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MANCHESTER CURRICULUM CASE STUDY:

PARKLANDS SCHOOL

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

Background Context

Parklands High School is a comprehensive 11-16 secondary school in Wythenshawe that was, at the time of the project, undergoing the process of transition to become the Manchester Enterprise Academy, opening in September 2009 under the sponsorship of the nearby Manchester Airport. During the period of the project, a new leadership team was working off-site from the school, and existing staff were required to re-apply for their posts and were learning about plans for a significant restructuring of departments and curriculum.

Overview of the Manchester Curriculum at Parklands

Parklands School ran a project called 'Undressing Manchester: the Urban World' as their part of the Manchester curriculum. This programme was run for half a term in the summer term with all year 7 pupils. It formed one unit of the Year 7 Competency Curriculum which focuses on developing students' personal, learning and thinking skills. The curriculum ran over 3 weeks and involved 6 x 50 minute sessions for the introduction, 1 full day trip for the whole year group to Manchester, 1 full day of master classes with Manchester artists, and 8 x 50 minute sessions of independent/group work.

The project was facilitated within the school by Assistant Head Teacher Alison Farrow, and the programme of work was designed collaboratively by a number of teachers, the core being a group of 3 teachers and a teaching assistant with expertise in competency approaches, SEN, humanities and behavioural difficulties, in collaboration with 2 teachers from the performing and visual arts faculty. A second Assistant Head, Garry Marshall, was responsible for the Learner Action Team element of the programme in conjunction with the researchers at MMU Centre for Urban Education. The teaching team responsible for 'teaching competency' in year 7 was responsible for teaching the programme of study.

The project was seen primarily as a continuation of the school's previous competency programme. The local element of the curriculum, its focus on Manchester, was viewed in two ways – first, as a simple 'hook', a focus for a programme of activity for developing personal, learning and thinking skills; second, as a means of raising students aspiration and pride both in their city and in their own potential.

The team involved in designing the project overcame significant obstacles, in terms of lack of time and resources, to mount a programme of activities that have, in their view, had a positive influence on: staff perception of student's abilities, staff teaching and learning strategies, curriculum design for the new academy and student-staff relationships.

Review methods

During the project, I visited the school on two occasions. First, for an informal interview with the lead member of staff for the school and an informal observation of one of the project sessions with students post-visit. Second, for a series of 5 formal individual and pair interviews with 7 members of staff involved in the project. The RSA lead, Kathryn Burn, also conducted two formal interviews with the teachers in the project. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The school also shared their planning notes and their scheme of work for 'Undressing Manchester'. The plans produced at the residential were also available for review.

Aspirations for the Manchester Curriculum at Parklands

The 'Undressing Manchester: The Urban World' project aimed to achieve the following goals:

An inclusive curriculum providing a high quality, creative and challenging education within a secure, caring and happy environment, where every child experiences a sense of enjoyment and achieves full potential.

We aim:

- *To deliver a curriculum which is broad, balanced and relevant to each individual pupil*
- *To create a happy and positive learning environment, fostering mutual respect, consideration for others and personal responsibility*
- *To be committed to developing positive relationships with parents, promoting education as a partnership between home and school*
- *To establish effective working relationships with other professionals, for the benefit of all at Parklands*
- *To promote Parklands as part of the wider community*

Our objectives will include as appropriate:

- *to offer a range of creative opportunities, including life-skills, visits, community workshops and independent enterprise projects*
- *to re-introduce pupils to the city in which they live, to inspire and motivate pupils to innovate and experiment with their skills to learn*
- *to provide a learning platform that enables students to re-discover Manchester and the community around them*

The Activities

The Undressing Manchester project involved 4 interlinked activities over a half term period. These activities were delivered by the school's year 7 curriculum team, with additional staff from Performing Arts brought in to provide master classes, and significant numbers of teaching and

support staff brought in to provide assistance for the full day trip to Manchester. The project involved the following teachers: Alison Farrow (Assistant Head teacher), David Allbutt, Jo Connor, Mary Howson, Siobhan Egan, Christy Lyons, Sarah Andrew and Veronica McGeorge. The learner action team was led by Garry Marshall.

Activity 1: An 'introduction to Manchester'.

These lessons involved presentations by staff, independent and group research by students and student presentations on key themes, including: Music in Manchester, Architecture, Manchester 'industrial city', Art in Manchester, and Famous Mancunians. The stated learning outcomes from these lessons are all related to the development of personal, learning and thinking skills, in particular, small group working, answering questions, planning and presenting, researching and working collaboratively with others. The implicit aims of these lessons were to enable students to share what they already knew of Manchester and be introduced to different aspects of Manchester, to enthuse and excite students about Manchester's history and culture and to encourage them to see themselves as part of a vibrant city:

Before they went, it was like finding out about Manchester and what's going on. This is your Manchester. This is your city. Find out what's going on in your city music-wise. Find out what's going on in your city, sort of inventions and technology, find out about the history, a bit of the background. What else was there? There were about five topics, all different ones, and what is so interesting for me, is like I really feel like the Manchester music scene is like a part of me and so I'm like, come on, you know Oasis, the Happy Mondays, even Take That, and they're like – what are you talking about? It was really interesting for me because I think I'm modern and cool and down with the kids and I'm really not what they see Manchester as is completely different [...] it's a city over there with lots of buildings, lots of businesses, lots of rich people, lots of footballers living there, lots of multicultural stuff that they don't really have anything to do with and they don't understand, and lots of shops, Primark, and that's it. [...] so that, to me, was like a really interesting part of that Undressing Manchester was that... (Teacher A).

There was quite a lot of discovering what's going on [in Manchester] before, but it was presenting it in a creative way and you are part of it, but I don't think they really felt that until they went on the trip[...] but that trip was really 'you are part of it' (Teacher A).

Activity 2: A full year group trip to Manchester.

This trip involved all students in the year group, including one who was on exclusion and others who would normally have been barred from participating due to concerns over risks, over bad behaviour, or as punishment for previous misdemeanors. The staff interviewed stated that one purpose for this activity was to demonstrate that even the children with the most 'challenging' behaviour could be trusted in these environments. The trip involved 6 groups of 13 students, with 3 staff per group and a guided tour for each group on one of the following themes: Crime and Punishment, Canals, Music of Manchester, Architecture, Green Manchester. Lunch was at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry and the outdoor 'Roman Fort' in Castlefield. The different groups then went on different walking tours across the city (with some 'focusing' tasks such as scavenger hunts and photograph competitions) until they finished the day at the

Manchester 'Big Wheel'. The explicitly stated aims of this activity were, again, related to students' personal, learning and thinking skills, with a specific focus upon adaptation to surroundings and environment, anticipating and managing risks, adapting to changing circumstances. A second set of objectives for this activity, from the teachers' comments in interviews, was to offer the students the chance to become familiar and comfortable with diverse elements of Manchester's cultural resources and history, and to empower students to feel that they had a right to participate in these spaces¹.

Just take them round and just let them experience Manchester. Let them walk; let them see the buildings; let them see the greenery in Spinningfields; let them look down by the canal and realise there are canals that run right the way through Manchester and we had a camera and a digital camera for each learning group and they loved taking responsibility for taking photos and we'd created a list that said the best photo, the best found object and they had to record all of it. We didn't say there was going to be any prize and some of the photos, when they came back, were fantastic, and it engaged just by giving that little bit of responsibility to some of those kids. That engaged some of the real behavioural issues at our school. (Teacher C)

It wasn't meant to be a rigid plan and that was another thing that we fell out about. One of the members of staff said, what are they going to do when they get to here? And I'm going, they're going to play. They can't play! That's why we had postcards. They were meant to write postcards home. (Teacher B)

[...] and that was nice because not all of them wanted to jump off and roll down the hill. There was a postcard and they put their address on it and they wrote it to their parents, or carers, or to themselves, put a stamp on it and then, on the journey back, find a postbox and post it and taking pictures with posting it, posting a postcard home. (Teacher A)

As will be discussed later, there was some tension around the aims and the purpose of the day. However, this 'trip' was intended to be more than simply a 'day out'; it was intended to create an environment for students and, in some ways, staff to demonstrate different forms of behaviour.

You've kind of facilitated this environment where they've learned about how to act, and how to adapt their behaviour, and how to be more appropriate to a given situation, and it was never more apparent than seeing some kids who are on the verge of permanent exclusion, who bang off the wall in a mainstream 9 to 3 day, lasting to 2 in the afternoon with every single risk around you, canals, traffic, other people – good as gold and just relishing the day because they've finally been invested in; they've finally been trusted to experience something new other than the four walls of Parklands. In the afternoon we walked them up to the big wheel and they got to go on the big wheel in turn, of which there were a lot of kids that had a lot of fears and stuff, and it was really nice seeing them overcoming those fears. (Teacher C)

It was a different way of working, wasn't it? It was having conversations and you can't underestimate that. (Teacher A)

¹ An early plan to enable all the students in one year group to sit down and have a meal together had to be abandoned for cost purposes. But this aspiration to allow children to stake a claim to the city and to be able to participate in its cultural practices remains, and the creation of space in the day for 'mucking around', for being 'free' in the city, shows remnants of that thinking.

Everyone just saw it as it was just a trip to Manchester. It really wasn't. It was proof more than anything [...] They were still kids but they were responsible kids and that was quite nice. (Teacher C)

Activity 3: Master classes

The 6 master classes were each run twice in the course of one day, with 6 groups of students taking two different classes. The students were allocated to these master classes, which included: graffiti workshop (external artist), clay workshop (teacher), print making (external artist), poetry (external artist), drama (teacher), and music (external artist). The facilitators of these workshops drew on the children's experiences of their visit to Manchester to create a range of cultural artefacts – from group drama pieces to graffiti art. The goals of these master classes were to develop students' abilities in independent and collaborative learning, experimentation and responsibility within a range of different disciplinary domains. In the interviews, there was little discussion of how these master classes tied in with the Manchester theme, other than to enable the students to draw on their experiences as a basis for cultural production.

It turned out that the hip hop poetry workshop was the most fascinating one going and you had members of staff hearing about its reputation throughout the day and going in and visiting the workshops which was fantastic because, on the Monday, you'd had this sort of negative viewpoint of, oh, competency takes over everything... but then, all of a sudden, everyone is like 'who's this [poet] that everyone is talking about?' And then going in and people were coming in on their frees to see the graffiti workshop and sit with the kids, because we'd freed up a lot of staff because we had them off timetable all day, and it was fantastic. (Teacher C)

Activity 4: Independent project.

This interconnected series of lessons allowed the students to develop their own 'response' to their experiences. Students, in groups of two classes at a time, worked to develop an idea of an artefact they wanted to create, either independently or collaboratively, and then worked over several sessions to produce this. The aims of these sessions were related to project management, group work and responsibility². However, the initial plan to showcase the students work publicly and to other staff and students did not come to fruition. The diversity of activities and the overall process is described below:

We were restricted on the amount of time we could allow for it in the curriculum and some of the projects were really good. We had massive 3D sculptures of the Big Wheel because that is what they remembered most and they put little snippets in about what they'd experienced. We had a TV advert drama piece. We had a massive big post card collage of pictures [...] the kids learning and being able to express what they have learned in a method that best suits them is not necessarily standing up and performing, and we had the kid that wanted to create a PowerPoint, we had the kid that wanted to write a letter to the head teacher telling them about their day. We had the kid that wanted to create the Beetham tower just because [one of the teachers] lives in there and they tried doing that and help was brought in from wherever and the thing about it was we had very

² These and other aims identified come from the Undressing Manchester Scheme of Work

limited resources so they had to find their own resources, and I felt that was very good, so they had to put a proposal together of what they wanted to do and why. They had to justify why they wanted to do it. They were not allowed to just do something for doing's sake and we were worried that they would all just want to create a piece of Graffiti and they didn't. We had sculptures, we had performances, we had a dance at one point; we had these big postcards, we had little postcards that someone had written to their mum, and it was a shame because [...] there wasn't this celebration at the end, and what we had wanted to do, and it was money that stopped us, we wanted to do a share afternoon where parents and carers in the local community and other staff could come in and we'd have put all of their work on display and Dave Allbutt had created this brilliant PowerPoint of images from the day out in Manchester that had been shown in their assembly [...] but time didn't allow it, money didn't allow it and, unfortunately, their products are stuck over in the library which gets bashed because its an unlockable door. (Teacher C)

Making the Project Happen

The process of designing and implementing this programme of work was highly challenging and required significant commitment and support within the school. The following discussion explores the different elements required to enable this activity to take place.

Staff Involvement

The school was approached to participate in the project by Kathryn Burns, the RSA's co-ordinator for the project. Parklands had been introduced to the Opening Minds curriculum three years earlier by Kathryn, who had been an advocate for the approach across Manchester. When Kathryn contacted Alison Farrow, Parklands Assistant Head, who she knew from the previous discussions around Opening Minds, Alison, Garry Marshall (Assistant Head with responsibility for competencies) and the Head were keen for the school to participate for a variety of reasons. These reasons included: the opportunity to learn from other schools who are already working on competency approaches; the opportunity to work on a programme that was supported by the City Council (the school had previously been criticised for their competency work by the Local Authority despite support from Ofsted); the opportunity to access funding to support the initiative (the school has been suffering from financial difficulties and no resource has been available for staff development or additional activities).

Given the previous link with Kathryn around Opening Minds and competency approaches, the project was seen in the school as tied in to their previous work on competencies in the curriculum. Despite this, Alison, Garry and others involved with competencies were keen to invite a wider range of other teachers with no previous experience of these approaches to participate in the project. The aim was to break down a divide that had developed in the school between 'competencies' staff and others. Kathryn was invited to the school to present on the project. However:

'there wasn't a great response. We had to coerce and cajole a few extras and it wound up with a core team which was part of my core from competency and a few other interested people that then volunteered for it' (Teacher F) .

There were, therefore, a number of different reasons why different teachers participated in the project, from informed enthusiasm, to naïve interest, to reluctant coercion:

They offered the opportunity for us to be involved in a new curriculum that would be working with other schools in Manchester and when they sold it to us I thought it would be a good project to be part of in regard to being my professional development [...] I thought you would get the opportunity to work with other schools and share in their practice as well ... I was the eager beaver. (Teacher C)

I had to have my arm twisted to come on it because I was going to back off, I wasn't going to come on it [...] having said that, I love doing these little projects. I love these debates and the educational philosophy that's behind it and I love the time for reflection and discussion about curriculum matters which you don't have time to do in school. (Teacher B)

Teacher C - It's teachers talking about learning and teaching rather than talking about operational minutiae...passionate bickering.

Teacher B - The colour of your bobbles and whether they should be allowed to wear black bobbles or red bobbles in their hair and that is just so irrelevant.

Teacher C - Which is what most staff meetings are dominated by these days.

The project was a little vague; you didn't know about it at the beginning; it was just do you want to put your name down for something and I think, generally, anyone who knew about the RSA or the competencies would straight away put their names down [...]. Other people like [...] and myself didn't have an idea about it but I'm quite young so I volunteer myself for anything before I know what I'm actually getting into. (Teacher G)

We've been involved in the Opening Minds type of structure, the competency curriculum, for about three years now and I've been involved since the very start [...] I'm very interested in inquiry-based learning, interested in Opening Minds, always have been, and so, for myself, professionally, it was just a natural progression for me to get involved with. (Teacher E)

The teaching group that came to take on the project was therefore made up of staff with widely divergent experiences and motivations. Some of the staff had been involved for three years already in competency based approaches and were confident of this approach to curriculum design and pedagogy. Others were new to these approaches and concerned about the implications of competency based approaches for their discipline and for students understanding of key concepts. Moreover, the staff involved in the discussions were 'the good people that always opt into everything', (Teacher C), a highly motivated group of individuals with strong ideas.

The group became known by themselves and other teachers at the residentials, as 'the noisy lot', because they were engaged in passionate debate and discussion about what the plans might be for the Manchester Curriculum. Such debate, however, was at times fraught and led to some teachers becoming less closely involved and the make-up of the group changing:

The group actually changed and evolved several times – it started off with mostly the art and drama and music department. They decided they wanted to do it and then [...], who was from PSE joined later, I think, I think she came in later and there was [...], [...] and me and [...] and [...], the maths teacher, all of us who had been right there from the very beginning, and the PVA people wanted to find out what it was about, really, what competency of Opening Minds was [...] I would say [Teacher C], me and [Teacher E] were the core of it and the other staff kind of came in and out, dropped in and out of it'. (Teacher B)

It was quite difficult, I found, the planning, with almost a too talented group of people. It was almost like, a gifted and talented group where you don't have some drivers and some followers and everyone's got their own idea and it was, actually, quite difficult to make decisions and move on those decisions. (Teacher D)

Lots of shouting and lots of stress... we fight but get over it very quickly, you know. We fight because we're passionate about what we want to do...It was very fiery...and then we present a public face you see. [...] I wasn't worried. (Teacher B)

Over time, the competency team familiar with the Opening Minds approach contributed to curriculum innovation, and took the lead; while teachers from Performing and Visual arts contributed to discrete elements of the teaching.

'So it just became a project within the competencies curriculum that's already running in year 7, so it was subsumed into that and those staff members who weren't involved directly in the delivery of year 7 competencies then became involved in the master classes that we ran during the Manchester curriculum time which I think was very successful and did allow other people to become directly involved'. (Teacher D)

Creating time to work out the ideas

The Manchester curriculum was, as discussed in the main report, an ambiguous proposition. Without a clear vision statement, 'the Manchester Curriculum' was, to a large extent, shaped by the teacher groups in each school. This meant that before beginning to plan activities, the teachers had to negotiate their educational objectives and to get to grips with what the project was trying to achieve. There were also significant debates about the scale of ambition that was feasible within the project, both for planning and for delivery of the new scheme of work. With very few parameters, highly divergent opinions and experiences, the Parklands team was faced with a major challenge in designing and developing a curriculum within the time made available at the residential workshops. Moreover, there were real difficulties in making staff available to attend the residentials, with the result that some teachers were only able to join in the evening and on Saturdays, giving them a sense of having missed important experiences:

Freeing up that number of staff was very difficult. (Teacher F)

We have attended all the residentials but the school found it difficult to release people for the whole of Friday so we haven't actually attended a whole day on a Friday because we've been unable to do that but we have attended all the residentials. (Teacher D)

The Parklands team was also working to reconcile competing visions of education in this process:

'...the others didn't really understand competency; they didn't know what it was about; they had their own preconceptions about it and they had their own way of planning, so it became a very fiery kind of debate and, because we are all quite fiery people anyway, it became quite.... And people had loads and loads of ideas and it was kind of trying to narrow the ideas down to make them practical and implementable and not just too woolly, so it was quite challenging but, as the year went through, it became easier and, as we took on other people's ideas, and then [...], [...] and I tended to go away and go, right, we can do this. (Teacher B)

'The competency staff have always said that content shouldn't matter at all and that it should be your skills. I think that your content should matter to a certain degree, for me, especially if you are wanting to address certain issues like, for example, the natural world. (Teacher G)

The competency team was driven by a sense that education structured around a formal subject based curriculum was failing their students:

We talked about why schools fail and we went off into groups and why we were failing – because we'd had another dire set of results, below the floor targets, and everything and every group that reported back said it was to do with the curriculum, which I knew they would [...] It wasn't motivating them [...] that it just wasn't engaging them and I think, when it first started, the competency curriculum, it was very – some of it anyway – was quite inspirational. (Teacher D)

While others in the group came from a different perspective:

I was very stringent over we can't lose drama; we can't lose performing arts and I knew all of these measures and I know it's not just in this school, that education's changing, and I was very much, where is my department going to go? What kind of teacher will I be? And I'd always wanted to be involved in competencies but I didn't want it to be at the expense of the department. (Teacher G)

While others resisted participating in the debate at all:

I'm head of department and my brain is 'which staff and which classroom with how many kids' because that's how I've always been and it's really hard to think about, from a concept, from an idea, to something that you can actually deliver to a group of kids, with all the challenges that that entails [...] I hate that. I just wanted them to tell me what to do. What do you want me to do? (Teacher A)

The competency team also had positive experiences of shared planning and team teaching to draw on:

There was a lot of them coming together, discussing ideas, coming up with themes and titles, exploring them for a bit and changing them around and that is what we'd seen in the competencies as well, you know, you'd get a group of people together and they'd start sharing ideas and then bouncing ideas off each other and what you end up with is something much more than any individual would have planned and its important to know that that is the big thing with

competencies, that, yes, it's good for the students because it allows them to develop skills and develop, but its also good for the staff, providing they get that time to work together. (Teacher G)

While others had had limited prior experience of this approach:

Teacher B – Team teaching is a real skill that people underestimate. Team planning and team teaching takes a long time to learn.

Teacher A – You don't get any training. You don't get any training for it because you do your PGCE and at the beginning of your PGCE you do a joint planning with somebody and teach 10 minutes and you plan for a week and teach 10 minutes and then you don't do it again. From my experience, even with your mentors, you know, when they're helping you its not joint planning, its them sort of helping you and then they'll say, now you do it, it's different and I think it should really be part of teacher training.

Time allocated for 'planning' a curriculum, then, was taken up with complex processes of negotiation about educational aims and working practices, developing not only the underpinning ideas for the programme, but also developing the capabilities amongst staff for such conversations and for such collaboration. These are complex, time-consuming challenges that confronted the teachers in the project.

Because of the scale of the challenge – the need to define aims, the need to work out what the project 'was', the need to determine the scale and feasibility of the project, and because of the difficulties of getting all staff released to attend all of the residentials, the planning time had to expand outside the residential time. Because no funding was made available in the project for teacher planning time other than the residentials, the staff took it on themselves to continue planning in the evenings after other meetings:

Six of us did the planning [...] sometimes if we wanted [Teacher H] or [Teacher D] to come who work in a different department, we had to make a formal meeting, so we said we would meet from 5pm to 6pm after various other meetings had taken place, because there are always other meetings, so it always had to be from 5pm to 6pm, and apart from that, [Teacher C], [Teacher E], me and [...] see each other all the time because – we're sort of in the same department and [Teacher C] was trained through me, and [...] works with me, and that was easy because, naturally at the end of the day, we would sit and go, right, what have we got to do. (Teacher B)

Teacher C - It took us hours... and it was after a meeting so it was after – we wouldn't start doing that until 5pm so it would be after a meeting that was already calendared so we'd be here from 5pm to 7pm doing stuff like that.

Teacher B – It was only done because we just give up time. Don't we. We just do it because me, you and [Teacher E] are just always here.

Teacher C - Stay back, thrash it out, we're not leaving until it's done – but it's the working relationship that we've developed over the years.

This core group were responsible for both developing the final plan and for communicating it to the wider group of teachers who would make it happen. For this second group of teachers, the experience of participation in the project was very different:

We went to the meeting and it was like, this is the scheme of work; have a look at it so you know what it's all about and this is the day and these are the workshops and this is what is going to happen and you're doing this and you're doing that, so everybody left knowing what they were doing and could have a look at what was coming next and I think that was quite [...] quick, easy, straightforward, and then everybody knew what they were doing on the day. (Teacher A)

Shaping and Defining the Aims

Early ideas for the project included a plan for an Olympiad, a zone of 5 events focusing on different elements of Manchester to be held at Urbis and a plan to draw on the technical platforms presented at the first workshop. There were aspirations to draw on the possibility of help from RSA fellows, but a lack of certainty about what the fellows could offer and a concern about whether this support would be sustainable year after year, meant that this was not followed up. The technical systems also failed to materialise. By the time of the second workshop, the teachers had come to realise that the project did not represent an opportunity to work across the city in collaboration with other schools and that they needed to create something that was achievable within their existing resources:

Teacher B - I think we could have, if we'd wanted to, [do], you know, much bigger and better things, but my reservation about that was I've done projects like this before and you really start off way too ambitious so I'm really conscious of trying to keep it small and simple'.

Teacher C - And I think that's where most of the bickering came from. Wasn't it? At the beginning, you had the realists and you had the visionaries and you had the people that wanted to do everything and they're the...

Teacher B - ...that knew that if we tried to do too much that it wouldn't work, that it would collapse.

It's like dropping a pebble into a pool isn't it? You have to start small and you hope the ripples will come out. (Teacher B)

By the second residential, the team had honed the ideas into a core focus for the project, namely:

'we just wanted to show kids Manchester and we recognised that kids in Manchester just – some of them have never been to Manchester. They don't actually understand that they are part of Manchester – and we decided that we are different from the other schools; we do need to focus on our kids'. (Teacher C)

The relationship between the competencies and the Manchester focus is quite a complex one in this school. To some extent, the Manchester focus simply provides a 'hook' for a scheme of work within which students can develop a range of personal, learning and thinking skills. Indeed, none of the learning objectives in the scheme of work finally developed actually refer to the development of understanding about Manchester itself. Some of the teachers also argued that it

was no different from other areas of focus in achieving its educational goals – i.e., the development of personal skills. When we examine the discussion of the Manchester curriculum in more detail, however, there is a sense in which the focus on Manchester is more than a simple ‘theme’, and is tied up to the development of new subjectivities. In many ways, the teachers talked of their students as suffering from limited aspirations and narrow horizons, of lacking pride in their environment, as being unable to make connections between themselves and the wider world

I did feel it would be a good thing to try and find ways to engage students with the city of Manchester because Wythenshawe tends to be like this little place, out on a limb, and they don't even feel that they're from Manchester, so I did feel that was a positive thing for our students, to try to find ways to engage them more in their city. (Teacher D)

The whole thing about students here is that they have low aspirations. They have little knowledge of what the world can offer them and so, anyway, that we could widen their horizons and open up the world to them, I wanted to go with that and I say that that is generally what's in our development plan, you know, the raising of aspirations. (Teacher D)

'We are conscious that many of our young students have a limited vision and understanding of the city in which they live. Throughout this scheme of work we would like to engage pupils in activities which would ignite a passion and pride for the city in which they live and a clear understanding of the contribution of culture and the arts in this process'³.

'Most of the students in Wythenshawe that come to Parklands in year 7 have not visited Manchester City Centre. They do not know about the history of Manchester or what their city has and can offer. This scheme of work aims to raise aspirations and motivate students to engage them with Manchester, their city!' ⁴

The Manchester link, therefore, could be interpreted as developing a new form of subjectivity for the students. By making them aware of the rich possibilities in their environment, it is implied, students will in some ways develop identities that chime with the goals of the Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills agenda. By developing pride in their own identity as part of this rich environment and history, they will be helped to develop the sorts of capacities implied by the PLTS. This link was never clearly articulated by the teachers being interviewed, but it can be read off the discussions of the reason for the focus on Manchester and the observations on ‘what worked’ from the project in terms of its impact on students.

What the Undressing Manchester allowed us to do was just give us a theme and a topic, a local topic, which would slot in, still allowing the competencies, but pushing the creativity element and being proud of Manchester and proud of the city we live in [...] We have to be careful not to cover too much, try to aim not to cover too much, so the underlying theme was really this, be proud of the city you live in and look at these very creative and sort of entrepreneurial people, all the fantastic things that have happened in Manchester.

³ Taken from the Project Brief developed during the second workshop

⁴ Taken from the module outline developed during the third workshop

This, too, is a highly complex idea – that pride in one’s environment can play a role in enabling students to develop the confidence and pride that will support the development of other skills. It is a connection that was not made explicit in any of the course materials, but it is something that was implied throughout. In essence, the teachers were making sense of the dual elements of the ‘Manchester Curriculum’ project that had been presented to them by the RSA and the City Council.

In addition, the leadership of the competency team, with their specialisms in SEN and behavioural difficulties, also meant that the project aims were filtered through a core commitment to inclusion and to ensuring that all students benefited:

Teacher B - Nobody was left out, everybody went.

Teacher A – That was a big part of it and that they wouldn’t have to do any reading or writing. It wasn’t like that and it was actually the people who did the best would be the most enthusiastic and they would be the ones who won’t be in top sets.

Teacher B – Or who ask lots of questions.

Given the complexity of the challenge, and the diversity of perspectives of teachers involved, there were heated but challenging debates over pedagogy and curriculum content. These tensions are exemplified in the following discussion between two of the competency oriented teachers:

Teacher C - I’ll gladly abandon a planned individual lesson if there’s a more specific focus that needs to be addressed, whereas some staff cringed yesterday when we were just completely left in the sort of circle time environment, where there was silence and there was thinking and things weren’t being dictated to the students and the answers weren’t being given, they hadn’t been uncovered yet and, obviously, members of staff in the room at times were a bit like – wanted to give the answer, always to ask the closed question, or wanted to spoon-feed them [...] it was too risky. It was too quiet because I made them sit there for two minutes in just, you know, complete silence and let them think, for example, and again, for the kids it doesn’t automatically happen straight away.

Teacher B – And that’s quite a high level skills isn’t it? That as a teacher you have to learn?

Teacher C – When [...] came into the competence curriculum, at first, she didn’t know what to expect and it scared the living life out of her and it was all: where are the levels? What’s going on? What are they learning? And she has come full circle.

Teacher B – We’ve had confrontations like we’re cowering in the corner.

Teacher C – And it was very painful. It came down to, again – came down to screaming rows.

Teacher B - There were a lot of prickly feelings.

Teacher C - But it’s shifting on. It’s definitely shifting on. It’s also having that trust with colleagues isn’t it?

Teacher B - Yes, it is, yes, and professionalism.

Teacher C - You're not judging each other, it's like a judgement level.

These values and aspirations were reconciled within a broad structure for the programme that served as a compromise between competency and disciplinary approaches. The agreed approach balanced the aspirations of 'subject-oriented teachers' to provide key conceptual and disciplinary information and tools, and the aspirations of 'competency-oriented teachers' to offer opportunities for students to take time and responsibility for their own learning. A consensus was achieved that balanced competency classes with a Manchester focus, with a whole year group trip, a set of expert master classes and a student directed project.

Sorting out the practicalities

Making these activities happen, however, required significant time, commitment and expertise. The teachers involved in planning the programme, for example, were committed to all students being involved in the trip and the subsequent activities. This required high staff:student ratios, something that caused significant resentment in the staff room as it required high levels of cover for those teachers who were going out for the day at a time (during exams) when there was already high levels of demand for staff:

Teacher C - There were three of us and about 12 kids.

Teacher B - Per group. Yes, heavily staffed. All the support staff, volunteer staff. Decimated the school.

Setting up the year group Manchester visit also required transport, staff, funding for all visits, planning of activities for all visits, and complex logistics, all on a very small budget.:

'We rang around and emailed and spoke to and booked and it does take a huge amount of time and chasing the money for it. We had a grandiose idea. We wanted all the kids to sit down in a restaurant for a meal at lunchtime, as the cultural aspect of it, but that just became too expensive. It was all those kinds of things.'

The team was also inexperienced in identifying external experts or specialists who might visit the school for the master classes. They had to draw on individual knowledge or suggestions from others in the school:

[Teacher C] is fantastic at research, she goes on the internet, and somebody in my department said – oh, [poet], he goes into schools, get him in and somebody else, knew somebody in the art department who knew the artist so it was kind of ad hoc.

The school, perhaps wishing to keep the relationships under their control, or perhaps unaware of what was possible, was unsupported by the RSA in this process of identifying opportunities for participating in the city and for bringing people in. They were, despite 10 years of national initiatives such as Creative Partnerships in this field, effectively starting from scratch:

Teacher C - The school used all local contacts, or connections, through the staff that ran the planning team as well. The kids hadn't worked with them but because the staff knew them and had relationships with them they felt comfortable in bringing them in. With the day in Manchester....

Teacher B – That was hard work. That was really hard work planning that.

Teacher C – We just researched it... because there was so much you could have done we couldn't make decisions for a while'.

Practical issues also needed addressing – risk assessments needed completion for all locations, transport needed to be found. Here the school was able to draw on support from their existing sponsor (for the academy) Manchester Airport, who provided buses for the day.

They said we can't give you money but we will try and facilitate you in any way we can and one of the biggest costs we have at the school is coaches so they have saved us thousands upon thousands this year. So they gave us a bus and a coach – an actual bus which made the journey so much better. The kids were, I'm on me own bus! It was fantastic. So, yes, we got all the kids on and off we went. [...] had arranged guided tours with the Manchester guides around six key areas in Manchester which was regeneration, green Manchester, canals, crime and punishment, music.

The schools' existing sponsor, Willow Park Housing Association, provided a further £4k funding, which allowed the school to buy in the external artists for the master classes and cover access to some of the venues on the visit.

Finally, however, the team felt confident that they could both justify the events and brief the rest of the staff on their roles:

We'd had so much planning and so much discussion and we had the logistics nailed like this. That was what gave us confidence. (Teacher B)

Despite this planning, however, the teachers on the day were still responsible for crisis management:

We'd booked lunches with MOSI and we'd walked these kids around for an hour and a half. They were absolutely famished and dehydrated and they got this little drink carton and a sandwich that big and some dried fruit... so we were just, we've got to feed these kids! We've still got this afternoon and [Teacher E] went and got Greggs for the whole Year 7. (Teacher C)

Setting up this sort of event, in a high stakes, risk averse environment, with conflicting educational philosophies, with few, if any, pre-existing links to the city and limited support to build new links, with staff resources already stretched to capacity and almost no budget, is a major achievement.

What came out of the project?

School Culture and Working Practices

The primary outcome from the project, according to those interviewed, has been the contribution it has made to teacher professional development, primarily in terms of allowing teachers with limited experience of competency based approaches and ideas to explore these and

develop their understanding. The following long quotation is worth presenting here in full as it provides a detailed insight into the complexities involved in negotiating subject based and competency approaches, and gives insights into the way that these ideas will be taken on and developed further in the next academic year both by this teacher and by the teachers she is responsible for:

It has made me have more of an open mind about things. I am very protective over my department and discipline. I'm not really – well, I was – I was very stringent over we can't lose drama; we can't lose performing arts and I knew all of these measures and I know it's not just in this school, that education's changing, and I was very much, where is my department going to go? What kind of teacher will I be? And I'd always wanted to be involved in competencies but I didn't want it to be at the expense of the department but then, when I saw how it could be facilitated, because I hadn't had that opportunity, and I think it would be the same with many staff, getting to see how you could do master classes and include your discipline, or teaching through your discipline, or even it's interesting just to see what other people do.

[...]because I know it is very difficult to think you're losing everything that you've – not only what you've trained for as a teacher but then everything that you've trained for when you're doing your department, your schemes of work, and everything, and you're looking at letting go of everything and you have to be very, I'm going to freefall and see where we can go with it and looking at how you can work with all the other disciplines and, at first, it seemed like – it think it seems too difficult or you think that it would be unreachable but, as soon as you start talking with other people, within different disciplines who are creative, or who want to express their disciplines or the subjects of their work, then it becomes creative and you feel just as creative as you would do in your own subject and you're suddenly aware of different projects you'd like to be doing rather than just thinking of, for example, we're used to doing bullying and all of the subjects that we might do within PSHE – drugs, truancy – but suddenly I'm looking now next year at doing things like the natural world through drama and music and art and dance, combining those skills together, and I am one to admit that I was stickler for it at the beginning.

The whole experience of seeing kids coming off that day buzzing about the experience or running back to tell the other kids what they've just done, I think the students had that buzz and the teachers then had that buzz. We were all sat there as a group. I felt more of a group that day than I have done. A lot of the time when you're talking to your department because you are so isolated, a lot of the time you don't have time to always come together and talk about your experience of the day, in a positive manner, about the lesson you've just had, or something that you've just done, or the kids. You're too busy running around. You don't have time to stop and think. But to be sitting there and thinking and reflecting with all these other teachers, I think that we did grow a lot from it. [...] I loved it. I liked that you all had little roles to play and you were seeing a bigger picture, that they all sort of came together and reflected on everything. (Teacher G)

This teacher, who had been involved in the planning of the curriculum, had been given an opportunity to reflect upon and challenge her educational philosophy and to work with others to explore and model new approaches. This opportunity, as with many other similar curriculum

design projects, enabled the teachers to articulate their vision for education. As another teacher put it:

Competency approaches give teachers a justification to have a say, enables them to be involved in discussions, it's given us a voice as well so that you talk about student voice; there is a teacher voice now. (Teacher E)

Such a shift in perspectives was, as another teacher put it, a sustainable long-term impact from the programme:

Teacher B - I think we've changed the minds of some of the staff.

Teacher E - And I think that's had a big impact. I think it really, really has.

Teacher B – Through discussion and debate and through all the rest of it and I think that's probably more crucial than anything, regardless of what the 7's have got out of it, because that's more sustainable. They'll take it away.

And indeed, the curriculum designs in the school for the following year from teachers previously uninvolved in competency work, would suggest that teachers were both incorporating competencies within different subject areas and following a mix of event based, project based and master class activities that owed a significant debt to the Manchester Curriculum. Such an approach is down to a changed relationship between teacher and curriculum, and teacher and colleagues best described by one teacher as, 'You felt worthwhile within it'. (Teacher G)

Staff Student Relationships

Such a change in perspective on both curriculum and pedagogy was also seen to have resulted from the changed staff-student relationships that the programme was felt to have engendered.

Yes, You can see the pictures there, just the closeness really, and the friendship that develops between the staff and students when they're outside and I think, also just giving them confidence that they can be in a city, and they can feel comfortable in that city, and that strong message that you heard today that it's your Manchester, it's your city, be proud of it, be part of it (Teacher D)

We took a group out, a large group, who staff wouldn't have taken so we've given those kids an opportunity in school where staff will think, actually, I can take that group out; I can do something with them because it's been shown you can. (Teacher E)

Even for those teachers who had previously been involved in competency work, this was seen as significant progress in enabling students to take responsibility for themselves and their learning:

I think we've made a step. It's a bigger step than we've ever had [towards engaging learners and learners having a say in how they learn]. (Teacher E)

Building Relationships with External partners

Another important contribution that the project was seen to have made in the school, was in opening up the school to greater links with external parties in a way that had previously been unknown in the school:

I've been in the school five years. This is the first time I've known students to have access to these master classes and we've got four artists in the school today. We've got a poet, a graffiti artist, a sculptor and a musician, so that alone I think is an excellent way forward for us [...] I went to the poetry one and intended to visit several but the poetry one was so exciting I just stayed there! It was just how great, how they managed to do. (Teacher D)

The involvement of the external partners also made visible new pedagogies and different ways of designing other areas of school activity and opening up the possibility of involving external partners in curriculum design:

Both days were seen by [...] who hadn't been involved in any of the planning. He was just 'wow! wow!' this is fantastic, what a fantastic two days and it made him think about the transition time that we use when year 6 come up and how that's delivered, so it will have knock on effects because of the people that came and were involved on those days. (Teacher C)

'I mean, one of the key things about that Wednesday was on the lunchtime when you had people who'd never met before sitting in the staff room, discussing Manchester, discussing what they'd seen... and there was a conversation going and we were listening to the conversation and it was fantastic, the enthusiasm, what we're doing, and then they would say, well, we could do this, this afternoon, and you could do that – that would have been great at the beginning'. (Teacher E)

Importantly, this creation of external links was not attributed specifically to support from Manchester City Council or the RSA, but was attributed to the project actively encouraging and giving permission for these relationships. In some ways the idea of the 'Manchester Curriculum' created a new notion of a school as connected with a wider environment, an expectation that the school then had to attempt to meet:

I suppose the only real different thing was the staff had a frame of mind that they had to make links with other people, whereas, in the competency, it was always a desire to make links with other people but you didn't have to do it and so it was probably easier not to do it, whereas, because there was a message that part of this project was about making these links, I think people went out there and did it. (Teacher F)

Now that such links have been made, there is a commitment to building upon these, developing and sustaining them:

I think those links with these people that came in to do the workshops is going to be the big sustainable part of the project. That's the bit that, hopefully, will be able to continue and grow and develop. (Teacher F)

We could take that trip out every year, and we could get those artists in constantly, and we could change artists each year. (Teacher C)

Student Aspirations, Engagement and Confidence

Assessing the impact of the Manchester Curriculum on student outcomes and dispositions is impossible as no formal evaluation was set up at the outset of the programme. While the

Parklands team did discuss, in the earliest stages, the question of how they might assess student learning, the complexity of the programme and the deadlines they were working towards, necessitated a move away from such issues. Moreover, disentangling the 'impact' of one unit of work within a much wider competency programme is likely to be fraught with difficulties. As such, the following tentative suggestions are offered as a basis for further exploration in subsequent initiatives rather than as definitive evidence of 'impact'.

Many of the staff suggested that the distinctively 'Manchester' element of the unit was secondary to the wider competency programme:

Teacher C - I think they enjoyed going out into Manchester and experiencing Manchester hands-on. I don't know whether the scheme of work has had any more of an impact than any of the other projects that we deliver within the competency.

Teacher B - It's just a nice hook to put it onto.

Teacher C - We've enjoyed having more funding to be able to do more creative workshops, or have a different approach into the way that we deliver it, but in regards to what the kids gain from it, they've done just as well in other projects; there's just as much enjoyment, just as much understanding, just as much development of skills.

The visit to Manchester, however, was seen to make a distinctive contribution in raising expectations and confidence of students, particularly of disengaged or disadvantaged students:

But it's also the thing about those students having that experience and thinking, actually, I can – it sounds silly but a lot of kids don't go out because they're punished; you can't go on that trip because you were naughty...at least it's given them the opportunity to say I can go out; I can be responsible; I can be trusted and that is a step for them. (Teacher E)

Confidence, you know, being confident – and that's across the whole group. (Teacher A)

The visit was also felt to have engendered significant student engagement which, given that disengagement was seen as a particular problem for the school, is a non-trivial result:

You can see that. While they were watching those slide shows they sat quietly. They were engaged entirely by watching what they'd done. You could see how much they'd sort of valued that just from their reactions in the hall today. (Teacher F)

While the project itself had focused upon the development of a set of key skills and competencies, a number of teachers observed a wide range of unexpected developments in understanding by students:

The morning was really focused, the afternoon was a bit more 'floozy' and it turns out, when we came back into school, that they learned more in the afternoon from their own experiences and

their own observations from the buildings they remember looking at, linked in with bits of chunks of information from the morning. They had the more academic ones in the morning, and the more kinesthetic, practical, getting going with it ones remember things they saw on the journey, like ‘that place, Miss, near that big Spinningfields thing where you got me the Calippo’ and its what they associate their memory with and, you know, when you say ‘what did you enjoy most, what did you learn the most?’ the things they come back with weren’t always factual information. There was quite a big mix – there were some kids that went ‘I learnt that even though I’m afraid of heights I can try, and if I’m with someone who is encouraging me, I’ll get up and I’ll do it and I’m proud that I did’ Very acute, very reflective, very skills-based. There were some that were like giving me the history of the ship canal and remembering the name of the Duke of Bridgewater, so you had a real mix. It was purposeful for all of them. (Teacher C)

And the experience that they had there, talking about what they saw when they first got off the coach, and some of the children’s memories of things, with the smells that they could smell, because they went into the museum where they saw all the old sewers, and they described things that, if you just asked them to write a report about, they wouldn’t be able to describe in such a vivid way and they wrote it as a whole group. (Teacher G)

Student Encounters with Difference and Diversity

The major outcome of the project, according to teachers, was in students raised awareness of and pride in the environment in which they lived, and of their sense of its diversity. The following teachers account describes the sort of impact the project was seen to have:

They’re not used to seeing lots of different people, from different styles walking down the street, their hair in dreadlocks that are purpose, or different styles of clothing, because it isn’t necessarily accepted here or seen here. It’s not multicultural – it’s growing – but it’s not a multicultural town at the moment. So to go in there and see so many different ethnicities or different cultures that are going on – seeing African dancing in Piccadilly Gardens. I think that’s really important to them and to be aware it’s only down the road for them really and the fact that some of them have never been there before, and if we don’t take them, or we don’t make them aware of it, what is there for them to want to go? I think it is quite important that they got to see it and then they got to celebrate it because I think a lot of the thing is there’s so much negative advertisement of things that are to do with Wythenshawe is that kids don’t necessarily feel proud of where they’re from. (Teacher G)

What is hard to assess, without talking with the students themselves, is whether this interpretation of impact is an accurate reflection of the implications of the project or an account of the teacher’s aspirations for her students. That this teacher, with her professional experience and initial scepticism, was committed to repeating these experiences in subsequent years, however, suggests a significant benefit to this endeavour.

Next Steps for ‘Undressing Manchester’

Parklands is going through significant change in governance, leadership, curriculum and school ethos at the present time as a new leadership team take over the academy and as the school moves to a new building in 2010. The whole school is involved in a process of curriculum

redesign with a focus on enterprise. The current competency curriculum is being dismantled and competencies are now due to be embedded within clustered subject areas. The staff team responsible for competencies will be reconfigured, although the enthusiasm will remain and the lessons learned from the previous three years work will be embedded in the new arrangements. As such, it is hard to talk specifically about next steps for 'Undressing Manchester' as the conditions within which it was designed have changed. What is clear, however, is that the staff have decided to take elements of the project and make them work within the new contexts of the academy:

'It is very like how we did it for this project [...] They went on the day and then they had the master classes and then they carried on working on it to fulfill that within, however they wanted to. So they'll be working on a project but have the chance to do master classes. A bit like, I guess as well, when you're at college and university and you start being able to make those choices early on. So we're informing them of those decisions straightaway and they're having the chance to see lots of different disciplines, both collaboratively and independently, hopefully they'll be able to develop as a learner, develop as a person to be able to make those choices. (Teacher G)

Throughout the interviews, however, a number of suggestions for further development of the ideas have been put forward and these are described here as a basis for further exploration both by the teachers involved and by other schools interested in the same approaches.

One area that the staff identified as needing further work was in following-up the high profile, high-energy, high-resource events of the trip and the Master Classes. Both the core team and others suggested that insufficient attention was paid to designing the subsequent student projects and to ensuring that links were made with the wider curriculum experiences in the school:

It's that follow up that doesn't happen. It just doesn't happen because you come back to school and they go back to maths, PE and history and sit there and nobody in the classroom makes any reference to it. It would be nice to think that maybe people plan their curriculum so that, after the trip to Manchester, every subject is doing something Manchester-based so you can do the history and the geography, just to do a bit of follow-up. (Teacher A)

I would have tweaked it by planning in the follow up more effectively and made it a mini project of our project and what I have is quite a good few lesson plans where you have to put a project proposal together and outline the outcomes of what you want to achieve. That actually staging it in that way and its very sort of skills and enterprise based. (Teacher C)

I think that, on reflection, we needed to tighten up the follow up afterwards, I think. That wasn't tight enough and I think, when we've talked about it before, maybe we ought to have been brave enough and gone for a whole day follow up rather than try and do it in lesson time because it loses its thread and it lost its momentum almost. (Teacher B)

Now that teachers have developed the confidence to run the highly risky and ground-breaking events for their school, these subsequent stages are likely to be the focus for further work and development. Such activities, however, require support not only within the school but externally from research communities and from other schools who are similarly wrestling with the complex

challenge of how to manage learner-driven inquiry activities, and the equally thorny issue of how that can be meaningfully assessed by students and teachers.

Another area for further development is the role of the students themselves in the design of the learning process. The project gave teachers greater confidence in their students' ability to take responsibility for their learning. It also made visible to teachers some of the gaps between their understanding of Manchester and that of their students. As a result some of the teachers were interested in exploring the possibility of enhancing students' involvement in the design of their educational experience. First, they wanted to give students more choice about their learning opportunities:

They have to be really part of it and we sort of had this idea that we were going to put these workshops on, a whole variety of workshops and kids could decide which ones they wanted to go to but we thought that was maybe a step too far so we put them in them. We made the group. (Teacher B)

Student voice is good but we've sort of done it in reverse. We planned it and we sort of give them a student voice of how they present so the ideal for us would be for them to decide on how they want to present it but also plan and decide what they're going to be taught and I think that's the next step for us... (Teacher E)

One of the teachers also wanted to involve students in the design of the whole programme:

That would have been a fantastic start [having a planning group of the students and whoever is delivering the programme] and that's something we've learned, I think, in the sense that next time we'd start the other way round, get the people on board and then see where we get'. (Teacher E)

This potential openness to student participation in the planning of educational experiences was also extended to an awareness that, rather than simply acting as an object of study, Manchester (or the people within it) might be able to play a role in helping to shape curriculum:

'Get a group of students, some community partners, and staff, and let's shape the curriculum between us. I mean that would be a pretty powerful looking group. (Teacher F)

Involvement of the wider community also extended to parental involvement, with several teachers suggesting that efforts should be made to include parents in the programme.

It would be great to think you could get a next step which is kids inviting their parents to a day in Manchester. They show them round and all those things but it's the time and curriculum because I think that's one thing that wasn't done, follow up with parents. They would say they enjoyed the day out but the reason the kids don't know about history and music and arts in Manchester is because their parents don't take them. (Teacher A)

The project, then, has stimulated debate within the school about its relationships with its community, with parents, and with students and has generated sufficient enthusiasm and engagement amongst teachers and students to ensure that these areas will continue to be explored within the new academy framework.