational system since many parents need more training on parental involvement '… in their child's education [as this] has been shown to have a significant impact on the child's future success.' (Calleja & Portelli, 2012, online)

It also has to be said that even though most teachers believed that homework was not a reliable evidence-gathering source this did not stop them setting three homeworks on average every day.

Tests

The use of summative tests was also identified by all teachers as a source of collection of evidence of student learning. Most Year 4 teachers declared that they tested the students once every term. Most teachers' responses showed that for them tests are important because they motivate them to study. Using tests to identify students' strengths and areas for improvement came a distant second in their list of priorities. A typical response was the following: 'If we don't give test students will not study. This is part of the Maltese culture and it cannot be changed overnight.' (Teacher 3)

However, others teachers, albeit a minority, claimed they tried to strike a balance between summative and formative assessment by implementing summative assessment formatively: 'I also make it a point that there is a balance between summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment is there but I use it formatively.' (Teacher 5)

This practice is congruent with teachers' reports of effective strategies proposed and implemented by teachers reported in Black *et al.*'s (2003) study:

"[F]ormative assessment has to work alongside summative assessment" (2003, p.53).

Teacher 12 was the only teacher who dismissed the use of summative assessment *per se* as pedagogically unsound as he thought that the rationale underpinning a test is that of providing the insights into the students' strong points and areas for improvement:

> I'm totally against giving a mark on its own to students. Students have the right to know what the mark means. After a test or an exam I give the paper to the students and we discuss it in class (Teacher 12).

Understanding where the learners stand in their learning

Gathering evidence of the level of learners' understanding is the most common strategy used by most teachers taking part in this study. The following transcript reveals clearly the implementation of this strategy:

> The teacher started the 'opposites' lesson by writing two sentences on the whiteboard *Tony is at the front/Peter is at the back, The hyena is thin/ The pig is fat*. Students had to try to guess what the lesson was about. The teacher was gathering evidence of what students know about opposites (Field notes, 8/11/12, 10.45-11.30/ Teacher 5).

> The teacher started the lesson by showing the students a YouTube video about adjectives. During this activity the teacher used the think, pair, share technique where students had to think, then discuss what they have seen in this video and then share with whole class. The teacher went round the classroom while the students were discussing in pairs so as to gather evidence what the students know about adjectives (Field notes, 5/12/12, 11.00-11.45am/Teacher 9).

This strategy is particularly effective during the demonstration lessons that I deliver. All the information that I collect during the first two-minute activity before starting a lesson through observation and good listening will enhance the opportunity to understand the needs of the learner and where learning needs to take place. This strategy informs me about what the individual learners already know and what misconceptions they have vis-a-vis the new concept that I will be teaching. This strategy exposes the changes I need to affect to my plan to cater for the individual needs revealed by the learners in the class.

Clear and shared learning intention

All the teachers in this study claimed that they shared the learning intention with the students at the beginning of the lesson. However, not all teachers had clear ideas about the articulation of the learning intention.

> After writing two sentences on the whiteboard – a normal sentence
> and one in the negative – the teacher gathered evidence of what
> students know about negatives, the teacher shared the learning
> intention with the students: ' We are learning to understand what
> negatives are and then at the end we shall write some sentences
> using the negative. (Fieldnotes, 12/11/12, 11.45 – 12.30 / Teacher 1)

James et al. (2007) found that the way the learning intention is articulated
makes a difference to the quality of learning and teaching, insisting that the
intention should be kept simple so that "students are clear of what's expected
of them during the lesson and that they can evaluate it and reflect on it at the
end" (p.123). It was evident from teachers' responses that some did not feel
that they had to write it down but chose to articulate it orally. This runs
counter to Clarke's (2001) insistence that it is fundamental to display the
learning intention where all pupils can see so that both the teacher and
learners remain focused throughout the whole lesson. As a practitioner in the
field, I can corroborate Clarke's assertion. When learners are exposed to the
learning intention of the lesson and are continually reminded of what they
are supposed to be learning, then both the learners and myself are extremely
focused throughout the lesson.

Clear and shared success criteria
Clear success criteria agreed upon by teachers and learners help the latter to
focus more on task as they provide clear feedback about the learning
outcomes (Sangster and Overall, 2006). The undoubted benefits of clear
success criteria were acknowledged by all the teachers participating in this
study, except Teacher 11 who was strongly opposed to their use. These
teachers looked forward to attending the Curriculum Development sessions
and following the demonstration lessons presented by the Head of
Department, Primary (Assessment). They recognised the effectiveness of the
success criteria but felt that they lacked the necessary training and practice to
be sufficiently confident to implement them in the classroom. Indeed only
Teacher 2 and Teacher 6 shared success criteria with their students. These
practices contrast sharply with the findings of the DfES AfL Schools Project
(2007) that concluded that most teachers did use the success criteria, although
some of the criteria were too broad and unclear, and were not shared with
students. The teachers in this project needed to develop "finer success criteria
which can provide a scaffold for learning for pupils" (p.20) by showing them
what "good looks like" (p.10).

In the demonstration lessons that I deliver, I always share the success criteria
with the learners. These key ingredients will assist learners to understand
where they have difficulties when they compare what they have achieved
against the listed success criteria. Success criteria help the learners realise
when they have reached the learning intention. In some demonstration

lessons, I use success criteria checklists. During such lessons I can effectively go round the class and capture and catalogue where the learners stand in their learning. The evidence gathered is later shown to the teacher so that she can act upon it in order to improve student learning.

Effective questioning

The importance of effective questioning techniques to support and improve teaching and learning (Millar & Hames, 2002) was highlighted by teachers taking part in this case study. Teacher 1, who rarely uses A*f*L, believed that 'when good questioning techniques are used you know where students are in their learning and then you could adapt your teaching accordingly.' Some of the questioning techniques that were mentioned were the use of open and higher-order questions, the provision of thinking time for students, giving the opportunity for students to build on each other's answers, the use of no-hands up approach and the acknowledgement of students' repsonses in a positive manner. These responses indicate that teachers are familiar with a wide range of questioning techniques. Teachers expressed their doubts about the effectiveness of using techniques such as 'wait time' as the waiting can create boredom. This concern is congruent with the findings of Black and Harrison's (2001) study in which teachers found wait-time difficult to adopt and the waiting for several seconds 'painful'. As a person directly involved in the field, I tend to disagree with such claims. Although time is very limited inside the classroom, our learners should be provided with opportunities to think during lessons. As Stahl (1994) affirms, the use of think-time contributes significantly to improved teaching and learning in the classroom.

It has to be pointed out that there is a discrepancy between the teachers' declared use of A*f*L in the interviews and the actual practice of A*f*L in the classroom. Indeed, although most of the teachers said that they used certain questioning strategies in class, their claim was not borne out by their classroom practice. For instance, Teacher 11 claimed that she used effective questioning techniques in the classroom:

> When the teacher asked the students the questions she gave them a lot of time to answer. Instead of furthering their responses and creating a class discussion, she asked the children to whisper the answer in her ear so that the other students do not hear the answer. During the lesson she also used the hands-up technique (Fieldnotes, 15/10/12, 08.45 – 9.45 / Teacher 11).

The careful preparation of key questions that helps teachers structure their lessons and keep students focused on task, was noted in the case of only two teachers of all the Year 4 teachers teaching at Blue Creek College (Teacher 7 and Teacher 12), both of whom are NQTs. Teacher 12 admitted that she tended to forget some of the questions she intended to ask as, '..[i]t is not easy

to think of all the open questions you are going to ask during the lesson itself if you do not [prepare] the questions beforehand.'

Quality feedback
All teachers stated that they gave feedback to students. Most teachers said that they prefer giving oral feedback as against written feedback since oral feedback is more immediate. They strongly believed that feedback prompts had to be given during the tasks being done in the classroom. Indeed as Teacher 5 pointed out: "Feedback prompts have to be immediate because if time passes it's too late." (Teacher 5)

The importance of improving the quality of written feedback was also widely recognised. Most of the interviewees stated that a lot of written feedback was given though most admitted that the feedback they gave was not always formative. Teacher 8's comment on written feedback given was typical of the other interviewees': "I give a lot of written feedback to the students but I have to admit that it is not always formative." Most teachers expressed concern about the fact that time constraints and the demands of overloaded syllabi prevented them from providing enough opportunities for their students to benefit from teachers' feedback by working on areas for improvement. As Teacher 10 put it succinctly, "It is not always possible to give the opportunity to students to act upon the given feedback." (Teacher 10)

A reassuring development was that some teachers, notably Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 were working on a range of strategies to make the written feedback process more formative:

> I use the traffic lights strategy when correcting children's work. I use a green highlighter to indicate where the success criteria have been achieved and an orange highlighter to indicate where improvement is needed (Teacher 2).

Self and peer-assessment
Although self and peer-assessment are increasingly being considered essential to the development of learning-to-learn skills (Sadler, 1989) class observations revealed that the use of these two important A*f*L strategies is still rather limited in the Year 4 classes. Teacher 1 was highly sceptical about students' ability to practise these strategies:

> I don't rely a lot on self-assessment as children use a blue biro instead of a green biro when they are correcting. During peer-assessment some children still do not know how to check other students' work properly. It takes time for students to get used to it.

This was echoed by Teacher 11 who implements some aspects of A*f*L in her classroom. She thought that '[s]tudents have to get used to peer and self-assessment. Students have to feel at ease in a supportive class environment.'

Nevertheless there was a general consensus that self and peer-assessment were very beneficial to learners, particularly when success criteria are shared by teachers and students:

> Class students do work better. They say, 'Look here I/you have a mistake.' (Teacher 9)

> [Peer and self-assessment] strategies are particularly effective when I share the success criteria with the students (Teacher 6).

One example of how peer-assessment can be used in the classroom is when a digital visualizer is used. During some of the demonstration lessons that I deliver, I give the learners the opportunity to view each other's work on the interactive whiteboard and give feedback against the success criteria. Through this way, learners are effectively being activated as 'instructional resources for one another.' (William & Thompson, 2007, p.64)

However, most teachers lamented that although they believed in these strategies, they were hindered in their implementation due to time constraints and an overloaded syllabus.

> When self and peer-assessment are used in the classroom they improve learning. But before I used to implement these strategies but now there are too many things to do. Time is very limited as the syllabus is very vast (Teacher 4).

Summary of Findings

The primary aim of the Blue Creek College case study was to investigate how and the degree to which A*f*L is being implemented in the teaching and learning process and what is influencing its integration in the Maltese state primary classroom. All teachers taking part in this study showed a clear understanding of what A*f*L is and had a clear idea of its impact on the teaching and learning process. Teachers acknowledged the myriad benefits of A*f*L, namely that formative assessment can be beneficial to planning, to guide and revise teaching through self-evaluation and promotes effective differentiation in the classroom. Teachers also pointed out that A*f*L enables the learners to identify their strengths and areas for improvement and through correct guidance move to the next step in their learning. As highlighted in the first section, assessment *for* learning necessitates the application of specific strategies to produce the desired results. The participants did use some A*f*L strategies outlined by Wiliam & Thompson (2007). The most common strategies employed, which are not always formative in nature, are tasks, tests, understanding where the learners stand in their learning before the actual lesson begins, sharing of the learning intention, effective questioning and providing quality feedback. This study also revealed that fundamental strategies such as the sharing of the success

criteria, peer-assessment and self-assessment were very rarely implemented in the classrooms. These strategies are fundamental since they shed light on supporting learners to gauge their learning, identify their strengths, their learning needs and the next steps to undertake.

Implications of Findings

Several implications for the successful implementation of AfL arise from these conclusions. First, assessment instruments and more assessment resources appropriate to Maltese primary schools could be developed. Second, progress with developing AfL in lessons and its impact on pupil motivation can be a recurrent item in every staff meeting. Examples of good practice can be regularly shared. This can also be done through school and college newsletters, the school blog, the E-Platform and various displays. Third, a college assessment policy that puts teaching and learning as its top priority can be developed. Fourth, AfL could be integral elements of the school plan in every primary school. This would eventually lead to the development of AfL policies. Fifth, more case studies and action research are needed in the field of assessment so that more good practice can be disseminated among Maltese primary school teachers. Sixth, voluntary accreditation schemes for good practice in assessment, standard setting, recording and reporting could be introduced. Finally, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education could employ more Heads of Department and introduce support teachers of AfL who can continue supporting schools in the effective implementation of assessment *for* learning.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative case study bring out the significance of the utilisation of assessment to support learning rather than documenting achievement. This notion can heavily impact the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to entrust the responsibility for AfL practices to their learners, making them more self-directed in their own learning, especially through the delivery of objective-led lessons and self- and peer-assessment. This enables learners to learn how to monitor their own learning, develop the capability to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers, and reflect on what to do next (Berry, 2008). The ability of learners to assess their own work contributes to learners taking control of their learning. The assessment of progress against personal rather than normative frameworks is another key issue, supported by Dweck's theory (2000) of achievement motivation. By and large, advocates conclude that authentic assessment and AfL, if implemented effectively, have the capacity to empower and transform our classrooms into dynamic spaces in which students can develop into autonomous learners thanks to AfL strategies that lay the foundation for life-long learning.

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