The role of schooling in furthering the aspirations of and for young people in local communities: Understanding contexts for educational change

A Research Report

Executive Summary

The project team has recently conducted a small, investigative project in two rural secondary schools that have been considering structural change. The study sought to identify constituency perspectives on the aspirations for young people at the schools. We found that regional location appeared most significant in framing the perspectives of school community members (comprising students, parents, teaching assistants, non-teaching staff, teachers and school governors). We also found that whilst respondents assumed relationships between schooling and aspirations for young people, their collective responses led us to ask whether general educational policies and their enactments accommodate the specific nature of communities and regional identities of students.

This report arises from The Schools Project, a programme of research on school change led by Dr Ruth Boyask, University of Plymouth. If you would like to discuss the findings in this report or the overall programme of research, please send contact details and the nature of your interest to Ruth Boyask, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Rolle Building, Drake Circus, Plymouth, PL4 8AA, United Kingdom ruth.boyask@plymouth.ac.uk.

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1. Section One: Aims and Objectives

This is the first in a series of studies which closely investigate the impact of school change upon the lives of individual young people and the communities in which they live. A recent review of research by the Social Exclusion Task Force (Cabinet Office, 2008) reports that young people who live in neighbourhoods where there is a high level of social deprivation are more likely to have low aspirations, consequently restricting their levels of attainment and life opportunities. Our study is centred on three adjacent school communities in Cornwall (a region identified as having considerable social deprivation (Government Office for the South, 2006)) that are working towards improving the prospects of young people. They are changing the structure of their schools with the intention of raising achievement levels and in particular, participation in higher education (DCSF/Academies, N.D.). Recently these three schools have been in discussion with Cornwall Local Authority, the University of Plymouth, Cornwall College and another school about propositions for school change. This included an application to the Department of Children Families and Schools to join the Academies programme, the Labour government’s prominent school improvement initiative that originally set out to overturn entrenched cycles of deprivation within particular communities and “…‘turn around’ underachieving schools…” (Curtis et al., 2008, p.75).

The Academies programme has been controversial, not least because of questions raised about the effectiveness of the whole programme (e.g. Gorard, 2009) and the success of individual Academies (Curtis et al., 2008) for raising levels of attainment. Curtis et al. (2008) claim there are “…many lessons that can be learned from existing Academies” and have derived a list of criteria for success from a review of literature about the Academies programme. These criteria point in particular to the importance of good external relationships, for example, with neighbouring schools, local communities and trade unions. Yet for schools attempting change this list offers little guidance about the kinds of internal relationships (such as those between management and teachers or student and teacher) that might make positive differences to learning outcomes. In our own investigation of literature there appears to be little known about the kinds of pedagogies used within Academy schools, whether they are substantially different from those in other schools and which are effective for achieving their goals. We contend that this is an especially important area to investigate, because educational research, even from different perspectives, shows that the relationship between teacher and student is significant to learning outcomes (Boyask et al, 2007; Luke, 2006; Wiliam et al., 2004).

Our overall task is to look closely at schools (like the ones in this study) that are attempting positive change. Our goal is to describe the effects of general policies (like the Academies programme) and investigate whether they are specific enough to attend to differences between school communities and cater to differences between individual learners (see Boyask et. al., In Press). In particular, we are interested in the perceptions and experiences of learners in environments of school change, so that we can better understand how changes impact on teaching practices and whether they contribute to positive outcomes for learners, providing an evidential base for schools and policy makers seeking guidance about
the kinds of changes to teaching and learning practice that should accompany structural change.

1.1. Aim

In this study we have focused on the aspirations of learners. We sought the perceptions that different constituent groups within the school communities held about the aspirations of their young people and examine these in the light of national social priorities, such as raising student attainment and regional development.

1.2. Research questions.

What perceptions do different groups have of the aspirations and intentions of young people in the community?

What is the role of schooling in supporting those aspirations and intentions?

What supports and barriers are perceived in relation to those aspirations and intentions?

2. Section Two: Research Design

2.1. Research design

The project drew together researchers and university lecturers already working in Cornwall schools who shared an interest in issues of social justice and how formal education (including schooling, further education, higher education and formal training/work-based learning initiatives) may better respond to the needs of local, national and global communities. This study was intended to be a small exploratory study that sought constituency perspectives on the aspirations of and for young people at the schools.

Terri Rees, our field researcher, approached three Cornwall secondary schools in close proximity: Worthfield, Dale and Wickbury with the intention of talking to different stakeholders within the school communities. While we initially secured access to all three schools, the headteacher at Wickbury withdrew the school from the project prior to interviews because of other time commitments.

Terri carried out semi-structured focus group interviews, exploring understandings of community and aspirations for the young people within the community. We requested up to seven interest groups (for example, the Parents, Teachers and Friends Association (PTFA), school council, other pupils, board of governors, teaching assistants, teachers and non-teaching staff) in each of the local communities of Worthfield and Dale. Our school contacts arranged the following groups:
Table One: Constituent Focus Groups at Worthfield and Dale schools (number of participants in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Worthfield</th>
<th>Dale</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Leaders</strong></td>
<td>Governors (includes Deputy Head) (2)</td>
<td>Governors (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching Staff</strong></td>
<td>Teachers (8)</td>
<td>Teachers (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents/Teaching Assistants (6)</td>
<td>Teaching Assistants (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non Teaching Staff</strong></td>
<td>Non Teaching Staff (6)</td>
<td>Non Teaching Staff (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young people</strong></td>
<td>School Council (10)</td>
<td>Pupils Year 9 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pupils Year 10 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Parents/Teaching Assistants (6)</td>
<td>Parents (5)</td>
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At Dale one of the groups of students (Year 10) was chosen using the following criteria: “Firstly, they were pupils who I felt would be confident enough to talk to a stranger. Secondly, I tried to select pupils who were of a range in academic ability” (Teacher, personal communication, 2008). It has not been possible to ascertain how the other group at Dale were chosen. The Worthfield student group comprised the pupil School Council and may therefore have disproportionately represented more articulate pupils.

The interviews were held during two visits to Dale and Worthfield in July 2008. They were audio recorded and transcribed in full, then content analysed according to the guiding research questions. This analysis highlighted three significant themes in the data:

1. Differences in the aspirations and intentions of and for young people in the community
2. Regional location and culture affecting the aspirations of young people
3. The role of schooling in supporting aspirations and intentions of young people

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3. **Section Three: Project Findings**

3.1. **Differences in aspirations and intentions of and for young people in the community**

Generally, adults at the schools wanted the pupils to succeed and reach their potential. At Worthfield some emphasis was placed on different pathways to success and the necessity of providing choices. The data from Dale suggested that the adult respondents perceived there are challenges for schools in fostering high aspirations in pupils. Parents’ aspirations were about wanting their children to be happy and to achieve their aspirations. The latter were couched in terms of future jobs (for example, by parents from Dale).

There was a perception amongst adult respondents that some pupils had high aspirations, particularly in terms of continuing education. “We have a number who have very high aspirations, and they tend to be the more academic, and theirs are clearly to go on to university and to go on to a full blown career” (Governor at Worthfield, interview, 21/7/08). However, many respondents expressed the view that aspirations for a seemingly significant group of pupils were low. “…I do think there is a significant minority, a significant element who don’t want to do much” (Dale Non-Teaching staff member, interview, 22/7/08). Most respondents felt that pupils were realistic, whilst others felt that some would not achieve what they wanted to because of their level of academic ability. The former also felt that students were in some senses selling themselves short because they had not aspired to their potential capability, so whilst their aspirations might be realistic, they were set too low.

At both schools, the pupils interviewed stated that their aspirations were to get good grades or good jobs. The sorts of careers they mentioned were in Veterinary and Forensic Science, Zoology, Acting, Primary School Teaching, Law, Journalism, Carpentry, Catering (Chef), Plumbing, Rugby (Player/Trainer), Child Care, suggesting that they had very high aspirations.

On balance, positive responses about high aspirations tended to predominate more at Dale than at Worthfield.

When asked whether they expected young people to stay in the locality, responses varied. Most respondents suggested that ‘local’ was as far as the county boundaries and the remainder suggesting that it was only as far as Truro. Factors felt to impact on whether young people stayed or left the locality were, unsurprisingly perhaps, related to whether the young people would be going on to higher education or whether they would need to leave in order to get work. Those expected to travel were largely the academic ‘high fliers’, with the implication that lower academic achievers would be less likely to have to travel for either study or work. Furthermore, respondents generally felt that attendance at university would lead some young people to take jobs outside the locality. Approximately five percent of respondents however, suggested that whilst some such young people will move away initially, they may return in later life, as others have done and indeed, a wish was expressed to see high level skills and employment opportunities brought back into the County.
In terms of staying in education at Further Education (FE) level, adult respondents generally agreed that a large majority would do so. Estimates ranged from 70% to 90%, the upper end of the range being the most commonly agreed upon. Estimates of the number of young people who would go on to university or other Higher Education (HE), were in the range of 5% to 10%, although this was far from certain because there were no sixth forms at the schools which might otherwise have given an indication of the number of students intending to move in such a direction.

3.2. Regional location and culture affecting the aspirations of young people

At Worthfield, much was made of the influence of community on pupil aspirations, and in particular, how the community limited aspirations.

Because in terms of aspirational thinking, I think it’s an insular community. When I think of some young people, I want them to understand that there’s a wider world that they may choose to buy into” (Governor at Worthfield, interview, 22/07/08).

Because of the low socio-economic area. Very often their parents are working in Tesco or not working at all...I don’t know, I just think everything seems very insulated here. Quite a narrow view of life (Worthfield Parents/Teaching Assistants, interview, 22/07/08).

Additionally, respondents other than parents and pupils often linked parental/home influences to low aspirations, suggesting “...sometimes because they come from families where aspirations are not fostered well enough. They may have no ‘in family’ role models that would indicate where high aspirations could take them” (Worthfield Non Teaching staff, interview, 22/07/08).

Other comments suggested that a “sizable minority” of pupils wanted to go on to higher education. Conversely, a significant number of adult respondents suggested that pupils’ aspirations were constrained by their desire to remain in Cornwall.

Some of the reasons given by the adult school respondents about why young people might stay in the locality appeared to be related to notions of geographical and cultural insularity. For example, a Worthfield Governor commented:

...there is ... this group who just don’t understand that there is anything outside of Worthfield. I know of some parents who have never been outside of Cornwall and of one person who has never been outside of Worthfield, and she is 60. (interview, 22/07/08)

The implication was that this not only affects aspirations, but also has an effect on whether young people in Cornwall achieve their aspirations. ‘Cornish children find it very hard to
move away. Some will go to university and in the first year, the pull of home is too great.’ (Dale Governor, interview, 21/07/08)

Teachers believed that geographical location also affected young people’s performance in schooling, influenced by the cultural values of their families. ‘All the time, as a language teacher, I ring up to say ‘Johnny hasn’t done his homework’ and when you say what subject, they say ‘Oh well, that doesn’t matter, they’re never going to go abroad.’ (Worthfield Teacher, interview, 22/7/08)

More than half of the responses from teachers, governors and teaching assistants suggested that some parents do not support or encourage their children enough and there is some evidence from at least three of the pupils that things like homework are not supported by some parents.

Whilst some responses suggested that ‘lower achievers’ were more likely to stay local because there were at least some jobs for them locally, more so than for the ‘higher achievers’, only one pupil gave a specific reason for staying local and he suggested that it was because ‘...it’s a better atmosphere around here. You know everywhere and where you can go.’ (Worthfield Young Person, interview, 22/7/08).

There were at least three responses that suggested that the cost of university or travel might be a factor preventing young people from venturing out of the county. At least four pupils stated that one reason for moving away was because there were more opportunities elsewhere. For those intending to stay in education at Further Education (FE) level, most respondents felt that young people would go to the local FE College.

3.3 The role of schooling in supporting aspirations and intentions

There were differences in perspective about how the schools currently support young people’s aspirations depending on what role the respondents had in the strategic direction of the school. Governors tended to talk about appropriate allocation of funds to support student learning by employing additional staff, the implementation of policies such as the new 14 – 19 curriculum, forging stronger links with local colleges and businesses or encouraging involvement and communication with parents. In other words, they made connections between the internal life of the school and its relationship to external forces. Non teaching staff were less policy focused, but also focused on external relationships, particularly between young people and the world of work (such as careers advice, work experience, local college ‘taster sessions’ and bringing in local employers to talk to the pupils). Pupils and teaching assistants however, made reference to pedagogical relationships such as, at Dale at least, the focus on the ‘whole child’, support for individual students, and the range of study choices. Dale teachers suggested that the school ‘provided options’. However, at Worthfield there appeared some dissatisfaction with how ‘the school’ in its entirety supported young people and their aspirations. Comments from teachers at the school implied that fostering young people’s aspirations would require overcoming divisions between different community members, finding a common school identity and
working together to reduce the burden upon individual teachers. The following comment from a Worthfield teacher (22/7/08) suggested that not addressing these issues will have negative consequences for the school experiences of young people.

One of the things is that after school activities will suffer because if you only have a half hour lunch, at the end of the day, you just want to get away as quickly as possible because you are so wacked. (General agreement) Where this has happened elsewhere, they’ve reversed it... We love what we do but we are hampered so much and at the end of the day at about quarter past three, the car park is empty because we just want to get away as quickly as possible.

However, location was also significant in respondents’ reflections on the role of school in supporting aspirations and intentions, with responses reflecting differences or a dynamic between national and local initiatives. Teaching staff, school leaders and non-teaching staff identified some national policy initiatives as significant to supporting aspirations, such as the new Diplomas and personalised learning allowing for greater flexibility in choices for students. One non-teaching staff member at Dale suggested that although there was a need for this, there was no one locally to ‘drive’ the new Diploma agenda. A point was made by a Worthfield Governor about the need for government finance to be used in a way that is ‘joined up’ in its approach to youth provision more generally. There were suggestions about how existing policies might be changed at national level to support aspirations, such as the reintroduction of apprenticeships and a less constraining national curriculum. There was some comment that the constraints of the national curriculum were alleviated somewhat through a local initiative at Worthfield called the TOTAL Curriculum. TOTAL stands for ‘Topic Orientated Teaching And Learning’, which groups curriculum areas around three ‘flavours’: Communications, Creations and Innovations. Other local initiatives and projects mentioned in relation to the schools’ involvement in the life of their students were the Dale ‘Heartland’ regeneration project, Worthfield’s ‘Murdoch Day’ celebration, interschool sports and the Comenius project, which promotes contact with Europe and is funded through the British Council.

When asked what school could be like to support pupils’ future, almost half of the respondents referred to practical issues such as making the school buildings and environment cheerful and welcoming and providing better IT facilities. There was also support for pedagogical change, such as more encouragement for students in need of additional support from teaching staff and pupils at Dale. Pupils at Worthfield also spoke about improving the student/staff relationship and how some tutors seemed to treat students unequally in terms of time and attention or allowing students to undertake certain activities. Pupils also suggested that improvements could be made to ease the transition from school to college, whilst parents suggested that a wider range of choices would be an improvement. However, some respondents suggested that profound educational change was required to genuinely affect student aspirations and outcomes.

It has to be more relevant to society. We have a model of education that’s hundreds of years old, it hasn’t changed very much but the children out in the world have and I
fear that we close children down by maintaining a system that isn’t necessarily applicable the way it should be. We put them in age groups, we put them in sex groups and that sort of thing, which you don’t ever do in other areas of society. We need a new model. I’m talking in terms of the way schools work completely, not just how you operate in the classroom as a teacher. I’m talking about the fact that we are in this building here and it’s a sort of a false place in lots of ways and if you looked at a school a hundred years ago, whilst it may not be so cheerful, it would be very similar. Children these days are doing 3 or 4 things at a time, texting while on their playstation and watching TV. Images are continually passing all the time. We sit them in a class and say, shut up and listen. (Dale Teacher, 21/7/08)

4. Section Four: Implications

This project was framed by our three research questions: What perceptions do different groups have of the aspirations and intentions of young people in the community?; What is the role of schooling in supporting those aspirations and intentions?; What support and barriers are perceived in relation to those aspirations and intentions? In this section we draw upon the answers to these three questions developed above to develop a set of implications for school change. Implicit in our questions was the desire to hear the perceptions of different constituencies within the school community, and consider how young people’s aspirations are shaped both within and outside of school. These concerns are developed within this section, which offers implications of the research for three interrelated contexts for change and their associated constituencies.

4.1 Teaching and Learning: What does this research mean for classrooms?

Sharing the successes of pupils seems to be important and something that takes place in both institutions. Yet we also noted variation in the expectations for pupils held by teachers and others within the school. Expectations can act as constraints to young people’s attainment and aspirational goals. We suggest that teachers, teaching assistants and young people themselves can engage in activities to help deconstruct the labels that inhibit their development.

For example, views of high aspirations amongst all the participants were commonly linked to qualifications or a job (i.e. an ‘endpoint’) rather than holistic outcomes (such as lifelong learning). Aspirations not connected directly with academic attainment and employment were much less evident, leading us to suspect they are less supported within the schools. We propose closer attendance to the different kinds of aspirations that can be recognised within the classroom. Basil Bernstein (1973) suggests there are three main message systems within schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Evaluation. Whilst national policy does mandate some aspects of these through the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and other regulatory bodies, we would emphasise the importance of complementary localised responses to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Support for the development of new and contextually relevant approaches could be provided through professional development or practitioner/participatory/action research and evaluation.
4.2. **School and Community: What does this research mean for the local community?**

Some pupils and their families appear to identify strongly with their location in the communities of Worthfield and Dale, as well as the county of Cornwall. However, the location of these schools, and in particular their situation in Cornwall is seen as a disadvantage to young people’s aspirations. For example, there were views expressed that the community is insular and that high aspiring and high achieving pupils necessarily must leave the area.

While we recognise that regional location can act as a barrier to improving student outcomes, we also point out that schools are less likely to enact change when they are working in isolation from their communities. Through recognising and drawing upon the qualities of the region these negative viewpoints can be challenged and perceptions changed. Constructive and creative possibilities may be offered to high aspiring young people in this locality, and these possibilities sought and found through shifting some of the responsibility for providing opportunities away from the school and to the local community.

4.3. **School Change: What does this research mean for the governance and structure of the school?**

The findings suggest that different constituencies within the school community held generally different views about aspirations of young people. We noted that in their responses there was a tendency for school leaders and teachers to focus on national policy goals (such as attainment and raising aspirations) and external relationships between the school, businesses and tertiary education institutions, whereas students and teaching assistants seemed most concerned with interpersonal relationships and other micro-level phenomena within the school. We suggest that sustainable and locally responsive school change could be informed by the voices of young people and what will help them to achieve their aspirations (through mechanisms such as this research project). Furthermore, young people will benefit from conversations about their relationship to the world outside of school and responsibility to the wider community. This could be facilitated through engaging them in important discussions about structural change and policy implementation, and thus including them more fully in decision-making.

5. **Section five: Conclusion**

This study sought to identify constituency perspectives on the aspirations for young people at the schools. Whilst different trends emerged from the groups, regional location appeared prominent in the perspectives of all constituency perspectives. The data also showed that whilst respondents assumed that young people’s aspirations were connected to the external demands placed upon schools, for example national assessments and qualifications, not all...
young people were expected to be successful in national (i.e. normative) terms. Whilst the schools are bound by national accountabilities, there is potential within curricular, pedagogical and evaluative functions of schooling to develop localised approaches that may better support the aspirations of young people in these school communities. The repertoire of what counts as a “high aspiration” could be expanded and the locality could be explored for its qualities, providing aspirational goals that are not entirely dependent upon moving away from the region. In the words of Worthfield’s Deputy Head:

When we talk about aspirations, what parents want for their children, we want them to be happy and when they are happy, they are successful...what makes people happy – young people’s access to and involvement in the community, being part of that, their understanding of their place in that, not just what they give but...the experience of being happy, building strength in communities and a sense of responsibility, that there is a sense of the importance of play. That whatever the design of this school is, social areas and social interaction will be important places to ...The idea that young people can genuinely contribute to what their community looks like and helping other people in the community because of the psychological benefits that can accrue to young people (22/7/08).
References


