
Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld

PETERBOROUGH CURRICULUM CASE STUDY



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Introduction – what is an Area Based Curriculum Project?

RSA Area Based Curriculum projects are designed by schools in collaboration with a local community partner; supported by local expertise and context; and taught using the local area as a classroom. The projects are embedded within the core curriculum of the school, and can both enhance and challenge the National Curriculum.

In 2010 we recruited five schools in Peterborough to pilot this approach to curriculum development with the aims of:

- Creating learning experiences that were engaging for children from all backgrounds
- Increasing children’s understanding of and attachment to the place where they live
- Embedding schools more deeply within their communities and localities

The school

Dogsthorpe Junior School is situated in a post-war housing estate in central Peterborough, drawing its pupils from both established and newly arrived communities. The school has been developing its curriculum for a number of years “working towards all learners in our school (including the adults) becoming more inquisitive; being questioners; enjoying exploring, discovering and enquiry because they have their own interests and passions” (**Mary Foreman, headteacher**).

Like many schools across the country, Dogsthorpe Junior School is located in buildings and in an area not generally much known about or noticed by outsiders. However, this hasn’t stopped the school from seeing the value and learning potential in the immediate local area.

“Our school site is set in the heart of a massive post-second world war show-case housing estate representing the nation’s attempt to rebuild a better future for the surviving families of the war: the builders of the estate still live amongst us, some struggling to come to terms with the change in identity of their locality ... we will not know what our community knows, cherishes and aspires to unless we engage with it in a way that we have not done so up to know.”

Mary Foreman, Headteacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

50–60 percent of Dogsthorpe learners have English as an additional language and the school serves large numbers of families with Pakistani or Eastern European heritages. Headteacher Mary Foreman explains why this provided additional drivers for the school to take seriously the resources available on the school’s doorstep:

“The dominant assumption is that schools should turn all children into white British children. We don’t want to patronise the children but we do want to stretch them. We are passionate about moving beyond an ‘empire driven’ curriculum.”

The community partner

Railworld is a railway heritage site and centre for sustainable transport located on a split site spanning the River Nene near Peterborough city centre. In existence since 1985, it has recently opened a new education centre and nature reserve, and seeks to establish itself as ‘more than just trains’.

“We have a lot here and want to open it up to the schools. We’ve never been involved with schools educationally - had schools down doing work and projects but not linked to the curriculum. Now we’ve got all this new centre we will be doing more. Lots of aspects of the National Curriculum can be taught through the local area.”

John Turner, Manager, Railworld

Run by just two staff members and twenty regular volunteers, Railworld is a small but committed organisation which has excellent connections with the environmental and heritage sectors in the city.

The partnership

Dogsthorpe Junior School were seeking a partnership through this project that went beyond ‘visit days’, and was much more fluid than the interactions schools traditionally have with outside partners. They found this in the relationship with Railworld manager John Turner whom the lead teacher met at a networking event organised by the RSA.

“The first conversation me and John ever had was ‘I’ve got a load of cars that my wonderful learners have built; I need somewhere to display them’. John said ‘oh you can display them at mine’, and that was literally where we started.”

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

Following on from a successful visit to the school by John Turner, Railworld and Dogsthorpe decided to embark upon the co-design of a full year long Area Based Curriculum project in the following year in which students from the school would cover curriculum content and develop skills through a real life project that benefited Railworld as well.

The RSA provided guidance and protocols for developing the partnerships based on mutual goals for the children, and an outline of the responsibilities of each partner. The school and the partner both established what they wanted to get out of the project and worked together

to ensure that their own goals and those of the children were met. This formal approach to working quickly provided the foundations for more flexible working arrangements as the relationship developed.

“He respects my side of it and I respect his ... I did do some work for him to deliver to his trustees and all sorts ... so we did the professional side first and because that all worked and we did get on, it’s now meant that we are a lot more flexible as partners, really. I can now text him and say ‘are you available tomorrow afternoon to come into school?’”

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School.

The teachers involved were quite clear about their role as teachers in the project: “it’s my job to bring in all the curriculum objectives. The kids won’t even notice that it’s curriculum stuff they’re doing and that’s what I’m excited about...”. Far from feeling threatened by the direct involvement of an outside partner they welcomed the expanded opportunities to provide their students with what they felt they needed:

“My children got a curriculum that was actually not just delivered by me, because somebody told me to: it was actually relevant, meaningful, and had people – the right people – delivering it. And that was the biggest thing for me as a practitioner.”

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School.

The project

Summary

This year long project involved Year 5 children from the school in helping to rebrand Railworld from the ‘railway museum’ image of its past into a ‘sustainable transport centre’. Railworld is involved in a local strategy of establishing Peterborough as a destination city for tourists and commuters, so children also had the opportunity to look at other aspects of the city and give their views.

The goals

Railworld were seeking a child’s eye perspective on their site as they redevelop their offer to schools and to the public; and were additionally keen to promote Railworld to children and their families as well as raise its profile in the wider city. The biggest goal for the school was to establish the children’s understanding of “what Peterborough is, how it’s changed, and how it’s going to change, and our children’s part within that”

(**Gemma Brown**).

Activities

The first activity was a conference for all 90 Year 5 children at the Town Hall in September. The children were treated as proper delegates with badges and a delegate pack, and were asked to give their views on a range of matters affecting Peterborough. They were told they were being brought into the decision making process; the Mayor of Peterborough as well as council officials and councillors turned out to give inputs and seek the children’s views.

Dogsthorpe Junior School
students at Railworld



Children were taught in advance about sustainable transport options, environmental concerns and vehicle designs, and then gave their views on what they thought the future of sustainable transport in Peterborough should look like. Workshops were given by environmental, heritage regeneration officers, and a key note by the tourism advisor to the council leader.

“A heritage officer present said ‘they gave great comments to us that really challenged how we present heritage (feel free to quote me!) to our stakeholders. The kids liked new buildings as they thought old ones were dirty, an interesting idea!’.”

Alice Kershaw, Heritage Regeneration Officer, Opportunity Peterborough

For a video on this event visit www.citizenpower.co.uk/video/dogsthorpe-junior-school-conference.

Students then visited Railworld itself and were asked what they did and didn’t like, where there should be better signage, and how the organisation should develop its wildlife reserve offer to make it more educational.

A series of visits to the school by Railworld staff cemented the relationship for the children, and a final celebratory visit was organised in the summer term which allowed pupils to see the rebranded Railworld for themselves, and the new signage designed on the basis of the children’s input.

Students have worked closely with Railworld staff, heritage officers, and local environmental voluntary sector workers. Throughout this ‘real life’ project the students learned geography, history, science, numeracy and literacy, as well as core skills.

How is this different from what schools normally do?

“The whole point of this project is not a transactional agreement where you are taking someone’s services to better your curriculum. You have got to be offering something back to those people ... John at Railworld is very, very keen for us to be part of the development of his museum, and he trusts us, and he values us, and he values the children’s involvement.”

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

For the school there were several substantial differences between this way of working with partners and the contextualised learning and school visits traditionally undertaken by schools:

- Having professional conversations before a visit was planned about what the children would be doing in school before they get there, what they would follow up on, and whether they could then work in partnerships to build a bigger outcome over time
- A genuine collaboration with shared goals for school and partner
- Authentic outcomes for students, so that they can see their work having an impact on the real world

“I don’t plan anything without a real audience and a real outcome and some ... impact on, you know the community or their lives.... We now plan our writing so it has proper purpose and audience ... nothing is done for the sake of it anymore.”

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

Impact

On students

One of the main goals of the project was to provide a means of engaging all children, starting with the least engaged. This seems to have been achieved at least in part, as teachers reported that a child with severe behavioural problems at the school said the project he did with Railworld was the best thing he had done all year. He still has the car he made at home (and apparently he breaks everything in his room according to his mum). He said “John added excitement and was inspiring”. When asked what John could offer that his teacher could not he said “you’re a teacher; he knows stuff”.

“The children absolutely love other people being involved in their education.... People with jobs they didn’t know about ... John in particular is a huge role model to our children now ... in their day to day lives they may not recognise that as a step they could take themselves.”

School data shows that attendance rates have improved on dates where trips out to the local area have been planned or members of the school community have been in to support and develop learning. The children now have a wider knowledge of the job roles available in Peterborough through working on this project and, an assessment of writing levels and

verbal oracy showed an improvement of one fine grade for a persuasive speech they prepared for staff from Railworld.

On teachers

Teachers involved with the project have learned a great deal about the barriers and rewards of working in partnership with other stakeholders. They report having developed specific skills in relation to risk assessment. They have also learned a great deal about Peterborough:

“Personally I’ve learnt loads about Peterborough! I now know who does what ... I’m a lot more knowledgeable about ... the council side of things ... who’s in charge of what, what the priorities for the city are, and once you know those, your curriculum can be built ‘round those brilliantly.”

On the wider school

The whole school are putting up the links they have already on a notice board in the staffroom so that everyone else can see. There is a newsletter going out asking for expertise.

“Every single year group has forged a local link to support their theme – it was easy when we sat down and thought about it! Lots of people in the school were enthusiastic. The older teachers are enthusiastic because it’s like it used to be when you knew the people up the road.”

As a school, what she wants is for the community to know that the school wants to engage as much as possible. They have been approached by a parent with the offer of a French exchange student who is coming for a year. They believe that not only is the school more approachable because of the Area Based Curriculum work, people are thinking that they have something to offer learning specifically – that the school seeks community contributions to learning.

What does it mean and what have we learned?

- That the National Curriculum can be covered through engagement with the reality of the local area outside of the classroom
- That teachers are not as well versed in the local area as one might suppose, so they learn as much as the children!
- That there is more learning resource available locally than it might seem
- That trying things out with people in small ways before embarking on a bigger project is a good way of building and testing a relationship
- Establish the outcomes you’re seeking for the children and keep monitoring the work to ensure they are still being met

What next?

Future partnerships are being planned, as well as the partnership with Railworld. Although the exact nature of these was to be determined at the time of writing, both partners were enthusiastic about the next steps.

“We have now raised our understanding of what Peterborough offers and how to use partnerships within our curriculum. So these two years, I don’t reckon we’ve got to where we want to be – that blue sky view of everyone belonging, and understanding of local, national, and international ... and understanding of what they can be as a Peterborough citizen as an adult ... I think they’re massive goals. But I think we need to keep them in sight and we need to build a four year curriculum around those.”

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School, Peterborough

“I don’t know what we’re planning, but yes, we’re planning to work with a few schools. I need to make sure we’ve got the resources there. I need to look more and do my research and start looking at what the National Curriculum, what education worksheets are needed, putting something together so that we’re ready.”

John Turner, Railworld

Food for thought – questions for the reader to reflect upon

- What is on the doorstep of your school that could be used for learning across the curriculum?
- What organisations near your school might benefit from a ‘child’s eye view’, and what impact would having an authentic role in the community have on your students?

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