



Raising aspirations and tackling deprivation in King's Lynn: Lessons from 'Learning Catalysts'

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1. Introduction

This Local Work is about the development of an approach to understanding and raising aspirations. As strategies and initiatives succeed one another to tackle deprivation, raise aspirations, increase social mobility, combat worklessness and reduce inequalities, we believe we have another small contribution to make about how long term action at the local level can bring about real change and, hopefully, why it is worth supporting long term initiatives.

2. Aspirations: rooted in family, community and place

The Learning Catalysts project came from the experience of a small-area regeneration programme in King's Lynn and a learning community created in, and by, the primary school in West Walton, in the West Norfolk Fens.

"A high proportion of families on the estate live on benefits ... life expectancy is significantly lower [than a neighbouring, much more affluent area] ... families are large: quite often the children will have different fathers ... parents are young ... some children come to school without having eaten at all ... there is a culture of intimidation within some families ..."

"Our village is very rural ... it's spread out along one long road ... there is one pub, some distance from the village ... there is a Travellers' site ... and a holiday caravan site ... most parents work locally ... some have part-time jobs, including the men ... some work on the land, some in factory work; some live on benefits ... there are very few 'professionals' ..."

These comments from head teachers and learning catalysts in two schools, one in one of the most deprived estates in King's Lynn, one in the Fens, present two quite different pictures of local families, communities and places. Common to both are low aspirations and an expectation of low-skilled, low paid work or benefit dependency.

About King's Lynn and the West Norfolk Fens

King's Lynn has developed as a manufacturing town from an agricultural base. It was an Expanded Town in the 1960s and early 1970s, attracting industry and workers from London. Manufacturing and agriculture in King's Lynn and the West Norfolk Fens are modern and competitive: there are global players in food, equipment and machinery production. Unemployment is low. However, the skills base and earnings are also low. As agriculture and manufacturing have modernised, agencies recruit for less-skilled and casual work in numbers far greater than the local economy can supply; and low-skilled workers have become more vulnerable to redundancy and long term unemployment. Estates built for workers, in the post-war and expanded town eras, house significant proportions of families below the margins of the labour market.

Recognition of a local economy characterised by a high proportion of low-earning, low-skilled work with significant 'pockets' of benefit dependency has led the Borough Council and the Local Strategic Partnership to identify low skills and aspirations as *"arguably the biggest challenge facing West Norfolk"*.¹

The Social Exclusion Task Force (December 2008)² identified clusters of neighbourhoods where attainment is lower than expected given the general pattern of deprivation – specifically in East Anglia and the West Country. *"These areas share some of the characteristics of communities with an 'aspirations gap'. Many are rural areas with close knit social networks, stable populations and poor transport links."* King's Lynn and the West Norfolk Fens form a significant cluster of red blobs on the map. The close-knit and stable population here has been augmented in phases by the needs of industry, not only in the 1960s and 1970s, but also from around 2000 and particularly 2004, from Eastern Europe and the Baltic in particular. It would not surprise researchers or policy-makers to find that the aspirations of the incomer tend to be higher – after all, they demonstrate more 'get up and go' than most of us.

3. The emergence of the Learning Catalysts project

The small-area regeneration programme in King's Lynn had some notable successes in encouraging adults into learning: building confidence, broadening horizons, experiencing achievement, raising aspirations, but it did not continue after the funding ended. West Walton seemed to offer a more sustainable route.

With Leadership for Learning, an international group led within the Faculty of Education of the University of Cambridge, we framed an action research project around aspirations and raising aspirations. Could we describe a baseline of people's aspirations? Could the sort of community learning we were engaging in make a difference to them? The project was conceived at the start as being about change as well as research.

Learning Catalysts started in January 2006, with three fundamental principles:

- 1. Working with families:** because families reinforce cultures, whether these are of high aspirations and achievement, or low aspirations and an expectation of low-skilled, low paid work or benefit dependency;
- 2. Working with schools:** because schools are a central focus of their communities; they have a fund of knowledge about their communities and a stake in the achievement of their children; and they are the main, if not the only, local 'mainstream' organisations with the potential to deliver change in the culture of learning among families over the sustained amount of time that this takes;

¹ Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk: Corporate Strategy 2007-11 'Transforming and Regenerating West Norfolk'; West Norfolk Partnership: Community Strategy 2007-30 'Transforming West Norfolk'.

² Social Exclusion Task Force, December 2008: 'Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities: Analysis and Discussion Paper': Cabinet Office. The analysis used MOSAIC UK neighbourhood types in which young people tend to have low educational aspirations ('Low Horizons', 'Families on Benefits', 'Ex-Industrial Legacy') and mapped clusters of these against a map of the 40% most deprived neighbourhoods (Lower Super Output Areas) where young people achieve significantly lower results at Key Stage 4 than would be expected given their level of area deprivation.

- 3. Working through one-to-one relationships:** because evidence and experience suggests that one-to-one relationships with, and support from, trusted individuals are the most effective way of helping people to make changes in their lives. The Learning Catalyst project is based on recruiting role models from among a peer group rather than bringing in support from a professional advisor. The peer group in this instance are support staff, usually but not always teaching assistants in schools, who live in the community and often are, or have been, parents of children in the school. Crucially, they are 'one of us' in both school and community.

Aspirations: Attainment? Being happy?

Norfolk Learning Partnership defined aspiration as *"the desire to reach our potential"* (Martin, 2005).³ Raising aspirations meant ensuring we are aware of our potential *and* can access opportunities to fulfil our potential *and* have the desire to do so.

Our research took the form of interviews – structured, but without formal questionnaires - recorded between Learning Catalysts and parents of children in their schools on the subject of 'family work stories': work, paid or unpaid, done by them and by their parents; and their hopes and expectations for their children.

One of the most striking findings was a lack of aspiration; but, equally, one of the most important was the value of having conversations about hopes and dreams for the future.

"If the daily work for someone is a matter of survival because of poverty, then long-term goals may never have been formed. The business is not so much about raising aspirations as about helping to articulate them, to know them and then to plan to make them happen. The capacity to have hopes and dreams is the lot of the informed, resourced individuals who have a sense of self-efficacy ... The conversations with learning catalysts could be an opportunity to imagine a future and plan for it." (Waterhouse, 2010)⁴

The strongest hope expressed by parents throughout the interviews was that their children grow up to be happy. There was a reluctance to guide children's choices.

"Parents are not particularly interested in achievement – 'as long as they are happy'" noted the Head teacher of a rural Fens school *"but if not coming to school makes them happy, parents would rather not influence them ... our attendance levels are poor; and attainment is well below national levels."*

There are links to be made with the Social Exclusion Task Force's analysis, quoting a survey⁵ of 12 to 19 year olds in which *"simply 'being happy' is the main goal for many"*. The Family Work Stories research questioned whether 'happiness' represents an awareness of opportunities and choice or rather a reluctance to make decisions, take risks and move out of a comfort zone.

"Just asking the questions can raise the issue and begin a series of thoughts and conversations. Making such conversations legitimate can be empowering. The notion of dialogue, of conversations that seek to understand and share knowledge, are also potentially effective in helping develop awareness of what 'happiness' might look like for an individual. The 'potential to achieve' is to be located in the development and acquiring of skills such as resilience and tenacity. It is realised in the expression of a person's self-worth and self-efficacy. An individual has to believe that she has choices, can make choices and a difference to her future if she has a chance to construct a plan to affect the realisation of her aspirations. The role of the Learning Catalyst is potentially at the heart of such a move to raise and realise aspirations." (Waterhouse, 2010).

³ Martin, R, December 2005: 'Reaching our Potential: Raising Aspirations in Norfolk 2005-2015': Norfolk Learning Partnership

⁴ Waterhouse, J: March 2010: 'The Learning Catalysts Project: Action Research for Raising Aspirations': University of Cambridge.

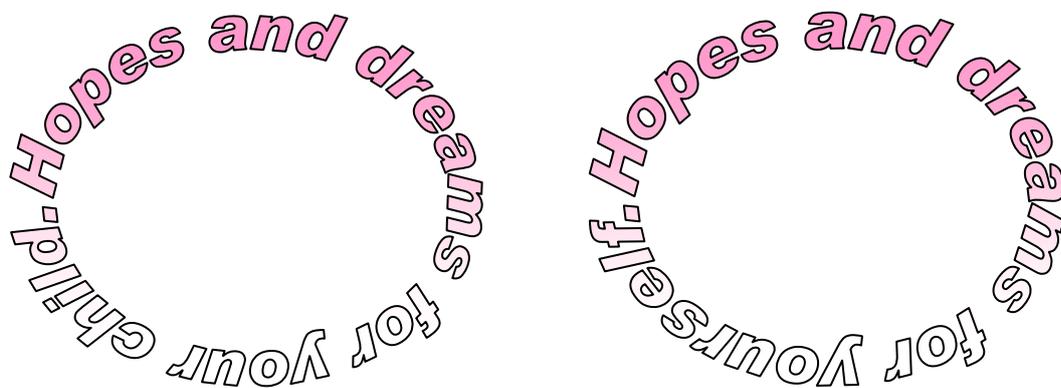
⁵ Young People's Social Attitudes Survey, 2003, quoted in the analysis and discussion paper of the Social Exclusion Task Force: see footnote 2.

4. Emergence of the Learning Catalyst role

The role of the Learning Catalyst as a catalyst – an agent for change - began to emerge. After four years of research and development work through family work stories and case studies in schools; training in Information, Advice and Guidance; mentoring and regular networks to share experience, we are now confident of being able to describe the six roles of the Learning Catalyst:

1. **A listener:** Learning Catalysts are active, reflective and informed listeners for parents/carers, gradually building a relationship of trust, enabling parents not only to express their concerns and worries and their hopes and expectations, but also empowering them to form their own decisions about what they are going to do to change things;
2. **An initiator of conversations:** to bring out parents' hopes and dreams for themselves and their children;
3. **A signpost:** towards information, advice and guidance and, increasingly, a provider of information, advice and guidance, to help translate hopes and dreams into plans;
4. **A creator of opportunities:** for parents and families to broaden horizons, build confidence, explore potential, experience learning and achievement. Creating these opportunities is vital. It gives adults permission to try something out in an environment where encouragement and support are the main features. Learning is a risk: it is possible to fail. For many adults, especially in neighbourhoods of deprivation, failure has been a common experience and self-esteem is very low;
5. **An observer and recorder of progress:** recording the impact of a learning activity or the provision of information, advice and guidance on behaviours and progression; providing evidence of change and of what works and what does not;
6. **A positive, 'can do' role model:** Learning Catalysts become sufficiently empowered to be learners themselves and to demonstrate by example that taking part in learning is not an admission of failure to achieve but a statement of confidence and self-belief.

'Hopes and dreams' became the aim of our conversations; and a simple format the means of recording them in an informal, non-threatening and open way:



Constructing a progression route

Information, advice and guidance, delivered through a combination of training for Learning Catalysts and referral, became the mechanism used by Learning Catalysts to help parents/carers to decide on and take the appropriate next step for them. The next step for one person is an impossible jump for another and too small to be noticed by yet another. Just as aspirations are bound up in family, community and place, so action to articulate and begin to raise them can be tailored through the support of a Learning Catalyst, in the context of their school community, to the needs of specific families, communities and places.

5. The impact of Learning Catalysts

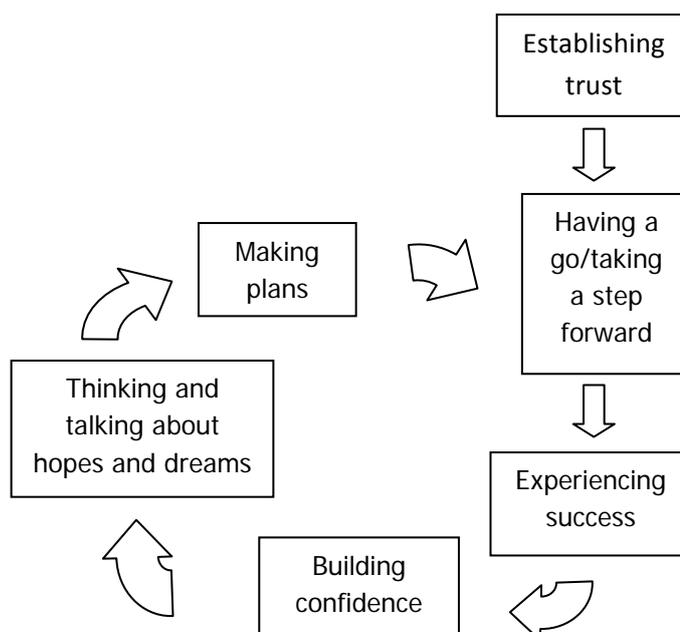
The Learning Catalysts project has had a whole range of positive impacts, some of which are illustrated by the quotes below:

- **Establishing trust**
 - *"If parents have had a bad experience themselves in school they are reluctant to speak to a teacher ... I explain my role as a bridge between the school and the parents. Parents know the kettle is on and that there is always a warm and welcoming feeling when anyone enters the [family] room. We want our parents to feel that the room is there for them and that they are welcome at any time ..."*
 - *"Since we have opened the room, our head teacher has noticed that the attitude amongst the parents has changed, with our 'hard to reach' parents now using the facilities that we provide – a big achievement for the school and me as LC."*
 - *"The pastoral support that our Learning Catalyst provides for families is invaluable and contributes highly to the 'building relationships' work that we are doing. We have at least doubled the families that we are engaging with. Our Family Learning Room is like a one-stop-shop for support or signposting – so needed, and something I [as Head teacher] do not have time to do."*
- **Community cohesion – a bridge within and between communities, and between community and school**
 - *"People that had never spoken to each other before now regularly stand together and talk in the playground."*
 - *"The Learning Catalyst's work was resulting in more parents coming into the school more frequently. Some [other support staff] perceived this as threatening and inappropriate. [The LC] argued the case for parents to better understand where school colleagues were coming from and portrayed the perspective of parents to her colleagues. She was a bridge for both parties to better understand the other."*
 - *"There can be some resentment from English parents towards the EAL parents and misunderstanding the other way ... I have explained the other parties' point of view. Sometimes they are not aware of where each other are coming from."*
- **Expanding the comfort zone: building confidence**
 - *"One of our regular mums said 'When I first started coming here, I felt out of place ... I thought other people could do things better than me. Now I feel comfortable and know I can do just as well.'"*
 - *"Now I listen with more purpose, trying to encourage the parents to just try something different outside their comfort zone ... they are surprised at how much more they can do."*
- **Making aspirations explicit**
 - *"While we were talking to families about their work stories, we started to ask about their hopes and dreams for the future. We realised how powerful this could be, as the parents said 'no-one has ever asked me that before'."*
 - *"It is really great to get to talk to the parents about their aspirations for their child. I believe that this really helps the parents to start having this kind of dialogue within the family about what they might like to do in the future."*
- **Translating into plans ... taking the next step**
 - *"Since the family room has opened, I have a parent who comes in to volunteer and that parent has now applied for a job. When I first met her, she had never worked and had very little confidence in herself."*
 - *"I ran an 8-week workshop where parents learned how we teach their children maths ... [from this] two have gone on to gain Level 2 maths for themselves."*
 - *"One of the mums said that if she hadn't come to drop-in and craft sessions, she wouldn't be doing what she does today. She runs a disability craft group called D.A.F.T. Craft."*

- *“Three of our creative club members have gone on to take their NVQ2 qualification whilst working at the school. One has completed and is now working in another school.”*
- *“The course [Levels 1 and 2 English] really was excellent. It has given the parents a real boost. Three of the parents are now going on to do further qualifications. The other parents tell me they feel a lot more confident about doing homework with their children. One parent has got a part-time job.”*
- **Being a learner ... and a role model**
 - *“Since becoming an LC my confidence has grown immensely. I will now enter full rooms for meetings and I’m happy to approach parents. I never feel intimidated in my role by anyone, that’s also including the professional people that I meet. I feel [the role] has encouraged me to learn and I have done so much since joining the programme.”*
 - *“The most important part of my role is being a role model, the person who says ‘you’d be good at that’ or ‘give it a go’ ... The parents themselves are now role models not only to their children but to other parents, asking them to come along, saying ‘you’d be really good at that, give it a go.’”*
 - *“Every class that is run, be it literacy or computers, I do as well as the parents. I’m no different to them and I also want to learn too, so this is good for them to see.”*

6. The progression route

The progression route might be envisaged as an upward spiral, once a starting point of trust has been established.



We suggest that a support worker in a school, as ‘one of us’ in school and community, is ideally placed to help construct this progression route. The Learning Catalysts themselves can be seen to be on a learning journey and progression route, becoming empowered and empowering others.

“An impressive aspect of the school’s work is the support and encouragement given to some parents and carers, helping them to be ambitious for their children and for themselves ... Leaders are ambitious for the staff, parents and children and ‘You can do it’ is almost a school mantra. Staff training greatly enhances the work of the school. Many support staff have gained qualifications, setting a good example to parents, who are increasingly making the most of the training and advice offered by the training and advice offered by the school.”⁶

⁶ Ofsted Inspection Report, Highgate Infant School, October 2009

Support staff are a tremendous resource. Support staff positions – midday supervisors, teaching assistants and administrative staff – provide a variety of entry points into paid work, particularly for mothers in a community. With investment in personal and skills development, the entry point can become part of a progression ladder, as we have seen in West Norfolk. Two of our Learning Catalysts have become PSAs and others are pursuing qualifications to teach adults. As Learning Catalysts progress, other parents from the community can take their place.

All too often, however, Learning Catalysts as support staff inhabit that band in the economy which is continually vulnerable to redundancy. As workers often on fixed-term contracts, they do not usually have the same opportunities for continuing professional development. But if we cannot empower our support staff with confidence and aspirations, how would we expect to empower our community of families?

In four years, the most noticeable change has been in the Learning Catalysts themselves. They, and their Head teachers and colleagues in school, have begun to see something of the same changes among parents. We cannot yet see evidence of an impact on their children's attainment or aspirations. We do believe, however, that without a process of this kind, change will not happen and policy-makers will be considering the same issues in a generation's time.

7. Learning Catalysts: a (another) long term approach to achieving a 'change of culture'

After four years, we feel we can offer an approach to articulating and raising aspirations: one which is located in and tailored to specific communities, led by 'mainstream' organisations with an understanding of their communities and an interest in their aspirations, and supported by local partners. Key to the approach is a group of people who are uniquely placed in school and community to act as a bridge between them and, if trained, resourced and supported, to carry out a set of defined roles that will help parents/carers to begin to articulate hopes and dreams for themselves and their children and put in place plans to realise them.

There is nothing really new in this approach. It brings together ideas and methods that are already known. 'Community Learning Champions', introduced as part of the 'Learning Revolution' by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, outlines similar roles for volunteers working in a community setting. We have Union Learning Reps and workplace Learning Champions; peer mentors in a variety of settings. A recent issue of *Local Work* highlighted Community Health Champions: an approach to reducing health inequalities through community empowerment; building capacity, building confidence and supporting a change of culture.

Changing a culture – whether it is one of poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking and stress or one of low aspirations and an expectation of low-skilled, low paid work or benefit dependency – is in itself a long term aspiration. Again, this is not a new idea. Nor is the recognition that, in order to sustain action over the long term it has to be embedded into the objectives of an organisation that will continue to exist over the long term.

Unfortunately, however, even 'mainstream' organisations cannot support this kind of activity, especially when facing years of public spending cuts. Support staff, part of that band of 'assistant professionals' who are an essential step on the ladder to higher skills, higher earnings, and 'social mobility', are vulnerable to redundancy. 'Raising aspirations' may be recognised as an essential part of a long term plan to tackle deprivation and reduce inequalities, but it is a luxury when there are short term targets, those that trigger funding, to be met.

A key finding of the Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) in relation to aspirations and attainment among young people was *"Evidence suggests that a **locally-tailored behavioural change approach** could be effective in shifting attitudes, changing behaviours and improving outcomes. This would mobilise the community around the goal of doing the best for their young people. It would provide a new model for **constructive local partnership** working."*

Learning Catalysts can offer such a model; but such models require a change of culture at Government level if they are to be able to make a real difference. The 'pilot project' funding culture has provided a wealth of evidence of 'what works'. A succession of pilot projects alongside short-term, target-driven 'mainstream' funding favours control, not change. Change, as so much evidence suggests, seems to require empowerment.

About the author and project partners

The author of this article is Sarah Glenn, Economic Development Projects Officer in the Regeneration team of the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, who acts as manager of the Learning Catalysts project.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk or the other partner organisations.

The partners in this project are the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk (Regeneration); the University of Cambridge (Leadership for Learning); the College of West Anglia (Community Education); Norfolk Learning Partnership; Norfolk Adult Education (Skills for Life); LMW Training and Research; The Park High School; St Edmund's Community Foundation School; Highgate Infant School; Howard Infant and Nursery School; Howard Junior School; Fairstead Community Primary School; Whitefriars CE VA Primary School; St Michael's CE VC Primary School; West Walton Community Primary School; Marshland St James VC Primary School and Nursery; Terrington St John Primary School; Tilney St Lawrence Community Primary School; Watton Junior School.

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