

AREA BASED
CURRICULUM



LEARNING ABOUT, BY AND FOR PETERBOROUGH

THE RSA AREA BASED CURRICULUM
IN PETERBOROUGH

LOUISE THOMAS
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www.thersa.org

RSA

Action and Research Centre

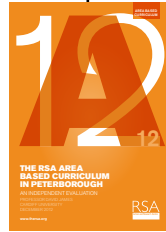
Reports and Publications diagram



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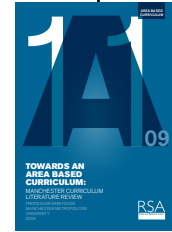
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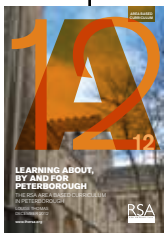
The RSA Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough: an Independent Evaluation



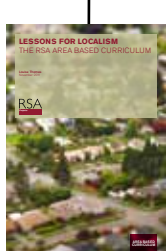
Engaging the Local: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



Towards an Area Based Curriculum: a Literature Review



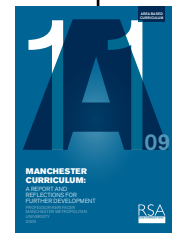
Learning About, By and For Peterborough: the RSA Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough



Lessons for Localism: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



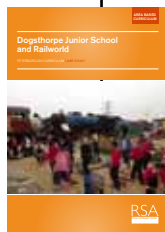
Project Tools



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.

Executive summary

This report describes the approach and the process, focussing on the value and impact of partnership working for schools on students, teachers, and the wider community

Introduction

The case for school-based curriculum design seems to have been won. Politicians and headteachers appear to agree that the nationally prescribed body of knowledge contained in the National Curriculum should provide a *minimum entitlement*, but should not define everything that is taught in schools.

Given, however, that accountability systems may have been reinforced through recent changes to inspection and assessment, how do schools take this opportunity to develop a whole curriculum that both meets national expectations (in an international context) and meets the wider needs and interests of their students' families and localities? What resources are available for them to draw upon to decide not only how knowledge should be taught, but what should be taught? Is there an opportunity in this new consensus to open up spaces in schools for democratic conversations with local communities about the purpose of education? And what might the implications of these conversations be for the kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes long taken for granted by schools?

The RSA has a long-standing concern with human capability, and in its contemporary '21st Century Enlightenment' mission endeavours to realise human potential, and to mobilise the social capital of its 27,000-strong Fellowship for the social good. The RSA's education programme reflects this agenda of realising human capability, and has consequently focused on educational engagement as a precursor to attainment, and on democracy and empowerment in and through education.

These latter concerns, coupled with an interest in the power of citizen participation to reform public services through a model of 'social productivity' (2020 Public Services Trust, 2010) underpin our Area Based Curriculum intervention. This curriculum is an example of localism and social productivity in action.

As part of a wider programme called **Citizen Power**, the RSA worked with five schools in Peterborough during 2010–2012 to develop a series of projects in partnership with organisations and people from the local area. The goal was to create engaging learning experiences that draw on the locality, at the same time as involving a diverse range of stakeholders in the education of young people.

This report describes the approach and the process, focussing on the value and impact of partnership working for schools on students, teachers, and the wider community.

What the RSA did

The RSA selected five schools in the city which were enthusiastic about curriculum redevelopment and engaging with their communities.

Through a process of networking, local resource mapping, partnership support and project development the RSA supported schools to identify potential partners, and begin to develop partnerships.

The RSA provided Continued Professional Development in curriculum design, partnership working, involving young people in curriculum design, and using the local area for learning.

We then supported the partnerships to develop, plan, and evaluate their projects.

Developing Learning About, By and For Peterborough

All of the schools we worked with took different approaches to developing Area Based Curriculum projects, and placed a different level of emphasis on creating curriculum that was:

- *about* a place: making use of local context and resources to frame learning
- *by* a place: designed by schools in partnership with other local stakeholders, and
- *for* a place: meeting the specific needs of children and local communities

Although each of the projects touched on all these to some extent, we have identified three projects that illustrate each aspect particularly well:

Learning about Peterborough: The Cathedral in a context of a changing city (West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral)

This project demonstrates the potential for projects that start with local areas to go well beyond the locality: to address national curriculum content as well as adding meaningful engagement with children's own – global – communities. It also demonstrates the importance of reimagining local sites as resources for learning that goes well beyond the obvious established features of a site.

Learning by Peterborough: Making Peterborough a destination city (Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld)

Staff from Railworld worked closely with the school to develop a strong partnership in which collaborative planning was possible, and in which activities for students related both to the school's curriculum, the children's personal development, and to the goals of the partner organisation and wider city.

Learning for Peterborough: The role of the Cathedral and our school in the community: past, present and future (Bishop Creighton Academy and Peterborough Cathedral)

The project revolved around the production of a 'Question Time' style event in which members of the inter-faith council, and the school council, sat on a panel and answered questions from the audience of Year 4 and 5 students.

This project demonstrates how the school curriculum can become a 'social project' which engages with the real issues facing a community, specific to time and place, through engagement with local institutions.

Curriculum development partnerships

At the core of the Peterborough Curriculum approach was the idea that schools would form partnerships with other local organisations, through which they would design and teach aspects of the school curriculum. The idea was that schools and other organisations from the locality would be able to form sustainable partnerships based on mutual advantage and shared objectives regarding children's learning. This form of partnership working was intended to provide a range of benefits to students and schools, including:

- Access to local expertise and resources
- To support learning
- Access to sites for learning in the locality that could be used
- Alternative perspectives on learning, education, and the locality
- Shared ownership of the learning going on in schools, providing common cause between schools and other local stakeholders
- A range of sustainable relationships between schools and local stakeholders which could be drawn upon in different ways
- Direct, positive contact for students with adults from a range of sectors and backgrounds

Key features of the partnerships that were created

- Relationships were put before content, leading to open ended and exploratory projects
- This in turn meant that the relationships and the projects could be flexible and change to meet the evolving needs of schools and children
- A feature of the more engaged partnerships was the 'creative disruption' they brought to the practice of teachers and schools
- The involvement of an outside partner meant that children were placed at the centre of an "outwards accountability"

The impact

The Peterborough Curriculum projects were developed with the aims of:

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

The impact of the projects on these aims is summarised below:

Creating learning experiences that were engaging for children from all backgrounds

- Teachers report improvement in student performance in literacy when in Peterborough Curriculum lessons

Students reported knowing far more about the opportunities available locally

- Students enjoyed learning about where they live and learning outside the classroom
- Students reported learning more factual information outside the classroom than in school
- Students particularly enjoyed having other adults involved
- Lack of confidence in the outdoor environment, and existing negative views of Peterborough affected some students' engagement with the work

Increasing children's understanding of and attachment to the place where they live

- Students reported knowing far more about the opportunities available locally
- Students demonstrated an improved attitude towards the value of the locality
- Feelings of belonging and identity have developed

Embedding schools more fully in the locality

- Teachers learned about the locality and felt more connected
- School and partner representatives reported a change to the way organisations engage with schools
- Partners reported that more schools are now open to working with outside agencies

Challenges

Despite the success of the Peterborough Curriculum work in shifting thinking about how and why schools and local organisations might come together to provide learning for young people, there were significant challenges in developing genuinely co-constructed curriculum in both primary and secondary schools.

- For some schools the Peterborough Curriculum represented a choice between a standards driven agenda and a more holistic approach that involved developing students as whole individuals. It was therefore framed as very much part and parcel of a strategic direction that was *in opposition* to a standards agenda.
- The secondary school curriculum in particular remained not only resistant to modification, but also to enhancement by the locality. This is in part due to the structures of the schools, where subject and classroom teachers were difficult for partners to access.

Next Steps

The Peterborough Curriculum programme of work was always intended to have an impact beyond the five schools and their partners, attempting to establish new ways of working for all those interested in learning in the city. Section 5 describes how Peterborough is taking this programme forward.

Section 1: introduction

The Area Based Curriculum in the educational landscape

“The aim of an ‘area-based curriculum’ seems elegant in its simplicity: to enhance the educational experiences of young people ‘by creating rich connections with the communities, cities and cultures that surround them and by distributing the education effort across the people, organisations and institutions of a local area’.”

Facer, 2009a

The case for school-based curriculum design seems to have been won. Politicians and headteachers appear to agree that the nationally prescribed body of knowledge contained in the National Curriculum should provide a *minimum entitlement*, but should not define everything that is taught in schools.

“This distinction between the National Curriculum and the school curriculum is vital – and it’s been lost. The National Curriculum is that which is stated in law. The school curriculum – what actually happens in a specific school with specific pupils - falls within the autonomy of the school and is critical in delivering public and personal benefits, providing a safe environment where intensive learning can take place, and giving wide experience.”

Tim Oates, Chair of the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review (NAHT, 2011)

International evidence supports this conclusion, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reporting that schools with more autonomy over curriculum are more successful (as measured by the international PISA scores) (OECD, 2009).

This distinction has always been there in theory, but has been rarely upheld in practice. The original national curriculum, introduced in 1988, was intended to cover 80 percent of pupils’ time in school, but the ‘quart into a pint pot’ effect happened almost immediately. The Dearing Review of 1997 slimmed content slightly, but did nothing to the accountability systems which forced schools to narrow and shallow their curriculum offer.

Given that these accountability systems largely remain, and may have actually been reinforced through recent changes to inspection and assessment, how do schools take this opportunity to develop a whole curriculum that both meets national expectations (in an international context) and meets the wider needs and interests of their students’ families and localities? What resources are available for them to draw upon to decide not only how knowledge should be taught, but what should be taught? Is there an opportunity in this new consensus to open up spaces

in schools for democratic conversations with local communities about the purpose of education? And what might the implications of these conversations be for the kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes long taken for granted by schools?

“There is a dual trajectory inherent in ideas of an area-based curriculum: first, the devolution of curriculum design from the centre to institutions and professionals; and, second, the opening up of curriculum design to include not only educational institutions and professionals but local communities. Both of these moves are necessary to achieve the creation of a truly area-based curriculum.”

Facer, 2009a

The Area Based Curriculum as ‘social productivity’

The RSA has a long-standing concern with human capability, and in its contemporary ‘21st Century Enlightenment’ mission endeavours to realise human potential, and to mobilise the social capital of its 27,000-strong Fellowship for the social good. The RSA’s education programme reflects this agenda of realising human capability, and has consequently focused on educational engagement as a precursor to attainment, and on democracy and empowerment in and through education.

These latter concerns, coupled with an interest in the power of citizen participation to reform public services through a model of ‘social productivity’ (2020 Public Services Trust, 2010) underpin our Area Based Curriculum intervention. The report of the 2020 Commission on Public Services argues:

“We need to see more local control of public services, sustained by citizen engagement and public deliberation. Decisions must be made much closer to those who will be affected by them, based on a new local democratic discourse. Public services must encourage and enable citizens to use services responsibly, make the most of their entitlements, and make a positive social contribution within their communities.”

The RSA Area Based Curriculum is an example of localism and social productivity in action: wherein the school curriculum as a public service is shaped and enhanced by the direct participation of the local stakeholders.

The Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough was initiated as part of a wider programme of work by the RSA in Peterborough entitled ‘Citizen Power’. This programme, carried out by the RSA in partnership with the Arts Council and Peterborough City Council aimed at increasing:

- **participation** of Peterborough citizens in civic life
- **attachment** of Peterborough residents to the place where they live and
- **innovation** in Peterborough’s public services

The Citizen Power programme represented a new approach to exploring how the renewal of civic activism and community action might improve attachment and networks between people, build local participation and cultivate public service innovation.

For more information about Citizen Power visit www.thersa.org/projects/citizen-power.

The Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough

The RSA worked with five schools in Peterborough during 2010–2012 to develop a series of projects in partnership with organisations and people from the local area. The goal was to create engaging learning experiences that draw on the locality, at the same time as involving a diverse range of stakeholders in the education of young people.

This report describes the approach and the process, focussing on the value and impact of partnership working for schools on students, teachers, and the wider community.

The RSA Area Based Curriculum proposes a way forward for schools to develop a ‘school curriculum’ in partnership with their communities: local businesses, heritage and cultural organisations, voluntary groups, faith communities and parents. This will inevitably open up questions about educational purpose and ownership.

Approach

An RSA Area Based Curriculum project does not simply detail interesting aspects of a local area’s history or geography, and neither is it a fixed, written document. Rather it aims to be a living set of projects and relationships that take the local area and its residents as the starting point for learning.

An RSA Area Based Curriculum is therefore one that is:

- *about* a place: making use of local context and resources to frame learning
- *by* a place: designed by schools in partnership with other local stakeholders, and
- *for* a place: meeting the specific needs of children and local communities

In order to explore what the impact and challenges might be in approaching curriculum in this way, we have worked with five schools on discrete projects, each of which must:

- connect with a part of the curriculum of schools;
- be designed by schools in collaboration with local community partners;
- be supported by local expertise and context;
- be taught using the local area as a classroom; and
- contain objectives both for young people and for community partners.

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

- Creating learning experiences that were engaging for children from all backgrounds

- Increasing children’s understanding of and attachment to the place where they live
- Embedding schools more deeply within their communities and localities

The programme was designed to focus on impacting on engagement as a foundation for attainment across the curriculum, rather than explicitly on attainment. The length of the programme and the diversity of year groups involved mitigated against gathering attainment data although some schools provided teacher-led assessments of student performance.

The core feature of our approach was the co-design of locally relevant curriculum projects by schools and stakeholders from the local area working in partnership.

The RSA Area Based Curriculum Project Criteria (see Appendix: Case Studies - West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral) included a requirement that learning take place outside the classroom and involve the input of people from the local area as well as drawing on the locality for content.

We did not define: how much of the timetable the Peterborough Curriculum should account for, what subjects should be included (if any), who the partners should be, any content or themes, or the boundaries of ‘local’.

Schools and partners were supported across one academic year to develop a partnership and to co-design their projects. During the following academic year students were taught using the Area Based Curriculum approach, and the impact was evaluated.

This report analyses the successes, challenges and implications of the overall programme run by the RSA with five schools, including summaries of the work undertaken by the schools. Our evidence is drawn from a combination of researcher insights from throughout the project, documentation produced by schools and partners, and interviews conducted with teachers, partners and a random sample of students from each participating school.

With a set of activities as complex and messy as partnership creation, curriculum development and education, the outcomes and the learning are unpredictable. We have done our best to capture what has been learned through the process of supporting these five projects. However, the project raises as many questions as it answers and so we present this report as a formative contribution to an ongoing process – an analysis for learning, rather than of learning.

For full case studies of the work undertaken by each of the schools, see separate case studies.

For a summary of some of the lessons learned about implementing an Area Based Curriculum, see separate document.

The context of the work

The Manchester Curriculum

In 2008–9 the RSA worked with four schools in Manchester to develop a series of Manchester Curriculum projects. This work was inspired by the

idea that by drawing on the resources of the city it would be possible to enhance student engagement, aspiration and attainment. The project was funded by Manchester City Council and managed by the RSA.

The schools were all already using the RSA's Opening Minds competence-led framework, and linked with external partners (for example, Manchester artists, BBC Manchester, Old Trafford) to create projects for young people that developed their **Opening Minds** competences as well as their knowledge of the local area. Challenges included developing more meaningful engagement between schools and community stakeholders and institutions in creating the area based curricula, and negotiating logistical problems. We sought to build directly on this learning in the development of the Peterborough Curriculum.

A full evaluation of the **Manchester Curriculum** by Manchester Metropolitan University is available at the RSA website.

Peterborough's young people make up a larger than average proportion of the population

Peterborough

Peterborough is a far smaller city than Manchester, but the two share some characteristics. Peterborough is one of the fastest growing cities in the UK, with a strong tradition of cultural diversity. Black and minority ethnic residents make up 12.8 percent of the population which is high compared with other similar places. Peterborough has higher than average levels of poverty: 18.5 percent of people are income deprived and incomes are declining relative to the national average (2020 Public Services Trust, 2010).

Peterborough's young people make up a larger than average proportion of the population and this growing number experience higher than average levels of disengagement, unemployment and teenage pregnancy. Peterborough's Children and Young People's plan 2009–2012 states that “children and young people appear to have low aspirations in Peterborough. When asked about their aspirations after leaving school, the results indicate that Peterborough's young people are less inclined to study to gain a place at university (48 percent compared to 54 percent nationally)” (Peterborough Children's Trust Partnership Board, 2009).

Section 2: what the RSA did

The RSA has provided a range of support “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)”.

Independent evaluation by University of Cardiff

“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.”

Independent evaluation report

Selection of participant schools

So that our findings were representative and thus relevant to the majority of schools, we drew our sample from secondary and primary schools in Peterborough, looking for evidence of effective partnership working and/or curriculum development through Ofsted reports, online research, school websites and conversations with a range of stakeholders in Peterborough. The intention was to work with schools that could demonstrate either experience of working differently, or a desire to do so. Schools were then invited to submit an expression of interest to the RSA.

On this basis we selected five participant schools which comprise three primary schools and two secondary schools (of which one is an academy and the other a community school).

- Bishop Creighton Primary School
- Dogsthorpe Junior School
- Ken Stimpson Community School
- Thomas Deacon Academy
- West Town Primary School

Mapping of local resources

One of the key recommendations from evaluation of the Manchester work was that local resources should be mapped and shared by schools. The evaluation also noted the risk of schools taking a deficit approach to local communities served by inner city schools, and so it was important that schools be encouraged to value the existing relationships they have with local organisations and parents (Facer, 2009b).

Existing school and student resources

The RSA developed a questionnaire for students in partnership with teachers and students from our partner schools. This questionnaire asks students whether they have met a range of different people, for example someone who works in the media, or someone who was born in a different country to themselves. The questionnaires also ask about where the students were born and what language they speak at home in order to provide teachers with a better sense of the cultural and linguistic resources available in students' families.

The results of the questionnaires showed a lack of intergenerational awareness among students, at least outside of their own families, demonstrated by the small number of retired people that students report knowing. Students also displayed a lack of awareness of community and volunteering roles among the people that they know. While the creative industries and politics were – perhaps unsurprisingly – underrepresented, many students had strong international links. In one school the students in one year group were born in 61 different cities – an enormously rich resource for curriculum learning, and point of engagement of parents and families. Students also knew people whose work took them all over the city of Peterborough in the form of taxi driving or delivery services. In one school 20 of 25 students in one class knew someone who drives for a living. Teachers were encouraged to consider how these previously 'hidden' resources might be drawn upon by the school.

Existing school relationships

The RSA asked schools to reflect on the relationships they already had outside the school: including those with governors, parents, local businesses, places visited on school trips, work experience partners, and any networks or partnerships. Schools were then asked to think about the qualities of these relationships, and how they might be converted from transactional 'service' relationships to collaborative ones; or how incidental personal relationships might be utilised to support and develop learning opportunities.

Potential partners

In order to maximise the chance of engaging a wide range of potential partners to work with schools in designing their curriculum projects, the RSA employed a number of methods including desk research; nominations by schools; soliciting recommendations from other strand leads across the Citizen Power programme; asking RSA Fellows from the local area for suggestions; speaking to a parent and a governor from each school about their ideas or contacts; and establishing a local interest group comprising key stakeholders from the city.

Potential partners were invited to networking events and were met with individually by the RSA team. Of a total of 234 named partners on the database, 53 organisations were represented at one networking event or continued professional development session, with 10 of these participating in more than one. Of these, 7 became directly involved with schools in a curriculum development partnership.

Partnership and project development

Networking events

The RSA hosted a number of events designed to introduce staff from the partner schools to a range of potential community partners.

“A particular event facilitated by the RSA was a powerful and effective catalyst in the formation of a partnership.”

Independent evaluation

The methods involved using creative approaches that attempted to disrupt conventional organisational roles: asking them to interact with a wide range of people in short bursts; design a 10 minute project; and talk about their hopes for education.

Other events used Open Space methodology to introduce staff to the idea of defining their own questions and exploring a wide range of possibilities for partnership.

Scoping sessions

Once a school and a partner had made a link that they wished to pursue, the RSA facilitated a ‘scoping session’ to support the exploration of early ideas. These were designed to explore what might be possible, to challenge assumptions of what partners and schools might do together and to begin to establish objectives, both individual and common. Importantly the Scoping Sessions left open the possibility of not proceeding together.

For a template scoping session agenda [see the Project Tools document](#).

Professional development

The evaluation of the Manchester Curriculum identified professional development as at the heart of developing a meaningful Area Based Curriculum. To support the participants in the Peterborough Curriculum to begin their own journey we commissioned a series of professional development sessions on the following topics:

- Curriculum design
- Using the local area as a learning environment
- Partnership and collaboration
- Involving young people in curriculum design

We invited not only teachers and senior leaders to these sessions, but also the identified and potential community partners as equal participants. The sessions were designed to provide structured input from specialist providers alongside spaces for developing relationships and projects.

The RSA hosted a number of events designed to introduce staff from the partner schools to a range of potential community partners

Section 3: developing learning about, by and for Peterborough

All five of the schools we worked with took different approaches to developing Area Based Curriculum projects, and placed a different level of emphasis on each of the three aspects of being:

- *about* a place: making use of local context and resources to frame learning
- *by* a place: designed by schools in partnership with other local stakeholders, and
- *for* a place: meeting the specific needs of children and local communities

Although these three aspects were in reality present to some extent in all the projects, the following vignettes describe how particular projects demonstrate strong examples in one of the three aspects. Full [case studies](#) on each of the projects undertaken by schools are available at the end of this document.

Learning about Peterborough

West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral

“Peterborough is such a vibrant, rich place that has so many links, and you know, different communities within it, that it’s more than just Peterborough and its history, it’s Peterborough and the people that are within the place that make it what it is, isn’t it – and that therefore makes those wider links ... quite obvious, I think.”

Hannah Quinn, Deputy Head, West Town Primary School

West Town serves a deprived and highly mobile community near the railway station. Peterborough Cathedral provided a central partner and context for learning, initially as a significant building in the city which has many links to the history topic of the Tudors.

Catherine of Aragon is buried in the Cathedral and so the school and Cathedral staff were able to construct a programme of work which complemented and enhanced the National Curriculum, using a locally specific context.

As a real world frame for the project the Year 3 and 4 students were commissioned by the Cathedral's head of Visits, Education and Heritage to make a display for the newly built Education Centre, aimed at other visiting children, about the Cathedral and its Tudor history.

Building on this work, the school and Cathedral went on to develop a topic called 'Peterborough: a sense of place' which is an inquiry into the school's relationship with Peterborough. The Cathedral provided a focal point for demonstrating how buildings and their surrounding area have changed over time, reflecting changes in Peterborough's population and its needs.

To support this exploration of the building of the Cathedral and other buildings in the locality the school brought in a local construction firm to work directly with students on basic principles of construction, related to the methods that would and would not have been available when the Cathedral was built.

The final term of the project involved students interviewing their parents about their reasons for their family coming to Peterborough, exploring these in the context of the Cathedral's historic role in drawing people to the city, as well as more recent economic and cultural changes. Children presented these stories to the school and to parents through an assembly.

"Interviews with children confirmed the centrality of the Cathedral in their learning and their positive regard for it."

Independent evaluation

"We've just had an assembly where parents have just seen their children talking about the reasons why they came to Peterborough ... that was great ... that's been a really powerful thing for the children, and for the staff, and for parents as well."

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

As such, a project which began with a conventional visit to a site of established national importance has, through a flexible and ongoing partnership with the Cathedral, resulted in an exploration of the communities served by the school in the context of nationally important local history. Aside from content relating to the specific local context, the project incorporated science (materials and their properties), Design and Technology and history (building structures over time), geography (physical and 'personal' mapping), Personal, Social and Health Education (aspirations).

Because the communities served by the school have strong international links, the stories of why families came to Peterborough had a global dimension. As one teacher put it "we're quite lucky because for – for us, our local curriculum is Peterborough, but it's also what the children bring to the school – which is global!". By leaving the project open-ended the partnership was able to blend local, national and global knowledges in a curriculum which reflected both the stability and change experienced by the local area and by the families served by the school.

This project demonstrates the potential for projects that start with a local stimulus to go well beyond the locality: addressing national

curriculum content as well as adding meaningful engagement with children's own – global – communities. It also shows the importance of reimagining local sites as resources for learning that goes well beyond their obvious established features.

“I don't think that you should limit ... if you need or want to go to London, fine, I don't think it's about it just being Peterborough, it's about that being the starting point, and it – it grows from there.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

Thomas Deacon Academy, John Clare Cottage and Peterborough Wildlife Trust

Thomas Deacon Academy is a secondary school with more than 2000 students and 300 teaching and associate staff. It takes students from a large number of primary schools across the city and serves a diverse range of Peterborough's new and old communities. The academy's sponsors include a locally based engineering multinational with a strong history in the city. Situated on a large site in a new building the academy has an impressive range of facilities and strong international links. Parental and community engagement are key priority areas for the school, as are helping students to develop a strong sense of identity and achievement.

The school 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). The initiative here involved each College linking with one or more organisations from the city to develop short projects in the summer term.

Students at Thomas Deacon Academy reported that focussing on their locality through school work had a profound effect on their attitudes towards the city.

“Normally, when – when someone says about a town or a city, I tend to think about tall buildings and the occasional neon sign with lights. When I think about Peterborough, it's just dull and it's just grey and it's really flat ... learning about Peterborough made it a bit more exciting, like going to places in Peterborough that I wouldn't normally go to.”

The project developed students' understanding of the opportunities available to them locally.

“Before I didn't know that there were nature reserves here in Peterborough ... that we could go to.”

Year 8 student

This project highlights the value of even short periods of focus on the locality that can open up the area around the school to young people.

Learning by Peterborough

Making Peterborough a destination city: Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld

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

Gemma Brown, Lead Teacher Dogsthorpe Junior School

Staff at Dogsthorpe Junior School worked with the manager of local heritage site Railworld to place students at the heart of Peterborough’s future development as a ‘destination city’. The partner organisation worked with teachers to design a year-long project which involved students acting as consultants to Railworld in its redevelopment from the ‘railway museum’ image of its past into a ‘sustainable transport centre’.

Dogsthorpe Junior School is situated in a post-war housing estate and now serves large numbers of pupils from diverse communities. Railworld, sited on the other side of the city, is strongly involved in a more general process of establishing Peterborough as a destination city for tourists and commuters, so children had the opportunity to look at other aspects of the city and give their views.

Staff from Railworld worked closely with the school to develop a strong partnership in which collaborative planning was possible, and in which activities for students related both to the school’s curriculum, the children’s personal development, and to the goals of the partner organisation and wider city.

“So it was the shared goals, how the curriculum would fit in, how rail power – how he – his side of things would fit in ... so, you know, I did do some work for him to deliver to his trustees and all sorts. Um, so we did the professional side first and because that all worked and we did get on, it’s now meant that we are a lot more flexible as partners, really.”

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

Railworld worked with staff from the school to find ways to build the literacy and numeracy into activities that also provided substantive feedback on the development of the site, as this vocabulary exercise shows:

“They did an audit of what they like: like the hovertrain was dirty. We knew it needed attention, but it was when they used the word ‘grotesque’ (their school word of the week) that we knew we had to get it sorted. So we did.”

Through the links that Railworld staff had with heritage, tourism and planning aspects of the council, the project was also able to draw upon wider expertise and links in the city.

The project began in September with a conference for students at the Town Hall, where the children were invited to give their views on the present and future of Peterborough to the Mayor, local councillors, and the council tourism lead. The Heritage Regeneration Officer also joined in

The process of involving a partner early in conversations about learning is now central to how the school now plans to proceed with future work

a planning meeting and helped to procure venues and speakers. Students were treated as delegates at the conference and were given talks and workshops by local experts about Peterborough's environment, heritage, built environment, and planned developments to the city centre.

For the video made at this conference, [see here](#).

Children subsequently worked with staff at Railworld to design new visual branding, and organised and hosted an event to launch the new brand during the summer term. Throughout this 'real life' project the students learnt geography, history, science, numeracy and literacy, as well as skills.

For the school, the involvement of a partner in the conception and development of the learning was not something they were confident about at the start. However, once the process of involving the real world issues of a local partner in the planning of children's learning was established, confidence grew:

"If it's an issue for your local area, it can be an issue for your classroom."

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

The process of involving a partner early in conversations about learning is now central to how the school now plans to proceed with future work. All staff are encouraged to ensure that before visits they "have more professional conversations before they go about what they're doing before they get there, what they're going to follow up on, and whether they could then work in partnerships to build an outcome" Gemma Brown teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School.

The school is hopeful that the relationship with Railworld will sustain in future years.

"John is our principal partner, and he has such involvement with this school, on so many levels, that I cannot see how it could go straight away."

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

This partnership generated many more ideas for curriculum projects than it was possible to deliver during the scope of this project, and demonstrates how a solid relationship between a school and a local partner can produce benefits for all parties, as well as enhancing children's learning and experiences.

Ken Stimpson Community School and Red Cross Peterborough

Ken Stimpson Community School is a medium sized school with a public library and sports centre on site as well as facilities such as meeting rooms for use by the community. The school has established good relationships with a range of businesses through their enterprise specialism. They also enjoy good links with the immediate community in Werrington where the school is based. Serving an area with an ageing population the school now takes many children from Peterborough city centre, including students from new Eastern European communities. The Peterborough Curriculum is one means by which the school seeks to build on its successful relationships in the local area as well as build understanding and links with other communities in the city.

The school formed a partnership with the Red Cross Peterborough and used this as a means of exposing students to the realities of migration in the city. As the independent evaluation found:

“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’.”

James, 2012

This demonstrates the power of involving people from the locality in delivering learning experiences for young people, and looking beyond what we have called elsewhere the ‘educational enhancement sector’. Properly facilitated students can learn more from the life experiences of an ‘ordinary’ person than they might from established experts.

Learning for Peterborough

The role of the Cathedral and our school in the community: past, present and future (Bishop Creighton Academy and Peterborough Cathedral)

Bishop Creighton Academy has around 200 pupils aged between four and eleven, and is situated within walking distance of Peterborough Cathedral. Students are drawn from a range of faith backgrounds and many of the families served by the school are newly arrived in Peterborough.

“There’s quite a large number who have no real history in Peterborough ... for a lot, no real connection other than with the road or the nearby roads that they live in.”

John Laud, teacher, Bishop Creighton Primary School

The school works hard to develop a sense of agency in its students, and staff were keen to build on this to develop a project that explored the role of the school and the Cathedral in the community of Peterborough. The school is physically very close to the Cathedral but in the past has made little use of it other than for RE visits.

Peterborough Cathedral is going through its own process of exploring its role as a faith institution in an increasingly diverse city, and staff viewed the engagement with schools through the Peterborough Curriculum as an opportunity to engage young people in this process:

“How does the Cathedral interact with the rest of the community?
– and that’s something important for the Cathedral because the Anglican Church is there for everyone as a resource: for anyone to use as regards faith or belief and therefore our outward facing department works in conjunction with education.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

During the early months of the partnership development the English Defence League held a march in Peterborough which deeply affected some students at the school. “Some of them were really scared” reported a teacher. This event strengthened the resolve of the Cathedral and the school to develop a project that allowed children of multiple faiths to explore their relationship with the wider community of Peterborough alongside the Cathedral and the inter-faith council.

The project revolved around the production of a ‘Question Time’ style event in which members of the inter-faith council and the school council sat on a panel and answered questions from the audience of Year 4 and 5 students. In preparation for this event, all students visited the Cathedral to learn about its historic place in the community. Cathedral staff visited the school and developed the debating skills of students in preparation for the event. Through the visits and engagement the students learned “science and numeracy as well as the obvious history and RE, and using it as a very, very close by facility really – a giant classroom”. John Laud, teacher, Bishop Creighton Academy

“In terms of raising the children’s awareness of themselves and where they stand in the community – that’s definitely changed because they’ve got a much deeper understanding about where we come from and where they come from, um, how they connect in to the Cathedral – some of the other [...] faiths that we met, and that’s been really, really useful.”

John Laud, teacher, Bishop Creighton Academy

The event itself was a great success, with the Bishop of Peterborough and representatives from Hindu and Catholic faiths answering children’s questions about diversity, and tolerance, and “why people from different religions can’t live together all over the world – it isn’t fair!” (**Year 5 student, Bishop Creighton Academy**).

The Cathedral and the inter-faith council plan to repeat and expand the event to include other topics and other schools in future years:

“[The Cannon Commissioner] and the other members of the interfaith council have all said, you know, that this is something that can grow ... this is something that is a really good idea and is going to work very nicely – but it’s also something that could expand...”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

This project shows how the school curriculum can become a ‘social project’ which engages with the real issues facing a community, specific to time and place, through engagement with local institutions.

Section 4: the curriculum development partnerships

“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.”

Independent evaluation

“I... thought ... it would be dead hard to engage with ... I thought ... ‘Crikey, it’s going to be really hard to develop a relationship with someone to a point where you can collaborate for joint goals’ ... I thought that it sounded quite difficult. Um, and then ... it wasn’t!”

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

At the core of the Peterborough Curriculum approach was the idea that schools would form partnerships with other local organisations, through which they would design and teach aspects of the school curriculum. This model provides one vehicle through which aspects of a school curriculum might become designed **by a locality**, through collaboration between teachers and other local stakeholders.

The idea of partnership working is a familiar one to many schools and partners, but the relationship between schools and local organisations interested in supporting learning is often limited to one-off visits (either by staff to a school, or of students to a site) or pre-packaged programmes – often linked to particular national curriculum areas . Whether or not payment takes place, they can often feel transactional, and superficial.

The Peterborough Curriculum was instead founded on the idea that schools and other organisations from the locality would be able to form sustainable partnerships based on mutual advantage and shared objectives regarding children’s learning. This form of partnership working was intended to provide a range of benefits to students and schools, including:

- Access to local expertise and resources to support learning
- Access to sites for learning in the locality that could be used
- Alternative perspectives on learning, education, and the locality

At the core of the Peterborough Curriculum approach was the idea that schools would form partnerships with other local organisations

- Shared ownership of the learning going on in schools, providing common cause between schools and other local stakeholders
- A range of sustainable relationships between schools and local stakeholders which could be drawn upon in different ways
- Direct, positive contact for students with adults from a range of sectors and backgrounds

This section explores how the curriculum development partnerships in Peterborough were created, the ways in which they differ from the relationships schools have had previously, and the impact that partnership has had on the schools and partners.

Who were the partners, and why did they get involved?

Partners got involved with the Peterborough Curriculum for a range of reasons, and there were far more potential partners willing to work with schools than the partner schools had the capacity to support. This supports the finding from the Manchester Curriculum that schools were often surprised by the willingness of external organisations to engage with schools (Facer, 2009b).

Potential partners tended to be drawn predominantly from the heritage and cultural sectors, although businesses, parents, voluntary organisations and faith communities were involved in smaller ways.

The paper *Lessons for Localism* (Thomas, 2011) addresses the challenges in engaging underrepresented groups in conversations about education, and draws out the implications for the localism and co-production of public services more generally. To summarise, the nature of an invitation to support schools to design curriculum undoubtedly results in self-selection by those who are sufficiently familiar with the formal school system. The capacity of under-represented groups to engage can also be limited, especially smaller voluntary groups or individual community members who work during school hours. On the other hand, as our paper *Re-thinking the Importance of Teaching* highlights, working with schools to select partners also means that school attitudes towards what is of educational value can be dominant (Thomas, 2012).

From the outset both partners and schools were asked to state their organisational objectives for working together. The idea of mutual benefit to schools and partners is a key rationale for partners and their continued involvement in the programme:

“Because it’s win-win – you get your visitors and raise the profile of your heritage site, and the children get another place in the community where they can build up their understanding, and there will be more visitors later on...”

Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

Objectives for partners included promoting the organisation to children and their families by ensuring children felt at home. Profile and recognition in the wider city was also a goal, as was a desire of Peterborough Cathedral to work with multiple faith communities on concrete projects. Aside from their stated aims, however, partners derived a range of benefits from working with schools. In some projects children

were involved in giving feedback on heritage sites, and insights into what they would prefer.

“The benefits to [the partner] from my children being involved are ... you know, there’s no monetary value to that ... [the partner] needed somebody to come in, and do what we’ve done for him – he could have paid a consultancy group to do that. Instead he got ninety kids to do it.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Key features of the partnerships

- Relationships before content
- Flexibility
- Creative disruption
- Children at the centre of an outwards accountability

Relationships before content

The Peterborough Curriculum programme required schools and partners to develop projects together, rather than to design something in school which they then asked partners to help deliver. Partner schools reported that early engagement with a partner was easier than they had thought.

“Understanding how much they want to engage with schools and how flexible they are willing to be has made me really think about engaging with them right from the outset rather than just when we need a visit ... but it’s about bringing people in on the outset and making sure you’re all moving in the right direction.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Schools valued the fact that prioritising the relationship between individuals and between organisations, rather than the content of what was to be developed, opened the projects up in a way that a subject or topic based approach might not have achieved.

“It means it’s always new and it’s always different. It’s not like a pre-planned outcome or series of activities with defined endpoints, it’s very much, sort of, happening, because of and as a result of the collaboration.”

Deputy Head, partner primary school

All of the schools sought relationships with organisations that could be sustained over time. One school was explicitly seeking its ‘natural partners’ in the community with whom they could build learning relationships over time.

Key to forming these partnerships was the idea of mutual benefit to both the school and the partner. The first sessions, facilitated by the RSA, asked schools and potential partners to share their own objectives for getting involved, and to develop shared objectives over time.

“It was the shared goals ... I did do some work for him to deliver to his trustees and all sorts. So we did the professional side first and because that all worked and we did get on, it’s now meant that we are a lot more flexible as partners, really.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Flexibility

A key feature of an ongoing curriculum development partnership between a school and a community partner is this flexibility: that rather than having a concrete plan, the process can be iterative and responsive to children’s learning and the evolving needs of the organisation and school.

For one project this flexibility was critical to the project going forward after the school received a disappointing OFSTED judgement.

“That was the biggest challenge, really, that the needs of the school changed.... So we kind of lost some of the outcomes we were hoping for, that were part of our remit, but it wasn’t like we were going to uninvest now because we’re not getting so much out of it.... And I suppose that if we’d been very hard and fast it would have been a problem, but we were able to say ‘yeah that’s OK’.”

Partner representative

Once a relationship had been established between a school and a partner, although ostensibly working together on a specific project they also drew on the partnership in a variety of other ways.

“Some days it was just me talking with them about their curriculum.... It was very little to do with visiting or involving the Cathedral – the Cathedral’s role was providing me as a kind of support. And I think that was entirely appropriate – we had that connection and as I say that’s one of the things it throws up – you have somebody else there, another resource, someone else to throw ideas in.”

Mark Tomlins, Cathedral Schools and Community Officer

Creative disruption

Despite being committed and flexible, developing projects across professional and institutional boundaries is never likely to be easy. However, the schools with whom we worked valued the ‘disruptive’ nature of working in collaboration – so much so that one school sought new partners once the relationships with initial partners had become too ‘comfortable’.

“It’s been brilliant having the same partner in the work right the way through, but what we’ve needed towards the end is to be bringing in new and different people, on a shorter term.... You need a new spark, sometimes, don’t you ... you’ve started at something that’s uncomfortable – move to a comfort zone, and you need something to ... kick out of that, if you’re going to be creative ... anyway.”

Deputy Head, partner primary school

Teachers inevitably found it challenging to involve a partner in their planning, because of the disruption to their own professional security.

“It’s not a safe environment, and I think that’s the challenge, isn’t it ... because teachers traditionally have got something that they’re ... presenting to children, and very few people, other than other teachers, ever question that! So to have those challenges from somebody coming in with a different viewpoint is really healthy, but it can be hard for people!”

Headteacher, partner primary school

On the other hand, the additional challenge of taking account of different perspectives was valued for the fact it made the learning offered to children broader.

“We already knew ... bringing people in would add some ... another layer to what you’re already doing – more specialist knowledge ... it changes the way you look at the learning, so that you don’t become too narrow with your perspective.”

Deputy Head, partner primary school

Teachers also relished the opportunity to draw on the expertise of others for their children’s benefit.

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

Teacher, partner primary school

“When I asked [the student] why he enjoyed working with [the partner] he said ‘You’re a teacher; he knows stuff!’”

Teacher, partner primary school

Children at the centre

In any project which involves children there should be natural and legitimate concern that the interests of the children are not sidelined in the pursuit of other stakeholders’ objectives.

Curriculum development partnerships in which some benefit from involvement is derived by the partner organisation may raise similar concerns.

Schools, however, are clear about whose agenda comes first.

“Because of the needs of our Ofsted and our literacy we went down more of a narrative route – the relationship with the Cathedral went down a less entrenched route – don’t regret that because it’s what the children needed academically – we knew the Cathedral was there if we needed them, and partners can’t dictate what the schools will do and how they will be involved.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Schools also felt an outwards (to the community) rather than upwards (to central government) accountability to an external party involved was useful in pushing projects forward.

“When you’re working with partners you have to have certain outcomes in mind and you might have to change them but you have to have a dialogue with the children and the partners to keep it on track. You’re not a power unto yourself.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Because the projects were planned with stakeholders not held to account by the same targets and systems as teachers within the schools, staff found that their planning naturally revolved around the needs of the specific children. This combined with the fact that an external organisation was expecting the project to go forward more or less as planned, meant that schools then felt committed to this course, despite other pressures that might be at play that make it more challenging for staff.

“It keeps you focused- it makes you do it ... and actually if you’ve got an audience that needs this, it makes you do it!”

Deputy Head, partner primary school

This is a small study, but a potentially important indicator that further work might be useful on the power of outwards, local accountability to place the more holistic interests of children at the heart of school curriculum development.

Section 5: the impact

“The initiative has positively enhanced learning for several hundred children in the Peterborough area whilst giving teachers a renewed sense of professionalism.”

Independent evaluation

The Peterborough Curriculum projects were developed with the aims of:

The Peterborough Curriculum project has been an exploratory pilot with a small number of schools

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

The Peterborough Curriculum project has been an exploratory pilot with a small number of schools. Variations in practice make it difficult to generalise, but there are a number of areas where impact has been significant.

This section is based on interviews with teachers and leaders from all five participating schools; key contacts from two partner organisations; and a total of 21 students between the ages 7 and 13 across four of the schools.

Creating learning experiences that were engaging for children from all backgrounds

- Teachers report **improvement in student performance in literacy** when in Peterborough Curriculum lessons
- Students **enjoyed learning about where they live** and learning outside the classroom
- Students reported **learning more factual information** outside the classroom than in school
- Students particularly enjoyed **having other adults involved**
- Lack of confidence in the outdoor environment, and **existing negative views** of Peterborough affected some students’ engagement with the work

Improvement in student performance in literacy

Although producing measurable impacts in academic attainment was not an explicit objective of the Peterborough Curriculum, in the two schools where teachers tracked student performance teachers reported a noticeable improvement in the standard of students’ work.

“The standard of work ... went up, um, at least a fine grade, in my class. When they were delivering their persuasive speeches [to the partner], then they would usually perform that. So in terms of standards, they, you know, our four Cs performed in a four B way, our three Bs performed in a three A way, at least. And there were some children that went up more than one fine grade.”

Teacher, partner school

Another school reported that the literacy outcomes of students had improved notably since students had been using a real local context as a frame for learning.

This finding is important because it is often assumed that visits and the involvement of external partners is somehow additional, or in opposition to academic learning traditionally carried out in the classroom. Primary schools demonstrated that it is possible to produce improvements in attainment through the meaningful and embedded involvement of the locality in the curriculum.

Enjoyed learning about where they live

Students interviewed seemed overall to have enjoyed the work they had done under the Peterborough Curriculum banner. Students had specific reasons for having enjoyed the work, including the focus for learning that it provided and that students appreciated. Learning itself was also an important source of enjoyment for students: “If we could just go out of form and do something fun then I find it interesting, ‘cause we learn a lot”. “It was just really fun, and we learnt a lot.”

For others it was getting out and about that appealed “Because ... I like going out of school and going around ... and going to different places”.

Learning more factual information

In some instances the students felt that they learned more factual information by learning through a local partner, and this was borne out by the details they recalled.

“You probably learn more ... than usual and instead of, like, sitting down and doing work, we learnt lots more facts.”

Year 8 student

“To be honest, ... it’s just ... more knowledge that I get on that than in my other lessons.”

Year 5 student

Having other adults involved

Students showed awareness of the key partners in the projects and were able to name several of the individuals who had been involved. Teachers reported that students enjoyed having people other than teachers involved in their learning.

“The children absolutely love other people being involved in their education.”

Teacher, partner primary school

“The Red Cross day that was impacted in their brains for about three weeks afterwards – every time they saw you they were like ‘wow, can we have him back’, you know it’s – they really did – We had a really powerful, powerful presentation from the Red Cross and then we had a visitor in school who was a refugee himself. There were a hundred and eighty students in the hall and you could have heard a pin drop when he spoke about his experiences...”

Business and community manager, partner secondary school

Students also demonstrated that they had learned specific values through working with external partners in the context of the partner organisation.

“I learnt like, what can be done if you get like a good team together and help – because that’s what [the partner organisation] did with their nature reserve ... I learnt that sometimes if something doesn’t go well, like with [the partner], just by doing a little bit each day you can make something really good.”

Year 5 student

Students and teachers alike were clear about the positive impact that adults other than teachers can have on young people.

Existing negative views

Students also gave reasons for why the work undertaken did not add to their enjoyment of learning. These reasons included that the approaches to learning were not necessarily engaging, despite the change of context: “some bits I found a bit boring ‘cause they’re continuously talking”.

This points to the importance of not relying on a change of location or context for the provision of engaging experiences: the pedagogical approaches used by teachers and partners are still important.

Perhaps more importantly for understanding the impact of the project, some students had a pre-defined view of their local area that framed the way they approached the Peterborough Curriculum work:

“Normally, when – when someone says about a town or a city, I tend to think about tall buildings and the occasional neon sign with lights. Um, when I think about Peterborough, I – I – it – it’s just dull and it’s just grey and it’s really flat.”

Year 8 student

However, these initial reservations about learning about Peterborough were modified through the focus the school placed on Peterborough. In this instance the same student reported learning about places they did not previously know about in class, and then taking a trip with friends at the weekend to visit them.

Increasing children’s understanding of and attachment to the place where they live

- Students report knowing far more about the **opportunities available locally**
- Attitude towards the **value of the locality** has changed for the better
- Feelings of **belonging and identity** have developed

Opportunities available locally

In some instances, students demonstrated real challenges in understanding where they live, and how their home and school relate to the wider world. Impact on student understanding was therefore straightforward to achieve for any project that focuses on the locality, but it also demonstrates the importance of ensuring children have access to placing their learning in context.

“Before I didn’t know that there was nature reserves here in Peterborough ... that we could go to.”

Year 8 student

It is interesting to note that far from limiting students to their locality, the process of learning about the locality in the classroom instead opened up opportunities on their doorsteps which they may otherwise have assumed they would need to travel further afield to access.

Value of the locality

Older students were surprised to learn that there was more to their local area than they had thought, both in terms of the activities that were available and certain aspects to Peterborough that were of national importance.

“I learned that there are more well-known people here than you would expect.”

Year 8 student

“If you, like, live here ... you’re like ‘aw, I just live in Peterborough’, but you could be like, ‘aw, I live in Peterborough, do you know John Clare came here’ because he was a good poet.”

Year 8 student

Belonging and identity

Apart from learning about Peterborough in a factual sense, one of the objectives was to improve students’ sense of belonging to the place where they live. This was in part a response to the Citizen Power objectives of promoting attachment to place among Peterborough residents.

Students reported that they had got to know places in Peterborough that they had not visited before, and did not know existed as a result of the Peterborough Curriculum. Students also reported that the repeated visits to one location made them more confident in visiting those places. For students who had moved to the area most recently, the work schools did in the locality seemed to have a particularly important impact.

“I used to live in Birmingham, so um, when I moved here to Peterborough I was quite scared, and I like, thought this was a horrible place. Then when I learned about Peterborough ... I thought ... I like it here.”

Year 5 student

Some projects also seemed to give students a sense of belonging in terms of where they fit in the historical context of the places where they live.

“You can see how Peterborough used to be, and then how it’s changing for the future.”

Year 5 student

“Um, I think – it makes me think how if, um ... about all the building, like, that you like are still going to be here for like, my grandchildren and stuff. And like if – if – and what things were there before I came into the world.”

Year 8 student

Several projects had the specific objective of allowing children to explore their own place in the community of the school and the wider city, which teachers felt had been achieved.

“In terms of raising the children’s awareness of themselves and where they stand in the community – that’s definitely changed because they’ve got a much deeper understanding about where we come from and where they come from ... and that’s been really, really useful.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Embedding schools more fully in the locality

- **Teachers learned about the locality** and felt more connected
- School and partner representatives reported a **change to the way organisations engage with schools**
- Partners reported that **more schools are now open to working with outside agencies**

Teachers learned about the locality

If students have learned more about Peterborough and their place in it, then what about their teachers?

Teachers reported needing to be more outward facing than they had been previously, and establishing a new kind of relationship with the locality served by the school.

“It means as a practitioner you have to actually put yourself out there to find these things out, ‘cause ... as we found out from doing the partner thing, people won’t always jump on schools and tell you what they’ve got, you’ve got to, you know, you’ve got to be out looking...”

Teacher, partner primary school

“... trying to get some attachment to Peterborough was something I probably needed to do as well as they did – as well as the children did.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Teachers learned about the locality and felt more connected

“I actually think it’s made me feel more connected to Peterborough, because I’ve been ... very actively looking ... and finding out about what’s happening across the city.”

Teacher, partner primary school

This was a key feature of teachers’ planned engagement with the projects and partnerships into future years, and at scale could have important impacts on the position of schools in the locality.

However, the engagement of the immediate communities around schools, and with parents, remains challenging for our partner schools in Peterborough. Our pamphlets *Lessons for Localism* (Thomas, 2011) and *Re-thinking the Importance of Teaching* (Thomas, 2012) provide in-depth analysis of many of the challenges to involving underrepresented groups in projects such as these.

Change to the way organisations engage with schools

Partners reported that other organisations were beginning to think differently about how they engage with schools as a result of the Peterborough Curriculum work.

“Lots of bits and pieces have come from it – Regional College, City College wanting to come on board as well. You know because they’re seeing the effect of what’s happened elsewhere and people are genuinely saying this is something that works really well and we should do that.”

Key contact, partner organisation

The Peterborough Heritage Attractions Group, which is a self-organising body of local heritage sites including Peterborough Cathedral and Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery, are now thinking more systematically about the Peterborough heritage offer to schools, with education taking a more prominent role in their thinking.

“Now it seems that with the Peterborough Curriculum that it’s the education officers that are coming. And the meetings are getting longer, and longer, because so much is happening.”

Heritage partner representative

Partners and schools report that organisations and schools across Peterborough are thinking and talking more about partnership. As one teacher put it:

“We’ve suddenly got to the place where if you mention partnership learning, there are quite a few people in Peterborough who now know what you mean. So if you ring up someone that you usually had a transaction with about a trip [she is] now aware that we want more than just a trip, and so can engage in that from her end as well. So I think that there’s – a bit of a culture shift.”

A partnership has also emerged between the Heritage Attractions Group and the Peterborough Learning Partnership (PLP) which is an association of 37 schools and other partners with an interest in learning

in the city with the chair of the heritage group now sitting on the executive board of the PLP.

More schools are open to working with locality

Partners had also noticed a change in the willingness of schools to become involved with partnership working with outside organisations.

“I think initially before getting involved that had been the challenge getting schools to kind of say ‘oh, shall we do that’... but now what we’re finding as a result of this is that most schools would be open to that kind of working because they’ve seen the effects and heard the positive responses.”

Partner representative

“The ripples go elsewhere, you’ve got you know educational literature that’s saying this is essential this is what we should always have been doing. And so therefore everybody’s turning around and saying well we should do it.”

Partner representative

The school improvement team at the Local Authority were also responding to the demonstrated impact witnessed in some schools and seeking to spread partnership practice more widely.

“We also had people from the Local Authority who were coming in to discuss with us how they could use the Cathedral in an Authority wide basis to promote mathematics... they were coming as a result of what they’d heard at [partner school] and how the school has really valued the project and the children were getting a lot out of what they were doing.”

Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

Section 6: challenges

“In both Secondary schools there were strong aspects of the learning culture that appeared to prevent an initiative like this one taking hold.”

Independent evaluation

Local engagement is seen in opposition to a standards agenda

Despite the success of the Peterborough Curriculum work in shifting thinking about how and why schools and local organisations might come together to provide learning for young people, there were significant challenges in developing genuinely co-constructed curriculum in secondary schools in particular. This is despite the enthusiastic leadership within the schools, and thoughtful planning by several members of staff.

Both secondary schools made significant and multiple new links with local organisations, with reported positive impacts on students. The independent evaluation reports the impact these links had.

“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 gob-smacked’. 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’.”

However, neither of the secondary schools was able to develop an Area Based Curriculum project in line with the established criteria. The independent evaluation found that:

“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.”

Activities that involve outside agencies, or learning outside the classroom might be considered important or not important, but seem always to be considered as *separate from* and often *in competition with* work done with a teacher in the classroom.

“‘Oh, you’ve got them out for a double English lesson they’ve got to catch up on that one...’ And when you’re taking probably under-achieving students out that’s a huge pressure, because potentially they may never catch up ... and although they’re learning a lot outside the classroom ... life skills etc.”

Staff member, partner secondary school

For some schools the Peterborough Curriculum represented a choice between a standards driven agenda and a more holistic approach

For some schools the Peterborough Curriculum represented a choice between a standards driven agenda and a more holistic approach that involved developing students as whole individuals. It was therefore framed as very much part and parcel of a strategic direction that was *in opposition* to a standards agenda.

“I think we’re at a crossroads. It has resonated with lots of members of staff, but I think that it still remains to be seen ... given the demands the government are putting upon us with these other more what you could argue more engaging, wholesome or holistic approaches to teaching and learning, I think we’ve got some big decisions to make on that front.”

Staff member, partner secondary school

As the independent evaluators found:

“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.”

At primary level this opposition between the Peterborough Curriculum and the standards agenda was not so evident. One school was down-graded from ‘Good’ to ‘Satisfactory’ near to the beginning of the project, prompting a revision of literacy teaching and intervention by the Local Authority. In this instance the partnership work already being undertaken was viewed by the school as something that helped them to maintain a more progressive agenda despite this renewed focus:

“I think actually in some ways the RSA work has saved us – it has. It’s something that we were committed to and therefore, you know, needed to go ahead, with the one strand of what we had been doing the previous years that we could cling to, and – and – and do in a quality way, I suppose.... Um, amongst obviously very high pressures, about ... raising standards in – in – in a very focused ... way.”

Headteacher, partner primary school

Interestingly, by the end of the process this primary school found that the two agendas did not need to be so separate:

“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.”

Both of the secondary schools are planning further work with local partners for the coming years which may penetrate further into the core

business of teaching and learning than was possible during the two years of this project. One important lesson, therefore, may be that the process of disrupting learning cultures in schools is one that takes significantly more time than we had available to us.

“The Curriculum” as an uncontested entity

The secondary school curriculum in particular remained not only resistant to modification, but also to permeation by the locality. This is in part due to the structures of the schools, where subject and classroom teachers were difficult for partners to access.

For primary schools the idea of school based curriculum development was easy to assimilate, as they were already experienced in working in teams to create a curriculum they felt met the needs of their students. The involvement of outside partners in that process was therefore a question of opening up the school, rather than of initiating curriculum development itself.

The independent evaluator found that in the primary schools:

“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.”

Even at primary level, therefore, the involvement with the locality remained one of ‘enhancement’ of the mainstream school curriculum, rather than challenge or disruption.

Both of these challenges: the difficulty schools appear to have in seeing anything that is not classroom-based, teacher-led learning as either risky or antagonistic towards the ‘standards’ agenda, and the fact that the ‘curriculum’ is seen by many as a fixed entity which can be rearranged but not challenged, need to inform any development of school-based or area-based curriculum design.

Section 7: next steps

Next steps in Peterborough

The Peterborough Curriculum programme of work was always intended to have an impact beyond the five schools and their partners, attempting to establish new ways of working for all those interested in learning in the city. In this it seems to have succeeded, as described in Section 5.

Each of the partner schools have plans to continue working with their partners, as well as to seek out new ones.

“The main thing is to continue our partnership with the Cathedral, develop our question time aspect but also using the Cathedral for a lot more curriculum work.... And I will get more staff involved – we’re single form entry with six other classes. So Y3 and Y4 went to the Cathedral this year, but we’ve got a change of staff again with three new teachers coming in. Getting Mark in to talk to us all, put it on the table what he’s got, and we can get started.... We need to get out there a bit more as well and see what else is out there... maybe doing the planning over there. We’re going to carry on with it, definitely.”

John Laud, Bishop Creighton Academy

“I’m desperate to start thinking about it for my new school.... You can’t start early enough. You can go to a deeper level on things. Fast forward 5 years from now – if this is how we continue to work – I’ve got a start of a relationship with so many people – that network is much more embedded – you’re starting with the right foot forward – we’ll never be at the beginning of that journey again because of the relationships. That network exists now.”

Estella Todisco, West Town Primary School

Through links with other Citizen Power strands of work in the arts, sustainability and citizen participation, and through working closely with the Peterborough Learning Partnership, the Peterborough Skills Service and the Heritage Attractions Group, the work was able to achieve a shift towards a more integrated vision of learning that goes well beyond what schools do. These organisations hope to take the work forward in Peterborough over the coming year, to embed ideas of locally created partnerships in the way learning organisations operate, and to engage the practitioners involved in spreading the practice to more schools in the city.

This may mean that Peterborough is well placed to respond to the proposed changes to primary and secondary curriculum, which seem likely to provide opportunities for schools to develop an innovative, locally generated curriculum responsive to the needs and aspirations of students and their communities.

Next steps for the RSA

The RSA also intends to take forward the Area Based Curriculum model elsewhere, building once more on the learning from the Peterborough work. The document ‘[Thinking about an Area Based Curriculum: A Guide for Practitioners](#)’ highlights the next phase in the development of the idea for Peterborough and elsewhere.

Building on its experience of Area Based Curriculum work, as well as Opening Minds and its Family of Academies, the RSA is working in partnership with the Curriculum Foundation and the Institute of Education to build a professional development programme that will foster a new generation of RSA-certified curriculum designers, enabling them to capitalise on the emerging opportunities for locally-led curriculum design that complements the new national curriculum.

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West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral

PETERBOROUGH CURRICULUM **CASE STUDY**

Introduction – what is an Area Based Curriculum Project?

RSA Area Based Curriculum projects are designed by schools in collaboration with a local community partner; supported by local expertise and context; and taught using the local area as a classroom.

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

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

The school

West Town is a School of Creativity and has developed an innovative curriculum based on inquiry and student directed learning. West Town serves a diverse and rapidly changing population close to Peterborough's railway station. Around 90 percent of the student population has English as an Additional Language, and turnover of students is around 30 percent between Year 3 and Year 6. The school's curriculum and other innovations reflect the challenge to engagement that this presents.

“Children need to know why they are learning what they are learning. And it should be about the human experience no matter where children are from – need to give them a sense of belonging.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

A 2008 Ofsted report said “Staff work exceptionally hard to innovate and adapt the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of children and promote active, collaborative learning”.

West Town have been looking at curriculum for a number of years, and see curriculum being a twin approach based on key skills and looking

at what children need in the 21st century. The school embraced the idea of an Area Based Curriculum as a means of developing their curriculum thinking further.

The community partner

Peterborough Cathedral is going through its own process of exploring its role as a faith institution in an increasingly diverse city, and staff viewed the engagement with schools through the Peterborough Curriculum as an opportunity to engage young people in this process

“How does the Cathedral interact with the rest of the community? – and that’s something important for the Cathedral because the Anglican church is there for everyone as a resource: for anyone to use as regards faith or belief and therefore our outward facing department works in conjunction with education.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

Peterborough Cathedral are developing a strong outreach programme with schools and the wider community and are keen to work closely with other faiths in the city as well. The vision is for the Cathedral to be a resource for learning across the curriculum, and to get beyond ‘pointing out the obvious artefacts’.

The partnership

Teachers from West Town were already used to working and planning in collaboration, and so wanted to embark on an open-ended process with the Cathedral, with the project evolving as the year went on.

“[We decided] we could leave the precise content for now and look at booking in the time that the children come here. The project could go several different ways and we want to design it as it goes along – with communication between visits, of course, and an ongoing process of development and design.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

The school also involved a number of different staff in the project, several of whom had the opportunity to interact with Cathedral staff who came into the school to support planning.

“Genuine co-construction of curriculum with partners, we’d done one teacher with one partner before, but to do it across teams and units, I think was really powerful.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher West Town Primary School

The project

Summary

As real world frame for the project the Year 3 and 4 students were commissioned by the Cathedral’s head of Visits, Education and Heritage to make a display for the newly built Education Centre, aimed at other visiting children, about the Cathedral and its Tudor history. Catherine of

Peterborough Cathedral



Aragon is buried in the Cathedral and so the school and Cathedral staff were able to construct a programme of work which complemented and enhanced the National Curriculum, using a locally specific context.

“It worked very well for the school in that it hit lots of curriculum areas, and it worked very well for us because we were talking to local children about interpretation ... it has absolutely contributed to our strategic goals.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

Building on this work, the school and Cathedral went on to develop a topic called ‘Peterborough: a sense of place’ which is an inquiry into the school’s relationship with Peterborough. The Cathedral provided a focal point for demonstrating how buildings and their surrounding area have changed over time, reflecting changes in Peterborough’s population and its needs.

“We’ve just had an assembly where parents have just seen their children talking about the reasons why they came to Peterborough ... that was great ... that’s been a really powerful thing for the children, and for the staff, and for parents as well.”

Nikki Cherry, Head teacher, West Town Primary School

The goals

The project goals were to develop a wider sense of place both in terms of children’s knowledge of their physical local environment and their conceptual understanding of Peterborough.

Specifically the project aimed to:

- Develop children’s understanding of UK history, especially The Tudors, and how this has impacted upon Peterborough and the Cathedral.

- Engage new arrivals, and those who have been resident in Peterborough for a number of years or even generations, and their families with Peterborough.

For the Cathedral goals included:

- The development of links with schools and community.
- To involve children with the development of the Visitor, Education and Heritage Centre.

Activities

Children made an initial visit to the Cathedral and completed questionnaires about what children would and would not like about the site. This gave feedback to the Cathedral for their education centre. An original plan to move on to thinking with children about the idea of interpretation, and how the Cathedral's assets might be interpreted by children was put on hold due to a disappointing OFSTED report on the school.

“What happened – and quite rightly – was that when we sat down they said inspectors had come and said we think that the children need to be concentrating on narrative writing rather than report writing which is what we had planned....”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

However, rather than abandon the project and the partnership, the school and the Cathedral adapted what they had planned.

“We still worked in partnership, they still used the Cathedral but what they did was they came in, had a visit, started looking at the building and started thinking what sort of story lines could you get from it. It worked very well because we were still able to provide them support but it kind of diverted from the original plan ... because they were able to support a change in curriculum, and we were able to say yeah, we can adapt.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

“We deliberately chose a literacy focus to the work partly because of OFSTED, but it was merging the two agendas together. It was about showing that you could do really quality, rich learning with focused outcomes that met all sorts of different aspects of learning and I think it's really succeeded in doing that.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

Following this narrative literacy focus in the first term, the school decided to build on the exploration of the building of the Cathedral and other buildings in the locality. The school brought in a local construction firm to work directly with students on basic principles of construction, related to the methods that would and would not have been available when the Cathedral was built.

The final term of the project involved students interviewing their parents about their reasons for their family coming to Peterborough,

exploring these in the context of the Cathedral's historic role in drawing people to the city, as well as more recent economic and cultural changes. Children presented these stories to the school and to parents through an assembly.

How is this different from what schools normally do?

“Teachers traditionally have got something that they’re ... presenting to children, and – and very few people, other than other teachers, ever question that! So to have those challenges from somebody coming in with a different viewpoint is really healthy.”

Hannah Quinn, Deputy Head, West Town Primary School

West Town Primary School was already experienced at bringing external partners into the process of curriculum planning and design through Creative Partnerships. Nevertheless, aspects of this project further developed the schools' practice in ways they had not explored before:

- Blending OFSTED requirements with creative learning outside the classroom
- Opening curriculum and learning processes to challenge by local stakeholders, as opposed to ‘experts’ in a national programme
- Offering children the opportunity to contribute to the world outside of school, with ‘real people to speak to, real challenges to address’
- Using the local area to provide links to global contexts

Impact

On students

“It’s the normal excitement you get when you go on a visit or have a real person in, but all the time and along a track.”

Estella Todisco, teacher, West Town Primary School

Teachers reported that the presence of an audience from outside the school has meant that the children were more engaged than in other lessons.

“Children have a very clear audience and purpose for their work in this project, which has resulted in a high level of focus and high quality outputs. The children have enjoyed having a role model outside of the education system in Mark Tomlins, and already show improved understanding of their locality and their own role within it.”

The independent evaluation of the programme agreed, reporting that “[Pupils’] Cathedral-linked work included a display of paintings, drawings and models which achieved high quality without much direct teacher input”.

The project also succeeded in developing children’s sense of place in Peterborough, and connection with the Cathedral and the history of

the city. Children reported being excited to learn new things about the Cathedral. The independent evaluation agreed that “Interviews with children confirmed the centrality of the Cathedral in their learning and their positive regard for it”.

On teachers

Staff at West Town Primary School found that the project had made them look more positively at the local area as a source of learning.

“Teachers tend to think that you need to get on a bus to get delight and wonder but it’s all on your doorstep if you look at it with the right attitude.”

Teacher, West Town Primary School

Further, they reported feeling that they needed to reassess the way they use the networks and relationships they already have.

“Often I talk to [the RSA team] to ask ‘do you know someone who can help?’ – but often I already did know them so just need to think differently.”

Teacher, West Town Primary School

One teacher involved in the project subsequently took up a post at another school in Peterborough in a curriculum leadership role, and credits this project for providing her with the confidence to do so.

On the wider school

Staff at the school appreciated the way that the partnership provided support at a time when a disappointing OFSTED might have led to the sidelining of much of the work they had done on engaging students with learning.

“I think actually in some ways the RSA work has saved us – it has. It’s something that we were committed to and therefore, you know, needed to go ahead, with the one strand of what we had been doing the previous years that we could cling to, and – and – and do in a quality way, I suppose.... Um, amongst obviously very high pressures, about ... raising standards in – in – in a very focused ... way.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

In addition, the outside partnership provided a means of linking together different terms, subjects and classes in a way that was meaningful for the students.

“I think it has been able to provide our curriculum work with a narrative so that all of us teachers and children having to think about where we are going with this – when you’re working with partners you have to have certain outcomes in mind and you might have to change them but you have to have a dialogue with the children and the partners to keep it on track. Not a power unto yourself.”

Hannah Quinn, Deputy Headteacher, West Town Primary School

What does it mean and what have we learned?

“I don’t think that you should limit ... if you need or want to go to London, fine, I don’t think it’s about it just being Peterborough, it’s about that being the starting point, and it – it grows from there.”

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

This project demonstrates two key points:

- That literacy and numeracy outcomes can be brought together with creative approaches that use visits, external experts and local context – meaning that a ‘standards’ agenda and the broader agenda of the school can be one and the same
- That projects that start with a local stimulus to go well beyond the locality: addressing national curriculum content as well as adding meaningful engagement with children’s own – global – communities.

Both of these lessons are key to schools engaging with a local focus for learning, because they emphasise that a local focus for learning does not need to be in opposition either to national standards, or ensuring children have global horizons.

What next?

The school intends to maintain its link with the Cathedral, as well as develop new links with other organisations.

“We would obviously like to keep the link with cathedral ... we’ve also got a really nice idea for a media-type, radio project and we would like to work with one of the secondary schools on that...”

The Cathedral are also planning to work differently with more schools in the future.

“We’d like to continue working with the same schools, and work with new schools. The legacy for us is that we see this as a process that has been really valuable, really worked for both parties.... We understand the process now and we know that it’s something beneficial. So it’s not selling it, it’s just saying where do we go this time, what can we do?”

Food for thought

- How might your locality be used imaginatively to support OFSTED recommendations or school objectives relating to academic standards?
- What national and international links does your school community have that could be drawn upon to link local and global concerns for students?

Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld

PETERBOROUGH CURRICULUM **CASE STUDY**

Introduction – what is an Area Based Curriculum Project?

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

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

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

The school

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

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

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

Mary Foreman, Headteacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School

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

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

The community partner

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

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

John Turner, Manager, Railworld

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

The partnership

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

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

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

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

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

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

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

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School.

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

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

Gemma Brown, teacher, Dogsthorpe Junior School.

The project

Summary

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

The goals

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

(**Gemma Brown**).

Activities

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

Dogsthorpe Junior School
students at Railworld



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

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

Alice Kershaw, Heritage Regeneration Officer, Opportunity Peterborough

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

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

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

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

How is this different from what schools normally do?

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

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

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

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

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

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School

Impact

On students

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

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

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

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

On teachers

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

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

On the wider school

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

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

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

What does it mean and what have we learned?

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

What next?

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

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

Gemma Brown, Dogsthorpe Junior School, Peterborough

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

John Turner, Railworld

Food for thought – questions for the reader to reflect upon

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

Bishop Creighton Academy and Peterborough Cathedral

PETERBOROUGH CURRICULUM **CASE STUDY**

Introduction – what is an Area Based Curriculum Project?

RSA Area Based Curriculum projects are designed by schools in collaboration with a local community partner; supported by local expertise and context; and taught using the local area as a classroom.

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

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

The school

Bishop Creighton Academy has around 200 pupils aged between four and eleven, and is situated within walking distance of Peterborough Cathedral. Students are drawn from a range of faith backgrounds and many of the families served by the school are newly arrived in Peterborough.

The school is rated as outstanding by Ofsted. The school works hard to build confidence in its students through student voice initiatives. Bishop Creighton has engaged with a number of initiatives such as Building Learning Power and employ a ‘growth mind set’ approach to learning.

The school works hard to develop a sense of agency in its students, and staff were keen to build on this to develop a project that explored the role of the school and the Cathedral in the community of Peterborough. The school is physically very close to the Cathedral but in the past has made little use of it other than for RE visits.

The partner

Peterborough Cathedral is going through its own process of exploring its role as a faith institution in an increasingly diverse city, and staff viewed

the engagement with schools through the Peterborough Curriculum as an opportunity to engage young people in this process.

“How does the Cathedral interact with the rest of the community? – and that’s something important for the Cathedral because the Anglican church is there for everyone as a resource: for anyone to use as regards faith or belief and therefore our outward facing department works in conjunction with education.”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

Peterborough Cathedral are developing a strong outreach programme with schools and the wider community and are keen to work closely with other faiths in the city as well. The vision is for the Cathedral to be a resource for learning across the curriculum, and to get beyond ‘pointing out the obvious artefacts’.

The partnership

Having met at a networking event organised by the RSA, staff from the school and the Cathedral started planning straight away. The Cannon Missioner, responsible for community relations was very keen that the Cathedral be used for ‘more than just Tudors and RE’ and had suggestions about using the façade and construction of the building to teach maths among other ideas.

After an initial scoping session, Mark Tomlins, Schools and Communities Officer at the Cathedral, took responsibility for engaging with the inter-faith council on behalf of the project, while John Laud, lead teacher at the school, started to plan in the time to the school year.

The school had always had a link with the Cathedral – it is named after a former Bishop of Peterborough, after all, and the chair of governors is a clergy member. However, through the Peterborough Curriculum the Cathedral and school embarked on a range of things together, including being involved in a promotional video for the Cathedral, and the school taking refuge in the Cathedral precinct on the occasion of a flood at the school.

“For the lead teacher the relationship with Mark was particularly valuable to the school community ‘because he’s been so open – and the other people as well – but him especially. Yeah, he’s – he’s – he’s made it approachable, whereas I think they thought it wasn’t before....’.”

John Laud

Mark also felt that the relationship was open enough to be flexible, despite having concrete plans for a project.

“And that’s what I like about the openness of it – that we’ve done it one way, if it doesn’t work we can change bits and pieces, we can keep what’s good, we can add new bits in, we can look again at using it in different ways, doing it with different people, and that to me – that is always the way anything should be, any kind of learning is open-ended.”

Mark Tomlins

The project

Summary

The project revolved around the production of a ‘Question Time’ style event in which members of the inter-faith council, and the school council, sat on a panel and answered questions from the audience of Year 4 and 5 students. In preparation for this event, all students visited the Cathedral to learn about its historic place in the community. Cathedral staff visited the school and developed the debating, and question and answer skills of students in preparation for the event. Through the visits and engagement the students learned “science and numeracy as well as the obvious history and RE, and using it as a very, very close by facility really – a giant classroom”.

The goals

The primary aim of the project was “To develop the children’s understanding of the role of the Cathedral and the school in Peterborough’s wider community”.

However, this was given additional focus because during the early months of the partnership development the English Defence League, an ultra-right wing anti-Islam group, held a march in Peterborough which deeply affected some students at the school. “Some of them were really scared” reported a teacher. This event strengthened the resolve of the Cathedral and the school to develop a project that allowed children of multiple faiths to explore their relationship with the wider community of Peterborough alongside the Cathedral and the inter-faith council.

“It has to be about children getting out and seeing their community – their worlds can be so small. The great thing will be for the children to meet people that they have never met before.”

The project was also intended to develop the writing and speaking skills of the students.

Activities

The classes met with Cathedral officers in the autumn term and have learnt about how the Cathedral came to be there and how it was built. Students discussed the work of the church as well as other faiths in the community and looked at what the Cathedral hopes to do.

In a skills-focussed session, students looked at forming an idea and arguing a point. They were encouraged to develop questioning and listening skills, and to develop their debating skills.

The event itself was a great success, with the Bishop of Peterborough and representatives from Hindu and Catholic faiths answering children’s questions about diversity, and tolerance, and ‘why people from different religions can’t live together all over the world – it isn’t fair!’.

For more detail on this event, see the RSA blog here www.rsablogs.org.uk/2012/education/opinion/.

Bishop Creighton Academy students in a workshop session at Peterborough Cathedral



How is this different?

“I think as I say for us it’s that understanding that this is a completely different way of working with schools and it will enable us to make permanent links.”

Mark Tomlins, Peterborough Cathedral

Both the school and the partner feel that this project was a profoundly new way of working for them. Notable differences from previous ways of working have included:

- The school and the Cathedral entered into a flexible and committed partnership which allowed for a range of activities and mutual support as well as the planned project
- The project built on existing links between the school and Cathedral to forge what both parties felt would be a permanent partnership between the two
- Both parties benefited from the project in a genuinely joint exploration of a topic of interest to both
- Students were granted a real audience and opportunity to debate matters of interest to themselves and the wider community

Impact

“The first time I went there I was scared... And I’m really, really, really, really glad I was going there because I’ve never been there in my life.”

Year 3 student, Bishop Creighton Academy

“I think there’s been a real shift in their perception of the Cathedral – which is what we focused on... it was a massive change in their ideas and understanding.”

John Laud, Bishop Creighton Academy

Despite the close proximity of the school to the Cathedral, many children had been unfamiliar with the building and the institution before this project. Students reported enjoying visiting the Cathedral, and looked forward to return visits.

“The children have been really positive. When I do go back to visit the schools they all say ‘that’s the guy from the Cathedral’ ... it makes me think that maybe what we’re doing is obviously something they value and that they’re enjoying.”

However, the project was always about more than simply enjoyment, and teachers felt that it achieved the goals of developing children’s sense of their own place in relation to Peterborough and its multiple faiths.

“In terms of raising the children’s awareness of themselves and where they stand in the community – that’s definitely changed because they’ve got a much deeper understanding about where we come from and where they come from, how they connect in to the Cathedral – some of the other [...] faiths that we met, and that’s been really, really useful”.

What does it mean and what have we learned?

This project demonstrates how the school curriculum can become a ‘social project’ which engages with the real issues facing a community, specific to time and place, through engagement with local institutions.

Issues that schools sometimes find it difficult to address, perhaps lacking confidence or expertise in complex political or faith-related areas, might be helped by partnership with relevant local agencies.

The partnership created by the school and the Cathedral has also demonstrated that educational and other institutions in a community often share common agendas that go unnoticed even where a relationship already exists.

What next?

The Cathedral and the inter-faith council plan to repeat and expand the event to include other topics and other schools in future years:

“[The Cannon Commissioner] and the other members of the interfaith council have all said, you know, that this is something that can grow ... this is something that is a really good idea and is going to work very nicely – but it’s also something that could expand...”

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

For the school, there is still a lot more that can be done together with the Cathedral, embedding the relationship further within the school, and plans are afoot for further work.

“The main thing is to continue our partnership with the Cathedral, develop our question time aspect but also using the Cathedral for a lot more curriculum work.... And I will get more staff involved – getting Mark in to talk to us all, put it on the table what he’s got, and we can get

started. We need to get out there a bit more as well and see what else is out there ... maybe doing the planning over there. We're going to carry on with it, definitely."

The Cathedral are also planning to work differently with more schools in the future.

"We'd like to continue working with the same schools, and work with new schools. The legacy for us is that we see this as a process that has been really valuable, really worked for both parties... we understand the process now and we know that it's something beneficial. So it's not selling it, it's just saying where do we go this time, what can we do?"

Food for thought

- Does your school have 'natural partners' that could be drawn upon to develop learning and curriculum-related projects?
- Are there current social issues affecting students that might be addressed through the curriculum?
- How might partnerships with local organisations help schools to develop a sense of identity among their students?

The RSA: an enlightenment organisation committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today's social challenges. Through its ideas, research and 27,000-strong Fellowship it seeks to understand and enhance human capability so we can close the gap between today's reality and people's hopes for a better world.



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