

AREA BASED
CURRICULUM



THE RSA AREA BASED CURRICULUM IN PETERBOROUGH

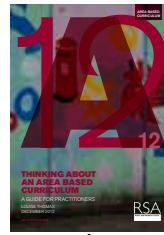
AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

PROFESSOR DAVID JAMES
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
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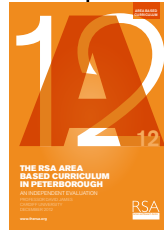
Reports and Publications diagram



Thinking about an Area Based Curriculum: A Guide for Practitioners



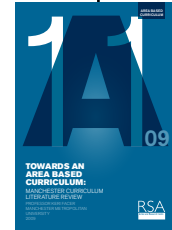
Re-thinking the Importance of Teaching: Curriculum and Collaboration in an Era of Localism



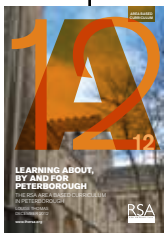
The RSA Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough: an Independent Evaluation



Engaging the Local: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



Towards an Area Based Curriculum: a Literature Review



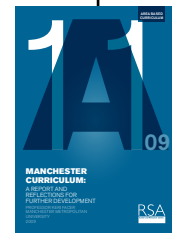
Learning About, By and For Peterborough: the RSA Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough



Lessons for Localism: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



Project Tools



Manchester Curriculum: a Report and Reflections for Further Development



Peterborough Curriculum Case Study: West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral



Peterborough Curriculum Case Study: Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld



Peterborough Curriculum Case Study: Bishop Creighton Academy and Peterborough Cathedral



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: Whalley Range School



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: Parklands School



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: North Manchester High School for Boys

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RSA Area Based Curriculum

This report forms part of a collection of publications on the RSA Area Based Curriculum. For an overview of the work see ‘Thinking about an Area Based Curriculum’ which contains links to all other publications in the series.

About the Author

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Executive summary

This independent evaluation of the RSA Area Based Curriculum Initiative in Peterborough examined a cross-section of project activity in the 2011–2012 academic year. The main findings and the outcomes of the analysis may be expressed succinctly as follows:

The initiative was based on a well-argued rationale, initially framed around the disconnection of children from the places where they live and the probable effects on their learning, and growing to centre on the promise of collaborative design for learning in certain forms of partnership. Taking into account previous mainstream ‘area’ initiatives, it represented a new direction of travel in which this co-construction of curriculum was the defining feature.

In the light of prevalent definitions of standards, accountability mechanisms and recent shifts in teacher professionalism, the initiative represented a courageous educational intervention.

The initiative generated a great deal of activity ‘on the ground’, and at the core of this were the partnerships formed by five schools in Peterborough – three primary schools and two secondary schools – with a range of organisations, most of which were in the arts and heritage sector.

In the primary schools the initiative met all of its objectives. It led to the collaborative design of curriculum and to a series of activities that achieved new forms of connection between children and their City and with some of the people and organisations within it. In general, these activities enthused teachers and pupils alike, and did much to ‘reposition’ the children as experts and citizens whilst at the same time contributing to mainstream curriculum goals. The initiative has positively enhanced learning for several hundred children in the Peterborough area whilst giving teachers a renewed sense of professionalism.

The outcomes were much more mixed in the two secondary schools. In one, the initiative became difficult to distinguish from numerous practices built on the continuation of the school’s identity as a Business and Enterprise-focused community school. In the other, the initiative formed the basis of an activity for a large number of pupils across an entire year group, but became so diluted that its core purposes barely registered for teachers and students alike. In both secondary schools there were strong aspects of the learning culture that appeared to prevent an initiative like this one taking hold. However, it is important to note that in the primary schools the project was seen as compatible with demands arising from OFSTED or from other aspects of accountability.

The initiative benefited from energetic and enthusiastic leadership provided by the RSA.

Should they so wish, the RSA could take aspects of the achievements to form the basis for an ‘RSA Area Based Model’ that other schools and teachers could take up if suitably supported.

The nature and scope of the evaluation

The evaluation covers project activity in the 2011–12 academic year. It made use of interview and observational data in conjunction with various documentary sources. Most of the data were generated during four visits to Peterborough. In addition, a small amount of data derived from questionnaires administered by the RSA has been incorporated. The evaluation addresses the core objectives of the RSA Area Based Curriculum initiative in Peterborough, though is not confined to these.

In summary, the evaluation draws upon data from:

- Four visits to Peterborough, each including an overnight stay and ‘walking the city’, focused on the areas in which the five schools are located
- Visits to schools (7 in total, across 5 schools)
- Visits to partner organisations (3 in total)
- Interviews with teachers (12 in total, of which 5 were with ‘key teachers’, ie those most central to the initiative in each school)
- Interviews with representatives of partner organisations (3 in total)
- Interviews with young people (18 in total, mostly in pairs and threes)
- Interview with Senior Researcher, RSA (1)
- Perusal of displays and individual examples of young people’s work in all 5 schools
- Perusal of various school-based and RSA-produced documents
- Attending an RSA expert seminar
- Quantitative data collected by RSA against pre-project baseline

It is worth noting that the quantitative data proved extremely difficult to collect and is much more limited than was anticipated at the outset of the project. Baseline data was collected from all five schools during the first year of the project, via questionnaires relating to relationships and partnerships that were completed by students and by staff. The RSA attempted to repeat these questionnaires near to the end of the project but were hampered by willingness and capacity of staff to repeat the exercise. The original questionnaire results had been fed back to the schools and were used to inform thinking around the projects, but the evaluative function was insufficiently valued by schools and felt to be onerous.

With the benefit of hindsight, it may have been better to have established a clearer division of labour between internal evaluative processes and independent evaluation, with the latter responsible for gathering

the questionnaire data. This may have helped participants to distinguish between project leadership functions and evaluative functions, making the latter more distinctive. In practical terms, the second questionnaire may have given a higher response if it had been administered in person during a visit by an independent evaluator.

The conceptual challenge of the initiative

The RSA Area Based Curriculum is a bold initiative working in difficult conceptual territory. It rests on a well-argued rationale, at the centre of which is the increasing disconnection of children from the places where they live, and the probable effects of this on their learning, wellbeing and achievements. The RSA argues that this problem has been exacerbated by (a) the National Curriculum, National Strategies and other policies that have been driven by concerns about standards and the economic competitiveness of the UK, and (b) a focus on competition and the performance of individual institutions, coupled with systems of accountability that together construct schools as decontextualised:

‘Schools are imagined as isolated institutions floating in a neutral space and as such, it is supposed, can be straight-forwardly compared through data on measurable indicators. Thinking about schools as dynamic, embedded, situated, human institutions makes comparability far more difficult and hence challenges dominant education discourses’

(RSA, 2010, p. 8)

Added to this diagnosis is a connected point that the same report describes thus: ‘Areas are visible only when they are seen as problematic’. In other words, the dominant sense of ‘place’ in contemporary political discourse is one that highlights deficit, whether this is about resources, the physical environment, or families and/or whole communities being described as having ‘low aspirations’ and a dearth of social capital.

The rationale for the initiative also includes a critical interpretation of previous, centrally-driven area based initiatives such as Education Priority Areas, Education Action Zones, Extended Schools and City Challenge, noting their association with ‘...a deficit view of communities and a psychological account of educational failure (passed down between families) rather than a structural critique of socio-economic factors leading to disadvantage’ (RSA, 2010, p. 11, quoting Facer, 2009). Such initiatives attempt to improve the performance of disadvantaged children at school, and can be read as attempts to re-shape communities, families, children and teachers so that they conform more closely to a dominant model, whilst at the same time ‘...(f)ew ask whether the standards agenda is supporting the communities it is supposed to serve’ (RSA, 2010, p. 12).

This debate is important for understanding the conceptual basis of the

RSA Area Based Curriculum and the difficult ‘space’ in which it sought to work. The initiative is neither a model for a new variant of the centrally-driven ‘deficit’ initiatives, nor a proposal for a more radical construction of an alternative schooling, such as that proposed by Fielding and Moss (2011). Rather, the initiative proposes what might be termed a ‘collaborative third way’:

‘...the Area Based Curriculum is a means by which communities and schools can work together to ensure that schools draw on the knowledge and resources of communities to create diverse approaches to learning. Communities and schools may take on different roles in supporting one another to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to engage. By developing curriculum on a local level and with a local community the system stands a far better chance of meeting the needs of all children’
(RSA, 2010, p. 12)

Conceptually and practically, this process of collaboration is the most distinctive feature of the initiative. The creation of new partnerships for curriculum and learning design became in practice both a means to tackle the ‘disconnection’ issue identified above, *and* a goal in its own right.

It is worth noting that this compelling rationale includes some conceptual difficulties. The initiative is squarely based on a rejection of the idea that the quality of schools can be reduced to single indicators and there is a convincing argument that this very practice contributes to the divorce of children from their local area and has negative implications for their learning and wellbeing. However, at the same time, both implicitly and explicitly, the rationale rejects as ‘fatalistic’ the idea that schooling might be ‘causing rather than reducing social inequality’ (RSA, 2010, p. 12). Arguably, this clear commitment to finding positive solutions is achieved at the cost of setting aside a more problematized analysis of the difficulties.¹

A similar difficulty arises with the initiative’s early portrayal of professionalism (RSA, 2010), though this issue is addressed in greater depth in a later RSA paper that draws upon the initiative (Thomas, 2012). The original rationale points to the rich opportunities for creative curriculum development and for democratic professionalism, which includes a more community-connected activist role. Yet whilst it notes the rise of managerialism and a shift, for teachers, from professionals to technicians (quoting Whitty – see RSA 2010, p. 19), the rationale does not confront the *fact* that teacher professionalism has changed and is – at least in secondary schools – now inextricably bound up with performativity. Put crudely, contemporary definitions of success as a professional are likely to value conventional and mainstream measures (Key stage levels, GCSE results) as much, if not more, than whether or not learning has been enhanced in a non – or less-measurable way. Many teachers are no longer ‘positioned’ so as to value what the initiative can offer.

The RSA’s identification of the disconnectedness of schooling (and children) from the locality is important. Yet whilst this may be regarded

1. An example of this would be sociological research examining the relationship between schooling and social inequality, such as that looking at policies promoting choice and marketization and their ramifications (eg Ainscow et al, 2007; Ball, 2003; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011; Tomlinson, 2005).

as a key problem or difficulty, it can also be seen as a sub-set of a larger problem, namely a society-wide confusion and lack of consensus over the purposes of education and the value of many processes carried out in its name (see for example Pring et al, 2009). A recent and rigorous meta-analysis of over 100 international classroom-based research studies carried out by Watkins is some help in appreciating the depth of this problem. Watkins has demonstrated that ‘... learning-centred school improvement...remains in tension with the dominant discourse about classroom learning and with the current policy interventions in England’ (Institute of Education [IoE], 2010, p. 1). He went on to show that schooling is increasingly performance – and goal-focused (rather than learning-oriented) as young people progress through the years. Furthermore:

‘(A)s educational institutions become more selective and the culture becomes more performance oriented, high learning orientation remains central to achievement, but it is not supported by the classroom culture. So a more limited group of students than could be the case are those who will succeed. If performance orientation is dominant in the culture without a developed learning orientation, there is an increase in strategic behaviour rather than learning behaviour, a focus on looking good rather than learning well, and a tendency to perceive education as a process of jumping through hoops, rather than something more transferable and lasting. This is not a strategy for success’

(Watkins, 2010, p. 5)

Watkins argues that in the current policy climate, it is increasingly difficult for schools and all those that spend time in them ‘to recognise that passing tests is not the goal of education, but a by-product of effective learning’ (IoE, 2010, p. 2). The difficulty is felt through the all-important accountability measures, and compliance with the technocratic view of purpose they represent is secured by a fear of falling (or of not being seen to climb sufficiently) on the part of teachers, schools and local authorities. We might add that the progressive narrowing of the curriculum that counts in ‘headline’ judgements of the quality of secondary schooling has effectively ‘ratcheted up’ this pressure.² Following the earlier point about learning cultures, such factors cannot be bracketed off as mere ‘context’: they enter the learning culture and contribute to the texture and meaning of teaching, learning and schooling for all those involved.

Whilst questions can be raised about aspects of the early conceptual framing of the RSA Area Based Curriculum, the initiative was a courageous one that was presented to schools and other stakeholders with clarity and coherence. It was especially clear to would-be participants that the initiative offered a supported process of partnership building and joint curriculum design, leading to a range of potential positive outcomes. Of particular note is the initiative’s attempt to draw on resources that

2. The progressive nature of this can be seen in the following sequence: Firstly 5 GCSEs at A* to C; secondly GCSEs at A* to C provided they include English and Maths; thirdly 5 GCSEs at A* to C provided they comprise all the elements of an ‘English Baccalaureate’; fourthly and most recently, 5 GCSEs at A* to C provided they do not include one of the vocational qualifications hitherto regarded as equivalent. To this may be added the so-called ‘floor targets’, based on GCSE results, which can trigger a dramatic change in a school’s standing.

are undervalued in conventional policy and practice, such as organisations and individuals in the local area, and the professional capacities of teachers to shape *what* is taught and learnt as well as *how* it is taught and learnt.

Key features of activity 'on the ground'

The Area Based Curriculum initiative was centred on five schools in Peterborough and a number of partnerships of different kinds. Three of the schools were primary, and two secondary. This section contains an outline of the activity pertaining to each school and some commentary, drawing as appropriate from across the evaluation data.

Dogsthorpe Junior School (Primary)

As with many of the key players in the initiative across Peterborough, a particular event facilitated by the RSA was a powerful and effective catalyst in the formation of a partnership between the school and *Railworld*, an educational charity heritage/leisure organisation concerned with sustainable transport issues and the history of railways, located near the centre of the city. The teacher concerned, who had worked at the school for roughly two years, explained that there had been many initial networking meetings with various arts companies, businesses and organisations. However, the event at the museum finally, in the teacher's words, 'sorted the wheat from the chaff': from the teacher's point of view, up to that time it appeared that some of the potential partners seemed to want to get involved just for publicity purposes. The museum event generated joint recognition of mutually compatible goals which could be worked on and refined. For the school there was an established identity and direction for curriculum development, already shaping parts of the curriculum, aiming to make 'place' a more prominent feature: this was in part a response to the mixture of children that included a high proportion of recent arrivals from Eastern European countries.

There is no doubt that the RSA initiative gave greater coherence to this goal and the means to achieve it. For the heritage organisation, there was a desire to raise its profile and to develop in a way that would make it more attractive and useful to young visitors, to 'review, revise and rebrand' as the teacher put it.

Activities included some 80 Year 5 children taking on the role of Tourism Consultants. They played a full role in an event at the Town Hall, attended by the Mayor and the Head of Tourism and other Councillors, which was jointly conceived between the school and *Railworld*. During this the children participated in workshops on major issues affecting tourism such as transport and the built environment. The children had delegate packs and were full participants. Soon after this the children visited the *Railworld* premises, and participated in exercises that were both learning experiences *and* which generated feedback for the organisation itself (some of which

was ‘quite hard for *Railworld* to hear’ according to the teacher). The feedback was used to develop aspects of the site including layout, signage and exhibits, with a view to making it more attractive to visitors in general and to school visits in particular. The director of *Railworld* gave an example of how suggestions arising from the children, which had been acted upon, had left him thinking ‘why didn’t we think of that before?’ As the teacher put it, *Railworld* was now better ‘geared up’ for visits. Another notable activity was a group of the children on a ‘walk through’ with an officer from the Council, looking at Peterborough in the role of first-time visitors. The results of this were fed into relevant parts of the Council.

The children also participated in activities to do with branding and the logo of *Railworld*. Finally, towards the end of the year, they were invited to a celebratory ‘fiesta’ event at *Railworld* – as visitors rather than as consultants – and were able to see what changes they had influenced.

The key teacher was delighted with the way the partnership had grown from strength to strength, and particularly valued it for its provision of a sense of place across a diverse group of children, some of whom did not feel much connection at all to the City beforehand. The teacher was also pleased by the amount and quality of mainstream curricular work that this project fed into and enhanced, citing examples in literacy, reading, design and technology, maths and some science.

West Town Primary School (Primary)

There were two noteworthy similarities with the Dogsthorpe example here: firstly, the key teacher had been in post around two years; secondly, there was a strong pre-existing direction for curriculum development, which the key teacher described as ‘a longstanding strength in real life opportunities for the children’. At the time of getting involved in the RSA initiative, the school was coming to the end of 2 years of working with Creative Partnerships:

‘In the most recent year we had followed Dorothy Heathcote’s³ model which sets out to change the power balance between adults and children and gets the children to lead. This, interestingly, puts the teacher into a more vulnerable position. It is about creativity in its broader sense and requires teachers to use their skills in new ways, involving more risk’.

Having come to a collective view that the projects with Creative Partnerships relied at times too heavily on the children’s imagination, the key teacher suggested that the RSA Area Based Curriculum was a ‘logical next step’ for the school, ‘moving from the personal to focus on the locality and the area’. The partnership here, also brokered at the ‘museum meeting’, was with Peterborough Cathedral’s education office.

It is worth noting how the relationship with the Cathedral differs from

3. The educationalist and drama teacher Dorothy Heathcote. One of her key concepts is *mantle of the expert*. This ‘asks children to approach problems and challenges as if they are experts...in 1981, for the BBC programme *Teacher*, the producer Roger Burgess filmed Heathcote giving a classic demonstration of “mantle of the expert”. She aims to release the latent knowledge in a class of nine-year-olds by asking them to run a fictitious shoe factory... The children had digested Heathcote’s Three Rs – rigour, realisation and responsibility’ *Guardian* Obituary, 17th November 2011.

a more conventional agreement about setting up enriched school visits. The key teacher explained that the recently-appointed director of the Cathedral's education arm, who had until recently been a teacher:

'came to us with a request for help (which) deliberately put the children into a different status or position to what they were in for a previous visit we had to a Tudor house. We tore up the script, and it is a huge amount of work to do that. Sometimes you have to be very adaptable. The first term's work was on the Tudors, then the second term was more unpredictable, but found its own logic and sequence'.

This teacher and colleagues found the RSA initiative provided them with continuity, in that a Cathedral asking primary school children for help seems exactly what Dorothy Heathcote would have prescribed.

It became clear that the link with the Cathedral was much more than simply a new resource for visits, and there was strong evidence here that the Area Based Curriculum was the platform for a series of imaginative curriculum developments. As the key teacher put it:

'The main emphasis in the first term was "history", though never only that, then the Spring term has a science/IT emphasis. The link to English and literacy is easier to see at present, so we are using a fire at the Cathedral in 2001 as the basis for children's imaginative stories, and it's a competition, with (the Director of Education) at the Cathedral judging the winners. We also had some focus on building materials, using the Cathedral. The Cathedral has been the starting-point for all sorts of questions, on the properties of different materials, processes...we have looked at the Mosque, used photos of other buildings, and used the abandoned hospital near the school. We have discussed the plans for a new community building on the site of that hospital which will be very near the school. The children have designed a model building and have had some participation in the (official) consultation process...a "sense of place" has become central to what we are doing with the children, but I am not quite sure where it will go in the third term'.

Interviews with children confirmed the centrality of the Cathedral in their learning and their positive regard for it. Visits had been very active for them, for example requiring that they chose which aspects of the Cathedral interested them the most. Their Cathedral-linked work included a display of paintings, drawings and models which achieved high quality without much direct teacher input. Other activities have included – unusually for a small primary school – a link with representatives of local businesses, leading to a school visit by two people from the construction industry who ran a session with children on some fundamental principles in building construction.

Bishop Creighton Academy (Primary)

There were close links between this small school and the Cathedral prior to the arrival of the initiative, in that one of the Cathedral's Cannons was a member of the Board of Governors. A parallel with the West Town case is that the approach is underpinned by the idea that children should be

enabled to participate in activities and discussions that are usually the province of adults. The two main elements of the activity are (a) working with the history of the Cathedral and its position in the community, in religious and non-religious ways, as a knowledge base, and (b) work with the young people on the School Council that engages them in discussion in a more public forum, with a focus on the contemporary role of the Cathedral. A goal is to set up a 'Question Time' event with a panel that would include Clergy, the City Interfaith Council, and children from the School Council. As the key teacher put it, a goal is to help the children 'gain the confidence to challenge, but in a positive way'.

For the key teacher at Bishop Creighton, the decline of industry in Peterborough has 'torn the heart out of the City', and has had many effects on people's lives, not least socially. His view of this is informed by a background that includes working in a large engineering company, and he recalls that there were once 'eight or nine working men's social clubs (in the City), which were hugely important, providing sport like football and cricket amongst other things'. This underlines his view that many children in the school do not feel any connection at all with Peterborough.

The 'Museum meeting' was, again, very significant. This strengthened links with other schools as well as with the Cathedral, which seemed 'a natural partner'. The teacher spoke of how the meeting had helped the school to clarify what direction it wished to take with curriculum development. The occasion had also clarified a partnership with another organisation, the football club. This relationship is very important to the school. Though it is no longer directly connected to the RSA initiative, there is much common ground. The football club provides opportunities for a range of activities which excite many of the children, linked to science, creative writing, and health.

For the key teacher, the relationship with the Cathedral provides something well beyond a place to go for a good school visit, and discussions with the education director there is itself a creative and generative resource. Groups of children participated in a multi-faith event, which was very successful.

The RSA initiative has helped this school to crystallise what it wants from relationships with other organisations, and these are increasing in number and diversity. There has also been some positive progress with the involvement of parents and the drawing in of their skills and contributions to school life, particular in areas like gardening and the care of plants or some small restoration projects around the school.

In this school, the RSA initiative sits well with a strong, school-based 'learning to learn' policy and ethos. For the key teacher, there was no tension between this and the expectations of Ofsted, the local authority, parents and other stakeholders. Whilst there was pressure to raise standards, and much relative scope to do this, it could only be achieved by focusing on the nature and quality of learning.

Thomas Deacon Academy (Secondary)

Thomas Deacon is a very large school, which combined three former schools when it was formed in 2007. It has around 2,200 students. It is organised into six Colleges (namely Arts, Humanities, Technology, Maths, Science and 'Community'), and these function as tutor group and

'home' for students and are the site for 'I-Connect' (ie tutor group time). Some of the teachers leading on the RSA work had been involved in the 'Museum meeting' earlier in the initiative, but not all. The initiative here involved each College linking with one or more organisations, shown in the table below.

'College' within the school	Partner organisation	Outcomes planned	Outcomes
Technology	Peterborough FM	Local radio programme	Unclear
Arts	Local artist from Peterborough	Group works of art	Incomplete works of art
Humanities	Museum and 'Relate'	Unclear	Use of Museum archive images and 'migration boxes' in class discussion.
Science	Perkins engineering, Peterborough Wildlife, Peterborough Age UK	Unclear	Unclear
Maths	Three sport organisations (A possible link with banks was abandoned)	Topic of 'Peterborough in a recession'	Use of sport-related data in class
Community	John Clare Trust	A focus on mental health issues	Unclear

The school's engagement with the initiative included an opportunity facilitated by the RSA to review all current community links in each College. Following this, each College would select a community organisation and work in collaboration with them to develop a new curriculum unit, to run through the summer term. Looking ahead, the activities would rotate around the colleges in subsequent years. Students spent up to three one-hour slots, spread over three weeks, on activities that were linked to the initiative.

The teacher that led on the initiative in the Arts College said:

'Initially it sounded like a really good idea, but it is questionable how much of a community link you can make in a three-hour scheme of work, or how much more aware they (the students) are of community or their local area after the activity'.

The focus here was on using a local artist to inform and inspire. The artist and their work were firmly rooted in the area. Interviewed students were enthusiastic about the experience but also a little frustrated by it:

'We had three hours on this. The first one was where an artist came and did a (slide) presentation which was very interesting. The second and third one was us working in groups and starting to do our own big bits of art...it felt unusual and we enjoyed it and it was nice to do and we hope we can do it again...(it was) unusual but nice at the same time'.

The students described the work of the artist as 'impressive' and 'really good' and they confirmed that, at least in prospect, 'doing this kind of thing could help us learn more about Peterborough'. However, the paintings were only partially complete, and whilst the pupils hoped that they

would get a good chance to finish them and that they would be displayed prominently in the school, they did not feel confident that this would actually happen.

The teacher responsible in the Humanities College explained that she had wanted newer, social sciences staff to lead on an activity, but that in the event the activity had been focussed on topics linked to history, geography and psychology. For this teacher 'it is quite hard to make new links outside school in the humanities subjects'. The three hour-long sessions had comprised: (a) the use of archive images of the city, with a view to comparing these with present-day images of the same locations, photographed by students (in the event it was only possible to view the archive images); (b) the use of 'migration boxes' from the Museum containing sets of the personal belongings of people who migrated and which tell a story, and a discussion of 'why people moved here'; (c) a discussion of stress involving the relationship counselling organisation *Relate*.

The teacher's own view of these activities was that they were largely worthwhile, but that they did not lead to a measurable increase in knowledge of the local area or community whilst at the same time running the risk of 'dumbing down', giving students a superficial view of history, geography or psychology. For their part, the students had enjoyed the 'migration boxes' activity because '...it made us think about the people themselves, and what they liked to eat'. They also valued it in another way, saying 'It was better than most of school because we learnt about different things, about people history, place history, all mixed up in interesting ways'. One student added that it would have been better to have had a person coming in rather than looking through a box of belongings.⁴ The students were very clear that in the rest of their schooling, they never spent any time learning about Peterborough.

Students from the Technology College described how for them, the Area Based Curriculum activity had been 'not three hours, more like one', and had not led to a clear conclusion. A teacher had spoken at a whole-college assembly about the range of community activities around Peterborough. This was followed by students writing questions about these, in and out of school. 'Then there was another session asking and answering with each other and we recorded it on our mobile phones'. The teacher had mentioned the possibility of editing these into a radio programme, but 'nothing happened...the teachers are too busy'. One said 'personally I don't think it was very useful'. Another said 'it was kind of pointless and it would have been better to have a purpose like maybe marketing Peterborough'. These students also confirmed that 'nothing in the rest of what we do at school connects with Peterborough'. Pre-established links with a community radio organisation had not been activated in connection with this particular activity.

In this example there was little direct contact between students and individuals or organisations from outside the school, and in most respects the activity did not meet clearly communicated RSA criteria for projects. However, the school's involvement coincided with a reorganisation of the school timetable, and provided a pilot for a way of working that the key

4. The other students in the small group were very keen on this idea, describing how they would be able to prepare questions in advance.

teacher hoped could become more established. There was some evidence that the RSA initiative had enabled new kinds of discussion about the school's relationship to the community and the area, and that the link with the RSA had helped to give status to community links. In addition, the RSA has reported that quite limited instances of learning about the locality led to some students making independent visits to new locations out of school hours, and to them thinking differently about Peterborough.

Ken Stimpson Community School (Secondary)

Ken Stimpson school is a mid-sized secondary school with around 1000 students, on the same site as a sports centre and library. The two nearest schools are both large Academies, and there is a strong internal sense of a distinct identity as a community school. The 'Museum meeting' was significant for building a new relationship with the Peterborough Environment City Trust, though as an event not as pivotal as it had been for other schools. Staff from this school felt they already had very good contacts and understandings with a range of organisations, including types of business that were somewhat under-represented at the event.

As well as its strong 'community' focus, the school has had Business and Enterprise College Status since 2006, and is highly active in the use of relationships with other organisations to shape learning opportunities, which include links with engineering firms, local churches and faith groups, a cluster of nearby sheltered housing, and a local branch of a large multinational corporation. The key teacher, who has business experience, acts as a broker for the rest of the school in finding and organising such opportunities. This teacher described the school's main interest as being in social enterprise, and like the deputy head, suggested that the RSA initiative was very close to what the school was already attempting to do through its links with the community. Initially, it had seemed to senior personnel that involvement in the RSA initiative would therefore be superfluous. However, after further discussions it became clear that the initiative did not have to be limited to re-labelling parts of existing activity. The initiative inspired some new activity and added to collective confidence. As the deputy head put it, 'The RSA (initiative) has been a catalyst that has further promoted our desire to get right into our local community and underlined our wish to do even more of that'. It is worth noting that for all the richness and variety of outward-facing contacts in this school, only one example of thoroughgoing collaborative curriculum design was apparent to the evaluation, and that was with a local college.

Amidst the extensive area-based work already in train, the activities most closely associated with the initiative were two 'collapsed curriculum days' for around 180 Year 8 students. One of these was focused on refugees, and involved the Red Cross: an important part of the day was hearing the testimony of a refugee, with an associated question and answer session. This had been a powerful learning experience in which 'you could hear a pin drop...the kids were just gobsmacked'. One of the young people involved described it as 'amazing because it really made us think, and we were talking about it for ages afterwards'. Interestingly, the day was also designated by the school as an 'enterprise day', and included organised debates and further work in teams, with the winning team's prize being the opportunity to present their impressions on local radio

(the piece is also available on the school's website). There is an intention to run a similar event each year. The second 'collapsed curriculum day' focused on teams of students working with adult volunteers from the local community to compete in a 'fashion through the ages' event. Here the winning team would see their design for a garment made up.

The key teacher involved noted the difficulty of having 'collapsed curriculum' days in a secondary school and thought it unlikely that there could be any increase in the number of these, given the pressure that subject-teaching colleagues were under to increase visible outcomes in more conventional measures of school success.

Key themes

This draws out six key themes from the school and partnership evaluation data.

Enhancing learning: The Primary/Secondary difference: In the primary schools, the initiative has been very successful. Project activity represents: a challenge to assumptions that have become conventional about the location and responsibility for curriculum (and to an extent, pedagogy); an enhancement of learning for several hundred children; a boost to aspects of professional identity for some teachers; a series of new relationships for children with adults, organisations, and material aspects of their local area. The initiative has functioned to support teachers in activities designed to enhance learning. Here, elements of the learning culture – particularly the meaning of professionalism and the lower profile of discrete academic subjects – enabled teachers to take risks in reshaping the curriculum. Importantly, the process of enhancing learning through the initiative was seen by the key teachers involved as either *superior to* (and a prior condition for) securing measured improvements in standards, or at least as *compatible* with such improvements. In one school the initiative was a recognised element of strategy following a disappointing inspection outcome, providing a means to build new strengths that both Ofsted and the local authority would recognise.

The initiative has been less successful, though not without merit, in the secondary schools. Here it has found itself contending with a learning culture which draws clear lines of separation between (on the one hand) subject learning in classrooms, and (on the other hand) cross-curricular learning, partnerships, relationships with organisations, curriculum innovation, the locality as a resource and so forth. The RSA found difficulty in developing conversations in secondary schools about how area-based activities could make a positive contribution to the quality of subject learning and to examination attainments, and some offers of help in this direction were not taken up. This suggests that the ‘performance orientation’ mentioned earlier in this report has found an affinity with a narrow view of subject teaching. This analysis is very close to that of a recent project on work-related learning in the secondary curriculum, in which it was found that subject-oriented materials and processes based on the world of work, with the potential to improve the learning of high-fliers in maths, were instead relegated to use as a ‘remedial’ measure for those students on a C/D GCSE borderline (James et al, 2010).

The two secondary schools represent different responses to the opportunity provided by the initiative, though in neither one could it be said

with any certainty that the initiative has had a major or distinctive impact in line with its core objectives.⁵

Compatibility with related educational thinking: RSA-based reflection has already pointed to the significance of ‘pre-existing educational mandates’ in some of the organisations forming partnerships as part of the initiative (Thomas, 2011, p. 5). A more general theme here is that teachers and others concerned found it compatible with other sets of individual and collective values that inform curriculum development, innovation and practice. Across the five schools, there were at least four examples of this. The Area Based Curriculum found productive affinities with:

- a. a strong pre-existing drive to use the local area in an educative way;
- b. an established way of working with Heathcote’s ‘mantle of the expert’;
- c. a strong ‘learning to learn’ agenda;
- d. a ‘social enterprise’ variant of the Business and Enterprise secondary school specialism.

In practical terms this suggests that the initiative’s definition and presentation was at the right level of specificity for schools, teachers and learners. Conceptually, the initiative both borrowed from and contributed to other sets of ideas and values about how to maximise the quality of learning. However, ready connection with other values and practices can hinder as well as facilitate curriculum innovation of the sort promoted by the initiative, and the RSA experience with secondary schools included some misrecognition or reinterpretation of the goals in ways that departed from project criteria.

A vehicle for confident curriculum development: As a recent RSA publication suggests, a declared greater autonomy for teachers to own the curriculum comes at the same time as many teachers have been, in effect, ‘deskilled’ by the National Curriculum and National Strategies (see Thomas, 2012).⁶ New forms of support will be needed if teachers are to develop curriculum with confidence – even more so if they are innovating and experimenting for the first time. Teachers in this position could benefit greatly from having a strong and well-identified vehicle that can become the focus of collective decision-making and which has goals that are compatible with a creative, progressive impetus. The initiative does

5. Thomas (2012) uses some early data drawn from the initiative to illustrate a marked difference between primary and secondary schools in how they are able to respond, so that a primary teacher can say ‘When I work on this I feel like I’ve got a proper job’ whilst teachers in secondary schools point to the immense difficulties of fitting in yet another demand, or getting ‘off timetable’. As the same paper also implies in passing, in secondary schools the ‘cross curricular’ tends to have a lower status than some of the academic subjects.

6. The paper (Thomas, 2012) also helpfully suggests that such ‘deskilled’ teachers will need support if they are to take on the role of curriculum developers, and notes that the White Paper (Department for Education, 2010) promotes more training in classrooms and more focus on ‘core teaching skills’ whilst saying nothing about how teachers might learn to deal with what should be taught and why. This, it is argued, is similar to contradictions in government views of teachers and teaching, and ‘...any genuine recognition that teachers could be curators or creators, rather than merely organisers, of knowledge, is missing from government analysis for what makes a quality teacher. Hence, support for teachers to develop into professionals creating and mediating knowledge is likely to be absent, despite the rhetoric of curriculum freedom’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 10).

provide a model for such a vehicle. In a very telling phrase, one group of teachers spoke of the initiative giving them the confidence required to ‘tear up the script’. There are strong parallels here with the findings of the evaluation of the Teacher Training Agency’s *School Based Research Consortium Initiative* where being involved in a research project provided teachers with a similar boost (see Simons et al, 2003).

Leadership, project management and support: Underpinning all project activity on the ground has been a high level of commitment and effort from the Senior Researcher at the RSA. A recurrent theme in the evaluation data is admiration for, and appreciation of (and at times outright gratitude for) this support. It has entailed a range of skills from detailed project management, to initiating discussions for creative problem-solving, to helping a school with an audit of community contacts, to high-level ‘political’ negotiations that made a great deal of difference to the level of engagement from (for example) local Councillors, (raising the ‘profile’ of events and the quality of learner experience) . The initiative has benefited from consistent and dedicated leadership, careful project management, explicit expectations, energetic promotion, very well conceived facilitation and a judicious monitoring of activity. Project management and leadership included an element of evaluation activity throughout, and the RSA may wish to reconsider whether initiatives of this kind require a clearer separation of evaluation activity from leadership functions.

Pragmatic clarity and conceptual boundaries: It is interesting to compare the conceptual basis of the initiative with other recent diagnoses of the problems in the schools sector and their accompanying recommendations for change. The RSA initiative attempts to identify major problems and weaknesses in current policy and practice, and to act to remedy these (at least by example). In doing so, it is mainly driven by widely-held definitions of those problems and weaknesses rather than by a compelling alternative vision for education. Good examples of such visions can be found in Fielding and Moss’s (2011) notion of radical education and the common school, or Coffield and Williamson’s (2011) idea of ‘communities of discovery’. These views of how the world of schooling might be are powerful because they are utopian in the most positive sense of that term (see Levitas, 2003): they construct a picture of something that is currently lost or missing – namely, a clear sense of purpose. They do this with reference to real-world examples as well as to conceptual reasoning. It is arguable that the RSA initiative, for all its many strengths, leaves a dominant (and dominating) vagueness of purpose unchallenged, and thereby limits its own potential reach with both policy and practitioner audiences.

The value of co-design in curriculum innovation: As already noted, the attempt to make new partnerships the generative basis for curriculum innovation is perhaps the most distinctive feature of how the RSA Area Based Curriculum initiative operated, and the furtherance of this became a goal in its own right. It is also a major sense in which the project has achieved something new. There is a crucial difference between now-commonplace ideas like ‘delivery in partnership’ and the rather more fundamental notion here, that schools and organisations can work together in a supported environment to experiment, share ideas and perceptions of need, and co-construct new forms of curriculum. There is compelling

evidence in the primary schools and some partner organisations that such co-construction was a prevalent and genuine feature of project activity, and that this had a positive impact on learning within and well beyond the skills and capacities specified in the established curriculum. The evaluation data includes several good examples of this, where groups of children knew and could trust that they were valued as experts and that their deliberations and actions would not be reduced to tokenism. Some of these opportunities highlighted a broader identity for pupils, as citizens in a democratic or geographical/location sense. At the same time, the teachers working in this way were energised by the process, with a palpable sense of professionalism within which calculated risks could be taken.

The original objectives and the degree to which they were met

The RSA Area Based Curriculum initiative in Peterborough had five specific objectives. These are shown below, each followed by a brief evaluative comment.

Objective 1

To increase the engagement of students in specific year groups in five schools in Peterborough by providing at least one Area Based Curriculum project per school during the academic year 2011–12. This objective was clearly achieved in the broad sense that all five schools developed and operationalized at least one Area Based Curriculum Project. It is always very difficult to detect changes of this kind and even more difficult to attribute them to specific causes. However, the evaluation saw impressive examples of increased engagement in the sense of young people and their teachers being enthused and energised by project activities. A good example of this is how some primary school children became enthused by an imaginative writing task based on a fire at the Cathedral, to a level well beyond what would be expected from a mere visit. Another is the activity in the Arts section of one of the secondary schools, where students were clearly motivated and inspired by the visit of a local artist and took this forward into group-based artwork which responded to the local area in ways they themselves declared absent from the rest of their school experience.

Objective 2

To increase the quality, number and diversity of relationships that students have with a diverse range of individuals and organisations in Peterborough between March 2011 and July 2012. This objective was clearly achieved in the case of the three primary schools. It was not achieved in one of the secondary schools due to a lack of sustained contact between students and outside partners and a learning culture that made it difficult for the Area Based Curriculum Initiative to gain purchase. In the other secondary school, whilst the quality, number and diversity of such relationships was high and increasing, it was impossible to say whether this was attributable to the initiative, or would have happened without it.

Objective 3

To increase the number, quality and diversity of relationships between schools, and between partner schools and individuals and organisations in the community (including those rarely involved in the life of schools), in Peterborough by July 2012. RSA ‘before and after’ quantitative data, though limited to two schools, shows that relationships with other organisations increased and changed in nature over the school year. Evaluation data shows that this objective was clearly achieved in case of the three primary schools. For the two secondary schools, the evaluation suggests the same outcome as noted above for Objective 2.

Objective 4

To develop a model for an Area Based Curriculum through the Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough that could be scaled up across the city of Peterborough and elsewhere nationally. The evaluation evidence suggests that this objective has been met in the case of primary schools. It is more equivocal with regard to secondary schools. The difference appears to rest on key elements of the learning culture that differ between the two phases. The Dogsthorpe/Railworld and the West Town/Cathedral partnerships are the clearest examples of an approach and mode of working with the RSA rationale and objectives at their heart. Potentially, these provide a model for how other schools and analogous organisations could work together to the mutual benefit of all, but especially young learners. The evaluation data suggests that the key elements of such a model would be:

- voluntary participation
- clear communication of the rationale for an area based curriculum
- an energetic facilitation and fostering of potential partnerships
- creating conditions for maximising partner ‘ownership’ of the relationships formed
- seeking out and building upon existing curriculum development directions and values
- supporting teachers as they confront multiple demands
- assisting partnerships to raise the profile of their initiative at all levels, but especially in the local community and with local or regional agencies with authority.

Objective 5

To contribute to the literature and evidence base around the question of how to balance local and national aims and opportunities in education. The initiative has made a definite and positive contribution of this kind, especially through ‘position’ documents and events which have drawn on the RSA experience of initiating and nurturing the various activities in Peterborough. In a general climate of concern at the demise of various forms of ‘community’, and the various responses in the form of social capital and citizenship initiatives (Thomson, 2006), the experience of running the initiative has given the RSA the opportunity to contribute to debates about the ‘Big Society’, specifically pointing out that the latter

tends to assume and expect consensus, with localism presumed to be in harmony with centralised goals. The initiative has attempted to acknowledge the presence of conflict as well (see Thomas, 2011, p. 9).

Another paper drawing lessons from the Peterborough initiative to address the question of teacher professionalism was a timely and well received intervention into debate on the role of teachers in relation to curriculum on the one hand, and communities on the other (Thomas, 2012). As a whole the initiative undoubtedly provides examples of what one recent major review of literature on school/community relations has signalled as a requirement for ‘greater dialogue between professionals and communities, leading, at least, to shared agendas’ (Dyson et al, 2012, p.2). It has also already led to a pilot for professional development in curriculum design between the RSA, Institute of Education and Curriculum Foundation.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of the evaluation is that the initiative was highly successful in the case of the three primary schools and the partnerships that they formed. The evaluation found a good triangulation between the independently-voiced claims of teachers, children, and key people in partner organisations: together with direct observations of pupil work, this evidence points clearly to the initiative making a tangible and positive difference to the learning of a large number of children. The more mixed results in secondary schools arose from a combination of factors, including learning cultures with a strong 'performative' orientation that positions subject teaching as insulated from (and superior to) other conceptions of educative purpose and which foster reluctance to depart from established practices. To some extent the original conception of the initiative underestimated such difficulties. The initiative was very well led and managed and provides a basis for a model that would be transferable to other (primary) schools.

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