

## CATCHING CONFIDENCE



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## **About the Authors**

Jan Eldred is Senior Development Officer with NIACE.  
Jane Ward is Regional Development Officer for the North West with NIACE.  
Yanina Dutton and Kay Snowdon are Research Assistants with NIACE.

# Catching Confidence

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
Acknowledgements	
1 Introduction	1
2 Literature review	5
3 Methodology	17
4 The confidence grid activity	21
5 So, what is confidence?	25
6 The impact of confidence	31
7 What helps confidence to grow	47
8 Conclusion	55
Appendices	
1. The participating projects	59
2. The grid	62
3. Instructions for using the grid	63
4. Learner interview / focus group questions	64
5. Interview guide for practitioner interviews	65
6. Teaching and learning approaches	67
Bibliography	69



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

### **Purpose**

This report describes the background, research processes and findings of a small-scale study conducted to carry out qualitative research into learners' and practitioners' views on the development of confidence in relation to learning. It set out to examine the nature of confidence, what seems to influence changes in confidence and whether any changes could be evidenced during episodes of learning. The research took place between September 2003 and March 2004.

There were three major purposes of the study:

- Conduct a literature search on confidence and self-esteem, especially in relation to learning, in order to gather existing knowledge;
- Develop a research tool which would involve learners and practitioners in identifying changes in confidence during a period of learning;
- Develop an approach to involve practitioner researchers in identifying the significance of confidence and what aids its growth within the learning process.

### **Action research**

The project developed an action research approach, which focused on the use of a grid, designed to form a basis for discussion and dialogue with and between learners. It was a tool for reflection on the nature and manifestation of confidence and a way of capturing any movement in confidence during the learning experience. Interviews with groups of learners in focus groups and one-to-one interviews with tutors and learners were also held. These explored experiences, feelings, reflections and evidence of changes in confidence, as well as differences between self-esteem and confidence. The report not only analyses the methodology and the evidence gathered but also assesses the usefulness of the research tool as a potential tool for self and group reflection in adult learning.

### **The report**

The report is set out firstly with a literature review related to self-esteem and confidence in the context of adult learning. The methodology then outlines the research design and methods used, including the development and use of the research tool. This is followed by the main findings of the research, which covers how learners and tutors defined confidence and self-esteem, how changes in confidence were recognised and the process which encourages changes in confidence. Finally, we have concluded with implications and recommendations about how to acknowledge and encourage gains in confidence in relation to adult learning and how to develop research in this field.

## **The Adult and Community Learning Fund**

The Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) began in 1998 and ended in March 2004. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, now the Department for Education and Skills, DfES) established the fund, to develop and discover what seems to work best in widening adult participation in learning. It set out to reach more and different learners by working with new and different learning providers, along with mainstream partners. Over 600 projects were supported and managed jointly by the Basic Skills Agency and NIACE and over 40,000 learners were reached. Projects had to submit quarterly reports as part of the monitoring and support process. These were read and responded to and much of the data was used to support wider reports, publications and further research. This study is in response to some of that data and was funded by development strands of the ACLF.

NIACE staff, including a Senior Development Officer, a Regional Development Officer and two Researchers, designed and facilitated the project. An Administrative Secretary supported the team. An Advisory Group with membership from interested people within NIACE, along with representatives from the DfES, the Learning and Skills Development Agency and the Wider Benefits of Learning Unit, guided the work.

Eight ACLF supported projects and one other associated programme were committed to the research. It was anticipated that 80-100 learners would be involved. The projects came from different geographical areas of England, the Further Education, Adult and Community Learning and Voluntary and Community sectors and worked with a range of different learners. These included refugees and asylum seekers, women only groups, people with learning difficulties, those living in particular neighbourhoods and people experiencing mental health difficulties and/or drug and alcohol difficulties. The practitioner researchers were briefed and trained in the research methods and supported through email, telephone and an update meeting. The practitioner researchers used the research tool with their learners and conducted some one-to-one interviews. NIACE staff conducted focus groups with the learners and held interviews with the practitioner researchers.

### **1.2 The rationale**

In seeking to work with and alongside people not usually found in adult learning, ACLF projects supported many vulnerable and often isolated people. The majority had undertaken little or no learning for many years; some had ceased formal study on leaving school. The ACLF reports spoke of the strategies adopted to not only attract people into learning but to address the low levels of confidence they felt about being able to learn 'later'. Projects supported by the Fund, therefore, appeared to be potentially productive sites for studying any changes in confidence in learning.

The ACLF monitoring reports were required to comment on progress to date and the final report sought data on achievements. These achievements included accreditation and qualifications, as well as imaginative and creative ways of recognising and recording non-accredited outcomes of learning. One

of the key outcomes reported by many projects was a growth in confidence and self-esteem amongst learners. Many quarterly reports and the majority of final reports identified these outcomes. However, further investigation and discussion revealed that the outcomes were based upon anecdotal evidence and little systematic gathering of indicators. Nevertheless, tutors reported how they were sure that not only did staff observe growth in confidence and self-esteem but learners reported it too.

Juxtaposition of the apparent significance of growth in confidence and self-esteem in ACLF projects was made with evidence in studies conducted by Eldred (2002) and Ward and Edwards (2002). In studying perceptions of success in teaching and learning adult literacy, Eldred found that increases in confidence were the most commonly reported difference which literacy learning made (2002). Both tutors and students agreed on this. She found that even though some learners made little measurable progress in their literacy learning, they reported growth in confidence as an indicator of success.

Ward and Edwards's study of learning journeys amongst literacy and numeracy learners also identified significant increases in confidence and self-esteem (2002). They saw such gains as positive factors in their development as learners. Growth in confidence and self-esteem were also seen as indications that they were making progress. Ward and Edwards reported that with increases in confidence, learners seemed to take their gains in confidence with them; they felt that they could do more outside the classroom as well as inside.

Confidence and self-esteem therefore appeared to be highly significant to learners returning to study after a long time and/or who felt that their experiences in initial education had been unfulfilling. The research team felt that there were sufficient indicators on which to base further, systematic exploration of the role of confidence in learning. However, they wanted to place the study in the wider context of adult and community learning rather than in the narrower one of literacy and numeracy learning. ACLF projects offered an ideal setting.

Not only had ACLF work and literacy studies suggested that confidence and self-esteem in learning seem important but work on identifying and recording learning outcomes and achievements also identified their significance. A recent initiative called Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) set out to develop systems for negotiating learning outcomes and recognising learning gains and achievements made by learners in non-accredited provision. The majority of pilot studies concluded that most learning brought about gains in confidence, some recommending that confidence building should become a planned learning outcome. A study into confidence and self-esteem in learning could support such initiatives, complementing their attempts to record all those outcomes that are significant to learners.

### **1.3 Why does it matter?**

Identifying learning gains and achievements are vital parts of the learning process. In non-accredited learning, the challenge is to clearly capture individual and group achievements, in order to demonstrate to learners, tutors and funders what has been gained. Many community-based and community-focused learning activities are non-accredited. If gains in confidence are as significant as many learners and tutors appear to suggest, ways of evidencing them seem to be important.

Gains in confidence are important to fulfil government policies too. Development of confidence seems to be one of the keys to the successful development of literacy, language and numeracy skills through the Skills for Life strategy. Similarly, the learning agenda linked to Neighbourhood Renewal demands that individuals and groups gain confidence to engage with issues of importance for their community well-being and regeneration. Learning to deal with mechanisms for change and growth requires confidence. The national Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) Widening Participation strategy would also be enhanced and enriched with greater insight into the role of confidence in attracting and sustaining involvement in learning. Links into the skills strategy, *Realising Potential; Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* could also be made, where targets are set to encourage people with few or no qualifications to achieve a level 2 qualification. The relevance of the study appeared clear and timely.

However, before it is possible to record gains or losses in confidence, attempts must be made to understand the nature of confidence and its significance in learning activities. This study set out to examine confidence in relation to learning and ways of catching changes in confidence during episodes of learning. It also attempted to identify those things that help to build confidence in teaching and learning.

## **2 Literature review**

The literature related to adult learning and soft outcomes was investigated to provide an overview of what was known about them and to identify existing practice in this field. The first part of the review explores the definitions covering what are termed soft outcomes, in particular confidence and self-esteem. The second part looks at ways in which researchers, learners and tutors identify the importance of and changes in confidence and self-esteem. The aim is to increase our understanding of this area of work while identifying gaps in knowledge and research.

### **2.1 Definitions**

#### **2.1.1 Defining soft outcomes**

Soft outcomes are considered in the literature to be those outcomes that occur as a consequence of learning but are not easily quantifiable. They are used to describe gains in confidence and self-esteem, and might also include acquisition of so called soft skills, such as problem solving skills. They are usually seen as intangible and difficult to quantify and therefore different to hard outcomes which are viewed as tangible evidence of success, for instance accreditation or completion of a course of study. In practice, as Ward and Edwards (2002) contend, the distinction between hard and soft outcomes is not so clear cut, as even hard outcomes "are often dealing with degrees of success rather than clearly defined absolutes".

As James (2002) points out, there is little literature relating to the definition and measurement of soft outcomes in the context of adult learning. Where it is found, the most commonly referenced 'soft outcomes' are confidence and self-esteem. This literature often relates primarily to government run programmes, namely the European Social Fund (ESF) and Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) (Lloyd & O Sullivan 2002; Steer & Humm 2002). Here, soft outcomes were defined as "those that are related to the aptitudes, attitudes and skills that are prerequisites to success in the spheres of education, training or employment and towards maintaining positive social relationships" (Steer & Humm 2002). Dewson et al. (2000) viewed soft outcomes as outcomes that could not be measured easily and were intangible. Both of these definitions were limited in helping us to develop our understanding as we designed our research to capture these outcomes.

To further our understanding of the concepts of confidence and self-esteem we therefore looked beyond the literature relating solely to adult learning and confidence and self-esteem. The volume of research in this area is weighted towards self-esteem with fewer studies of confidence. It also proved difficult to locate literature that explained the concepts of confidence and self-esteem in relation to each other. Often one concept was explained in-depth (usually self-esteem) with no explanation given for the other concept (usually confidence), despite making reference to it, as if there is a shared understanding of its meaning. The next sections will explore definitions of confidence and self-

esteem separately, although in the literature they were often used interchangeably. We start with confidence as this is the main focus of our study.

### **2.1.2 Confidence**

*Confidence is a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation. This belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation. (Working definition of confidence developed to inform the research.)*

The definitions and concepts of confidence used in the literature differ (Norman and Hyland 2003), but usually relate to an individual's beliefs about their abilities and attributes. Moreover, whilst individuals can possess an overall level of confidence, this can vary at different times and in different situations.

Lindenfield (1995) defines confidence "as made up of not only a wide range of learned social skills but also some specific deeply rooted positive personality attributes." She sub-divides these under outer and inner confidence. Outer confidence refers to "the confidence that most people would recognise" and she refers in this context to social skills in the areas of communication, self-presentation, assertiveness and emotional control. Inner confidence refers to "the more privately felt experience of inner peace and psychological strength whose main components are: self love, self knowledge, clear personal goals and positive thinking." One kind of confidence influences the other.

Norman and Hyland (2003), suggest that there are three elements to confidence: 'cognitive' is a person's knowledge of their abilities; 'performance' is their ability to do something; and 'emotional' is feeling comfortable about the former two aspects. This has implications for learning, as developing confidence would need to accommodate each aspect.

People can also have both an overall general level of confidence, and situational confidence, which is the notion that they can be confident in one or more areas of life, but not necessarily in others. Levels of confidence are variable as a person possess the knowledge or skills required to do something, but not be confident to act because of the specific situation or environment. Thus they could be confident in one aspect of life but not another, such as being confident to travel anywhere but feel unconfident about starting a learning course (Eldred 2002). Learning has been found to develop both situational and overall confidence. For instance, Schuller et al (2002) found that gains in confidence through learning helped people to cope with other areas of their lives, and sometimes influenced their overall levels of confidence.

There is also a complex relationship between confidence and self worth. Confidence in an area of life does not always mean that a person values themselves highly or has high self-esteem (Therapy Today 2003). A person may be confident in some areas of their lives but not necessarily relate this to their own sense of personal worth, so that this confidence does not contribute to their self-esteem. Moreover, some people with low self-esteem put on a 'front' so that they come across as confident whilst having genuine self-doubt, (Tice 2003). On the other hand, as Tice (2003) also notes, when people have healthy self-esteem general confidence flows from this.

This implies that working to build one's self-esteem, consciously or not, also adds to confidence. This suggests that confidence needs to be built from the inside to add to feelings of self worth and avoid being a 'front' for a person's real feelings about themselves and their abilities. This is also fundamentally related to their overall level of self-esteem. We shall now turn to the concept of self-esteem.

### **2.1.3 Defining self-esteem**

*Self-esteem is more than feeling good about your self. It is also about being aware of your abilities. It is about who you are, being able to acknowledge positive and negative aspects and still feel good about yourself. It's about having a positive sense of identity. (working definition of self-esteem developed to inform the research)*

Concentrating on self-esteem as a soft outcome of learning is important, as everyone has a level of self-esteem, and developing it is a fundamental human need which influences our lives whether we choose to acknowledge it or not (Branden 1994). It is therefore important to develop self-esteem because of its significance in our lives.

Definitions of self-esteem vary, but the general theme running through the literature is that it is related to the twin aspects of worth and competence (Mruk 1999). A person's level of self-esteem is important and related to both their sense of worth, that is how they feel about themselves, and what they feel they are capable of doing or achieving. Competence and worthiness keep each other in balance, so that being out of balance can create problems. It is important therefore to sustain the possibility of maintaining and changing self-esteem.

Branden (1994) is frequently cited by James (2002, 2003, 2004) and Fraser (2003) in regard to defining and understanding self-esteem. In Branden's work competence and worthiness are also identified as core concepts of self-esteem. Self esteem "is the conviction that one is competent to live and is worthy of living" this conviction is the motivator that inspires behaviour. Self-esteem is wrapped in competence and worthiness where competence is related to our trust in our ability to do something. This security lies in our confidence in our ability to learn and adapt rather than the actual knowledge we know. Worthiness is related to self-respect, where someone is assured of

his or her value. They feel comfortable about appropriately asserting their thoughts, wants and needs. Branden's definition of self-esteem makes no reference to adult education, although it is about managing change, accepting responsibility, making choices, making decisions and being active "and as such it does have an impact on the purpose of adult participation in learning" (James 2002).

Many definitions reinforce the notion of self-esteem as being related to feelings about oneself, as it involves individuals valuing and making judgements about themselves, for example Balbir and Gulati (2003). For some this also implies the importance of maintaining awareness of your own behaviour in order to take responsibility for your own actions and behaviour towards others, for instance in the Assembly of California Legislature Task force's definition of self-esteem cited by Mecca (1996): "Appreciating my own worth and importance and having the character to be accountable for myself and to act responsibly towards others." Dolley's (1995) definition also recognises the importance of relationships with others. Consideration of wider societal situations are important because an individuals' self-esteem is strongly influenced by cross-cultural, social and environmental factors.

Lawrence (2000), looks at self-esteem specifically in the context of adult learners. He sees a person's self-esteem as the discrepancy between a person's self-image and their ideal self. The self-image is how someone sees themselves, whilst the ideal self is a collection of ideal values, standards of behaviour and abilities to which a person aspires. A person's self-image can motivate or inhibit the actions they take. For instance, if they have had prior experience or believe they can do something then they are more likely to do it. Lawrence goes on to say that "In practice, self-esteem can be defined as confidence and as such it has two aspects: Confidence in personality, and Confidence in abilities". These two areas of confidence are similar to other references that use the terms worth (personality) and competence (abilities).

### ***Healthy levels of self-esteem***

There is some debate as to what constitutes desirable levels of self-esteem. Emler (2001) and others consider too high a level of self-esteem to be dangerous and undesirable because they perceive particular behaviours, including delinquency and risky pursuits, such as driving fast, to be associated with high self-esteem. In this case, high self-esteem is seen as problematic and characterised by arrogance, a sense of superiority and failure to heed social, moral or legal rules and conventions.

Branden (1994) considers instances where individuals appear to have a high level of self-esteem, but obtain it through bragging, boasting and being arrogant. He terms this 'pseudo self-esteem', and argues that all these actions actually reflect a lack of self-esteem, as the individual needs to feel superior to others.

In response, Alexander (2001), Hammond and Jackson (2003) and James (2002) suggest that it might be more desirable to aim for people to have

'healthy' self-esteem rather than high self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem is considered to reflect personal resilience and emotional well-being. It "does not mean that we do not see our flaws or weaknesses, or that we overvalue our attributes or abilities. Rather, it means that when we look at the balance of which we are, both our positive qualities and our shortcomings, we still feel good about ourselves" (Therapy Today 2003).

Alexander (2001) and James (2002) refer to global and trait self-esteem. Global self-esteem relates to unconditional self-acceptance, sense of capability and purpose, appropriate assertiveness, experience of flow and fulfilment, a sense of responsibility and accountability. Global self-esteem relates to a person's overall self-esteem and refers to intrinsic worthiness, regardless of what particular abilities or qualities we may have. Trait self-esteem, on the other hand, reflects confidence or ability in a particular area, such as at work.

Like confidence, self-esteem is changeable and needs an effort to raise and maintain it. Ison (2003) talks about her self-esteem in relation to her adult learning experience. She notes how self-esteem constantly changes over time and requires work to keep it at a healthy level.

There are many situations in people's lives that challenge their level of self-esteem. Mruk (1999) believes that when an individual reaches a crossroad in their lives their current level of self-esteem conflicts with their past issues of self-esteem. This can result in an individual moving on to a new level of self-esteem or it can reinforce their current level of self-esteem. The worthy option usually requires challenge and a certain degree of competence. The less worthy/unworthy choice does not involve demonstrating higher or new forms of competence. We have lots of these crossroads in our lives, this leads to us building, maintaining or losing self-esteem, with pain being a more powerful motivator than promise.

At a crossroad situation past experience will influence the choice taken. Branden (1994) believes that having high self-esteem will be reinforced through higher resilience and an ability to bounce back quicker from situations, than those with low self-esteem. Having low self-esteem often means expecting failure or things to go wrong. When a crossroad situation occurs and the less worthy option is taken it reinforces failure and maintains low self-esteem. When a person has low self-esteem any situation can take longer to recover from as the situation often reinforces the person's low level of self-esteem.

Some of the literature (Lawrence 2000, Fraser 2003, James 2002) states that high self-esteem and attainment are linked. "People who possess high self-esteem are generally eager to learn, they get along well with others, they enjoy new challenges and they are highly motivated... People with low self-esteem are likely to become concerned about what others may think, and lose motivation. The effects of low self-esteem include a sense of worthlessness where individuals can feel that they cannot offer any positive contributions to other people, and are equally not deserving of any help or opportunities. Often

they are unable to acknowledge their positive attributes, and thereby further lower their own self-esteem” (James & Nightingale 2004).

#### **2.2.4 The link between self-esteem and confidence**

The relationship between confidence and self-esteem appears to be complex and difficult to define. Much of the literature appears to use the words interchangeably but we have attempted to separate them in our working definitions of confidence and self-esteem which have assumed a close link between them but do not suggest that they are the same thing. Both confidence and self-esteem can rise and fall, and levels of confidence can vary significantly in different situations. Although good levels of confidence in at least some life situation appear to be a pre-requisite for healthy self-esteem, the reverse is not always the case as people can be very confident to act in particular situations but have low self-esteem because of a low sense of self worth which they are able to disguise.

Self-esteem could be described as a ‘capital investment’ that incrementally grows but which can also fall in value; confidence is more like a ‘current account,’ which can be at different levels according to the situation. We feel that where confidence grows it can contribute to self-esteem, the capital, which acts as a buffer when confidence is low. Where confidence is constantly low, self-esteem is likely to be damaged.

In a simplified way, self-esteem is raised through feelings about ones self in relation to worth and competencies. Gains in confidence are more related to the actual doing of things and belief in abilities, including acceptance by others (Lawrence 2000). Confidence in this sense appears to be part of self-esteem.

Confidence is concerned with how we feel about doing and attempting things. It is raised/lowered through experience of doing things, whereas, self-esteem is how you feel overall. To build up confidence in different situations through practical and personal skills can add to the senses of worth and competency needed to boost self-esteem. The situational confidence may influence self-esteem in certain areas of a person’s life (trait), which in the long term may spread over to other areas of a person’s life and influence global levels of self-esteem.

In relation to learning, it was felt that to influence confidence in the ‘situation of adult learning’, would have an affect on other situations. We drew on the research where it existed, but found that little research has been carried out into the dynamics of how this happens and the full extent of the impact, either positive or negative. Research into how confidence is built through learning increases knowledge about ‘confidence capital’ and ways in which it might lead to improvements in an individual’s overall global self-esteem. The next part covers the literature related to ways in which confidence and self-esteem have been captured and recorded by others in research and learning environments.

## **2.2 Capturing confidence and self-esteem**

### **2.2.1 How to increase learners' confidence and self-esteem?**

From the literature common themes emerged about how to increase learners' self-esteem. These themes relate to learners' self-identity and providing support to empower learners to take control and responsibility for their own learning.

In the literature, central to the development of learners' self-esteem and confidence was the role of the tutor in learners' success and enjoyment (Eldred 2003, Goodland 2003, Lawrence 2000, Hammond and Jackson 2003). Tutors development of self-esteem involves more than praising learners, it is about giving them a realistic image of themselves (Lawrence 2000). Tutors therefore require an understanding about their role in identifying and raising learners' self-esteem through effective listening and communication skills. Fraser (2003) states "it is crucial that adult educators understand what self-esteem is; how to develop and enhance it in self and to nurture it in others, and to recognise its importance in all forms of learning". James & Nightingale (2004) also emphasise the importance of tutors being aware of their own self-esteem levels, as it can "affect the way we act and impact on others." Other research has found that peers play a crucial role in developing confidence and self-esteem by encouraging each other to recognise achievement and providing positive encouragement and praise (Ward and Edwards 2002).

Some working in the field have developed indicators of self-esteem. For instance, Alexander (2001) in the context of employees within organisations and Dolley (1995) in the context of adult community learning. The indicators included;

- A sense of purpose – generated by people exploring their vision, sharing their dreams and developing action plans for achieving their individual and learning goals;
- A sense of identity – developed by learners clarifying their values, achievements and goals;
- A sense of belonging to a group – engendered by accepting the environment, opportunities for interaction and participating in shared activities;
- A sense of personal competence – through experience, developing problem solving and coping skills and also by developing a record of achievement;
- A sense of security – by having designed sessions and guidelines. Participants also feel secure within a framework that effectively enables their learning capabilities to be reawakened.

Branden (1994) also highlights the themes of self-identity, control and responsibility in his 'Six Pillars of Self-esteem' where he states practices that have an effect on individuals' self-esteem. He recommends the following six areas as way to maintain and raise self-esteem. Although they are not

specific to learning the themes are similar to those developed by Dolley and could be developed with learners in mind:

- Living consciously – being aware of our actions, reasons, and values of what we do
- Self-acceptance – acknowledging who we are and accepting it as a precondition to change and growth
- Self-responsibility – having a sense of control over existence, responsibility for goals and actions
- Self-assertiveness – honouring and expressing needs, wants and values
- Living purposefully – having a sense of purpose and direction in life
- Personal integrity – where our behaviour matches our values, when ideas and practices meet

### **2.2.2 How to capture self-esteem and confidence?**

Although indicators of self-esteem have been identified and learners' and tutors' perspectives examined in the literature, there are limited explorations of means of capturing and recording this evidence. Reference in the literature was often made to psychological techniques to measure self-esteem. For example, Steer & Humm (2002) used the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, where respondents respond to statements by choosing from a variety of levels of agreement, such as strongly agree, agree, and disagree.

Other techniques to capture changes involved basic evaluation/research techniques. For instance, Janssen (2000) used focus groups with learners to gauge their perceptions of learning. Confidence was identified as the most commonly emphasised benefit of learning. The learners also emphasised that they preferred one-to-one feedback and that any outcome measurements should be integrated within the course. Turner & Waters (2000) also found learners preferred discussing outcomes and learning achievements when it contributed to a dialogue with their tutor.

Learners are often involved in recording their self-esteem and confidence in relation to learning and how this affects other areas of their lives. Newell (2003) used course feedback forms to gauge learners' perceptions of outcomes. The feedback forms indicated that 97% of students had improved their confidence. In addition "raised self-esteem in our students is measured through student progress, increased inter-action in class and with the lecturer, tutorial records, completion of and achievement in courses, regular attendance and verbal feedback."

Knighly (2002) also involved learners to record their changes in self-esteem through an approach that only aimed to capture self-esteem by using the Q-sorting technique and an ideal self-inventory. The Q-sorting technique involved ranking cards in order of beliefs about one's self thereby involving participant subjectivity. A grid recorded the scores thereby allowing a comparison of results if the activity was repeated at a later stage. As the method did not capture participants' own words the self-inventory technique

was used, where participants spoke about the difference between their self and ideal self.

A survey on recognising soft outcomes on community projects found some projects were using questionnaires, scoring systems by participants and employees and one project was developing a graphical system of review with participants using a computer based traffic light system (ESF 1998; Lloyd & O'Sullivan 2003).

A more unusual way for tutors and learners to recognise achievements and levels of self-esteem was developed by Newell-Walker (2000). Art/life histories were used as an effective technique to develop self-understanding and self-worth. Learners used art to recognise and reflect the value of self, which led to an increase in their value of themselves and raised self-esteem.

### **2.2.3 Learner & tutor perceptions on confidence and self-esteem**

Often learners and tutors identify gains in confidence as their most prominent learning outcome. Eldred's (2002) study found that both tutors and learners from basic skills groups identified increases in confidence as the main indicator of success along with feeling better about one's self. Confidence also emerged as a key indicator of success of teaching and learning regardless of whether externally measured literacy gains had been made (Eldred 2002). Thus Eldred (2002) states that confidence should not only play a role in recording achievement or progress, but should be seen as evidence of success and a goal of literacy teaching.

Norman & Hyland (2003) looked at whether confidence was an inhibitor or facilitator of learning through asking trainee-teachers to identify the cause and lack of confidence in relation to their own learning experience. Factors that contributed to an increase in confidence were social interaction, familiarity, receiving support and engagement and being treated well. A lack of confidence was experienced when they did not have a sense of security and purpose as they doubted themselves, over-estimated the task required, felt unaccepted by others and judged. A sense of belonging, security and identity all emerged as important.

NIACE's research on family learning, adults with learning difficulties and returning to learning have led to an evidence base of self-confidence as a reported outcome of adult learning. Studies on women in education and training (McGivney 1993), adult learning in pre schools (McGivney 1998) and informal learning in the community (McGivney 1999), found raised confidence to be a significant gain of participating in learning. Many other studies have identified an increase in confidence as one of the main or only gains for learners.

In Charnley and Jones's (1979) study of literacy students they found that "students did not primarily judge their success in terms of utilitarian objectives; they registered a feeling of increased confidence." Increased confidence among the students was recognised as; a willingness to reconsider personal

attitudes, an ability to assess evidence, a willingness to evangelise about learning, an improvement in self-reliance, an improvement in assurance and a reduction in anxiety. It is evident that learners consider personal gains, such as increased confidence, one of the major benefits from participating in learning and that such gains have a significant impact on their lives.

As well as learners identifying gains in confidence as important, confidence is often seen as the bedrock of all other achievements as it inspires learners to progress (Charnley and Jones 1979; Grylls & WEA 2002). For example, a review of a Women's Learning Programme, found that many learners' experiences raised confidence levels and identified positive changes in their personal relationships and ability to handle family responsibilities. The learners' accounts of their learning activities demonstrated that confidence acted "as a fuel to enable them to move on to a great variety of new activities, situations and experiences" (Grylls & WEA 2002).

Learners often find changes in self-esteem and confidence leads to changes in self-image and everyday life, beyond the learning activity (Grylls & WEA 2002; Ward and Edwards 2002). In Ward & Edwards's (2002) study of Learning Journeys when respondents reflected on their lives in the context of the learning they had done the most 'profound' change of many learners' was enhancement of their self-esteem and confidence. The increases in confidence impacted on the learning and into other areas of their life. McGivney's (2002) findings also indicate that the achievement of softer outcomes such as increased confidence enable and facilitate educational and economic progression.

Schuller et al (2002) analysed 140 in-depth interviews with adult learners, and identified a range of benefits in outcomes of learning, in particular raised confidence. Learners described how raising their confidence through learning had enabled them to do other things such as: put forward their own views, acknowledge mistakes, communicate more effectively with family or personal relationships, to communicate more effectively with professionals, actively offer help to friends, neighbours or family, and to take on new roles and responsibilities in the family and community. "It is hard to think of a single field where confidence is not mentioned as a key benefit of learning" (Schuller et al. 2002).

Hammond (2004) found that many of the learners interviewed believed through learning their confidence increased resulting in them taking more control of their lives, feeling empowered to tackle issues and to deal with problems. The learners were more relaxed with strangers and took more active roles in their communities, again echoing the indicators of self-esteem previously outlined. The learners' self-value was enhanced through achievements, positive feedback from tutors and peers and through being able to help others. It was found that a sense of purpose and future was closely linked with self-esteem and led to the formation of new aspirations. The development of control and responsibility was also apparent as the learning brought structure, routine and focus, which provided "distraction from

cares and anxieties which is important in promoting well being, mental health and positive coping mechanisms” (Hammond 2004).

Schuller et al. (2002) found that “Confidence leads to greater social inclusion at a number of levels concurrently.” As other studies, outlined above, have also found the study noted that confidence helped learners cope with other areas in their lives. Self-esteem was also a recurrent theme with people coming to a clear understanding of self but also valuing themselves more highly as they gained more control over their lives.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Confidence and self-esteem are complex concepts but seeking to understand them in relation to the learning context is important as developing them can bring about enormous benefits for learners. Whilst there is little consensus as to the exact nature of confidence and self-esteem there are some recurring features.

Confidence is said to relate to ability to do things and this ability depends on possessing the knowledge or skills to do something, believing that one can do it and feeling comfortable about this. This can vary in different situations so that confidence can be seen as situated.

Self-esteem relates to how people view themselves. This relates to their feelings of self worth as well as their ability to act. Confidence can be seen as an aspect of self-esteem but not exactly the same as self-esteem. In practice many writers use the terms interchangeably but this may mask important differences. We developed working definition of the two terms and aimed to test them through the research.

It is clear from the review of the literature that identifying key characteristics of self-esteem and confidence could assist in understanding how learning develops individuals’ confidence and self-esteem. Techniques can be developed in relation to these key elements, which can be used in learning to develop and capture changes in self-esteem and confidence. However, research in this area in relation to adult learning is still scarce and our study sought to add to knowledge in this area.



### **3 Methodology**

We adopted qualitative research methods for our study as we felt that these would garner the detailed information and insights we sought to enable us to explore both the nature of confidence and the dynamics of confidence and learning. As confidence is a difficult concept to define, we set out to investigate the nature of confidence as defined through the lenses of learners and tutors. Their perspectives are largely absent from the research literature on this issue, and this study provided a valuable opportunity to add their voices to the discussion. We aimed to explore the perceptions, opinions and experiences of tutors and learners in-depth, as we believed that these would yield valuable information on perceptions of confidence, the connections between learning and confidence acquisition and loss, and ways in which these changes are manifested in real life situations.

This section outlines the methods used to determine the sample, ethical issues, data gathering and data analysis. The catching confidence research grid activity tool was developed because, as already noted, the evidence base relating to confidence is thin, and this presented us with a considerable challenge when considering ways in which we might capture confidence. In response we designed an innovative approach, the confidence grid activity, which will be considered in some detail in section 4.

#### **3.1 The sample**

As indicated, the research was carried out with ACLF projects, and we aimed to recruit up to 15 projects to yield a sample of 100 learners and 15 practitioners. The projects that had noted increases in confidence as one of the benefits of participating in their activities were invited to take part as they already had an interest and knowledge of this aspect of learning. Additional projects were then selected on the basis of their location and learner groups in order to include a spread of variables: urban, rural, age, gender, ethnicity and ability. A bursary was offered as recognition of the value of their contribution.

However, some projects were unable to follow through their initial enthusiasm for the work and withdrew at a later stage leaving insufficient time to recruit substitute projects, and 9 projects took part. Although frustrating, this is perhaps an inevitable feature of working with vulnerable groups with little funding and small staff teams. In these circumstances frontline work has to be prioritised and research can appear an unaffordable luxury. Time and staffing was the issue rather than funding in these circumstances. Despite this attrition, the spread of learner groups and circumstances was maintained and provided rich and interesting data.

#### **3.2 Ethical issues**

The project team considered ethical issues in relation to all aspects of the research practice. We undertook to ensure confidentiality, and that participants understood the purpose of the research activities, and the ways in

which we might use the information they shared with us. Our approach was based on respecting the tutors and learners who agreed to take part, seeking to minimise the impact of power differentials and doing our utmost to avoid harming respondents in any way. This was a particularly pertinent issue, as we knew that many of the learners we were talking with were, or had been, in vulnerable situations so that discussions about confidence carried an inherent danger of causing distress by triggering unpleasant recollections. We sought to work closely with tutors and project staff to develop an understanding of circumstances and to carry out the interviews with tact and sensitivity.

### **3.3 Gathering the data**

The confidence grid activity research tool was complemented by the use of interviews which used the information and insights generated by the confidence tool as starting points for a more in-depth exploration of the issues raised. We interviewed tutors and learners as we anticipated that both groups could contribute a wealth of insights based on personal experience, reflecting different perspectives and positions. We conducted one-to-one interviews with tutors and used both individual and group semi-structured interviews to discuss confidence with learners. We took this approach in order to draw on the dynamic in which members of a group stimulate and encourage each other to develop their ideas and thoughts as well as to offer the opportunity for articulation of individual experiences and views.

We designed a question framework for the focus group and one-to-one interviews with learners and a second framework for interviews with tutors (see appendix 4). These guided the interviewers through the discussion and were complemented by reference to the grid activity. Issues included views on confidence, gains or losses in confidence and how these developed, the indicators and impact of these changes, whether and how confidence helped learning, and reflections on the grid. They were intended as flexible guides rather than a rigid procedure, and in practice the order and phrasing of the questions was often changed to fit the situation and those being interviewed.

Members of the research team visited projects to carry out group interviews with learners and to interview the tutors. Tutors also conducted the individual learner interviews, as well as carrying out the grid activity twice with the learners. Interviews with learners and tutors generated a wealth of fertile data, although some of the individual learner interviews were rather short. This could have been because the learners felt more secure in the group setting, although the inexperience of the practitioner researchers might also have been a factor.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The research yielded a large amount of data in the form of copies of the grids and interview transcripts. This presented a considerable challenge, not least because of the dispersed nature of the research team. Our approach was that two members of the team scoped the data and produced an initial list of themes and topics, which was then examined and modified through

discussions within the team and with the practitioner researchers. The team also drew on a process used by Barton and Hamilton (1998) and used the grids to organise the data to enable us to seek patterns. This generated further ideas, themes and definitions, which the research team then drew on as they refined the analysis and concepts. Identification and interpretation of the most significant themes then brought us to the conclusions presented in this paper.

### **3.5 Practitioner research**

An important aspect of the approach adopted for the study was working with practitioners as research partners. One reason for this was that we wanted a more equal and inclusive relationship than merely using them as data resources, but the most compelling reason was that they possessed credibility, knowledge and understanding gained from their work with people and communities which enhanced all aspects of the research, especially the design of the tools, conduct of the research in the field and the data analysis. Further reasons were that it offered a training opportunity and interesting and enjoyable development experiences.

One condition of involvement in the project was that project staff should attend two training/consultation days. The first training day aimed to explain the aims and approach of the research and equip project workers to use the grid activity and interview frameworks. It was also designed to consult on the draft research activity and tools. Initial discussion revealed a surprising degree of consensus around definitions of confidence and what it means to be highly confident, confident, not confident or have very low confidence in a situation. Role-play with a dual purpose of training in the use of the tool and testing the content was used and produced constructive criticisms and changes. The second training day brought the practitioners together to contribute to the data analysis through discussion of the emerging findings and themes. Their reflections and suggestions added to and refined our initial thinking, for instance by confirming some of our hunches and adding to or proposing alternative explanations for other suggestions. The final stage was to circulate the draft report to elicit further reflections and comments on the findings and conclusions. Researchers who attended the training found it a good starting point for the work, and meeting colleagues provided peer support.

The research practitioners brought knowledge and understanding which enhanced the study. Their insights improved the design of the research tools and added weight to the analysis of the data. Their work on the confidence grid produced valuable information in its own right and constructed a solid foundation that supported learners to explore and articulate detailed reflections in the interviews.

However, not everything went to plan and valuable lessons were learned. The main issue was that not all the individuals who attended the training then carried out the research, as some passed it on to colleagues. As the colleagues had not attended the training some of the important messages

about the research process were lost or diluted with a consequent impact on the conduct of the research. This appeared to have come about either because we had not emphasised our requirements sufficiently, or because individuals who had intended to do the research found themselves unable to continue their involvement because of the pressures already identified.

Despite this, the practitioner researchers were valuable and constructive partners and their contributions certainly enriched the study. The researchers told us about the benefits to them of taking part in the study. They found that discovering what confidence learners gained through participation, and what it meant to them, was invaluable. They also developed their own thinking on the issue of confidence, especially in relation to the nature of confidence and how to evidence this with the learners. Finally they valued learning with and from colleagues working in other ACLF projects. We concluded that it is definitely worthwhile to pursue this aspect of research, although further work may be required on clarity of intent and means of supporting the development of robust research practice.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The research encompassed a wide range of learning situations and learners from a variety of backgrounds within the ACLF projects. The qualitative approach provided an effective means of capturing learners' and tutors' views. It generated rich data and enabled a picture to be built of the awareness of tutors to the confidence process in teaching and learning.

The involvement of practitioner researchers enhanced the value of the research study and added to knowledge about what works in this difficult area of research. The training days and feedback sessions were essential elements in including the practitioner researchers in the process and ensuring the quality of the research, and problematic issues arose where the research was passed on to staff who had not taken part in the training. Despite this both the research project and the individual researchers benefited from participation in the study.

## 4 The confidence grid activity

The aim of the research was to develop a way in which we could capture any changes in confidence experienced through learning, whether it was positive or negative. We wanted to capture these changes over time and try to identify periods where confidence was higher and lower, as well as the overall change from beginning to end. The second aim was to see in what ways any changes in confidence through learning were reflected in other areas of people's lives, outside of the learning situation, for instance, at home, socially with friends, in the community or at work.

We learned some general methods to capture self-esteem and confidence from the literature and adopted the idea of having statements that people could agree or disagree with. We also liked the idea about having cards as this made the activity visual, interesting and gave the users the opportunity to reflect, change their mind and move the cards, as they felt appropriate. We then considered how we would record any responses and changes.

From these considerations an activity that was visual, easy to understand and could be used by a variety of people with different learning needs in different learning environments was developed. This was a grid activity that involved learners reflecting on their levels of confidence at two stages, ideally as close to the start and end of the learning activity as possible. A grid allowed a way for the activity to record the responses to different statements.

Ten statements that captured different aspects of confidence were placed down the first column. These statements ranged from general overall confidence, such as 'I am a confident person', to more specific areas of people's lives or skills, such as 'I am confident to write'. Along the top row each box represented a different situation/environment in a person's life from the learning centre to home, social situations, at work or out and about in the community (see appendix 2 for the grid).

The idea was that the individual doing the grid activity would place a card that best represented the level of confidence they felt they had for each situation (such as, the square corresponding with 'I am confident to write' with when I am at 'the learning centre'). The cards had one of four different shapes stuck on them, each representing a different level of confidence (Highly confident, confident, not confident and low confidence).

The cards were used to allow learners to reflect, discuss their choice of card with another person or group and change the card, as they thought appropriate. Once a final decision was made the next stage was for the learner to place a sticker that matched the chosen card in the grid space, thereby recording what they believed their level of confidence to be. Initially, the sticker was to be placed on the left hand side of each box in the grid and then when the activity was repeated a second time, near the end of the learning activity, the sticker was to be placed on the right hand side, thus offering a quick visual guide to where the learner thought their confidence had

changed and in which direction. The point of using the cards, rather than just going straight to placing a sticker on the grid, was to recognise that the task of self-reflection was not easy or a quick exercise, we wanted people to be able to stop and think about it, have time to self-reflect rather than rushing through the exercise. Where the grid was a group activity this also allowed for individuals to revise their first choices in response to the comments and observations of peers.

Shapes were chosen to correspond to a level of confidence in an attempt to avoid them being too value laden, as for instance, the use of numbers might have been, where number one was seen as the desirable number to have. Faces were considered ranging from smiling to unhappy but we felt they might not be a good way of discriminating the different levels of confidence, such as the difference between confident and low confidence.

Levels of confidence that the shapes represented were to be discussed by the group prior to carrying out the activity, in order to make sure there was shared understanding among the group about what confidence was and what each level represented.

We tried to design the activity to fit a variety of learning situations and a variety of learners. The grid was therefore adaptable so that the practitioners could change it to suit their learners' needs, such as using different symbols, changing the wording of the statements or situation names to fit the learners lifestyle, such as taking out the 'at work' situation if none of the learners worked. The activity was piloted with the practitioners involved in the research and they tried the 'defining confidence' exercise where they discussed what confidence was and what each level represented. Some minor changes were made and then the practitioners tried the activity with their group of learners.

#### ***4.1 Using the grid***

Nine groups completed the grid activity, in a few cases some learners had only done the grid activity once, due to time restrictions, absences and other practical problems. Some projects carried out the activity as a group, where people could discuss their choices and in general the issues of confidence. Other projects carried out the activity with the learners on a one-to-one basis, based on the need for privacy, practical reasons and the perceived influence the group would have had on other learner's responses.

The majority of the projects did not adapt the grids to suit their learners, although they all commented that in future they would do so, so that it would better suit their particular learning environment. This was to help the learners gain more from the activity through being more appropriate to their needs. Of the projects that made changes they included:

- Changed the 'at work' column to include 'volunteering' and 'out and about'
- Used pictures to illustrate the wording

- Reversed which stickers represented which level of confidence, due to the star sticker being seen as representing high rather than low confidence
- Split the ten confidence statements into five work sheets rather than being one grid
- The cards that represented the levels of confidence were not always used. The learners went straight to placing stickers on the grid. (There was a mixed response to whether using the cards was necessary or not.)

In future, one project would like to develop and use visual statements so that the grid activity would appeal more to learners who had difficulty with English as their second Language. Some of the projects would also make more time available for the learners to carry out the task.

The majority of projects prepared the learners before starting the grid activity, including a session about agreeing what confidence meant, the different levels of confidence and the reasons behind doing the activity. Only one project was able to carry out the grid activity with the learners close to the start and end of the learning activity. The other projects carried out the grid activity as close to the beginning and end where possible, but it was not always the case due to the timing of the research in relation to the timing of the projects' learning activities. The activity was usually done with three to ten learners, although sometimes everyone at the learning activity tried it, including as many as 50 in one project.

#### ***4.2 Learners' perspectives of the grid***

The activity allowed some learners to reflect in ways that they had not done before. It was challenging as it involved self-reflection on how they felt about their abilities and attributes. The majority of learners were pleased that they had taken the time to complete the activity and they could see changes that had occurred. A few learners found it difficult at the time to reflect and come to terms with how they saw themselves and what they were actually like. In an extreme example, one learner, after completing the activity for the first time, wanted to make changes in her life, as she did not like what she saw on the grid. After completing the activity for the second time, she realised that she had a long way to gain the level of overall confidence that she wanted. However, she also recognised that she had made some changes, which were positive and very significant to her. The grid activity gave some of the learners a new perspective on their 'self'.

A few learners saw the activity as part of an assessment and did not enjoy participating. In these cases the activity had not always been explained to them very well and they had been given a limited amount of time to complete it. The learners identified some drawbacks that reflected those highlighted by the tutors. Mainly, the wording on the grid was too complicated (where English was a second language) and the different situations did not always reflect their life style, such as those not working or who lived alone. One group would have liked a level of confidence that represented 'confidence okay' that went

between not confident and confident. An indicator like this was originally rejected on the grounds that the majority of people would have chosen it because it was in the middle of five choices rather than having four choices and therefore needing to think more about which side their confidence lay. It was also suggested that tick boxes rather than stickers would also have worked just as well. Using smiley faces instead of stickers was also suggested by a couple of projects, although others felt that the learners they worked with would have viewed this as patronising.

### ***4.3 Tutors' comments on the grid activity***

Most tutors found the grid activity useful. One project was dubious about the usefulness of the activity but did feel it contributed to the group bonding quicker than other learning groups. Two projects were 'struck' by the changes they had seen over the period and felt the grid activity captured this and brought to their own attention how significant confidence was as part of the learning experience. Another project felt the grid had accurately captured the learners' confidence.

It was difficult to always say whether the grid accurately reflected the changes in confidence, as some people talked about changes that were not reflected in the choices they had made. One tutor felt the grid had not captured all of the changes she had seen, as the learners had not recognised the changes or felt any had taken place.

The main drawback that two tutors felt was that to some learners the activity was considered to be a test. In one case the tutor had not given the learners enough time to complete the activity and did not explain it well. The other group of learners had difficulty with the wording being in English. The activity did take time to complete.

Another drawback with the grid was that it did not capture the learners' own words, the discussions that took place while doing the activity and communication changes made through body language. This is why the activity, while significant, was only part of the process of capturing confidence and why talking and interviews about the subject were encouraged. One practitioner suggested video recording the group as an additional way for the learners and evaluators to see the changes in confidence through body language.

### ***4.4 Conclusion***

The confidence grid activity was a powerful tool for supporting learners to recognise changes in confidence in and beyond learning situations. It was an effective framework for stimulating discussion and self-reflection. The activity worked best when the wording and presentation of the grid was adapted to fit particular groups of learners and their learning environment. It also helped if plenty of time was made available for the activity and it was built into part of the learning experience.

## 5 So, what is confidence?

In all the encounters with learners and their tutors, questions were asked about whether the interviewees could begin to define confidence. Evidence predominantly arose from the learner focus group discussions; less insight was offered during the one to one interviews, although there were exceptions to this. Tutor interviews revealed valuable observations and insights but the richest sources of evidence came from the focus groups.

A number of key phrases arose in the interviews. These were that confidence is concerned with feelings and beliefs; it is related to 'doing things' which includes talking. A 'before' and 'after' situation was also described by a significant number of people, suggesting that confidence is something which changes. In a total of 9 focus groups with learners, 18 one-to-one interviews with learners and 11 tutor/practitioner researcher interviews, references to feelings and beliefs dominated. Such references arose in 29 separate conversations; 'doing' arose in 25, 'talking' in 8 and 13 interviewees referred to 'before' and 'after'.

### 5.1 Feelings

The focus groups revealed that many learners believe that confidence is related to how you feel. They said such things as,

*"...it's having a positive attitude...", "...it's not feeling 'a tip'..."*,

*"...it's not having butterflies...", "...it's self-belief..."*,

*"...confidence is not being wary, being at ease with yourself and others..."*

They also said that it related to belief in self and,

*"...loving yourself, having hope, feeling positive, feeling whether you can cope..."*

One group suggested that confidence makes you feel happy about yourself;

*"...it is being on top of the world"*.

The individual interviews suggested that confidence is,

*"...feeling pleased with yourself, feeling sure of yourself, believing in yourself..."*

as well as,

*“...it’s about how you feel in your heart.”* One learner said that confidence is, *“...having respect for yourself, in yourself, having hope and feeling positive.”*

The tutor interviews also indicated that confidence is concerned with issues of self-belief and feelings. One tutor suggested that confidence is what helps overcome difficulties whilst another said that it was about feeling sure of one’s self. Another tutor said that confidence is,

*“...feeling somebody, feeling valued and achieving...”*,

whilst another one suggested, *“...it’s feeling good and comfortable about yourself...it’s feeling in control”*.

One interviewee said that confidence is belief about stepping into the unknown and trusting in yourself. Several tutors said that confidence is complex and difficult to describe.

## **5.2 Doing**

Whilst few of the learner interviews revealed statements offering a definition of confidence, many revealed insights into how it can be described. This was often in relation to things which people felt able to do. They said that confidence is such things as,

*“...doing things in front of others...”*,

*“...meeting new people...get out and go...”*

*“...doing something off your own back...”*,

*“...walking into a room full of strangers...”* and

*“...it’s doing new things...gaining new skills...trying new things.”*

These learners appeared to be reflecting on those things which having confidence enabled them to do. Their definitions related to their behaviour in new situations, with new people or new experiences. Confidence appeared to be something described and evidenced through action.

Tutors also suggested that confidence is revealed through action. They said that it is,

*“...doing something with which you are comfortable; you don’t have to be good at it.”*

They also suggested that confidence is what helps you to see that you can do things and are doing something, about which you might previously have been unsure. One tutor suggested that confidence is about doing new things and

showing that you can achieve. Tutors seemed to draw on evidence of action, more than learners did, to indicate the nature of confidence.

### **5.3 Talking**

In addition to doing things, learners suggested that talking or '*speaking up*' seemed to be a feature of confidence. They suggested that confidence is

*"...speaking up for yourself"* and

*"... about talking to new and different people".*

Tutors did not indicate that speaking up was a characteristic of confidence.

### **Before and after**

Seven of the individual learner interviews referred to 'before' and 'after' situations as an insight into what confidence is, saying such things as:

*"I'm not scared now...before I wasn't very confident...but now..."*

The words, 'before' and 'now' were frequently used as well as 'in the past' and 'previously', along with such things as,

*"I've come from being quiet and shy to what I am today."*

The focus groups revealed a similar number of references to doing things, 'before' and 'after',

*"I used to sit quietly...I always used to sit next to the people that gave better answers...Standing up in a group in front of people I could never do that... but now, I just get up and say, 'Come on'"*.

They spoke of how confidence is about doing something that in the past they did not think they could do or tackling something other people thought they could not do. The sense that confidence is defined by comparisons, change and moving on was evident.

Only two tutors made direct reference to confidence being related to changed actions with comments such as,

*"Confidence is doing something you never thought you could"* and,

*"Confidence is something you do which you were negative about".*

### **5.4 Situated confidence**

Some tutors and learners suggested that confidence is not a fixed feeling or behaviour but that it changes in different circumstances and situations. In the individual interviews some learners said that,

*“...confidence varies from situation to situation,”*

and one tutor suggested that, *“...it’s different for different people in different situations.”*

Another tutor simply stated that confidence is situated. These statements, combined with the ‘before’ and ‘after’ insights suggest that both learners and tutors realise that confidence is not something you have, or not, but that it changes and it can be influenced.

Most of the discussion focused on confidence being a positive feature; however, some of the interviewees also revealed what they believe low confidence is.

### **5.5 Low confidence**

When asked for a definition of confidence, some interviewees responded by talking about low confidence. The focus groups revealed such comments as,

*“...low confidence is associated with isolation and few relationships...”*;

*“...it’s blue...it’s horrible...it makes you feel low.”*

Tutors said,

*“...low confidence is when you feel down, you feel you can’t do something...”*;

*“...it comes from so many negative things in people’s lives...”*;

*“...it comes when you’re isolated.”*

These insights into low confidence can help to suggest further characteristics of confidence. By indicating the negative dimensions the learners were able to illuminate the positive. Interviewees seemed to know what feelings and behaviours indicated that their confidence was raised or growing; they also knew how low confidence felt and what impact it had on behaviour. The converse of how confidence was suggested as being included, having good relationships and feeling good.

### **5.6 Confidence and self-esteem**

During the interviews with tutors, questions were raised about the similarities and differences between confidence and self-esteem. Responses were extremely varied, with some interviewees suggesting that they are the same thing, without offering any further responses or ideas. Some tutors acknowledged the difficulty of trying to separate the two but offered definitions such as,

*“...confidence and self-esteem are part of the same thing...”*;

*“...self-esteem gives you confidence...”* and

*“...self-esteem can be damaged by low confidence...”*

One tutor said, *“...Confidence affects self-esteem...”*,

While another said, *“Confidence builds self-esteem”*.

These observations suggested that whilst tutors recognised the close links they also recognised the differences between confidence and self-esteem. One tutor said that self-esteem is hidden whereas confidence can be demonstrated; confidence changes more quickly than self-esteem and self-esteem grows much more slowly than confidence. Another said that confidence comes before self-esteem and that confidence grows before self-esteem. Yet another tutor said that,

*“Self-esteem is loving yourself”*.

### **5.7 Different perspectives – tutors and learners**

In triangulating the research methods, it is possible to suggest that the different interview approaches gained different insights into the nature of confidence. The focus groups revealed rich sources of evidence of some aspects whilst some of the individual interviews revealed others. Little was revealed by learners about how to define confidence but insight was gained from them about the characteristics of it. Individual interviews revealed more about evidence of changes in confidence than the focus groups and the tutors. The significance of speaking up was revealed in the learner interviews but not with the tutors. All tutors attempted to describe the differences and links between confidence and self-esteem.

The differences are highlighted in order to indicate the different perspectives, which the research drew out. Learners and tutors bring different experiences of the learning situation; the importance is to capture both perspectives in order to develop fuller insights.

### **5.8 Summary**

Tutors were asked about the differences between confidence and self-esteem. Some suggested that they are the same thing; others said that it was difficult to separate them. Some tutors indicated that they are part of the same thing and that confidence contributes to self-esteem suggesting that confidence builds self-esteem. Some tutors suggested that low confidence can also damage self-esteem. Confidence seemed to be easier to evidence than self-esteem and several tutors felt that whilst confidence can be demonstrated, self-esteem remains largely hidden. Generally, tutors felt that self-esteem is a more holistic characteristic; confidence is more specific and situated.

This evidence seems to endorse our working definitions of self-esteem and confidence in the learning situation. Tutors and learners spoke about feelings in relation to doing things, in relation to other people and particular situations. Whilst they often seemed to use the terms to mean the same thing, they suggested that self-esteem is often not demonstrable whereas confidence can be evidenced. Learners added that confidence is often revealed through a 'before and after' situation. We shall now look at how changes in confidence affected learners' lives.

## 6 The impact of confidence

The research findings revealed a high degree of consensus of views of the relationship between confidence and learning and the indicators and manifestations of this. The specific instances and indicators were diverse, reflecting the broad range of life histories of the participants. The primary themes were:

- Participation in learning did enhance confidence
- Learning was not the only driver of confidence and levels of confidence changed in relation to external circumstances
- Levels of confidence varied in different situations
- Increased confidence brought about changes in:
  - ◆ Self-esteem
  - ◆ Body language
  - ◆ Ability to speak out
  - ◆ Heightened life aspirations
  - ◆ Ability to learn and aims for progression
  - ◆ Relationships with family and friends
  - ◆ Community activity and activism
  - ◆ Work ambitions, performance and relationships

These themes will now be explored in more detail.

The learners were involved in a wide range of contexts and diverse subjects which included vocational and life skills, community development, personal development, drama, arts and culture. A common strand running through this diversity was that almost all the learners experienced successful learning and their confidence increased. This in turn enhanced their achievements and progression to further learning, but the combination of new skills and knowledge with enhanced confidence and self-esteem brought many broader benefits. For many learners, they were a powerful catalyst for wider changes, achievements and ambitions which had a transformative effect on their lives. This related to their sense of self, their aspirations and dreams, further learning, work, relationships, and community involvement:

*“I’ve got that much confidence I think I can do anything now.”*

### **6.1 The rise and fall of confidence**

The learning experiences had a significant effect on confidence. From different starting points, most experienced a rise in confidence, but this developed at different speeds, and was more pronounced in some situations than others and when interacting with different people. Learning was not the only variable affecting confidence and external factors or set backs in learning could cause confidence levels to fall.

With almost no exceptions, the learners interviewed stressed that their confidence had increased, as a direct result of taking part in the learning

programme. Some had started with high levels of confidence, although this perhaps varied in different areas of their life, so that they might be confident in the home environment but worried about entering new or strange situations, or confident at work but less so at home. However, highly confident starting points were the exception, and most learners observed that they started with very low levels of confidence and self-esteem. Whereas for the majority there was a gradual increase, for some it was a fast journey that took off as soon as they started learning:

Interviewer: *“Was it a long process?”*

Learner: *“It started as soon as I came through the door. Well, everybody was so friendly and I think that from that day on it changed completely.”*

One tutor noted that, *“The time it takes is gradual but for some it’s quite sudden.”*

It is also important to note that changes were often mediated by the realities of day to day lives and experiences, since, as one group observed, learning alone cannot change everything. Learners noted that their confidence levels varied in different situations and this often reflected past experiences and current life situations. They were sometimes more confident when interacting with different groups of people. For instance, some were more confident with women but not men, others were more confident with peers on the course than people they knew outside, others were confident with familiars in their home and family environment but uncomfortable meeting new people outside.

One of the strong messages emerging from the findings was that confidence is not a constant but can be higher at some times than others: *“It goes up and down”*. This is because many influences and situations affect it. For the learners in this study, these included progress in learning, external circumstances and the actions and reactions of other people, arguments with friends, being out of work, accidents. It is not surprising that circumstances, such as serious illness or the rejection of an asylum application, have a profound effect on confidence levels:

*“It depends on what you’ve got going on in your life. Some things can go so smoothly and be so good and then something can happen and bang, you’re back down again.”*

However, for many, learning was a resource for regaining confidence, even though they might recognise that it would be a lengthy process. One learner explained that sometimes problems can be so deep and that although the project can do a lot, it takes a long time to get your confidence back.

Success and achievement in learning, reinforced by tutor and peer recognition and praise boosted confidence, as it made individuals believe in their abilities and potential. Conversely, stumbles in the learning process knocked some learners’ confidence because the experiences of failure made them doubt

their capability. However, not all were set back by failure, since, as one learner observed,

*“[You] have bad days and good days and, if you have got confidence the bad days don’t hold you back”.*

Despite these highs and lows, all those interviewed reflected that overall they had gained in confidence and, as already noted, this had a transformative effect on many aspects of their lives.

## **6.2 Sense of self**

Two of the changes which appeared to be of primary significance, as they were reflected in all the different domains of everyday life discussed by the learners, were massive increases in their sense of personal worth and the ability to ‘speak out’. These both underpinned and were created by the developments, achievements and transformations in learning and the different aspects of their lives.

Enhanced confidence was related to changing self-image and attitudes. The learners developed more self-respect and started to like themselves more, to feel that, *“I am worth something”*. This was important, as when they liked little about themselves their sense of self-worth was low. Consequently, they also felt that other people would not like them. This inhibited their ability and willingness to enter new situations and relate to new people.

Many factors contributed to this low self-esteem, often negative life circumstances and the attitudes of others towards them. Many believed that they were stupid or thick because of school experiences or because others in their life reinforced this self-perception. Successful learning liberated these individuals, as positive learning achievements demonstrated that that they were not stupid. They realised that they ‘had a brain’, that they could achieve in the same way as peers in their group and that their abilities were as valuable as those of everyone else. Tutors who, as one learner put it, made them feel *“that no-one is above you”* reinforced this. One tutor noted that this led to a heightened sense of purpose, and learners started to realise they had something of value to offer and ‘believe in themselves’, they were more able to try new things, meet new people and consider new employment or community activity:

*“I have the confidence to go and try anything. I’m not saying I’d achieve anything but I’ve got the confidence to go and try something. I’d give it a go.”*

Some learners talked about arriving at their learning project as ‘nervous wrecks’ with little or no confidence and often unhappy and isolated because of life circumstances. Whilst they still felt nervous, enhanced confidence made them ‘less timid’ and they became more self-assured and as a result would go and try something instead of allowing their fears to stop them. In addition to enhanced belief in their capability to succeed, fear of failure diminished. This

was likely to be associated with the knowledge that failure would not reinforce their so-called stupidity, and even if things did not go to plan they could still draw something positive from the experience.

As learners became more confident, and enjoyed learning in the group they became happier, and not as 'down' or depressed. This was related to feeling better about themselves, to the social contact this brought about and to the positive effects of learning experiences, which were both successful and enjoyable. Many learners referred to this happiness, often relating it to body language, which was identified as changing as confidence increased.

### **6.3 Body language**

Positive changes in posture, movement and facial expression were traced to increased confidence by most of the tutors and learners from two of the groups. These reflected learners' enhanced self-worth, assertiveness and happiness

Changes in the way people moved were notable, and appeared to indicate that learners had moved from trying to make themselves as insignificant as possible to portray their new sense of purpose and value. One group, for instance, described how they used to enter a room,

*"...coming in anywhere new you are all sliding in quietly and don't say a word".*

The difference now was, *"We just push our way in now."*

Furthermore, they *"could walk into a room full of strangers and find someone to speak to".*

Posture also changed as learners moved from sitting 'hunched up' and looking down, trying to be unobtrusive and unnoticed, to sitting more confidently and making eye contact with others. One tutor referred to specific course content, which aimed to encourage the learners to recognise the messages portrayed by different body language and to think about how they might be perceived by others.

Facial expressions also altered to reflect increased confidence and happiness. One tutor noted that at the start learners *"sat there looking blank and worried"* and as they progressed started to smile more, another learner who used to blush very, very easily could now talk to others without embarrassment. *'More smiles'* was a recurrent theme, related to the enjoyment in learning, increases in confidence and growth in self-value noted above,

*"I think we have more smiles than we used to".*

## **6.4 Speaking out**

The theme of 'speaking out' emerged as a very strong indicator of change, as every learner cited this as one of the gains resulting from their increased confidence. This was a significant indicator of progress and achievement for many learners who had been quietened, often for many years, by a range of different reasons. These included power and control by others, interactions with professionals, gender factors such as perceptions of women's role and place, isolation, illness and, often, simply by the belief that they had nothing worth saying. It was a powerful and empowering gain, as it enabled or supported them to operate more effectively, assertively and independently in both familiar and new situations. This in turn further enhanced confidence levels.

In brief, speaking out meant that people developed more knowledge and clarity about what they wanted to say and were able to say it. This included many specific skills, for instance being able to take part in a conversation, to talk in a group, to express an opinion, to make a presentation to an audience and to resolve difficult situations and interactions.

The combination of elements that supported them to do this were:

- Their increased belief in their own value convinced them, often for the first time, that they had something worth saying
- Their increased confidence enabled them to say it
- Their learning had equipped them with the skills and knowledge to know how to say it

Learners identified multiple and varied speaking out achievements, and these appeared to relate to their different starting points and circumstances. As we shall see in the following sections, this ability to speak out then enabled them to act more effectively in a range of personal and community situations. For some individuals, talking to new people, for instance to make new friends or in a work situation, presented a significant challenge, whereas for others talking to friends presented no problem, but asserting themselves within their family had been difficult. Authority figures or systems had silenced others and they developed the confidence to engage with them more positively and assertively, for example at their child's school, at a hospital or social services. Others found the ability to address audiences ranging from their learning group to public talks and presentations to large groups.

Development in this area varied, and a number of learners reflected that despite being more able to speak out they still found it difficult to speak to particular people or groups of people, or in some situations. However, others found their new confidence to speak out very empowering:

*"I'll stand up for what I believe in now. Whether it's right or wrong I'll say what I want to say and if they don't listen then they've got the problem not me."*

## **6.5 Dreams and desires**

Taking part in learning activities stimulated dreams and aspirations. Many learners decided that they wanted, and were able, to improve the quality of their lives. This took many different directions, ranging from very small to major life changes. Progression was envisioned not only in relation to learning, but also in other aspects, which included occupational, community involvement and personal relationships, and confidence was cited as underpinning these aspirations:

*“If you have confidence you will try different things, stuff that you wouldn’t normally dream of trying. As you get involved in more different experiences you then get even more confident. It’s like a spiral and you just need someone to set you off.”*

In some cases the learning activities and environment had enabled people who recognised few prospects for themselves to envision a future:

*“Before the project his life was looking bent, he can’t see ahead properly. He was confused in his mind what to do. Coming here the door is open. He can get everything straight.” (Translated)*

Dreams included fulfilling personal ambitions, for instance to publish writing, to travel by plane, to read a book, to go in a pub on their own, to live independently. Others aspired to help their community or learning centre:

*“I’d like to get a building [for the area], and like open up a café type of thing where people could just come in and sit down for a cup of tea.”*

*“I’d like that... but I’d like our own personal counselling building as well. A big day centre as well. There’s loads of counsellors and that but there’s more people than what there is time for them and the waiting list is horrendous. I just think that not being able to help them is awful.”*

Not only did they develop ambitious dreams, they determined to act to achieve them, and in the next sections we will examine the ways in which enhanced confidence and self-esteem manifests itself in relation to further learning, work, family and social life and community involvement:

*“Now we have ambition. We can do something instead of sitting at home.”*

## **6.6 Learning**

Learning took place in a broad range of contexts and diverse subjects, which included vocational and life skills, community development, personal development, drama, arts and culture. The common thread running through this diversity was that all the learners experienced successful learning. This success, a new experience for many, with other aspects of the learning environment, as described in section 7, had raised their confidence. This in turn supported successful learning. As one tutor commented, learning a new

skill in itself is empowering because this gives people confidence in their own abilities. This is often, but not always, a new experience. One effect of this was a change in their view of how other people perceived them. One learner, for instance, thought that being unable to read made them unattractive to other people, and improving these skills made them more acceptable to colleagues and peers.

### **6.7 Getting a tingle**

Learners from the different projects acquired new skills and knowledge related to course aims which included acting, dancing, drawing, English, computers, Feng Shui, advocacy and community development skills. Some course content included personal development skills, but even where this was not overtly taught learners enhanced their interpersonal skills, and became more able to speak out as they participated in their group and inclusive learning practices. A common response was that they felt better as they gained knowledge, or became able to do something, and as a result their confidence grew. As they gained confidence they felt more able to achieve and try new things, although as noted earlier there were setbacks and brakes on progress.

Acting was empowering as performing to an audience enhanced learners' confidence and gave them the feeling that they could do anything. In turn this stimulated them to become more involved in the project, perhaps as a facilitator and taking on this role makes them realise that they can do something they did not think they could do. Another learner developed drawing skills, with encouragement from the project:

*“She knows we like her drawing and gets a tingle from that.”*

Other learners said that improving English gave them more confidence because it was good being able to write things, or that learning computers successfully had given them more confidence. Some wrote stories and found reading them out in class challenging but worth while, as positive feedback from tutor and peers had really helped lift confidence:

*“I’ve got that much confidence I think I can do most things now.”*

But not all experienced a gain in confidence, sometimes because the programme was not made fully accessible to them. At the beginning of their courses some learners were not at all certain they could succeed. Two cited their age as a barrier and were worried about their ability to remember what they were taught. When one of them did not understand, she wondered whether it was because she was ‘thick’, and felt that the tutor had not fully recognised their learning needs, and there was too much information in each session. One learner said:

*“Well, I’m not so confident as I thought I would be after this programme because there is too much to absorb.”*

On the other hand another responded to difficulties by asking questions and requesting clarification throughout, and said that she was able to do this because she was a confident person before joining the course:

*“I don’t have a problem speaking my mind.”*

Most learners, however felt a great sense of achievement and this changed their self-image. Moreover, and as noted in an earlier section, when this happened, day to day set backs in the learning took on less significance as they stopped seeing this as an indication of failure; they felt able to bounce back the next day.

Achievement was recognised and celebrated in different ways and there was a clear message that learners brought different expectations, as well as worries and concerns, that affected how they wished to recognise their progress. For many learners, knowing they had learned was enough, and this recognition came through personal perceptions alongside tutor and peer feedback, often accompanied by public acknowledgement and celebration of achievements in class.

*“I’m enjoying what I’m achieving. I never achieved anything really before but I am now.”*

For a learner who was attending her second course, the combination of the group gelling and feeling that she knew something was important,

*“On the previous course everyone was very nervous. This time around we are more confident in asking questions. People you are with can make a big difference. Everyone is in the same boat knowing nothing, but on the first course you think you are the only person who doesn’t know anything and are scared to ask in case you look stupid, especially because I’m so much older than the rest of them. On the next course with all the same people you get to know each other and feel better about asking questions. I am more confident this time around.”*

It was not just taking part in learning activities that helped to boost confidence. For some it was going out to the learning centre and positive experiences of the environment there where, for instance, they were made to feel valued. Some said they had discovered or rediscovered themselves as a person. Some carers, for instance, had been so absorbed in an enclosed home-based world, focusing on the person they look after, that they lost confidence and a sense of self. This could be exacerbated by additional circumstances, such as being left alone by a death.

*“So it’s lovely you can come to these and you’re a person again.”*

*“I think personally coming to the centre itself. It saved me from having a nervous breakdown.”*

Growing confidence led to more independence in learning situations, both in the classes and centres and in the outside environment. Some learners became more independent learners in their group as they became more willing to 'join in' and more able to solve their own problems so requesting assistance from the tutor or volunteer less frequently. One tutor talked about learners gaining confidence from using their learning independently in situations outside the learning centre such as the library:

*"You can see their faces light up. 'I went to the library the other day. I can't believe it, I've cracked it.'"*

There were many instances of speaking out during the learning activities. Learners felt empowered to do this, in the safe environment. They voiced their opinion instead of keeping it to themselves as in the past, said what they needed, made presentations, took part in discussion, and became more talkative. One tutor observed that confidence enabled people to ask how to do things or find out what they want to know. Some tutors considered that when learners started to talk it was a big indicator of change, perhaps exemplified by the learner who said:

*"The more I go, the more gobby I get."*

### **6.8 Progression to further learning**

Intended or actual progression to further learning was a key feature resulting from enhanced confidence. As noted previously, aims and aspirations were raised and progression was viewed as one means of achieving these. The recurrent theme of differences relating to experiences and circumstances also applied to progression, as ambitions and hopes differed and some learners were able to progress successfully to courses very quickly, whereas others were more restricted by life or attitudinal factors.

The majority of learners had experienced learning for the first time as adults in the ACLF provision, and as a result of their positive experience had become 'hooked', and wanted to continue learning. This stemmed from increased interest and heightened aspirations but was underpinned and made possible by enhanced confidence.

*"I feel like even if I don't succeed that I'm opening up and trying new things that I would never have dreamt of. So I don't know what I can achieve. There's so many possibilities I should go for them all."*

As might be expected, progression intentions were diverse. Destinations included different courses within the same project and new learning venues, including colleges. Some young people had been averse to learning but had come to recognise the importance of it. This enabled them to go to college on a full time course. Some learners were motivated to continue learning for interest and enjoyment, for instance to fulfil a dream such as learning to drive. They wanted to take up or continue aromatherapy, massage and creative writing, and people in this group reflected on the contribution learning made to

their well being, as it helped them relate to other people and reduced stress, 'it chills me out'.

*"I'd like to continue learning because I think everybody must try and learn something. They must have some aim in life."*

Does being confident affect your learning?

*"Oh yes, you've got to have confidence in yourself to do your learning."*

Success in a course motivated people to progress. One tutor observed that the majority of learners usually wanted to continue learning and started to ask about what they could do next quite early on, as soon as they gained confidence. Some wanted to progress in similar learning, for instance a higher level of the course they were on, for interest, or touch typing to help with computer skills. One learner said that being able to learn computers gave them the confidence to start an English course, which they had been interested in when they enrolled but lacked the confidence to start.

Some learners were rebuilding shattered lives. Learning had started them to move beyond the fragments and as they developed ideas of their future they saw learning opportunities as a means of helping them to achieve this.

*"It had given me ideas and something to do. I would like to do photographs and film."*

Another group of learners had vocational aims. These might relate to developing skills they had started to learn on the ACLF course, such as moving from computer skills to maintenance and repair or acting and dancing courses. This learner said they would have considered it before but not realised they could do it. A significant number aspired to train in skills that would assist them to work in the type of project they attended, for instance counselling, befriending, volunteering, mentoring and teaching. In one project, the tutor reflected that the majority of volunteer mentors started as learners. Some had even progressed to tutor training and returned to teach in the project. Others wanted to train for skills for working in the community either informally or formally by training in community developing or housing. Often their aspirations had been raised significantly by participation in the learning; as one tutor said they "*can look higher up the ladder*".

Intention to continue in part derived from confidence gained from successful experiences of learning, "*If you've got this far you can get a bit further, and I will*". Some learners were apprehensive about progression and the work demonstrated the vital importance of providing bridges to enable learners to move from very supported learning environments to situations that entailed more independence. Engendering the self-belief that they could succeed was essential, but for some learners this was not enough.

Some needed to remain within the shelter of their project for a longer period. This was particularly pertinent for those who were vulnerable because of external issues and difficulties in their lives. For instance, some women were

reluctant to expose themselves to a mixed environment and, with one exception, learners from one project said they would not go to college:

*“I wouldn’t do a college course if it was offered me. I just wouldn’t go because I’d feel out of place. I would just not go full stop. Even if they said it was free I still wouldn’t go because I’d be mixing with a different type of people.”*

Others were ready to try a college. One reason this was possible was increased confidence to go to new places and mix with new people:

*“You just go out and you do not necessarily enrol for more courses here but you might see a course like going down to the gym or something and you’re quite nervous about that. It just gives you the get up and go, to go out and do it because you’re not that afraid of meeting new people.”*

Despite this, many needed additional support to enable them to progress successfully, and most projects continued to offer support when they engaged in their new learning programme; for some this was actual attendance, whilst for others the knowledge that the project was there as a safety net and that they could always return was enough. One tutor was proactive and went along to explain to the new tutor how to ensure that the learner would feel comfortable and confident in the new learning environment. It was important for others to progress with peers so that they did not have to go alone.

Progression to further learning was important, but it was not the only benefit accruing from increased confidence and new skills and knowledge as learners ‘progressed’ or made changes in other aspect so their lives, which will now be considered.

## **6.9 Family and friends**

Changes in confidence were both affected by, and had a significant impact on, learners’ relationships with family and friends. As one tutor commented, friends and family can be the biggest influence and can either help you or ‘*knock you back*’, and both positive and negative consequences were noted in relation to family and friends.

For some learners, the home environment was supportive, and their families welcomed their participation in learning, showing interest, offering encouragement, investing in such as computers or by helping them to practice or revise new skills. These individuals reflected how friends and/or family had noticed and reflected on changes in their confidence and abilities and ways of going about things.

Increased confidence had a positive impact on relationships with children and equipped them to offer more practical support for their children’s learning. As a result of success in her creative writing course, one woman started to write her life story for her granddaughter, some learners talked about increased

capacity to support their children at school, and another group talked about enhancing their children's confidence by presenting a positive lead for them to follow:

*"It helps you teach your kids that you don't have to just sit there and be quiet.... It's given you confidence and you can give that confidence to your children."*

The study demonstrated that concepts such as home and family are not always positive, or even benign, because some individuals have unstable or difficult home lives. Some learners were homeless, or had lost families, as they became refugees and asylum seekers. Others lived in a destructive family environment. Yet others lived in caring families but their roles as carers confined them to home and isolated them from social contact. Some people with learning difficulties and/or mental health difficulties were not so confident at home. The tutor explained that this was because although they lived in caring environments, at home or in residential establishments, their lives were often organised for them and other people decided what they should do, thereby reducing their independence. A common consequence of all these different situations was that the individuals concerned came to suffer from low confidence and self-esteem.

Once again increased confidence and speaking out comprised a powerful combination that changed lives, as individuals began to assert themselves and claim their rights and independence. Some of the people with learning disabilities began to consider living independently, and to believe that they had the ability to succeed on their own. They became more assertive to say what they wanted and to take more control of their lives and destinies. Women started to confront oppressive situations. Others gained the confidence to express their views and tell family members what they wanted. Sometimes this improved relationships, but for others there were costs; one woman said that her husband was not happy with her new persona, and a tutor reflected that the backlash from personal development and changes often led to broken relationships.

Confidence had a significant effect on friendships. People who were isolated or had low levels of confidence tended to have fewer friends before starting the learning programme and some learners from one group, who attended a resettlement project, claimed that they had no friends at all. They found difficulty establishing friendships and did not know how to talk to new people. As a result of increased confidence and interpersonal skills, most learners made new friends, often in the centre they attended, and consequently their social isolation reduced. Friendships in the learning centre were frequently cited as extremely important and meeting new people and making new friends were put forward as valuable benefits of joining a course, as they provided mutual support and help, reinforced the growing sense of self worth discussed earlier, reduced isolation and loneliness and supported the development of social skills:

*“Me and her hit it off straight away and we get on really well now so it’s nice to have a friend out of it as well. It makes it a lot easier.”*

Increased confidence had both positive and negative effects on existing friendships. Some people said they were more confident with friends and were better able to relate to them and negotiate decisions making and resolve conflict, although one person said they were still not very confident that they could resolve difficult situations. Some friends provided encouragement as individuals grew through their learning. In contrast, others lost friends who felt left behind as they moved on. One tutor suggested this was because their friends want them to stay the same, noting that this was usually unexpected and could hurt badly.

### **6.10 Community involvement.**

Enhanced confidence appeared to have a key role in increased levels of community involvement and activism. Levels of community involvement can be viewed on a spectrum which ranges from using amenities located in communities, such as libraries, through attendance at groups offering support and services, for instance many of the ACLF projects, and more active involvement in groups involving activism and campaigning for change.

A small minority of learners said that they were confident at the start of the course, happy with their lives and were already confident when meeting new people. The picture for the majority of the learners was rather different, which is not surprising as the most projects aimed to work with people who needed special encouragement and support. Many had been restricted to home at the start of the project, and both the conditions that brought about this social isolation and the isolation itself fed low confidence and self-esteem. Reasons included caring for children or sick or elderly relatives, little will or incentive to go out, often connected to feeling ‘*down or depressed*’, cultural expectations, and shortage of money.

Staying at home reduced confidence, primarily because people felt that they did little of interest to themselves or anyone else. Moreover, they often exacerbated low self-esteem by neglecting themselves, and sometimes failing to eat properly. They felt of low value, did not meet anyone who could boost their confidence or make them feel better:

*“You feel you can’t do anything except stand in the kitchen and peel potatoes and wash dishes and you’re past doing anything.”*

Low confidence stopped people wanting to go out,

*“You might not want to see anyone or talk to people, just sit in on your own”.*

Low confidence was associated with depression when people felt bad about themselves so that:

*“You don’t eat. You lose yourself a bit. You don’t bother.”*

*“You’re depressed then you open a big can of worms and you’re in a big hole.”*

Conversely learners associated getting over it with having a laugh, doing their hair and make up and caring about their clothes, seeing friends and going out. Increased confidence led to higher levels of community participation, as individuals stayed at home less when they felt good and thus mixed more in their community. One learner expressed it as *“coming into the world again.”* The learning centres often provided the first steps back into the world. The path was eased by the positive aspects of learning previously described and enhanced interpersonal skills and confidence in speaking out enabled people to socialise and interact with new people.

Accessing facilities was a major achievement for individuals who had been isolated or excluded from community activity as, for instance, some visited the local library for the first time. Most learners spent time in the ACLF projects and others started to socialise more with other people in the day-to-day life in the community. One of the things that helped this was that they felt able to speak to new people. Everyone said that meeting others, often at the learning centre boosted confidence.

A further impact was that individuals started to get involved in community activity. This was a stated aim of a small number of the programmes, for instance a project set up to support citizens to develop the skills and confidence to plan and establish learning in their own community. Other individuals also started to see beyond their own concerns and wanted to support others in a similar position to them. This took the form of volunteering, often in the project they attended as learners, but also in other venues, such as their children’s school or in a work placement. Other action involved setting up new groups which included a self-help group.

Two of the projects were set up with the explicit aim of encouraging learners to engage in community development. It is not surprising therefore that learners from these groups became active in their communities. One group was working towards establishing a community based learning to meet the needs of their community. In order to achieve this, participants had developed the skills needed for activism, including writing successful funding bids. Along with this they needed to run meetings, make presentations, speak to large groups of 80 or more people, question service providers about their offer. These learners had often been isolated at home but were now out and, *“We now have a mission.”* People also turned to campaigning action on behalf of their community. This took different forms as learners gained the confidence to take up advocacy work, join committees and speaking out at the meetings, start a newsletter, and help to organise a demonstration:

*“We go to X and in February we’ve got a demonstration coming up to save cuts. I’m going up with a banner.”*

Confidence was a major enabling factor in all the above forms of community engagement:

*“It motivates me and builds up my self-esteem, which helps me to continue helping the community.”*

### **6.11 Work**

Many learners were not in work so there were fewer reflections on the impact of confidence on work than on some of the other areas. Where they did take place, changes brought about because of increased confidence resulted in greater independence, enhanced relationships with colleagues and for some, a heightened sense of achievement, and this in turn resulted in more success.

As a result of participation in the learning programmes, some learners acquired the confidence to apply for employment and entered paid work during or following their course. Others gained the confidence to take up voluntary work, sometimes at their learning centre, which they hoped would be a stepping stone to paid employment in the future. Thus learning was a way back into employment, and gaining work was a particularly significant achievement or aspiration for individuals who had been out of the job market for a long time for diverse reasons, which included domestic circumstances, illness, substance or alcohol misuse and criminal activity, and confidence was a major, albeit not the only factor, that enabled them to succeed.

Other learners started to aspire to paid employment although they recognised that for them this would be a long-term goal:

*“I’m now happy to move into employment. I feel I have a lot more to offer although it’s a long-term goal. It seemed so far away before, as not working for a while I didn’t think I had any skills, but coming here has made me see I do have some skills and can work on the ones I haven’t got.”*

This learner also wanted to change to a different type of employment, an ambition shared by some learners who were already in work but their increase in confidence stimulated them seek more satisfying and fulfilling employment:

*“It’s changed my way of looking for a job as well because I’ve always been a cashier and even though you meet a lot of people through being a cashier it’s so boring and I’m 43 and I’ve been doing that since I was 16 and I’d rather go into something like computers.”*

These changes were related to increased confidence that they could succeed and the belief that they had something of value to offer. Speaking out arose again as a significant aspect of confidence in work. In relation to job-seeking, people saw that they had something to offer, hence something positive to say about themselves on application forms. Furthermore, they believed that they could present themselves successfully in job interviews.

In the workplace they found that they could do their jobs better. Again this was related to speaking out. This was not a one-way process and the feeling of being listened to provided further positive reinforcement. Speaking out activities were diverse, ranging from the confidence to talk to customers to making formal presentations and/or contributing to the discussion at meetings. This represented tremendous progress for some people, for instance the learner who said they had gone from shy to speaking at meetings. Others in work were more able to speak up about work practices or attitudes they wanted to change, for instance the person who expressed her opinions about the treatment of children in order to improve conditions for the children at the school where she worked,

*“At work now I have more confidence to share my opinion and ideas in order to improve things/teaching of the children at school.”*

The informal workplace culture and relationship with peers in the workplace is an important element of working life, and acceptance in this culture can affect how people feel about themselves and their work. Several commented that they were able to talk to colleagues because they knew what to say and how to say it. This was sometimes difficult, for instance one learner found it hard to talk to older people at work, but when they had done so found it an affirmative experience that improved their working life.

## **6.12 Conclusion**

The findings in relation to confidence gained demonstrated that there is a close and complex relationship between learning and confidence. It showed that confidence is not a static state, and that highs and lows in confidence can have a profound effect on learning, sense of self worth and activity and relationships in everyday life. Enhanced confidence appears to increase success in learning. This in turn leads to heightened aspirations and progression in learning, although the nature and rate of this is very diverse. Further benefits include enhanced sense of self worth, improved ability to speak out in different situations and interactions. As people experienced success and began to feel better about themselves their sense of what was possible changed, and they wanted take on new challenges. At the same time changes took place in relation to family life, friendships, social and community activity and work. This illustrates the deep importance of developing confidence through learning and suggests that more attention should be paid to this issue in policy, practice and further research.

## 7 What helps confidence to grow?

This section will examine the factors that supported the growth of confidence through learning. The analysis of the responses to the questions concerning what seems to help develop confidence was divided into three areas: the tutor, teaching and learning approaches and support for learning. Most evidence was presented about the significance of the tutor with rich evidence about the teaching and learning approaches they used. Not surprisingly, tutors contributed lots of evidence to this theme but the focus groups revealed insights too. They also contributed many suggestions about support for learning.

### 7.1 The tutor

Focus groups commented on the characteristics of the tutor when asked what seemed to help them to develop confidence in learning. They said such things as,

*“She’s friendly and encouraging; not like school teachers.”*

*“Nothing’s too much trouble for her.”*

*“Tutors are helpful to you...they are tremendous, they listen and help you...they treat you individually and in confidence.”*

These comments came from five of the nine focus groups, which suggest that the individual person, whilst important, was not the over-riding influence on building confidence. One individual learner interview revealed,

*“The tutor was great...she helped and didn’t moan... the tutor told them to congratulate me when I did well.”*

No other learners commented on the individual tutor. However, all the focus groups and the majority of one-to-one learner interviews revealed insight and understanding of the teaching and learning approaches used. They commented extensively on them. They seemed to separate the person from the teaching and learning strategies used. Whilst it was possible to analyse the data in this way, it is hard to differentiate either in practice or from the comments of the learners between the attributes of the tutor and the teaching and learning strategies used. The actions of the tutor appeared to have the greatest impact on whether learners gained confidence in the learning situation.

## **7.2 Teaching and learning approaches**

### **7.2.1 Focus group responses**

It was possible to list a number of activities, which learners in the focus groups cited as being particularly helpful in promoting their confidence. In relation to teaching and learning activities they suggested:

- *“The tutor goes over things if you wish...it helps when the tutor explains things as well as reading them to you.”*
- *“Doing drama makes you more confident.”*
- *“We do lots of speaking up.” “Talking helps most of all.” “The tutor encouraged me to give my point of view.” “The way the tutor taught...talk, talk, write and read with others.”*
- *“Tutors answer your questions and give you time.” “...everyone listens...” “Counselling is available if you want it.”*
- *“ Doing presentations helps.”*
- *“ Problem-solving together.” “Sharing ideas and knowledge together.” “Doing the exercises and seeing other do them gives you the confidence to have a go.”*
- *“Learning new things, lots of new knowledge and information.”*
- *“Doing tests are relaxed; it’s not like a pass or fail thing.” “It’s good to get a certificate.”*
- *“Doing voluntary work helps.”*

The significance of talking, expressing opinions and speaking up was commented upon by seven of the groups; this suggests that regardless of the context, the group or situation, this was an important way to build confidence. They also spoke of the value of doing presentations, doing drama or taking part in volunteering activities. All these activities require speaking up. This can be compared with the suggestions that talking is an indicator of what confidence is as well as evidence of its growth. It might be argued that talking is not only a vehicle for developing confidence but also a characteristic of it.

The focus groups spoke of how doing things in the group helped to build confidence. They suggested that doing things together, sharing what they did and problem solving with others helped. Four of the nine groups made reference to joint activities. This was separate from the comments made about the support they felt they received from the group (see the section below on support for learning). Implications for both of these suggestions are that learning as a social activity helped to increase confidence.

The learners identified that values and attitudes also helped them. They said such things as,

*"...[She] treats everyone equally; no-one is better than you."*

*"Not judging helps."                      "It's relaxed."*

*"You can cry if you need to; it's safe; there's always someone to turn to."*

Three of the groups felt that such things as humour and having fun helped them.

They said,

*"...a sense of humour, that's what's needed..."*

*"Build in fun and achievement."*

*"It's friendly, it's fun and it's a laugh!"*

Several references were made to the fact that learning was interesting, based on, *'what you're interested in'* and *'you're here for yourself'*. Learning new and interesting things was cited as helping to build confidence by three of the focus groups. They included the neighbourhood development group, the learners recovering from drug and alcohol abuse and the refugee group. Only two groups referred to achievements and certificates as things that helped to build confidence.

### **7.2.2 Individual learner interviews**

Less evidence was available from the individual learner interviews but, interestingly several of them referred to being able to work at their own pace. They said such things as,

*"Teaching was based on your own programme."*

*"We learn at our own pace." and*

*"...our programme, our own programme."*

This was not referred to in the focus groups. The individual interviews also endorsed the value of speaking with such comments as,

*"The tutor encouraged me to express my point of view."*

*"Lots of opportunities to express views."*

*"We shared ideas." and "Talking helped."*

Other resonances with the focus groups came from such remarks as,

*“The course gave lots of practical opportunities such as role play and events.”*

*“We not only used our minds but our bodies.”*

*“I had to get involved.”* and *“I was able to join in doing things.”*

The individual interviews seemed to highlight similar things to the focus groups, in teaching and learning, which helped to build confidence.

### **7.2.3 Tutor interviews**

The tutor interviews revealed rich insight into the kinds of teaching and learning strategies they believed helped to build learners' confidence. Some of their suggestions were about specific activities whilst others were about values, attitudes and approaches. Some of the tutors referred to planning:

*“I plan learning in a regular pattern of activity; this helps them to feel comfortable and know what's going on.”*

*“We plan helpful, one to one approaches, step by step.”* and

*“The course is planned to build them up.”*

Many of them referred to the underpinning approaches they used to develop a positive attitude and belief in learners' own abilities. They said such things as,

*“Help them believe they can do it.”*

*“I ask what they want from learning and focus on that.”*

*“Positively look ahead...remove barriers.”*

These suggestions indicate that some of the tutors were aware of possible negative experiences of learning amongst the groups and the barriers that may prevent the development of confident learners. One tutor spoke of guiding learners through initial assessment activities, which could be *'frightening'*. Another spoke of *'handholding'* as a way of getting through difficult times. Words such as *'praise'*, *'encouragement'*, *'support'*, *'constant praise'*, featured in several interviews.

The word, *'reflect'* also appeared to be significant for several of the nine tutors, revealed in such phrases as,

*“Each session is reflective practice.”*

*“Reflect on what they can do and their skills.”*

*“Groups reflect on what they are doing or have learnt.”*

The notion of reflective practice, identifying positives and building on them seemed important. It was as if the tutors recognised that they had a responsibility to address past negative experiences; for many this was through reflective practices, which identified the evidence of what learners can do. They then set out to build on it.

Like learners, tutors were able to identify the importance of speaking, with such comments as,

*“Try to encourage everyone to say something.”*

*“Have weekly ice breakers.”*

*“Speaking freely and being accepted”*

Doing presentations in front of the group was also felt to be important. Another tutor said,

*“They are helped to feel that they belong and can talk...sharing is major...the group helps with dealing with problems and suggests solutions.”*

### **7.3 Support for learning**

In analysing what the three interview groups said, it was possible to extract information about the role of learning support and where that support came from. Learning support was not simply regarded as that offered by the organisation in response to identified needs, such as childcare or support for dyslexia. It was interpreted as all those things that learners and tutors felt supported the learners and their learning. The evidence was drawn predominantly from the focus groups. Tutors and individual interviewees had little to say on this topic.

The kind of support cited predominantly came from within the group. Learners said such things as:

*“Building the group helps; everyone is committed and that helps to develop confidence.”*

*“We help each other. Having shared experiences and difficulties helps you to relax in the group.”*

*“We share; it helps to remove bad memories.”* and

*“The group members support you. There’s always someone to turn to. You can lose friends when you’re learning so you need to help each other.”*

This form of support was mentioned in every focus group. Some women suggested that having an all female environment helped them to feel confident.

Associated with group help were individual relationships and friendships. The focus groups said:

*“Meeting people is helpful; we support each other, are friendly and listen.”*

*“You only need to get on with one person especially. It helps when you get on with the others.”*

*“Meeting someone you get on with keeps you going.”*

The group was also important in helping individuals to address their concerns. Comments included:

*“You think you’re thick as you get older; younger ones seem at ease. Others help you to see yourself.”*

*“You worry about how you’ll perform; if you know someone it helps.”*

This kind of reflection seemed also enshrined in such sentiments as:

*“It helps because you’re all the same.”*

*“We’re all in the same boat.”*

It seems that the support of the group and the relationships formed within the group were of paramount importance in not only building confidence but in helping people to stay in the group.

Learners mentioned other people who supported them; one group found that mentors helped. Several individual learners said that their family and friends outside the group supported them and helped them to feel more confident with their learning. They said:

*“My gran helps me and people at the hostel if I need them.”*

*“My family and friends noticed a difference and offered help.”*

*“My family bought me a computer to help and encourage me.”*

Other outside help came from staff in the organisation,

*“The guidance man sorted out a course for me; he helped. This course is designed for me.”*

A few tutors made comments about support with one suggesting that the group support is very important and that peer influence could be helpful. Another tutor indicated that peer support can be very positive but also warned that friends and family can have a negative effect on the confidence of learners. One other tutor also mentioned the potential negative influence of home life. One tutor commented on how great it was that the younger women in the group often helped older ones.

Both teachers and learners were aware of what seems to help confidence to grow; they all believed that involvement and 'doing' things was significant. They also believed that talking was a vital way to build confidence; they identified the kind of activities in which talking featured such as group work, drama and presentations. Attitudes and values such as being non-judgemental and helping everyone to feel included were also important. Forming relationships, friendships with others who were in a similar situation and who had similar life experiences seemed to provide the best form of support for building confidence. These features were regardless of whether the prime purpose of the learning programme was to build confidence or not. These findings reflect the literature review in the sense of common indicators being identified and evidenced as steps towards building confidence. It also confirms that gaining confidence in one area of an individual's life can then begin to encompass other areas of their life.



## 8 Conclusion

This research provided powerful evidence that there is a strong connection between learning and confidence. The findings suggest that there are specific features and characteristics which can define confidence; some people felt able to define it through both positive and negative descriptors. The essential characteristics of confidence, indicated by both learners and tutors were associated with positive feelings which led to new actions and behaviours or which emanated as a result of actions and behaviours. Learners felt that one of the most significant indicators of confidence was the ability to speak up, especially with strangers. Both tutors and learners agreed that confidence is situated and can vary, according to the situation and circumstances experienced; learners believed that a change in confidence is evidenced by a 'before' and 'after' experience. Tutors suggested that confidence and self-esteem are closely linked and that confidence influences self-esteem in a positive or negative way. They felt that self-esteem is difficult to evidence and remains hidden within a person; confidence is easier to identify through changes in behaviour and attitude.

The importance to tutors and learners, of changes in confidence, as an outcome of learning was one of the starting points for this study. Catching changes in confidence means defining first of all what is being caught and then recording its growth or loss as evidence. In attempting to define confidence, tutors and learners can contribute to a wider debate about how it might be described as an outcome of learning. By reaching a degree of consensus about its definition, it is possible to record it at any point in the learning activity. Changes in this aspect of learning, along with evidence of those changes could be presented to learners, other tutors, managers and funders as learning outcomes. Learners and tutors often identify a growth in confidence as a retrospective outcome of learning. With a clearer definition they are able to aim for a growth in confidence as a planned learning outcome, with evidence of its achievement. Our research seemed to endorse our definition of confidence as well as its relationship with self-esteem.

Confidence was an outcome of learning which had wide ranging benefits, one of which was that it enhanced ability to learn and inclination to take up further learning opportunities. We will now suggest some implications for the field of adult learning arising from the establishment of this clear relationship between learning and confidence.

### ***8.1 Implications***

#### **Teacher development**

As there appeared to be such clarity about what helps confidence to grow in a learning situation, a distillation of these features could be promoted in all teaching situations. Whilst some programmes were specifically designed to build confidence the approaches and attitudes could be applied in most teaching contexts. An underlying theme of all learning programmes should be

to build confidence in that situation; this affects retention and achievement of learners. Clarity of what affects and effects growth in confidence will help teachers to include it in their planning and delivery strategies. The greatest implications are therefore for teacher development. Further research would verify whether these approaches are effective in a more diverse range of teaching and learning settings. This is particularly relevant in relation to the significance of talking.

### **Confidence as a learning outcome**

The findings have important implications for defining learning outcomes and recognising achievement. If enhanced confidence has such a significant effect on both learning and learners' lives it is worth raising the question whether this should not be cited as an intended outcome of learning programmes.

One problem with planning learning outcomes relating to areas such as confidence is that they are viewed as intangible and subjective and therefore difficult to record. This has led to the use of the term 'soft' to describe these outcomes. This study has demonstrated that whilst confidence is difficult to view in terms of absolute measures, not least because it changes in relation to variables that are not necessarily related to learning, it is possible to catch and articulate changes in confidence. This process is enriched by relating these to developments in self-esteem and everyday life activities in addition to learning. Furthermore, the process of tracing these changes can build confidence by increasing learners' recognition of their personal strengths and distance travelled.

### **Guidance and sign-posting**

Once evidence of confidence can be identified and learners acknowledge its growth and benefits, guidance about other learning activities can be introduced. The offer of information about further opportunities, sign-posting activities and support should be sensitively linked to gains in confidence in the learning situation. Growth in confidence seems to be a significant pre-cursor to progression.

### **Using the grid**

The confidence grid activity was a good research tool for capturing changes in confidence and creating a way to discuss confidence as well as the benefits from learning beyond the activity knowledge and skills gained. The tool was also beneficial for learners and tutors as it offered an opportunity to make time available to discuss and reflect on changes in confidence. For learners particularly it was valuable in enabling them to reflect about themselves before, during and after a period of learning.

As a research tool and as a learning activity it has potential for further development and use. It would be beneficial to use the tool with different groups of learners and in different learning situations such as FE.

Different designs of the grid, which encourage the tutors to adapt it to the learners' needs would help the learners relate better to the activity. Improved material to complement the tool would help the tutors to grasp the task without attending a training event. If this were successful then a large number of tutors would be able to use the activity without training.

Carrying out interviews with tutors and learners was an essential complement to the tool activity. It would be more beneficial if those individual learners interviewed were separate from those who participated in the focus group.

### **Practitioner research**

As stated previously involving practitioner researchers proved valuable to the research. However, if this method of research is to be expanded, serious consideration needs to be given to the resources required when involving practitioners as researchers.

### **Government policies**

At the outset of the study we were clear that any significant outcomes could help to further current government policies in relation to Skills for Life, the Skills Strategy, the Widening Participation strategy and Neighbourhood Renewal. The implications for developing confidence in learning situations for all these strategies are clear. Without increases in confidence, many adults will remain non-participants, not achieving their full potential in personal development as well as skills and qualifications. The importance of non-threatening, first step learning which gives learners time to gain confidence, develop their identity as successful learners and supports diverse aims and aspirations is vital. Only then can broader, higher and more specific outcomes be realised.

## **8.2 Recommendations**

It is important that the research findings are given a national perspective in order to be developed further and the recommendations outlined below should be viewed in this way.

- The methods of building confidence in the adult learning environment identified in this research should be built into adult learning programmes and managers should work with staff to develop strategies for integration within curricula and learning programmes.
- Further research should be carried out to enhance our knowledge of what works in this area.
- Work should be carried out to develop best practice in framing confidence growth as a learning outcome and methods of recognising and recording progress in this area. The RARPA initiative is already considering this area and would be an appropriate site for further development.

- Developing confidence should become an integral aspect of initial tutor training and training should be provided for existing tutors, so that strategies and approaches to developing confidence become an essential part of adult pedagogy.
- Growth in confidence should be recognised by funding bodies and the Adult Learning Inspectorate as a valid and desirable outcome of adult learning.
- The grid/tool could be used as a way to record changes in confidence in a learning situation but as it was used in a limited way and only with ACLF projects in this research, further broader, rigorous testing of the tool should be applied in LEA and FE settings
- Development of other tools for recording confidence should also be considered

## **Appendix 1                      The participating projects**

### ***1. Homeless young people***

The project was a partnership between a voluntary organisation and FE college. It aimed to engage homeless young people into housing, guidance and learning. It linked crisis housing with a learner centred pathway to develop life skills, basic skills and vocational skills to help people back into society.

A tutor on a one-to-one basis carried out the grid activity with 5 learners who then participated in the focus group, 3 men, 2 females, all of white origin. 4 learners were in the 18-early 20s age range and 1 learner was over 30 years old.

### ***2. Feng Shui course***

The only project not part of the ACLF, an evening class about Feng Shui. Anybody could join the course for a small fee. The course was attended by 10 women of various backgrounds and ages. The course was run by the local FE College.

5 women took part in the grid activity as a group, 3 took part in the focus group. All the women in the research were white and over 30 years old.

### ***3. IT learning support***

This community group project aimed to support learners who were homeless or vulnerably housed, have had problems with drug or alcohol misuse or have received support with mental health. The project recruited and trained volunteers who had themselves been through some form of care plan or resettlement process. The volunteers would then offer additional support to the learners.

The group who participated in the research were doing an IT course and included individuals recovering from drug or alcohol misuse. The grid activity was done as a group exercise. From the group 4 people participated in the focus group, 3 males, and 1 female, all over 30 years old. 3 were of white origin, 1 was of unknown origin.

### ***4. Neighbourhood learning***

This project developed neighbourhood learning planning groups to enable citizens to plan learning delivery for their communities. Through building their skills and knowledge, citizens were able to develop a range of learning activities that met the needs of their neighbourhood and would be sustainable once this project ended. The group participating in the research were looking at providing learning activities in their neighbourhood specifically for women.

50 Asian women did the grid activity in small groups and 7 women in the age range of 18-50 participated in the focus group.

### **5. IT for carers**

This voluntary organisation works with carers in offering a wide range of activities to encourage them to return to learning. The project was designed to respond to carers' needs through support, advice and guidance. The carers in the research were taking part in an IT course, with most of the learners having been involved with the project for over a year.

Ten women took part in the grid activity as a group, with 8 of them participating in the focus group. All the women were white and over 40 years old.

### **6. Speaking Up course**

This voluntary organisation is working to promote community participation by empowering adults with learning difficulties to speak up for themselves and their issues, to influence the planning and delivery of services in their communities and to take an active role in community development. In order to gain the skills to do this effectively and confidently, the 'Speaking Up' course takes a 'learning through doing' approach.

6 learners did the grid activity as a group and 8 participated in the focus group, 3 men and 5 women, all of white origin. Their ages ranged from 20-40 years.

### **7. Performing arts**

This voluntary organisation worked with refugees and asylum seekers from black and minority groups. The project aimed to create a new community structure in lives of refugees through celebrating diversity in a safe environment, sharing experiences and building on skills. This was achieved through arts, drama and performance.

5 people did the grid activity in a group, with 2 men and 1 female participating in the focus group. All the participants were in the 18-20 age range and were Black African.

### **8. Personal Development course**

This community group encouraged learning within the local area through learning champions. The project developed the skills, abilities and confidence of the learners and the learning promoters. The group in the study were part of a personal development course.

5 people did the grid activity as a group and participated in the focus group. There were 4 female and 1 male participants all of white origin.

### **9. Women's project**

This voluntary organisation worked primarily with women, particularly vulnerable women who have experienced abuse, ill health and social exclusion. The project tailored short courses to attract women into learning.

The grid activity was done by the tutor on a one-to-one basis with 3 females who then participated in the focus group. All the women were of white origin and over 40.

#### **Project details:**

<b>Project number</b>	<b>Number doing grid</b>	<b>No in Focus Group</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Ethnic Origin</b>
1	5	5	3	2	18-early 20s	White
2	5	2	0	3	30s upwards	White
3	4	4	3	1	30s-40s	3 white 1 unknown
4	50	7	0	7	20s-50s	Asian
5	10	8	0	8	40s upwards	White
6	6	8	3	5	20s to 40s	White
7	5	3	2	1	18-20	Black African
8	5	5	1	4	-	White
9	3	3	0	3	40s-upwards	White

## Appendix 2

## The catching confidence grid

**Key:** Highly Confident • Confident ■ Not Confident ◡ Very Low Confidence \*

Situations	At a Learning Centre		At Home		Socially/ with friends		At work / out and about	
1. I am confident when meeting new people								
2. I am confident I can learn new things								
3. I am confident I can learn from this programme								
4. I am confident that I can use what I learn in daily life								
5. I am confident to speak in a group								
6. I am confident to speak to one other, unfamiliar person								
7. I am confident when writing things down								
8. I am confident that I have valuable skills to offer								
9. I am confident in organising my day to day affairs								
10. I am confident in situations which might be difficult								
11. I am confident I can do the things I want								
12. I feel I am generally a confident person								

**Learner name:**  
**ACLF Project title:**

**Tutor name:**  
**Date:**

## Appendix 3

## Instructions for using the grid

- The grid activity should be carried out at the beginning of a course/activity and at the end.
- The grid can be done on one to one or with individuals in a group
- The activity will take approximately one hour
- Please enlarge the grid to A3
- This is a framework and works well when adapted to suit the specific learning environment it is being used in. So please adapt as necessary. For example 'At a learning centre' can be changed to the term your learners are familiar with. Or you may want to merge or change the other columns/statements.
- Alternatively a visual interpretation of the grid or one conveyed in a community language may prove beneficial.
- Explain to the learner(s) the reasons for the activity.
- Start by agreeing with the learner(s) what the categories highly confident, confident, not very confident and very low confidence mean. You might like to try a brainstorming exercise, displaying ideas on post it notes.
- The symbols for the above categories are at the top of the grid and relate to the stickers
- Let the learners suggest any additional indicators, which will help them, complete the grid. For example they may wish to add another category of confidence.
- Please ensure that the 'At a learning centre' column is completed for each statement on the left hand side
- Learners do not have to complete all the other columns
- Once everyone is happy with the categories for confidence give each learner a set of cards and stickers.
- Learners should place the cards in the boxes that best suit how they feel.
- Encourage them to move the cards around and discuss their choices until they feel happy with where they have placed the cards.
- The learners can then put the relevant stickers on the boxes
- Remember the key to each sticker is at the top of the grid
- For the first grid activity remember to put the stickers on the left side of the box. When you do the activity the second time complete from the right side of the box.
- You may find it useful to take a photocopy of each learner's grid so you have your own record.

## Appendix 4            Learner interview/Focus group questions

### Practitioner 1:1 interviews & Focus Groups

1. Use both parts of the grids from learners as prompt and reminder of the focus of the discussion. What changes, if any, have taken place?
2. Do you feel that you have gained confidence (or lost) in
  - Relation to your learning?
  - Relation to your life e.g. social, home, work
3. What has helped you to gain/lose confidence?
  - Were there particular sessions?
  - Was it how the course was taught?
  - Was it anything the tutor(s) did?
  - Was it anything that family/friends did?
  - Something else?
4. How do you know you've gained (or lost) confidence in relation to your learning?
  - What's the evidence?
  - What are the indicators?
5. Has anything, about what you'd like to do in your life, changed since joining the course?
  - Is there any learning you'd like to do now?
  - Are there other things you'd like to do now?
  - Would you have thought about doing them before joining this group?
6. Does being more/ confident affect your learning?
  - How does it help/How does it make you feel?
7. Review the grid again
  - In the light of this conversation are there any changes you'd like to make now?
  - What are they?
  - Why do you want to make changes?

Thanks for helping us with this research

## **Appendix 5 Interview guide for practitioner interviews**

Part 1: This part will cover the grid activity and research process and will help us to evaluate the effectiveness of our approaches and tools.

Did you change/customise the grid, produce supplementary materials

How did you carry out the grid activity?  
When, where, how, with who?

In what ways did you find the grid activity to be useful?  
Why, examples

What were the drawbacks of the activity?  
How easy was it to use the grid (explore problems)

Did the grid accurately reflect the confidence changes in learners that you observed?

In what ways, any examples  
If no – how did you respond/follow up/prompt

If you were to repeat the grid activity, are there any changes you would make?  
Why (changes in process, timing, number of learners involved,  
Language, design)

As the facilitators, what changes do you recommend we should make to the design of the activity?

### **Part 2: This part covers your views about confidence in relation to learners**

How would you define confidence and self-esteem?  
Same or different from research definition  
Why did you choose those words/phrases?

From the indicators listed on the grid, which do you think were the most significant to learners?

Are there any other important indicators  
What are they?  
Why are they important?

Did (your?) the learners tend to lose or gain confidence?  
In what areas and why?  
Did this change over time?

If we now discuss what seems to bring about changes in learners confidence:

Do you consciously teach to develop confidence?  
If so, what approaches do you use?  
Which learning activities in your experience bring about changes in confidence?  
Does the influence of peers in the learning situation bring about changes in confidence?  
What other influences bring about changes in confidence such as  
Family or friends support?  
(Discuss both loss and gains)

How do you recognise any changes in an individual learner's confidence?

With the learners, how do you reflect on the learning journey they have taken?

Do you use the Catching Confidence tool?  
What other methods?  
What have you found to be effective, what wasn't?  
How are these activities recorded?

How have any changes in confidence influenced learners in their learning activities?

How have any changes in confidence influenced learners in other aspects of daily life?

How have changes in confidence led to learners feeling differently about future learning?

Have changes in confidence led to progression by learners?  
Please give examples

## Appendix 6

## Teaching and learning approaches

It was possible to distil the essential features of teaching and learning which interviewees suggested helped to build confidence. They could be used as a check-list for tutors to use when planning and delivering learning programmes. This would ensure that confidence-building is consciously built into adult learning activities.

- Try to bring together people into learning groups who have some shared background or experiences. This might be through working with referral and sign-posting organisations such as schools, housing associations, neighbourhood or community organisations. Learners who feel that they have shared backgrounds or experiences appear to develop effective support and mutually-helpful strategies in the learning situation. This helps to build confidence.
- Plan learning and communicate the plans so that learners are informed and can predict patterns of activity and attendance. The research revealed that tutors believed that including learners in the planning helps them to cope with the new situation.
- Include activities such as discussions that reflect on shared experiences, build the group and develop trust; these seem to lead to increases in confidence.
- Acknowledge that learners may bring negative experiences of learning from their past. This will help learners to understand any anxieties about returning to learning and assist tutors in addressing attitudinal barriers.
- Individualise programmes, wherever possible, to demonstrate that learners are working towards their own aims and aspirations. This also helps them to work at their own pace. Learners suggest that working at their own pace towards their own goals, in non-competitive situations, helps them to feel more confident.
- Provide as many opportunities as possible to develop skills in discussion, speaking up and making presentations. Learners revealed that talking helps to build their confidence and speaking up offers evidence that confidence is growing.
- Use practical activities as often as possible; doing new and interesting things seems to build confidence as well as evidence its growth.
- Monitor social groupings and friendships within the group and build on these; try to ensure no-one is isolated.
- Ensure everyone feels included and involved. This can be through group and paired working, building on new or existing relationships and

friendships as well as tutorials. The study revealed that relationships and friendships were important ways of building confidence in the learning situation.

- Reflect regularly with the group and with individuals on activities, learning and behaviours. Include not only classroom but also other life and work activities. Highlight the positives and the 'can do'; gradually work on the negatives and challenges. Tutors felt that reflection offers opportunities to build confidence by identifying the positive aspects and changes in learning that may, otherwise, remain hidden. Learners revealed that some of the evidence of what they are now able to do is evidenced outside the classroom.
- Offer regular feedback orally or in writing, both confidentially and in front of the group. Offer praise and encouragement; ensure this is genuine to avoid appearing patronising. Involve the group in offering feedback and praise. Learners indicated that such feedback and encouragement helped them to feel good about their learning and built their confidence in their ability to learn new things. They also indicated that listening to and relying on each other supported their learning.
- Be non-judgemental and actively develop equal opportunities practices. Learners revealed that their low levels of confidence were because they felt failures, isolated, different or excluded. Not being judged seemed to help them to build confidence in their identity as learners.
- Make sure learning is fun and includes laughter!

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