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MANCHESTER CURRICULUM CASE STUDY:

WHALLEY RANGE SCHOOL

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The Manchester Curriculum in Whalley Range School, Case Study written by: Keri Facer, Education and Social Research Institute, MMU

Background Context

Whalley Range is an 11-18 specialist college for Business, Enterprise and Sport. A girls' school with a highly diverse student intake, the college was described by Ofsted in 2007 as 'good and improving' and 'well respected in the communities it serves'.

Overview of the Manchester Curriculum at Whalley Range School

Whalley Range ran a project called 'Our Manchester: Our Whalley Range' over half a term at the beginning of 2009 with all Year 7 students. The project involved in the region of 10 days curriculum time and staff from RE, History, Geography, Citizenship and ICT. Each class in the year group was assigned a different period of Manchester's history, and they were then required to plan, film and edit a 'documentary' for their chosen period. It led to the production of a DVD by the whole year group on Manchester's history.

The project was led by Deputy Head Teacher Jane Townsend and was tied in to the school's decision to rethink their year 7 curriculum, which was intended to be organised around project days and around engagement with both SEAL and PLTS as well as humanities subject areas. The project was rich in ICT and digital media use and involved students in activities both in the school, on visits to the city and the resources of the local CLC.

Review methods

The following discussion is based upon the school's written proposal for their project, a visit to the school, including a short observation of a full year group activity and class lesson, and interviews with the school co-ordinator for the project and two of the participating teachers. The RSA lead, Kathryn Burn, also conducted an interview with the school co-ordinator.

Aspirations for the Manchester Curriculum

The 'Our Manchester: Our Whalley Range' activities were located within a wider programme of change to the year 7 curriculum in the school, which involved a shift toward cross-curricular teaching and learning centred around year 7 project days run with half the year group on a Monday and half on a Friday. These were designed as days in which the students would work on projects that required student engagement with the subject knowledge of a range of different humanities disciplines and which promoted a range of ICT skills, and personal skills and competencies. A theme was chosen to structure each half term. These were: Identity, A Museum for Manchester, Our Manchester: Our Whalley Range, Heroes and Heroines, Fit for Life, and 21st Century Learning.

A significant proportion of the plans for the curriculum were, therefore, already in place before the school agreed to participate in the Manchester Curriculum project:

We already knew that we were going to have year 7 project days. We already knew that we were going to have six topics, one for each half term. We'd already decided that we'd try and have a trip in each half term. We already knew which people were going to be teaching it and that it was going to be a cross-curricular day that involved History, Geography, RE, Citizenship and ICT. […] we knew that one of the projects was going to be about Manchester. It was going to be making a documentary about the different periods in Manchester's history and that was kind of as far as we knew. We didn't know how it was going to work out […] we knew we wanted to include, not just the subject disciplines, but that we wanted to use the PLTS or SEAL. (Teacher J)

The teachers were keen to increase student engagement and social skills, and thought that a cross-curricular and competency focused approach might achieve this aim:

At the heart of it is the Every Child Matters agenda, in terms of Enjoy and Achieve, and we wanted to see if, in year 7, we could create real engagement in projects which would give students more time to develop those kinds of team work skills and cross curricular learning, and things that would be motivating, where we have time to go out on visits, or get speakers in, rather than having the subject, RE, one period a week for year 7, or history, one period a week. (Teacher J)

The school was also keen to encourage student aspiration and awareness of their city:

We wanted students to have ownership of Manchester because a lot of students here don't go out at weekends. They don't go out after school. They might be collected, driven home. They don't travel on public transport […] I think it's partly an ethnicity issue. We've got a very high proportion of Asian students and we've also got students who are poor, you know, in terms of parents having time or money to take their daughters out to see things. It can be very expensive to have a day out in the city, with all the things that involves if you've got a few children […] we felt that we wanted to make sure that, every half term, there was some kind of trip so the students were getting out and seeing things but we wanted them to feel 'the city belongs to me; I know my city; I know some of the famous buildings in my city; know I can go into some of these things for free,' that kind of thing'. (Teacher J)

Importantly, however, the lead teacher on this project talked about the potential for a local curriculum to have a parochial focus, and challenged the conception of identity and community as geographically bounded. Indeed, she argued:

I think we want to get students to feel that they're part of our school community; they're part of their wider community and they're part of a global community. So we had one project that focused on fair trade and social enterprise kind of issues and I think if we hadn't had any world view, you know, that wouldn't have been good, and I suppose, on the identity one we were thinking about, well, we're in Manchester but we've got all these links with other countries that people have come from so that's kind of what's made Manchester what it is, the links it's got with other places […] I suppose every term has got aspects of Manchester in, but I also want there to be something that's wider than that as well and that was originally what put me off the Manchester curriculum because

I thought are we going to have every half term and its going to be Manchester? I suppose my question was, why do we need a Manchester curriculum? (Teacher J)

Activities

The model for the year 7 project days was a combination of whole year group activities in the hall, in which teachers would present a set of materials and activities intended to inspire and challenge students before setting them a major project to work on. This was followed by a series of activities in classrooms and on visits as a class group in which students worked through a handbook to structure their activities. Each half term led to a different end 'product' created by the students. On the Museum for Manchester, they constructed a physical museum model and made a PowerPoint presentation. On the identity day, they created a class exhibition.

The whole year group activities were designed specifically to challenge traditional pedagogies in many ways. For example:

For 'identity' we had rolls of wallpaper cut up so that each big table had a piece of this wallpaper and they drew round themselves and then they covered the outline of the human being with all the things that they thought were connected with identity, and the sense of engagement and creativity that was in the room during an activity like that, and the space of the hall, there are quite a lot of things you can do. I mean, one time […] we played 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' with a half year group moving round from place to place for the answers, […] we've also had a big simulation, in the stadium, a UN conference. (Teacher J)

In the case of the 'Our Manchester: Our Whalley Range' project, which ran over the first half term in January 2009, the lead history teacher invested considerable time and effort in creating a DVD that showed him at different periods of time in Manchester's history.:

We decided that we were going to make a really interesting launch DVD for this documentary project and the Head of History really went for that and organised and took over and we had a really professional video where he was a time-traveller going back to the different periods and forward to the periods that the students would be looking at. (Teacher J)

Following this, the students were challenged with creating a short film about their chosen period:

Each class is responsible for a different time frame; students plan, and develop materials – images, keywords, sketches, poems, songs, interviews, drama – that reflect their era. Within each class teams of students develop their co-operative learning skills researching and using information retrieved to devise items to be included in the documentary film. (Written summary presented to RSA team)

This challenge having been set to the students, they then went on a tour around Manchester by coach, where they had a map *'with pictures of different things that they had to spot, like an I Spy type thing, so that was to give them a sense of where the main city's spread out and what kind of parts its in, and what kinds of different historical periods there are in the city and can they recognise certain buildings that represent, maybe, different times and we had some map reading activities'*. The Manchester wide coach tour was complemented by a Whalley Range walking tour where students were looking at the different historical periods in evidence in that particular area.

Throughout this process, the students were using still and video cameras to capture footage, and were beginning to explore the different elements that might go into their films of the period. Gradually students took on more responsibility for their films. In some cases, they decided to revisit places like the Museum of Science and Industry to gather more footage; in another they invited an actor in to talk to them about their experience of Manchester. Students and staff were free to take the challenge in a range of different directions. The processes of editing their film took place at the local City Learning Centre, often without class teacher involvement, leaving the children to take on responsibility for major editorial decisions. Finally, the different films were presented back to the whole year group in the hall.

The staff who were interviewed identified a number of challenges that remained unaddressed in this pilot activity and which they were continuing to explore.

First, the difficulty of finding ways to assess student learning remained a live issue, and one that they had hoped to address through the links with other schools in the Manchester Curriculum project.

The challenge of developing cross-curricular and project focused work for staff who have a traditional subject background also remained. In the early stages of the project, the process involved explicit mapping of subject areas into the project activities:

We fully understand that certain projects will be heavier in certain topics than others so when we did Fit For Life, for example, that was nearly all citizenship and a little bit of ICT, very little Geography, very little History, very little Art. Whereas when we did the Museum for Manchester and the documentary on Manchester I was fully aware that there was quite a lot of history in there so I know because history benefited a lot from those two projects, got more than a fifth of the time, you sort of give and take a little bit. (Teacher M)

Some of the students, familiar with subject based teaching, were also uncertain about what was being learned, leading staff to consider clearer 'labelling' of activities:

Some girls genuinely feel, well, I'm not doing ICT this year… you just say to the girls well ICT is part of it. You've done PowerPoints; you've done the word-processing; you've made a documentary so you've done film editing. They've actually done loads, you know, they've done about internet safety. Most of the stuff they would have done in lessons but because it's part of a project day they don't always say that they're learning like the lesson. We tried to make it so it didn't feel like you're doing a History lesson; you're doing an ICT lesson. It maybe went too far that way and you need to let the girls know what subjects they are studying when they are studying so this is your ICT part of the day when you're doing this. We're going to focus on history now. (Teacher M)

The fact that non-specialist teachers were being asked to lead work outside their specialist area also influenced planning activities:

The number of students just changes the way you teach the lesson so the fact that you've got non-specialist teachers teaching history so you've got to make sure that everything is clear so you have to give instructions. The plans for the day, obviously, have to be far more precise. Obviously if I'm

planning just for myself I don't need to plan everything in the minutest detail because I know what I'm doing. (Teacher M)

Over the course of the year, increasingly, the team was coming to focus on the skills and competencies rather than the subject content. A new approach was developing, which saw the staff increasingly see the need to pay attention to the skills students required to participate in project based work – and at the time of the interview, there were suggestions that there should be a more explicit focus on literacy and on the teaching of collaboration and group skills.

The tension between subject based and competency based approaches also comes out in the challenge of teachers being asked to teach and lead in areas outside their own field of expertise. There were, for example, significant challenges to the educators in the technical and artistic processes of creating a film/DVD as part of the Manchester curriculum:

We had problems with incompatibility between things that had been filmed here and things that were at the CLC. Some footage was lost and so on so, from all of that, lessons learned. We've got a new signing out sheet for camera and equipment, and so on. We've decided that, next year, somebody from the CLC will come and do a training session with the staff before we set off and so we know very clearly about how that bit of it is going to work. He'll come and talk to our Media staff and make sure that they know what's being required of them. […] I'm not an IT specialist. I've never done anything like this before, so it was a real shot in the dark really, because we didn't know what we'd need. (Teacher J)

They got all dressed up – sort of 1800s – and went to the Museum of Science and Industry and they all brought clothes to dress up in and we went round and they found a place where they wanted to film and they wrote their script and filmed it. Brilliant. But when it came to putting it all together they lost all the sound. It was so close to being a really good idea. All of a sudden they got there and they were doing silent movies and all the research was lost because the sound was gone so it just looked like my class had done a silent movie, dressed up in clothes and running in and out of rooms. It kind of lost the sense of – some of them like, when they filmed, pictures broke up and pictures went green at times so it just didn't look as professional as we hoped it would when we filmed it but that wasn't any fault of the girls. That was the fault of the, just the technology. (Teacher M)

The sustained inquiry-based project days also made visible to some of the teachers that certain topics or subjects form more or less amenable subjects for student inquiry:

The research was a big part. […], for example, people who were doing something about Manchester in the 50s to the 2000s so they got to do about sort of immigration into Manchester… they got to do about the bomb. There was loads of stuff for them to research. Whereas, I was doing about 1800s Manchester and the idea was to focus on Whalley Range. Well, Whalley Range in the early 1800s there was nothing here but fields and what actually happened wasn't all that dramatic. Big houses were built because it was a wealthy area but not enough to warrant a documentary, therefore, we had to wind it to Manchester but, doing that, we open up how do you research Manchester in the 1800s so we had to pinpoint what topics we're were going to have so it was like

crime and punishment, so it was about finding out about crime and punishment in Manchester and it was university-level stuff of actually researching such a topic. (Teacher M)

The different timescales of the project days – with students in the same group with a teacher all day – also brought challenges for the teachers who needed to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of their students' and the dynamics between them to ensure a successful experience:

So you've got issues like that with group dynamics […]. If I thought the group was top heavy and was too heavy or too weak I would possibly move them around but what I tend to do is, every half term, putting a seating plan up that will change so they're all working with different ones each half term and, for that half term, that is there seat and that's where they stay… .a bright student, an average student and everything in between. So the dynamics of the group is important. Some girls are very forceful and push their opinions upon others. Other girls sit back and allow what's to happen to happen so, as a teacher, for us, it was a challenge to make sure that happened and make sure they have all got a fairly equal say in what's going on. (Teacher M)

Lessons, however, were constantly being learned and embedded into practice throughout the year. On the day of my visit, for example, a Friday project day, half the year group was assembled in the hall to start a new project on 21st century learning. Children organised themselves into groups of 7 or 8 around tables in the hall and the Deputy Head gave a presentation with a series of video clips and ideas about the different approaches to teaching and learning that might come to pass in future. The students then were involved in a mind mapping exercise to explore how they use new technologies and how these could be used to create different approaches to teaching and learning. Following this, the Deputy gave the students their challenge – to create a safety DVD about using the internet for other students. Noticeable in this brief were the lessons learned about the use of ICT in project-based work, exemplified by the high level of structure that was given to the students to support their planning of the film, and the emphasis on using still images rather than grappling with the complexities of video. Such an approach reflected the staff's views that they wanted the children to focus on the substantive issues, to ensure that they were able to achieve their goals, rather than become tied up in the complexities of video editing.

Making the Project Happen

Recruiting staff to participate

The project was led by the Deputy Head Teacher in the school responsible for learning. She was invited to lead the project as she was already heading up the school's curriculum reform at year 7. She was also personally interested in the question of how to enhance learning in the school, and interested in learning from other schools about how they tackled the substantial challenges involved in a shift towards cross-curricular rather than subject focused teaching:

I want to find out about what's going on outside my school, in terms of learning and innovation, and it was an opportunity to get ideas from different people and to look at different frameworks, to think about assessment, to think about delivery, and I suppose I want to be better at what I do every day and so I've got to get my ideas to do that from somewhere, you know, and I also thought

that, as I was leading a new team this year on the project, that the opportunities offered by the residential might be good ones for people to get together and share ideas and so on, and it might help to build that team, and I think that, certainly, in terms of the first residential, when more staff from my school went, it helped us to sort of start off in the right way'. (Teacher J)

She was particularly keen to be involved in a project that was attempting to 'do something a bit different' and that was a big project that crossed a number of schools.

There were more staff interested than could be included in the project. In the end the decision was taken to focus the year 7 project days on humanities and ICT, so all staff involved were drawn from those areas. At the same time, subject expertise and interest were not the only factors that shaped involvement:

It came down to scheduling for timetables, it's kind of a bit about who's available but we certainly wanted to make sure that those people who were involved wanted to do it, and so everybody who is involved had said, yes, I'd like to do the project day. (Teacher J)

Creating time to work out the ideas

The team designing the new curriculum (10 teachers in all), two from each of the humanities disciplines and ICT, had had some time to begin to plan their year 7 project days at the end of the 2007/2008 year and had already begun to implement the curriculum by the time of the first residential for the 'Manchester curriculum'. As such, many of the logistical issues relating to timetabling and staffing, and many of the curricular and pedagogic issues had already been explored by this team in relation to their redesign of year 7.

This residential, however, played an important role not only in giving them time to sit and talk as a group, but also in 'opening up' their ideas about what was possible:

I think the most useful thing for us of all the things we've been involved in to do with the RSA was the first residential. The first residential was useful for us because four of us went […] and three of us stayed the night and we were there for the night and the morning.[…] it's good for people to mix with other staff to see models of good practice and think, of yes, that's interesting. So I think, on that residential, the phrase Opening Minds had a kind of impact on thinking. Right. OK. This is about trying to do things differently. We saw a couple of DVDs from different schools where they were doing things, including one school where they were using electronic evaluation systems, where the students were kind of evaluating themselves through e-portfolios and using hand-held technology, and we also saw a DVD that had been made for one school […] where the teachers had dressed up as characters to introduce the project with a launch video […] and we also had time to sit and talk and thrash around ideas which I don't think would have happened in quite the same way if we had been in school. (Teacher J)

This residential and the second residential served to inspire and challenge the teachers to think differently and acted as a useful impetus in their planning. Outside the residentials, teachers split into smaller groups to plan specific areas of activity, often within their subject disciplines. Creating time for this, however, became difficult and involved creating space within the school day:

We had bits of time, as the year's gone on we've had less and less time in school and I've ended up writing quite a bit of it but what we had then was, we probably had a meeting that was a bit after school and maybe a bit in school, and we just kind of thrashed around the ideas and I think, maybe the planning for that one happened pretty much after school. (Teacher J)

Often, however, because the curriculum was designed as a cross-curricular, project-focused activity, the deputy head responsible for the programme was uncomfortable asking teachers to prepare activities outside their subject discipline, with the result that much of the planning and materials increasingly fell to her as the year progressed, a process that required significant personal commitment:

I mean, I thoroughly enjoyed doing it, but there was many a night when I've been up until 12 or really early in the morning, to make it happen and when you know you've got 150 children going to be in the hall expecting something that's high quality, you've got to make that happen, you know, so it's been demanding… (Teacher J)

Sorting out the practicalities

In practice, the school found the practicalities of organising activities and partnerships with organisations outside the school gates particularly challenging. Risk assessments, cost and transport were all barriers that needed to be overcome:

One of the things about going to the CLC – we're a partnership school – it's a link facility and it is going to cost us over £100 to take the students up there for a day. We're talking £150 to take two classes up, one class up and back, another class up and back. We've got a mini bus there that we've just bought, but nobody is yet qualified to drive it because you've got to have all sorts of things so… I mean the CLC has got a mini bus but the time it takes to split a class in two and go up and back… the other thing is all the side of the permission slips and so on, the donations and things like that […] your risk assessment […] but we've persevered with it because we really wanted it and we will do the same next year. (Teacher J)

Similarly, the difficulties of arranging permissions for all students, and for finding venues that would take the number of students involved, were also challenges that need to be confronted:

It's just giving out the letters, people not returning letters … it can be just a lot of paperwork and I think they're finding it difficult to get certain trips organised for certain days, not every religious building can take them on certain days. It was just things like this because it is a whole year group of nearly 270 students. (Teacher K)

Building relationships with external partners

The school also found it particularly challenging to establish links with new organisations with whom they weren't familiar and had hoped that there would be more systematic support for the schools in building these links:

I suppose, at the beginning, I thought there was going to be some support, a bit more, coming from the RSA which was like, saying 'well, we've actually got this person who can offer this, and that person who can offer that, and we'll make the contact with them, or we'll introduce you' so that we

haven't got to get on the phone and explain what the project is and go through the whole thing. They're already primed and they're interested in it, and they want to be a partner because there isn't really time for me to go knocking on doors [...] I think it would be helpful to have somebody like that who coordinated for the city and knew that there were all these people in the city who were willing to offer things. (Teacher J)

The teacher made clear that the time required to set up such new relationships did not necessarily sit easily with her own way of working and personal identity:

I mean, one of the other schools, just rang up a load of people and said, you know, I'm doing this project; will you do it for free? Well, I don't find that sort of thing particularly easy so I ended up paying for the things that I wanted [...] We didn't have anything for free. (Teacher J)

Despite these concerns, however, the school's activities did draw upon many of the resources in the city. By the time of completion of the year's activities, the school had made use of a considerable number of Manchester's resources – museums, tour guides, City Learning Centre, bus trips, visits by cultural groups. Critical to the preparation for these activities, however, was the support of an administrative assistant in the school in arranging the logistics and relationships.

It should be noted, as well, that the school already had a set of networks and partnerships connected with their 'Business Citizenship Review/Deep Learning Day' when external organisations would come in and talk with the school. Interestingly, these partnerships were seen as distinct from the Manchester Curriculum.

One of the teachers involved in the project also argued that a major challenge for teachers was not so much the establishment of new partnerships, but the real integration between the skills and activities and motivations of external partners, and the curriculum and timetabling requirements of the school:

I'm linked in with Citizenship. There are people who come in quite a lot and want to do different workshops with different groups of people and I get about two phone calls a day, people asking to come in [...] But I just can't have everybody in. It's kids off timetable; it's letters going home so I have to be quite selective but it's definitely out there for the taking, especially in Citizenship, we don't get any phone calls about Geography. [...] It's police; it's university students; there are even law students who want to come in and teach an element of Citizenship because they have to do it as part of their course. [...] . Literally, I just don't have the time to invite everyone in. [...] The problem is a lot of them only want a select group of 15 students to do a workshop and sometimes I think 'it's more useful for you than it is for me' but if there is a group looking to come in and they're willing, every year, to do ... Citizenship class, I'll definitely go for that. (Teacher K)

What came out of the project?

It is not possible to distinguish the implications of the specific 'Our Manchester' half-term scheme of work from the impact of the whole year's changed curriculum and pedagogy. The

following, therefore, should be understood to reflect the teachers' perceptions of the implications of that wider experience over the course of a full year.

School Culture and Working Practices

The changed year 7 curriculum has offered participating teachers an opportunity to work with others, to experiment with new models and to encounter new ways of doing things outside their own school. The project seems to have played an important role in raising staff aspirations and excitement about what might be possible in terms of the design and delivery of novel learning experiences:

They came back and said, 'oh! North Manchester is doing this wonderful project and they've got the BBC involved and it's going to be on the screen. The 'wow' factor […] I've been kind of thinking that people are struggling a bit with this project and maybe we've had enough wow factor. But they're kind of coming back saying 'maybe we could have done something that was even a bit bigger and those were people who I wouldn't have necessarily have thought would have thought like that, so I think that's probably the best thing that we got out of it'. (Teacher J)

All the staff who have delivered it this year have asked to do it again next year because they feel like they want to build on it […] and some people who, at the beginning of the year, were very nervous about how it was going to function, have had some really enjoyable days. (Teacher J)

Enthusiasm for this new way of working was evident despite the high commitment and stamina required of teachers participating in the project:

It's just constant, the pace, and you're with the same group all day but, at the end of it, you feel as if it went really well and I think, towards the end of the first term, we all agreed that we really liked it […] Other people in school were like, oh, I feel sorry for you doing a project but I said, yes, it's really not that bad; it's really good. (Teacher K)

It's just constant; the girls are asking questions; it's far more interactive between the students themselves and us because that's the sort of day it's set up us so it's tiring. Year 7s are tiring compared with older students. You can't leave them. They're always hands up asking something so just the fact that it's Year 7s; it's the same class all day; it's intense; there's a lot to get through. It is often a race to get the stuff finished because of the time of day yet every single teacher enjoys teaching it. (Teacher M)

An important factor in this enthusiasm also seems to be related to the opportunity for staff to work with each other and to develop collaborative group identities:

We all got to know each other really well and how we work. (Teacher K)

The project also clearly gave teachers the flexibility to develop new approaches to teaching and learning and to experiment with a range of different activities often focused on reorganising the temporal practices of the school:

I think the key benefits come about from the flexibility […] Some activities can last ten minutes, others can last two hours, so the big one is the flexibility over the whole day to do the activities. The

fact that they're not moving to and from; they go to the hall. You haven't got that movement; you haven't got that stop and start. (Teacher M)

Changed perception of student achievement

The technical challenges that the school had posed for themselves by setting a film as the major outcome from the 'Our Manchester' unit led to a number of unexpected consequences. The use of digital and media technologies meant that many of the staff developed a range of new technical skills and opened up the possibility of students taking on more responsibility in the classroom:

Well, most of us had never tried to make a DVD before or use the computer equipment to do that. I'd never even got stuff off a camera in school before […] at the end of it, the people had moved forward in terms of having children responsible for cameras and wandering around with them and making decisions about what was going to be in and out of it and sending children off on their own to make the end product because none of the staff, who were actually responsible for that class, went to the CLC with them, so the children's editorial – all the responsibility was with them for how they linked it together in the end, which, when you felt, maybe, that it's going to be a bit competitive and that all of these are going to be shown in the hall and what if yours isn't very good? – is quite stressful. (Teacher J)

Such an experience, it seems, led to teachers having a greater awareness of and respect for what students might achieve when offered responsibility and leadership opportunities for their learning:

[There is a recognition] that when they work independently […] they can produce something that's really quite impressive and if you think about all the hiccups and everything we've had, we've still got this DVD and on the whole […] what a fantastic resource we've got to show the students next year to say, well, this is what was achieved last year, so you can get a sense and you can laugh at these bits that weren't very good. I mean one of the groups even did little outtakes. (Teacher J)

This experience, combined with a project based approach that intentionally set out to devolve responsibility to the students, was seen to counteract the notorious year 7 dip:

Sadly, when students come up from primary school, they get a bit de-skilled […] having more student leadership within the classes has been an important part of it, that thing about them making the editorial decisions or the choices, rather than the teachers doing it, so the teachers are relinquishing some of the authority and allowing the students, when they're behaving and they're on task, to be more in control of what they're doing. (Teacher J)

Knowledge of students and personal relationships

An important aspect of the Whalley Range curriculum over the course of the year was that staff worked with the same group of students for a full day and with that same group over the course of a year. This approach has built meaningful relationships between staff and students:

Working with one class all the time […] people got quite attached to the students that they were working with […] and feeling that, I'm getting to know these students and their strengths and

weaknesses and who works well with who and everything and I'd like to keep that class so I can help students to develop and so on, so relationships, I think, have been an important part of it. (Teacher J)

It's turned out that I've been with one group now for the whole year, one day a week, and the quality of the relationships that you can take from that is really great, and when we're looking back and seeing how the students have developed, we can really see changes. (Teacher J)

Such an approach also seems to have led to different staff attitudes in managing children's behaviour and difficulties:

If you've got somebody in your group who's being a bit tricky and it's period 1 for the day and you know that they're going to be with you all day, I think you've got to do more to manage that behaviour, otherwise you're going to end up with that child being C3 or C4'd every day of the year, you know; you are going to be creating a really difficult situation for yourself and that child. (Teacher J)

This knowledge of students and ongoing relationship with them also enabled one of the teachers to use this knowledge to enhance all students' development by tailoring activities to them personally:

I think it just meant I knew the pupils really, really well and I knew that, after Christmas, I knew the people who were always wanting to do the presentations and to try and mix it up a bit and change it a bit and to give everybody really a chance because it was the same people wanting to do the high-profile things so, by the end of it, I think everybody was – I don't think there was anybody who was really quiet….so I think that has had an impact. (Teacher K)

Such close relationships in different environments also enabled students to demonstrate capabilities that otherwise might have been overlooked:

I knew those 20 students better than I knew my GCSE classes. Although they were a little bit fed up of it by the end of the year they're the same girls that now – on the whole, most of them will always speak to you in the corridor and when I see them in the corridor there is a familiarity, still teacher-student, but definitely an openness and we can talk about a lot of stuff and you just get to know the girls really, really well and you know their strengths and you know all their weaknesses. A lot of those strengths are things that when you're teaching an academic subject like History you don't notice that they're really good at organising other students or that, you know, sometimes, there was one girl who usually spoke very, very little yet, at times, she just came out of herself. It sounds quite childish but, for her, it was massive. Like, say, when we were putting stuff together she'd make sure she'd got all the equipment and she'd lay it out and she'd make sure that everybody had things. She just loved taking a responsibility, ordering people about for a bit. She certainly felt that she was giving students certain jobs, that she was delegating. In a History classroom, a weak student wouldn't often get to delegate things. So just the fact that the girls were able to show other different skills, regardless of their ability, was a positive. (Teacher M)

Improvements in behaviour

Over the course of the year, the school reports a substantial decrease in student detentions and exclusions:

It's had a massive impact on year 7. I mean, I know every cohort is different, but in terms of our consequence system and the number of C3s (which is a detention) or C4s (which is a removal), that happened on a project day, are absolutely minimal, and also, in terms of the overall Year 7 consequences, they're very, very low compared with Year 8 […]last year there were 167 C4s and this year there's been 27. I think, whatever the cohort are like, that's pretty dramatic. (Teacher J)

Whether this is a consequence of a more engaging curriculum and creative pedagogy, increased responsibility being demanded of students or improved staff-student relationships is not clear. Indeed, one of the teachers commented that not all of the students enjoyed the different approaches to teaching and learning that the project days required:

One of the things we learnt was that the girls just enjoy completely different things. We had ideas about what we thought had been the most successful and the trips were certainly very popular and that was the thing that makes it unique and that's the things that makes the girls in the older, the other year groups, jealous is the fact that they get to go out on all these trips. So trips is a big one, so apart from the trips, some girls prefer their lessons and some girls genuinely said to me, oh, I wish I had History or oh I wish I had two History lessons and two Geography lessons. So it's not universally…the majority of girls liked it because it was different but some don't like it at all; some find sometimes its really boring; some find, being in the hall, they hate. Even when we're playing games, they're like we don't like being in the hall. It's like when they're playing bingo and when we're doing like running round and 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'. No, I don't really like any of that. So it's just things that we thought were real fun things for the girls to do, the girls didn't always find fun. At the same time, things that we thought they wouldn't enjoy as much but they had to do, some girls really enjoyed it. Kids are different and that's the one thing that really came out. It certainly didn't make us want to jack it all in and give it all up because we thought the majority of it was positive and the majority of the girls saw what they were doing and saw the value of it. (Teacher M)

This comment makes visible not only the diversity of activities involved in the project, and the diversity of responses by the students, but also the way in which this project required the teachers involved to actively challenge their own perceptions of student interests, and get beyond commonly held expectations.

Understanding of the city

The project, in particular the bus tours, was reported to have helped students to get a much better understanding and knowledge of their own city, and made visible to students elements of their environment with which they had previously been unfamiliar:

There was a buzz. On the day, I'll never forget it. On the day that I took the children on the tour, we went to the Lowry and we got out there and walked onto the bridge and a ship came to go through and we had to wait at the side while the bridge was up. Well, the students were just screaming with delight. They didn't even know there was a bridge there like that. They didn't know. The whole panorama there is really impressive so, personally, it was very fulfilling for me to know

we'd facilitated this sort of opportunity for the students and for them to be there with their cameras and everything, kind of clicking stuff, was really good. (Teacher J)

I was at the City Stadium on a bus and a girl said 'oh, I go to Asda, I've driven past here, I never knew what that was' – She never knew that that was the B of the Bang or that's the City Stadium. She's in a car where nobody mentions what it is. (Teacher J)

This, felt the teacher, was particularly important in challenging social and cultural inequalities and in enabling children to create a sense of belonging and ownership over the cultural resources of their city. This view was echoed by another teacher:

Where we focused on that the documentary for Manchester, My Manchester Documentary was the working title. By the end of it the vast majority of the girls felt more part of Manchester because of that and they felt proud of Manchester and they felt proud of what they'd produced about Manchester so from the girls feeling part of the community, yes, I think it had a fairly sizeable impact. (Teacher M)

Competencies and Understanding

The Manchester Curriculum in Whalley Range was challenging, attempting to combine both subject understanding and the development of a range of personal and interpersonal skills and competencies. The Deputy Head believes that there has been evidence of development of students' capacities for self-organisation, responsibility and collaboration:

I've seen the difference in my class […] I couldn't believe the creativity and quality of what they were doing and I didn't even show them […] when it came to it, the way they just got on with it and worked with it in the groups and everything […] it isn't given the opportunity to blossom in the same way [in other lessons]. (Teacher J)

Another thing is that we put the SEN students into one year half so that they were on one particular project day so that all the TA support would be focused on one day and those students have integrated really, really well into the activities, and that's been remarkable. Anecdotally, a lot of staff say students are much better at working in teams; they're much better at organising themselves; they're more independent. (Teacher J)

I think the skills are just interacting with each other and I think the lesson is more based on them interacting. It's more based on them… just getting to know each other. By the end of last year my class all knew each other really well. There was no animosity between anybody. They all worked in teams, different teams, throughout the year. There were loads of different skills that they were learning whereas they might not have necessarily have got that sitting in a lesson and doing an activity for 20 minutes…(Teacher K)

I think that the skills they gained are going to benefit them in later school years. So the team work and the confidence is, possibly, for me, the biggest. The last year 7s, the current year 8s, are the most confident year group we've got in the school […] So if you said to the girls go and stand on the stage there and speak to 120 students – try and get a year 11 to do that you've got no chance. Obviously, in any school, you've got a small number who are happy to do that, you know, drama

queens who want to sing and dance and do whatever, but your average student you won't get on stage to talk about stuff. Whereas, the majority of year 8s, probably quite easily the majority – I mean, most of them will have been on the stage and will have spoken to 120 students. The mic is forever going 'round and the students have to give answers to 125 students, or whatever, so the levels of confidence, the skills. (Teacher M)

At the same time, there was evidence of at least some of the students being able to reflect upon and articulate the competencies that they were developing:

A visitor came and we had about eight girls […] they just said, oh we've learned this kind of thing and we've learned that kind of thing […] the sort of thing they said was that they didn't like working with different people, you know, that they'd prefer to work with friends… (Teacher J)

One of the teachers also observed that while the students were able to articulate the different skills they were developing through the project days, they also seemed to be able to understand when and where different approaches to learning and different relationships were appropriate:

The funny thing was I had them for the project and I had them first thing on the Monday for Geography. They were different in the Geography lesson than what they were on the project day… When they worked they were quiet, it was just as they should be in a lesson. I don't know. They were just different. They knew that they Geography had a different way of working than the project lesson..(Teacher K)

These early and still anecdotal observations underpin the school's commitment to continue the project in subsequent years and to begin, now, to rigorously explore the tools that teachers and students might use to further develop, reflect upon and assess this learning.

This commitment was also supported by the positive feedback from parents about the activity: feedback that was gained through the school's Learner Action Team survey of parents' understanding about the project:

One of the things that the girls, themselves, highlighted was that they didn't feel that the parents knew, necessarily, what it was all about so we came to an agreement that until the parents understood it, and supported it fully, with what we're doing, then the girls wouldn't necessarily put value on it. So we wanted to at least find out if parents are on board […] It was incredibly positive, the feedback we got off parents. Most of the parents were really, really pleased that the girls were involved in something that was different. They liked the idea of it being quite skills-based rather than sort of content leading it so that was really positive. (Teacher M)

Next Steps and lessons learned

This school had a very clear set of activities planned to further develop the programme in subsequent years.

The lead teacher had been involved in a range of information gathering activities about related initiatives (including visiting John Cabot in Bristol, and in seeking out new assessment methods). The school was continuing to explore how a year 7 project-based approach could successfully

balance the tensions between competencies and subjects, and alterations were planned to the initial introduction to the programme. At one point, for example, the teachers were considering more explicit teaching of skills and competencies at the outset, although this was later rejected:

Build more time in earlier on to build up skills, we'd have more introductory weeks before we even start any of the projects, where we go through some of the basics about why we're doing it, what we're doing, going through the kind of philosophy of that, and helping the students to develop some of the core skills that they're going to need to apply in the project, that they can kind of refer back to, and that would help with assessment so they've got a clearer idea about what we're looking at before we start out. So I think those things would be quite important. (Teacher J)

At the same time, the ongoing issue of assessment was a subject of concern. The school now intended to develop this further, both by building in assessment/reflection opportunities for students…

One of the things that we discussed at the beginning that didn't end up happening, and possibly could work going into next year, was that we thought that we would have […] the final period of the day which would be kind of reflection and we thought that might be an opportunity where all the students would be in the hall with one or two staff leading that – but it didn't happen because 1) we were ambitious about what we wanted to get in the project and 2) in order to have a quality of reflection it's quite good to have the staff who've actually been experiencing that with the children there, to help them reflect and prompt ideas and so on. So still, going into next year, I think we need to build in more reflection time for the students. (Teacher J)

…and by testing out new peer-review assessment tools, using handheld devices.

Going into next year, we've now got what I believe are six really good modules of work that can be built on and we can really focus on the assessment, and we are going to try using the 'assessment by pieces' software as a way of getting students involved in reflecting on their learning and evidencing what they're learning against the in-house criteria. (Teacher J)

Finally, the school is looking to explore how the project days can be linked in to a range of other initiatives focused on learning, including linking with the Learning to Learn modules also being developed in the school, and the strategy for building student leadership across the school:

Drawing on the learning to lead initiative from the […] school - you do a whole survey with the school about what all their priorities are and then you create teams and the teams don't change from year to year […] and you become expert in that area and that follows you through. Well, what we wanted was Learning to Lead teams for subjects where you have got students who are contributing to the development of the curriculum, so that's the idea for next year, if that can be taken further. (Teacher J)

Alongside the commitment to a continuity of staff-student relationships, and to the importance of creating exciting and challenging experiences for students; alongside the commitment to collaborative working amongst staff, and to the critical reflection upon the relationship between

subjects and competencies; the focus on assessment and student involvement promises to offer a powerful development to the project next year.