

'SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS': CONCEPT, CHILDREN'S VIEWS, AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

'Successful learners' is one of the four capacities, or purposes, of *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE). This paper reports on a project which aimed to clarify its meaning, explore children's understanding of the term, and consider possible implications of both for classroom practice. The project was thus conducted in two parts: a conceptual consideration of the term, followed by an empirical study where the views of upper primary children (n=31) were elicited, using a Philosophy with Children approach. The study found that the term is infinitely ambiguous and can be used to support a whole number of different classroom approaches, some of which run quite counter to the ethos of CfE. The study suggests that fuller constructive collaboration between CfE advocates, teachers, and learners is required for the concept to become useable, supportive and enabling rather than restrictive, divisive, or elitist.

INTRODUCTION

A Curriculum for Excellence was published in 2004. In the years since, the development could be said to have lost its indefinite article but gained a reputation. The original document, on which this major change to the Scottish curriculum was based, was the product of The Curriculum Review Group, set up the previous year by the Scottish Executive to identify the purposes of education from ages 3 to 18 and principles for the design of the curriculum (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.7). One of the most striking features of the report was that it identified four key purposes of the curriculum 'for all children and every young person' to be 'successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and at work' and that 'the curriculum should enable them to develop these four capacities' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12).

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), as the programme is now known, has developed and grown considerably in the years since, as implementation progresses, but it could be said that it is these 'four capacities' which seem to have penetrated deepest into Scottish educational discourse. A visit to a Scottish school today would be unusual if these phrases were not to be found in foyer or atrium displays, on classroom walls, in pupils' jotters and folders, or even on badges and certificates. Some critics suggest that they may be 'vacuous' (Cockburn, 2010), while others lament that they have 'been subject to little in the way of interrogation' (Priestley & Humes, 2010, p.351). Priestley (2010, p.28) himself has warned that the four capacities risk merely having 'the status of aspirational slogans or mantras'. Buie (2011) showed that some children's knowledge of the four capacities was limited merely to recitation and that the meaning of 'successful', 'confident', 'responsible' and 'effective' was simply understood as 'good' (p.5).

This paper aims to redress the situation by seeking to explore the possible meanings of 'successful learners', report the views of some children on the matter, and, most importantly, outline the potentially serious implications for schools and young people if particular meanings were to be inscribed into practice. Thus, in this paper, the researchers aim to address three key questions: what are some of the different potential understandings of the term 'Successful Learner'; what do children think 'Successful Learner' means; and, what are some of the possible implications of these different understandings for classroom practice?

RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

Whether or not exploring understandings of 'successful learner' is educationally significant depends on the extent to which the term is an explicit and active concept within classrooms. Certainly, in many primary schools in Scotland, the four capacities do appear to have a very high profile and are used, for example, in assessment and reward systems with varying degrees of prominence. In such circumstances, the understanding of 'successful learner' by practitioners and pupils is important because, as is well known, there is a considerable body of literature which points to the significance for achievement of attitudes to, and beliefs about, learning. These include learner beliefs, teacher beliefs, but also, crucially, learner beliefs about teachers. Thus whether or not a learner believes they can be a 'successful learner' will affect performance; whether or not teachers believe their pupils can be 'successful learners' will affect practice; and, whether or not a learner believes that the teacher believes in them also affects their performance. A learner, no matter how capable, may not achieve as well as they could if they doubt that their teacher has confidence in them, or doubt that the teacher expects them to succeed. For example, the study by Hoff and Pandey (2006) showed how performance dipped in students who did not believe the assessor would be favourably disposed towards them or would believe them capable of high performance. The seminal study of Rosenthal & Jacobsen (1968) established the key role of teacher expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies, and much recent work by such as Dweck (2000) demonstrates the importance of learners' beliefs about their own capacity for success. The effects of learner beliefs on motivation and conceptions of agency are also well documented (McLean, 2003, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2004; Boyd, 2008, p.70ff.), as are beliefs about the nature of learning itself (Dweck, 2001; Maclellan & Soden, 2008).

In addition, in cases where the term is embedded in classroom reality, what teachers understand 'successful learning' to be will affect their approaches to teaching, the nature of the syllabus they construct, and the assessment strategies employed. The concept may not just be important in psychological terms, therefore, but in essential pedagogical terms too. Thus how the concept of 'successful learners' is framed and understood in the classroom will have an influence on practice and performance, on attitudes and attainment, and especially so where the concept is given prominence and explicit attention.

RESEARCH PROJECT DESIGN

The paper combines both a conceptual element and an empirical one. To begin with, the paper considers the concept of 'successful learner', probing both the nature of 'success' and that of 'learning', aiming to point out the various different understandings of the terms which can operate and so its inherent flexibility as a concept in educational usage. While a conceptual consideration of the term 'successful learner' can generate new insights, in this study the views of young people were also of interest. The study aimed to explore what the implications of their understanding(s) of the term might be for their learning, starting with an examination of these 'understandings'. The contributing group of children comprised of a school class of seventeen boys and fourteen girls between the ages of ten and twelve from a town in the west of Scotland, in a catchment area identified as 'deprived' (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics). Their participation involved compliance with relevant institutional ethical guidelines.

'Successful learner' has no precise, fixed definition and therefore an 'inductive' approach to research (Hinkin, 1998) was adopted in exploring children's thinking. A Philosophy with Children (PwC) approach (Matthews, 1994) similar to that of Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI), developed for young children by Catherine McCall (2009), was chosen for this study, as it allows for 'all young people' to contribute and seemed best to reflect the ethos of CfE in this regard (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12). The class had no prior experience of philosophical dialogue, and so they participated in a development session each week leading up to the 'Successful learners' focus. Although only using some

of the structures of the CoPI method, these dialogues aimed to encourage an inclusive attitude of co-inquiry (Murriss, 2000; Haynes, 2002). The class participation in PwC sessions prior to the dialogue about 'Successful learners' familiarised them with the rules and expectations of this method.

The method, for all sessions, mirrored that of the CoPI method, where pupils sat in a circle, an equal distance apart. Cassidy (2007) states that in CoPI, '. . . status is not, [and] indeed *cannot* be present' (p.123). In a circle, all pupils could be seen clearly and no one appeared to have authority. The children were told they must raise their hand if they wished to contribute but that they may not be called in the order their hands were raised. They were also instructed that they must agree or disagree with a previous point, before sharing their own views and that no consensus needed to be reached. For engagement and participation to occur, it was not necessary for all pupils to contribute; some participants opted to speak less than others, or not at all. The role of a facilitator is to enable philosophical discussion to occur, not to ensure every child contributes.

An initial written task was completed by the pupils where they provided an example of someone they thought was a 'Successful Learner' and explained their choice, with no external influence on the response. The need for the responses to be individual and without external influence was made clear to the pupils. Following this, a tally system was used to track the popularity of all of the pupils' interpretations. It has been suggested that practitioners' personal values and beliefs are likely to influence provision and assessment of successful learning. However, in this case, using a structure similar to CoPI ensured the children's ownership of the dialogue.

The question: 'Successful Learner: What does this mean?' was provided and pupils were encouraged to reflect verbally on the reasons they had given for their choice in their written responses. In order to ensure the inclusion of particularly popular and notable points from the written responses, further questions were asked by the facilitator which were aimed at exploring the children's responses on a deeper level and to ensure their views were fully clarified. This dialogue was also recorded, which ensured the children's views were unedited through the analysis which followed.

A detailed account of the dialogue was typed from the recording, including direct quotes from the participants to ensure accuracy. Coding, through themes (Mason, 2002; Holliday, 2007) and recurring ideas, was then used to organise the data. Firstly, the tallied list was organised into themes based on key words and similar meanings to form 'organizational categories' (Maxwell, 2005, p.97) and these acted as a starting point with which to sort and compare the content of the dialogue. Similarities in theme were then drawn between the dialogue and the written responses which were typed and appeared as 'substantive categories' (Maxwell, 2005, p.97), providing contexts and examples for discussion in addition to any links which could be made between the ideas. Maxwell (2005) explains that the creation of this type of category can help to describe points made by participants which deviated from the 'organizational categories'. Therefore, differences were also noted as this was vital to the project's intended demonstration of multiple interpretations.

An 'interpretive' (Mason, 2002, p.149) approach to reading data was used. Although it could be argued that researcher bias could influence these deductions, it is important to emphasise that the data was taken from pupils' clarified and contextualised views and includes direct quotations from a dialogue. Finally, the details of the lists created were then compared to the interpretations raised in the conceptual study, drawing on commonalities and highlighting alternative interpretations of 'Successful learner', where appropriate.

'SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS'

The original, very concise document (Scottish Executive, 2004) was inexpressive in its treatment of 'successful learners', leaving it open to be interpreted in numerous different ways, each of which is significant for classroom practice, as we will argue. The report declared that the curriculum should aim to produce:

'successful learners'

With

- enthusiasm and motivation for learning
- determination to reach high standards of achievement
- openness to new thinking and ideas

and able to

- use literacy, communication and numeracy skills
- use technology for learning
- think creatively and independently
- learn independently and as part of a group
- make reasoned evaluations
- link and apply different kinds of learning in new situations

(Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12)

The prospects of being able to assess if a person meets the criteria for 'successful learner' can immediately be seen to be problematic given the difficulty of making objective judgements about another's levels of 'enthusiasm . . . motivation . . . determination . . . openness'. In addition to the divergence that may arise between a self-assessment and an external assessment in this context, there are the perennial problems arising from applying the criteria in norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, or ipsative senses. These problems apply to all educational assessment contexts, however, and what this paper focuses on is attempting to unpick the concept of 'successful learner' itself. In order to examine potential interpretations of 'successful learners', a deeper exploration of 'success' and 'learning' is required and that is explored in the sections which follow.

'SUCCESSFUL'

'Success' is difficult to define. One meaning could be 'the accomplishment of an aim or purpose'; another 'the attainment of fame, wealth, or social status' (Oxford Dictionary online) another 'the favourable outcome of something undertaken'(Free Online dictionary); another 'the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for' or, 'something that achieves positive results' (Cambridge Dictionaries online). There is quite a range here and one can see that these could have considerable classroom implications, if used in a uniform way: 'favourable outcomes' are never guaranteed in education, far less 'results hoped for', and so 'success' in this sense would seem to be beyond many learners in many curricular areas on a regular basis. If the curriculum wishes this to be an aim for all learners, from 3 to 18, then clearly such meanings would need to be avoided for, if they were endorsed, then the only outcome would be the grim success/failure divide of the past which bedevilled Scottish schooling for generations.

'Success' can, therefore, be interpreted in a number of different ways but there is a limited amount of literature about children's views of success. However, Pardoe (2009), operating in an English context, identified common responses children offered to the meaning of the term. These included references to winning, grades and external rewards which suggests that these children think that in order to be successful, they are required to be the best and be recognised for that. Although this only includes a limited number of pupils' views, it does not diminish the potential danger of thinking of success in this competitive way, where success is only valued in an elitist fashion, and so cannot be presented as an outcome 'for all'.

In considering the meaning(s) of success, three specific problematic issues can be identified: the first relates to setting standards for 'success'; the second relates to success as

formative or summative; and the third, relates to success as an absolute or as a gradation. Each of those will be seen to have implications for schools.

CfE documentation is explicit that the stated purpose is for *every* child and young person to be a successful learner. However, given both natural and socially determined differences between learners, it seems that this purpose could only really be said to be aspirational, if referring to levels of attainment. If a criterion-referenced understanding of success is assumed, it would seem to be something of an educational fantasy to expect every learner to be 'successful' (in all areas of the curriculum). Alternatively, if it is a genuine, real target for every learner to be successful, then this would suggest that the criterion would need to be set extremely low if this was to be achieved in reality. CfE documents refer to 'every learner' and so one must take into account the full range of learners, including those with moderate or severe learning difficulties. If the curriculum is to be inclusive, it would seem neither possible nor morally defensible to be setting a universal standard for 'success'. It is difficult therefore to see how a criterion-referenced understanding of 'successful learner' could be operationalised. It is also clear that a norm-referenced definition of success is unworkable in this context since, by definition, only a certain proportion of the school population could be deemed to be successful on this model. That leaves only an ipsative or self-referenced model and while this is much more sensitive to individual circumstances, it proves very difficult to implement meaningfully in a national system. It could mean for example, that very minor improvements from a very low base would be judged evidence of 'success', without there being evidence that these were either appropriate or acceptable levels of development.

Nevertheless, given the serious problems with both norm- and criterion-referenced senses of 'successful learner', it is only really the ipsative sense which could survive as a system-wide goal. The CfE definition, however, includes reference to determination to reach 'high standards of achievement' without exception. One has to assume, therefore, that an ipsative sense is not the intended meaning here, unless these 'high standards' are to be interpreted as relative to each learner's personal circumstances.

The second problem area relates to the formative or summative assessment of 'success'. This has two main aspects: the first relates to age and stage standards of success. If 'successful learners' is only seen as an outcome for the whole curriculum 3-18, then only those who reach the required standard set for the age 18 end of the curriculum could be seen to be successful. No one below this stage could ever be viewed as 'successful'. Thus, for all learners to be deemed successful, or to have the prospect of being so evaluated, the criteria would need to be set for all the various ages and stages across the 3-18 curriculum. Again, however, there are the same problems over criterion-referenced standards of 'success' which were alluded to earlier. Unless set in an ipsative sense, these criteria would inevitably be divisive. On the other hand, if a formative assessment regime is utilised, then one would expect that learners would get feedback on how they might become successful, or reach success. As this would be employed repeatedly over the school years, however, it would seem to be self-defeating as an approach as there would always be more success to be aimed at. One could never be summatively deemed 'successful' as there would always be somewhere else to strive towards. On the other hand, educational experiences could be broken down as they currently are in the CfE Experiences and Outcomes documents and 'success' would be achieved each time one or more of these was overtaken. This seems a rather reductivist view of success, however, and does not begin to embrace the broader sense which the initial CfE document envisages with its references to 'determination', 'motivation', 'enthusiasm', and 'openness'. It seems clear that the document envisages a much richer notion of 'success' than that of progressing through the various stages of the curriculum outcomes, although that would certainly comprise the easiest, if stultifyingly mechanical, means of 'measuring' success.

The third, related, problem is that of success being seen as an absolute or as a gradation. The main issue here is whether or not the situation is to be understood as involving a simple binary of 'successful' or 'not successful'. The problem here, as can be seen in the discussion of formative assessment, is that it is hard to justify evaluations of 'not

successful' as being either helpful or sensible in an educational setting. For a long time in Scottish education - at least since the development of Standard Grade - there have been worthy attempts to avoid this sort of negative assessment and reporting, and instead to report on what has been achieved. Thus, simple pass/fail assessments tend to be delayed until much later in the system with grade-related criteria being used otherwise so that each performance gets a positive grading on its own merits, rather than been seen negatively as a failure to achieve some other grade. Indeed, even within CfE, the 'I have...' and 'I can...' statements in the Experiences and Outcomes documentation seek to present this very approach. Unless every experience is to be reported as a 'success' regardless of the facts, or if unsuccessful performances simply go unreported, then it is clear that a simple binary approach risks a return to the old elitist, divisive days of Scottish education where the elect few were endorsed and rewarded and the vast majority damned and rejected.

The alternative, therefore, would seem to be to have some sort of spectrum of success, ranging from 'partly successful' through to 'very successful' or 'wholly successful' and all points in between. This would seem to be a more realistic and supportive approach but it considerably dilutes the goals of CfE and raises the spectre of euphemistic and increasingly meaningless evaluations of the minutiae of learners' performances.

Grade and qualification-driven views of success could be seen to pressurise teachers and pupils and fail to recognise that the experience of success can be an internal phenomenon. It suggests that (external) recognition is always needed in order to be successful and that the only aspect that is of importance is the final product, rather than any 'journey' to success through progress and improvement. If this view is applied to developing 'Successful Learners', the focus is likely to fall on being successful, rather than on becoming successful - meaning the final product takes priority. This contrasts with Assessment for Learning (Young, 2005) which is embedded throughout CfE documents, where assessment is an integral factor involved in learning (Scottish Government, 2010). This philosophy values sharing success criteria and self-assessment, which both seem to contribute to a journey towards success, not simply the status of being successful. If an elitist view of success is adopted, this could result in implications around classroom organisation and general classroom ethos as it is likely pupils achieving the highest grades, and who are considered to be the most academically successful, would be favoured. This could lead to exclusion for those who do not have this 'higher status'. This view also raises the question of whether or not the intended goal of a 'higher ability' group would be valued more than that of a 'lower ability' group, due to the ultimate product being of a higher academic standard.

Success can also have implications for practice when viewed in terms of setting goals and targets. Scottish Government (2010) talk about involving pupils in setting goals and reflecting on how to progress whereas Butler and Winne (1995) state children might not know what is fully involved when setting a task. If pupils set their own goals, this could be problematic, leading to pupils underselling or overselling their abilities which, in turn, could lead to inevitable success or failure. However, if teachers do not include pupils in the target-setting process, this could still occur and it would also raise questions around whether or not an individual's success can be planned and assessed solely by external means.

Woolfson et al (2009) show that practitioners feel they have had very little input and advice since the launch of CfE, making them confused and apprehensive, resulting in some alarming suggestions of how to assess the four capacities. An example of this involves teachers and pupils issuing 'tokens' (p.20) when development towards one of the four capacities is observed. This appears to simply be a gesture which could be argued to have no further meaning other than for use as evidence that the terminology of CfE is being adopted in practice. Such uncertainty may result in an extended straddling period between the ethos behind CfE and the former structure of 5-14. The practitioners reported by Woolfson et al. generally agreed that 'Successful Learners' was the easiest of the four capacities to assess as the others would involve looking at 'conduct' (p.19). However, this seems to take a narrow view of success. Motivation contributes to success and this would be likely to involve conduct. It also suggests that 'successful learners' are only assessed on their outcomes and not on their engagement with learning, on the 'conduct' of their learning

activities. The study also reports the professional view that, if the capacities are not assessed, however imperfectly that may be, they would no longer be seen as the core of CfE.

CfE's experiences and outcomes could, instead, be viewed as assessment tools in teaching and learning. Priestley and Humes (2010) present the outcomes in this manner, but say they are vague in specifying content, which may work against the development of the four capacities. They indicate that the content of any curriculum needs to be narrowed, and not left in broad terms as in the case of the four capacities. The experiences and outcomes appear to retain CfE's ideology of keeping the child at the centre through its continuous use of 'I can' statements. Yet Priestley and Humes (2010) note that the terminology used often does not correlate with the language skills of the pupils they address. As a result, a view of what happens in the planning (by teachers) is provided, but not what happens in the learning. The uncertain place of the four capacities within the slowly emerging assessment system is underlined when taking *Building the Curriculum 5* as an example. It was published in 2010, leaving a gap of six years from the review group's initial publication. It also claims to be a framework for assessment, yet the four capacities merely appear as footers on each page. This may be significant since it suggests they have not to be formally assessed, and yet are 'purposes' of the curriculum, and are used in such ways in schools.

Carver and Scheier (1990) state various possible implications when comparing the expected rate of success with the actual rate of success. If success is achieved more rapidly than expected, then the positivity is likely to surround the factor aiding this change in pace. This takes the focus away from the learning. If the rate of progress is slower than expected, Carver and Scheier argue that success could be viewed negatively, affecting self-belief in future learning experiences. A 'Successful Learner' is not necessarily determined by rate of progress; just because progress is slow, does not mean it is absent. This view could discard deep learning in favour of racing through work and cause children to compete to finish their work the quickest rather than the focus being on the learning.

These varying potential understandings of the term 'success', therefore, demonstrate considerable ambiguity and show that the term 'Successful' could be interpreted in a number of ways, each offering different potential implications for classroom practice, and so dependent on each practitioner's personal values and beliefs.

'LEARNER'

Following the discussion of 'success', this section will explore potential ambiguity in the term 'learner' through looking at various differing understandings. These include theories of learning, meta-learning, and approaches to learning; all of which, again, present different implications for practice. There are many possible interpretations of 'learning', making it difficult to define simply. The least controversial is that it refers to some sort of cognitive, behavioural, or affective change or development in the individual. For practitioners, measuring the success of a learner requires in-depth knowledge and understanding of how individuals respond and engage with the process of learning (Maclellan & Soden, 2008). However, different views and ideas will have different implications for teaching and learning in the classroom.

Only a limited review of the topic can be attempted here but sufficient, it is intended, to demonstrate the diffuse nature of the practical usage of the term. One useful starting-point is the distinction made between cognitive and situational theories of learning: between learning as acquisition and learning as participation (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Without delving any further into that issue, one can immediately see how conceptions of 'success' would differ widely between these opposing conceptions, as, indeed, would the classroom practice supporting them. This divergence is merely one amongst a vast spectrum generated by competing views of learning. Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2003), for example, in reviewing the field, identify a host of learning theories under the broad headings of the behaviourist, cognitive, social, and experiential traditions. The particular view of what learning is and involves will influence the teaching process, and that view will also influence

how 'successful' learning is to be demonstrated in that manifestation. In passing, it could be noted, with a nod to Biesta's concept of 'learnification', how the idea of 'education' has slipped from the discourse, the attention now solely on learners, learning experiences, and learning outcomes - with content and purpose left open (Biesta, 2009, p. 39).

One of the more traditional views of a learner could be said to be someone who simply receives education. Teachers adopting this instructivist approach will be likely to take control of teaching and learning, which would cut across CfE's stress on the role of the learner as growing in autonomy and independence, oppose its implicit endorsement of constructivist approaches and 'active' learning, as well as compromising the stated curriculum principles of 'relevance' and 'personalisation and choice'. 'Success' on this model could merely amount to regurgitation, a demonstration that what had been received can be repeated. A teacher with behaviourist views is likely to use reinforcement to control learning in their practice. Phillips and Soltis (2009) highlight that a behaviourist approach fails to take cognitive processes into account when learning is complex, and that abstract ideas would involve more than simply a stimulus and response. A 'successful' relevant 'response' on this model may mask a lack of understanding and an absence of meaningful learning.

A constructivist approach is likely to encourage independent learning, and teachers with social-constructivist views would be more inclined to value collaborative learning. Collaboration is included in CfE's explanation of 'Successful Learners', and throughout the curriculum documents, suggesting a preferred theory for practice. However, this is compromised through stating all children should '. . . develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.3), implying an individualised approach to learning, and certainly to assessment. While collaborative practice and group work may be promoted, the assessment system, including the four capacities, is aimed at the individual. Phillips and Soltis (2009) relate successful learning to constructivism, in terms of being able to organise learning logically and make sense of, and retrieve, information in an effective manner. Yet if children are working independently of a teacher, whether in groups or individually, misconceptions may arise and if these are not corrected, subsequent learning may be misguided and problematic.

One possible solution for balancing pupil and teacher involvement could be through meta-learning. Meta-learning encourages autonomous learning, yet there is still an element of teaching involved. Claxton (2003) uses the word 'learnacy', but the concept is usually referred to as learning about learning, or learning how to learn (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1984; Watkins, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2004; Lucas, 2005). The concept does recognise the need to consider improvement and progress and presents learning as a lifelong activity. This echoes CfE's aim to promote skills for life and work, not just for education. Winch (2008), however, states that learning how to learn is problematic as, logically, we have to be able to learn in order to learn how to learn. He points out that we become locked into an infinite regress, where we need to learn how to learn how to learn, and so on into doltish infinity. Winch points out, alternatively, that much of the literature on 'learning how to learn' is actually focused on the development of specific but transferable skills, dispositions, and virtues which tend to aid learning.

Further incarnations of learning with potentially detrimental implications for classroom practice can be uncovered. Lucas (2005) states that the more 'accidental learning' (p.14) that occurs, the better, as it may allow for reflection on what is gained from experience and for connections to be made. However, 'accidental learning' could also refer to practitioners unintentionally imparting views upon pupils through the hidden curriculum. This danger is also implied when Illeris (2007) talks about 'unconscious learning' (p.17): registering without thinking. This has rather odd connotations, raising the question of whether or not one can learn unconsciously. This corresponds, however, to the idea of non-reflective learning (Jarvis & Parker, 2005), which again suggests mere reception without any internal process of mediation.

Another incarnation could stem from looking at approaches to learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990). In this view, a learner may only be seen to be successful in specific aspects of learning. For example, one could be a successful 'surface' (p.175) learner, with skills in memorising large quantities of information, yet not be able to comprehend what one is learning, making one an unsuccessful 'deep' (p.175) learner. This concept adds further to the diversity of learning. The authors promote deep learning as the favoured approach but it could be argued that it is unrealistic to expect deep learning in every aspect of education.

This very brief overview of learning, and some of its possible understandings, suggests a challenge to define how practitioners can assess whether or not someone is a (successful) learner. Through examining both success and learning, it is clear their meanings depend on individual values. Buie (2011) demonstrates that some children thought being 'successful', 'confident', 'responsible' and 'effective' meant being 'good' and that those who fall short of this were failures. This demonstrates just one danger stemming from a lack of understanding and 'a general issue with CfE adjectives' (Buie, 2011, p.5). In an educational context, the word 'learner' could be argued to outweigh the word 'successful' in importance. If you are deemed a 'learner', it is difficult to determine the need for the word 'successful'. This relates to Priestley and Humes (2010) who state that rearranging the adjectives makes no significant difference to the meaning of the capacities. Indeed, the need for the adjectives at all could be questioned. CfE could be aiming simply for all children to become 'Learners', 'Citizens', Contributors' and 'Individuals', although this highlights the inadequacy of 'individuals' as a descriptor. Singapore, which has a version of the four capacities, for example, aims at developing every learner as 'a confident person, self-directed learner, active contributor, concerned citizen' (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2009). Here, at least 'person' addresses the social situatedness of the learner (Macmurray, 1961), rather than the mythic, pre-social isolation of the 'individual'. Interestingly too, the epithet 'self-directed' sidesteps completely all the complications of 'successful', although it may also be pointed out that the term 'active contributor' is more than a little puzzling since contributing is always, by definition, 'active', and an 'inactive contributor' a logical nonsense.

The point about the removal of the epithets is important, however. If one is a 'learner', achievement of some sort in learning is assumed, and thus some sort of 'success'. This gives rise to the question of whether or not there is a difference between a 'learner' and a 'successful learner'; it may be that there is not. Thus, 'unsuccessful learner' would be a meaningless contradiction: 'successful learner' a vapid tautology.

On the other hand, part of the CfE intention seems to be a focus on children and young people as successful *in their approach to learning*. Some of the terminology in the original document certainly points to intellectual virtues, to dispositions seen as important for engaging in learning activities: 'determination . . . motivation . . . enthusiasm . . . openness'. In this sense, the 'success' is to be measured in terms of behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement rather than in relation to the actual outcomes: success would lie in the activity of learning rather than in its products. This may be the case, and most would see this as desirable for all in education, but the CfE emphasis on 'high standards of achievement' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12) means that more than mere 'successful engagement' is intended.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Because of the philosophical element in the project, and in order to avoid repetition when critiquing potential implications of the term 'Successful learner', the findings will be presented here simultaneously with the discussion.

The written responses provided breadth, where sixty-six points about what constitutes successful learning were uncovered; the dialogue covered fewer points but in greater depth with detailed examples to clarify some contributions. The number of interpretations stemming from the written responses, as well as the inclusion of agreement and disagreement in the dialogue, contribute to the study's demonstration of the ambiguity of the term in question.

A common theme was that of 'smartness'. In the written responses, many of those identified by pupils as being successful in learning were said to be 'smart', suggesting a more elitist view, where only the smartest children can become 'Successful Learners'. However, during the dialogue, the need to be smart was debated and some of the children disagreed that you had to be smart in order to be a 'Successful Learner'.

The written responses and the dialogue regularly featured the theme of 'trying', stating that this was an important trait for a 'Successful Learner' to possess. The presence of improvement over time was referred to in the dialogue as becoming 'more successful'. Although 'correctness' was briefly mentioned, there was overwhelming agreement that persistence and effort, linking to showing progress and improvement, were of paramount importance, regardless of the accuracy or quality of the final product. This differs from the findings of Pardoe (2009) and it implies this particular group of children view success as a journey, rather than something based on attainment or grades. These findings suggest the class ethos is not elitist or competitive, but that all pupils are capable of achieving success, if they work for it. One pupil stated in their written response, in reference to disability, that a 'Successful Learner' 'does not let that get in the way'.

Another idea mentioned fairly frequently in the written responses, and included briefly in the dialogue, was that of 'finishing work'. It was briefly discussed in relation to the speed of completion which, although in a different context to the study carried out by Carver and Scheier (1990), carries similar implications, where children could compete to finish their work rather than focussing on the learning. If considered in the context of trying, which seemed to be the key theme of the dialogue, this could result in effort being applied to task completion rather than task quality.

In terms of assessment of success, and when assessing effort, one child spoke during the dialogue about comparing work to peers' work, suggesting a notion similar to the spectrum of success mentioned in the conceptual study. A position of authority was not specified in this contribution, so it remains unclear if the child was referring to a pupil conducting the comparison or a teacher. Nevertheless, the reference to a spectrum of success appears to show that the potentially damaging side of a binary view of success, where pupils who have not reached success may be labelled 'Unsuccessful Learners', does not seem to concern these pupils at the moment.

Conversely, in relation to the need for a 'Successful Learner' to 'listen', the teacher was referred to. This could be seen to link with the more traditional, instructivist, view of a 'learner' as mentioned earlier, where pupils simply receive education. It could be said to contradict the social constructivist approach to learning, where children are expected to work collaboratively with each other. However, those who contributed within the theme of assessment seemed to refer to personal, rather than external, assessment implying that effort is internal and individual. If this view is adopted, children could become more autonomous in their learning and could develop reflective, analytical skills which may help to aid progression and move closer to what CfE seems to be aiming for. However, if adopted as the sole approach, it could prevent children from developing the skills to communicate effectively with peers. The written responses and the dialogue both seemed to focus mainly on attempting to define 'successful', rather than 'learner', which is in line with the view that the ambiguity lies mainly in the adjectives contained in the four capacities (Buie, 2011; Priestley, 2010; Priestley & Humes, 2010). Potentially the most pertinent of all contributions, although only mentioned briefly by one pupil, was: 'there is no right or wrong answer here'. This eleven-year-old's recognition that subjectivity may ultimately define the term in question epitomises the problem.

Through the empirical study, several points arose which did not appear within the literature. This further demonstrates the number of possible interpretations which present fresh implications for classroom practice. One point that was mentioned on more than one occasion was the need for confidence which is particularly worth noting because 'Confident Individuals' is another of CfE's four capacities. This suggests that a link between these capacities, at least, is required in order to achieve success. It would be interesting to look

into whether or not one capacity is achievable independently of the others or if all need to be achieved simultaneously. One child also mentioned 'over-confidence' and juxtaposed this with nervousness, stating that sometimes apprehension can bring about a better result than being 'over-confident'. The written responses showed an idea which was linked to this: the notion that a 'Successful Learner' thinks 'they can do' something. This corresponds with CfE's 'I can' statements presented in its experiences and outcomes and, again, suggests an ethos of positivity, where all can achieve the status of 'Successful Learner'. However, a balanced view would need to be adopted. As with the other three capacities in CfE, 'Confident Individuals' demonstrates ambiguity and presents its own complications, 'over-confidence' included.

The findings also suggested knowing 'how to' do something, but not necessarily getting it correct, still made you a 'Successful Learner'. Reflection aimed at understanding the cause of mistakes and overcoming obstacles was discussed in terms of looking to the future instead of dwelling on past mistakes. One pupil stated 'Let bygones be bygones with your past'. This interpretation of the term would contribute to the previously mentioned positive classroom atmosphere, where progress and improvement are valued and encouraged.

The findings raise questions around how the term is understood by those on its 'receiving end', as it were. It was stated by pupils that it was easier to be a 'Successful Learner' in adulthood than in childhood. This could be attributed to CfE spanning the whole formal education of a young person who would progress and improve in order to achieve the status of a 'Successful Learner' by the time they leave education in their late teens. However, this also suggests that younger children may be incapable of successful learning; a notion which could be viewed as demeaning and negative. The point, however, was raised following a contribution about the possibility of being 'perfect at everything'. The pupil stated that children could not possibly achieve this due to age limits on certain activities such as driving, providing a reason for why adults are more likely to be 'Successful Learners'. This notion of perfection continued and became the part of the dialogue which was strongest philosophically. One pupil acknowledged that some things are 'not here yet', rendering it impossible to be 'perfect at everything'. It was also said that being perfect at everything would be 'unhuman', suggesting a more realistic view of success and a recognition that individuals' talents vary. An example of a sportsperson was also raised to illustrate that successful learning is not required to be specifically associated with 'work'. This provides a broader view of a 'Successful Learner', recognising wider achievement which, in turn, could produce a person rather than a product of education. In passing, it is worth noting the argument of Claxton and Lucas (2009) that more focus on 'learning' rather than 'work' might benefit many classrooms and that replacing the imperative 'Get on with your work' with 'Get on with your learning' might be instructive and beneficial for both teachers and pupils. Determining the specific 'learning' aspect of classwork set and homework assigned might indeed be an arresting challenge for some.

Two additions to the vocabulary of assessment of successful learning were unearthed in the dialogue. This contribution stated someone could be good at something 'theoretically', but not 'physically'. When asked to clarify this, the pupil provided an example of being skilled in a snowboarding game, but not in real-life snowboarding. If this is applied in an educational setting, this opens up a wealth of potential implications for classroom practice which could be heavily influenced by personal opinion. For example, a child could be deemed, or could deem him/herself, to be good at something 'theoretically' - a term which would require further definition - but may not demonstrate this effectively when applying the skill in the context in which it is being assessed. This may result in success being overlooked if the 'physical' demonstration of the skill is assessed, when the child can only demonstrate the skill in a 'theoretical' sense.

Enjoyment was raised in the dialogue, an element which is not included in the four capacities diagram (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12), although it does appear as part of one curriculum 'principle'. According to the child who contributed, enjoying what you are doing is linked to the aforementioned theme of trying, through giving something 'your full self'.

When matching the data with CfE's 'Successful Learners' box, already reproduced above (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12), some interesting comparisons can be identified. It is important to recognise that this analysis presents only one interpretation of the findings and one view of where the connections lie. Although these exact words presented in the 'Successful Learners' box were not used, 'enthusiasm' and 'motivation' were alluded to in both the dialogue and the written responses. It could be argued that the main trait of successful learning, according to the children, of effort and persistence could be attributed to motivation. The idea of wanting 'to do well in school' was also mentioned within the written responses, and implied in the dialogue when participants were discussing effort and a willingness to try new things and develop existing skills, demonstrating an 'openness to new thinking and ideas'. As previously discussed, the need to achieve high standards of achievement was superseded in the children's view by the need for effort and persistence. However, determination was implied within the written responses, where the notion of focus was included and to which the concept of 'trying', which dominated the dialogue, could also be related. The idea of 'trying' appeared task-based, but could be argued to show a determination to improve attainment. Literacy, communication and numeracy skills were all mentioned, but not specifically explored, in the dialogue as being of importance when defining a 'Successful Learner'. Similarly, technology was only referred to when giving an example of a skill, not in relation to learning. This suggests that the children did not necessarily view these as defining characteristics of a 'Successful Learner', but as skills which can develop over time and which can be used to gauge progress towards success.

The intended meaning of 'think creatively and independently' is debatable. The children discussed using reflection as a tool to progress their learning, which could be interpreted as creative thinking as the learner would be creating a method to learn from mistakes. The idea of reflection could also be argued to apply to the final two attributes. However, it could be said that the final attribute - 'link and apply different kinds of learning in new situations' - differs from the responses, assuming it refers to the interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning which CfE advocates, where skills and attitudes are applied in different subject areas.

Contrary to CfE, there seemed to be no mention of collaborative learning as the children seemed to be focussed on independence. This suggests that although collaboration is something which is desired throughout CfE, and through the wealth of literature which surrounds the topic, it is not recognised by the learners in this context. Although the child is claimed to be at the centre of all decisions made about education, this potentially presents a fundamental clash between the curriculum and those engaging with it as learners.

CONCLUSIONS

This project has explored 'Successful Learners', through reference to literature and in examining children's written and oral responses, and it seems that ambiguity remains. The lack of academic literature on 'Successful Learners', required a split in the term so more depth could be achieved by individually analysing 'success' and 'learning'. This demonstrated the possibility for a range of interpretations of both terms and, therefore, of 'Successful Learner'. The conceptual study, however, only included some possible interpretations and implications for classroom practice and future research might wish to explore this further.

For the empirical study, it could be argued that the children could have been asked if their initial understanding of the term was altered following the dialogue. However, this would seem to be a study of the impact of PwC as a research tool which, although an interesting consideration, is not what this project intended to explore. The project was restricted to including the perceptions of one group of thirty-one primary seven children. It is important to recognise that children of a different age group or from a different area or establishment are likely to have different views. However, this apparent restriction, in fact, strengthens the argument and hints at an even bigger range of interpretations of 'Successful

Learner' when no definition is provided. Interpretation of both the written responses and the dialogue, imply that the values of the class teacher are evident through pupil responses. Although care was taken to prevent externally influencing the pupils, this influence could not be avoided.

The term 'Successful Learner' should be treated with caution due to its various potential meanings. It would be undesirable to consider it in such a way that it would damage pupil progress or be viewed as a negative concept. CfE will potentially define Scottish education for the next generation yet at its roots are capacities which, as demonstrated in critiquing 'Successful Learners', contain ambiguities which have the potential to have a negative impact on classroom practice, and so on pupil learning and progression. This study suggests that, in the light of the literature on self-efficacy, for the term to be of classroom value it ought to be seen as open to all without condition, that 'successful learning' is seen as within each person's grasp, albeit in ways suited to individual circumstances. The pupils' focus in this study on effort and persistence, on the virtues associated with learning, seems eminently suited to the establishment of a productive learning environment and to a worthwhile role for the concept. Combining these two elements would suggest that one possible way to understand 'successful learning' is that it involves reaching a level of achievement appropriate to circumstances, and the acquisition and exercise of generic skills, dispositions and virtues deemed conducive to learning.

On the other hand, however, notions of success which focus on being the 'best', on being 'smart', or which are reserved for the highest levels of attainment, would appear to be potentially damaging to some learners. Similarly, notions of learning which privilege rapidity of progress, the mechanical overtaking of itemised 'learning outcomes', or the uncritical ingestion of information, would appear to counter a more fruitful view of what successful 'learning' might involve.

The study also identifies some uncertainty about the role of the 'four capacities'. It has shown that where 'successful learners' is used explicitly in assessment procedures, then it can have powerful effects and needs to be treated judiciously. However, although this is practice in some schools it does appear that policy documents are reticent about how the capacities are to be utilised in any practical sense. Originally, they were 'purposes' and so one would have assumed that they should be subject to assessment. However, their role seems to have evolved in the literature to very general curriculum organisers, or aspirational values of the sort found in 'mission statements'.

If CfE is to have a positive effect, and the risks minimised of 'successful learning' being pursued in questionable ways, then increased dialogue is recommended between its advocates, teachers, and learners, with the aim of co-constructing a meaningful and useable educational term.

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