

THINKING ABOUT AN AREA BASED CURRICULUM

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

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RSA
Action and Research Centre

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RSA Area Based Curriculum

This report forms part of a collection of publications on the Area Based Curriculum and offers an overview of the work. See page 6 for a Reports and Publications diagram which presents an interactive map of all the publications in the collection.



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Foreword

This report, written by the RSA's Louise Thomas, summarises findings from the RSA's three year Area Based Curriculum project in Peterborough. Together with its suite of additional resources, including case studies and evaluation reports, it aims to provide an honest, practical and reflective analysis of the project's findings, and its potential implications for policy and practice.

Instead of asking 'what should the curriculum include', our starting question should always be 'who should determine what the curriculum includes'?

The curriculum has always been a political animal. As a nation, and as institutions and individuals, it defines our values and clarifies our hopes for future generations. Any attempt to try and 'depoliticise' the curriculum is neither desirable nor realistic. Indeed, most debates about the curriculum start from the wrong place. Instead of asking 'what should the curriculum include', our starting question should always be 'who should determine what the curriculum includes'? Such a question enables curriculum development to play a significant role in building and reshaping civil society. As Andreas Schleicher from the OECD has argued, curriculum design should be seen as a 'grand social project'. This links to the RSA's own values and expertise around social productivity as the best means to improve public services, and expanding human capability as the ultimate goal of society.

Throughout its 260 year history the RSA has built and sustained interest in school curriculum issues. Building on this reputation, as well as our learning from the Area Based Curriculum and our Opening Minds framework, we will continue to contribute in four specific ways:

First, we will continue to work in Peterborough through the Peterborough Learning Partnership, and find ways to transfer our learning to other areas interested in developing local curricula.

Second, in partnership with the Institute of Education and the Curriculum Foundation, we are developing a pioneering professional development programme for teachers and other educators. *Grand Curriculum Designs* will foster a new generation of skilled and sensitive curriculum designers.

Third, we will continue to foster curriculum innovation in our growing family of academies.

Finally, we will continue to offer the RSA's House and online platforms as spaces for purposeful, evidence-based debates about the curriculum to take place.

We are currently developing a new programme that aims to turn the RSA into a world leading education think and act tank, connecting even better with the RSA's Fellows and other areas of expertise. Although we already have a strong suite of possible projects, we are always looking out for new possibilities and partnerships to take these and other ideas forward. Whether you are inspired, perplexed or irritated by this report please get in touch if you feel that you might be able to work with us to support our mission – to realise the potential of all learners and ensure that all children and young people thrive, as children and as adults.

Joe Hallgarten, Director of Education

Introduction

“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 (2009, p.2)

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 Report 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 (2009, p.2)

The RSA Area Based Curriculum proposes a way forward for schools to develop a ‘school curriculum’ in partnership with their communities

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.

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

Its objectives are to:

- Create learning experiences that are engaging for children from all backgrounds
- Increase children’s understanding of and attachment to the place where they live
- Embed schools more deeply within their communities and localities

Based on four years of research and development of this idea with schools and communities in Manchester and Peterborough, this document highlights:

- the **key questions** schools and those working with them should ask when thinking about developing a curriculum that is based on the locality, and a **model for thinking about Area Based Curriculum** ideas
- the **lessons we have learned** about getting Area Based Curriculum projects off the ground and ensuring that they make a difference to learning
- a **model for partnership working and a suggested process** for anyone looking to develop an Area Based Curriculum

This document provides an overview of our research and links to all the relevant papers we have published during our exploration of this idea.

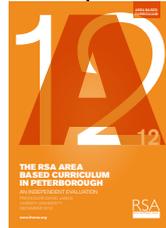
Reports and Publications diagram



Thinking about an Area Based Curriculum: A Guide for Practitioners



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



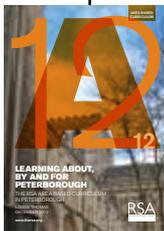
The RSA Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough: an Independent Evaluation



Engaging the Local: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



Towards an Area Based Curriculum: a Literature Review



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



Lessons for Localism: the RSA Area Based Curriculum



Project Tools



Manchester Curriculum: a Report and Reflections for Further Development



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



Peterborough Curriculum Case Study: Dogsthorpe Junior School and Railworld



Peterborough Curriculum Case Study: Bishop Creighton Academy and Peterborough Cathedral



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: Whalley Range School



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: Parklands School



Manchester Curriculum Case Study: North Manchester High School for Boys

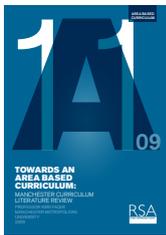
Existing and linked ideas

The idea and practice of schools engaging with other organisations locally is nothing new. Links between schools and local businesses in particular have a long history due to requirements for work experience, the development of the 14–19 Diplomas, Education Business Partnerships and a plethora of other policies and schemes. The [Education and Employers Task Force](#) has a wealth of research and links to projects and schemes in this area.

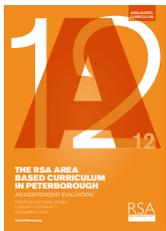
Similarly, schools have always used the local area as a classroom resource. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom provides a repository of resources and research about the benefits of learning outside of school. [Learning Futures](#), by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Innovation Unit contains within its model of an engaging school a concept of the ‘school as base camp’ which involves the repositioning of the school as just one arena for learning. The [Engaging Places](#) programme (by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, now hosted by Open City) also sought to highlight the potential of using visits outside of school to support curriculum learning, and local initiatives such as a [Sense of Place](#) in Cornwall as well as the locally focussed [Heritage Schools](#) pilot being run by English Heritage seek to build on these ideas.

Democratic or Community-oriented education is also a well-established idea, particularly in the United States. Fielding and Moss’s (2011) notion of radical education and the common school, or Coffield and Williamson’s (2011) idea of ‘communities of discovery’ are more recent examples from the UK. The RSA Area Based Curriculum draws on the learning from these thinkers, and a comprehensive review of the literature by Professor Keri Facer can be found on the [RSA website](#).

Professor David James’s evaluation of the Peterborough Curriculum includes a more detailed analysis of how the Area Based Curriculum fits within this field of thinking (James, 2012).



Towards an Area Based Curriculum: a Literature Review



The Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough: An Independent Evaluation

Key questions to ask

People everywhere seem to agree that schools should be making better use of the places and the people in the local area where they are situated. And as we have already argued, schools are increasingly expected to develop a school curriculum which complements and supports the core entitlement of the National Curriculum.

However, *what* people mean by ‘the locality’ or ‘the area’ varies enormously: as do the reasons *why* people feel schools should be using it more. And the extent to which the school curriculum is in fact open to serious re-development by schools is also a matter of debate.

Why does this matter? Because what schools might do with their local area or community depends on why they think it is important to do so, and how far they are prepared to rethink their curriculum along local lines. And who schools choose to involve is also crucial to the nature and impact of any Area Based Curriculum which is developed.

Here we pose three key questions to anyone interested in embarking on an Area Based Curriculum:

- Why is the local area important to your school curriculum?
- What, and who, ‘counts’ as local?
- How open to change is your school curriculum?

Why is the local area important to your curriculum?

There are many reasons why people feel it important that schools take account of the local area in their curriculum development. Although any one school or other partners with whom we have worked would say that they would agree with many if not most of the reasons below, different people place emphasis on different kinds of reasons.

All of these reasons fall into one of three groups:

- **Recognition:** schools need to **recognise** the local context
- **Rights:** Localities have a democratic **right** to influence curriculum design and content
- **Resource:** the local context is a **resource** to improve learning

Recognition

The ‘local’ is important because of the importance of students knowing about where they live:

“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



The RSA Area Based Curriculum: Engaging the local

much deeper understanding about where we come from and where they come from ... and that's been really, really useful."

Teacher, partner primary school

- Students should be well informed about their locality as an entitlement which is not always provided by families
- Students should be supported to develop a sense of belonging and identity in relation to the place where they grow up
- Students should understand more about local opportunities for employment and future life because their 'imagined future self' depends in part on what they perceive to be available locally
- Communities and families *by definition* have important knowledge and cultures that the school curriculum should recognise and value

Rights

The 'local' is important because the school should be responsive to local context and need:

"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."

Teacher, partner primary school

Schools need to promote cultures of learning in their local areas – to support student learning in school, and lifelong, lifewide learning for the whole community

- Schools are important democratic spaces in local areas where conversations about educational purpose should be encouraged
- The school curriculum could be a resource for a community to effect social change
- Schools need to promote cultures of learning in their local areas – to support student learning in school, and lifelong, lifewide learning for the whole community
- Schools will be more resilient institutions if they share a common purpose with the communities they serve

Resource

The 'local' is important because the locality is an important or convenient resource for curriculum and learning ...

"But, there was maths down there, there was literacy down there, there was science down there, certainly.... There was all sorts of things that we could have done down one path. So my outlook on what you can do when you get to places is very different."

Teacher, partner primary school

"If you happen to have a fantastic link in Birmingham that still helps students make some sense of how their curriculum is real life connected I'd be really happy with that to be frank. It's just that if you have it on your doorstep that's even better."

Teacher, partner secondary school

- Local sites and local context can be used to enhance National

Curriculum content and make it tangible

- The locality can provide a sustainable and accessible context for ‘real world learning’
- The locality is not necessarily important in itself, but is by definition easier and cheaper to access than other places, and there are sufficient opportunities for learning locally
- Local organisations and employers can provide experience and familiarity with the world of work to young people
- Communities and families have useful knowledge and cultures that the school curriculum could use to support learning

These are just some of the motivations that have come from our work directly with schools, and from conversations with experts and practitioners over a number of years. There are many others, and most people will believe that more than one is important. Indeed, Nancy Fraser’s definition of social justice requires redistribution, recognition and participation (Fraser, 1996). The Area Based Curriculum promotes redistribution (of educational opportunity) through the use of local resources to enhance learning; recognition (of diverse cultures and communities) by the school curriculum; and participation (by parents or other under-represented communities) in the development of curriculum.

These three elements are not always mutually reinforcing, however, as attempts to redistribute opportunity through the engagement of high status local resources may serve to further prevent the participation or recognition of groups or resources with lower status locally.¹

It is therefore critical that schools and other partners share, debate and discuss with staff the reasons *why* they feel it would be valuable to engage in an Area Based Curriculum: not least because *who* they engage with depends heavily on the answer.

What, and who, ‘counts’ as ‘local’?

“Critical to the idea of an ‘area-based’ curriculum, is the question of what counts as ‘the area’; what counts as the ‘cities, communities and cultures’ upon which educators might draw?”

Facer (2009, p.4)

The question of who or what ‘counts’ in the locality is strongly linked to the question of whether the locality is to be a *resource* for a school curriculum, something that should be *recognised* through the school curriculum, or something that has the *right* to be involved.

Why is it important to tackle this question of who gets involved? Firstly, by involving the locality in the curriculum we are telling a story – whether we intend to or not – about what, and who, is important and ‘legitimate’ in the local area. Keri Facer highlights in *Towards an Area Based Curriculum* the importance of this power to tell stories.

1. See Facer and Thomas, ‘Towards an Area Based Curriculum? Creating space for the city in schools’, *International Journal of Educational Research*, July 2012.



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



Towards an Area Based Curriculum: a Literature Review



Lessons for Localism: the RSA Area Based Curriculum

“A curriculum that tells tales of its local communities, then, is not a neutral representation of that environment, but has the capacity to shape, influence and reshape those communities in turn. Who gets to tell the stories about the community, and the types of stories that are told are therefore fundamentally political questions that cannot assume the rights of one group to name and represent the area for all other groups.”

Facer (2009, p.5)

The tendency, of course, is to start with the curriculum (as already defined or imagined by the school), and then look out to the local area to see where links might be made: and schools naturally tend to turn towards organisations they can see would be valuable. However, this can lead to a limited role for the locality in shaping the curriculum, and means not only that who and what ‘counts’ is pre-determined by the teacher or the school, but that the locality is immediately reduced to a resource for learning, rather than something to be recognised in its own right.

Schools are encouraged to look beyond the obvious links with curriculum areas, and instead start with the realities of the communities and locality in question

The RSA Area Based Curriculum attempts to take a different approach, in which schools are encouraged to look beyond the obvious links with curriculum areas, and instead start with the realities of the communities and locality in question.

In order to diversify the kinds of partners that schools engage with, we make a call in our concept note for “The starting point for community engagement being those groups least often engaged or heard in the formal education sector”. The RSA also used a mapping exercise with schools and students to identify resources in the immediate community of the school that might otherwise have been overlooked.

However, as we report at greater length in *Re-thinking the Importance of Teaching* teachers and schools “find it challenging to conceive of parents from more disadvantaged groups as partners”. (Thomas 2012, p. 12)

“Would be great to get the parents involved ... will be very difficult with the students we’ve got...”

Teacher, primary partner school

Locations for learning in the immediate environs of the school can similarly be overlooked in favour of high status institutions.

Key questions and exercises

- Are you seeking to recognise the realities of their locality through the curriculum?
- Do you want to work only with the resources which fit what you already think is important?
- In two groups, or in pairs:
 - Group 1: write down the nature of the communities served by your school. Think about faith backgrounds, parental occupations, languages spoken, countries of origin, type of housing and anything else you know.
 - Group 2: write down everything you think could be an important resource for curriculum development locally.
- How do the two lists compare? What does this tell you about who and where 'counts' as a resource locally?
- What are the barriers to involvement for various potential partners?

How open is your curriculum to change?

“It is far from clear whether such a reintroduction [of local knowledge] will encompass a profound challenge to other forms of knowledge or simply the addition of new material and insight to the curriculum.”

Facer (2009, p.3)

While schools might be promised more and more freedom in determining their own school curriculum, we have found that the idea of “The Curriculum” as a fixed entity that ‘exists out there’ is a powerful feature in the imagination of teachers and schools both at primary and secondary level.

When thinking about an Area Based Curriculum it is therefore crucial that schools and others consider how far they are willing to open up the school curriculum to change – to redesign by the school.

As Brian Male and Mick Waters explain:

“Curriculum design is about more than listing all the things we want students to learn; it is also about designing the experiences that students need in order to learn those things. It is about ensuring that those experiences are effective and compelling in themselves, and also that the sum total of those experiences add up to a coherent and worthwhile programme that will bring about the ends that we seek.”

Male and Waters (2012, p.9)

This is distinct from a process of curriculum planning which largely involves the arrangement of pre-determined content into specific timed slots.

We have found that primary schools consider the curriculum to be *permeable* in the sense that it can be reorganised and integrated with local examples and projects; but it tends to remain *uncontested* in the sense of schools feeling able to replace or challenge aspects of traditional ‘school knowledge’. The process of planning with local partners was often one of finding ways in which those partners could enhance the learning of



The Area Based Curriculum in Peterborough: An Independent Evaluation

already established curriculum content.

At secondary level the curriculum can remain *impermeable* to influences which involve external partners or local examples and opportunities for enhancement. This is potentially due to the frame with which schools and teachers approach ‘visits’ or anything to do with the locality or the world outside school as necessarily additional to, separate from – and at times in conflict with – classroom based learning.

“There is still a significant proportion of staff who are still so locked into the narrow sense of what learning’s about within their subject compartment.”

Deputy Headteacher, partner secondary school

If the school curriculum is neither permeable nor contestable, then any attempt to produce an Area Based Curriculum is unlikely to have more than a marginal impact. However, if a school is willing to take seriously the idea of the school curriculum as something that should recognise and reflect the concerns and contributions of the locality it serves, then it needs to think carefully about whether this is in reality shared by staff, or made possible by the culture of learning in the school. The independent evaluation of the Area Based Curriculum (James, 2012), argued that:

“The more mixed results in Secondary schools arose from a combination of factors, including learning cultures with a strong ‘performative’ orientation that positions subject teaching as insulated from (and superior to) other conceptions of educative purpose and which foster reluctance to depart from established practices”.

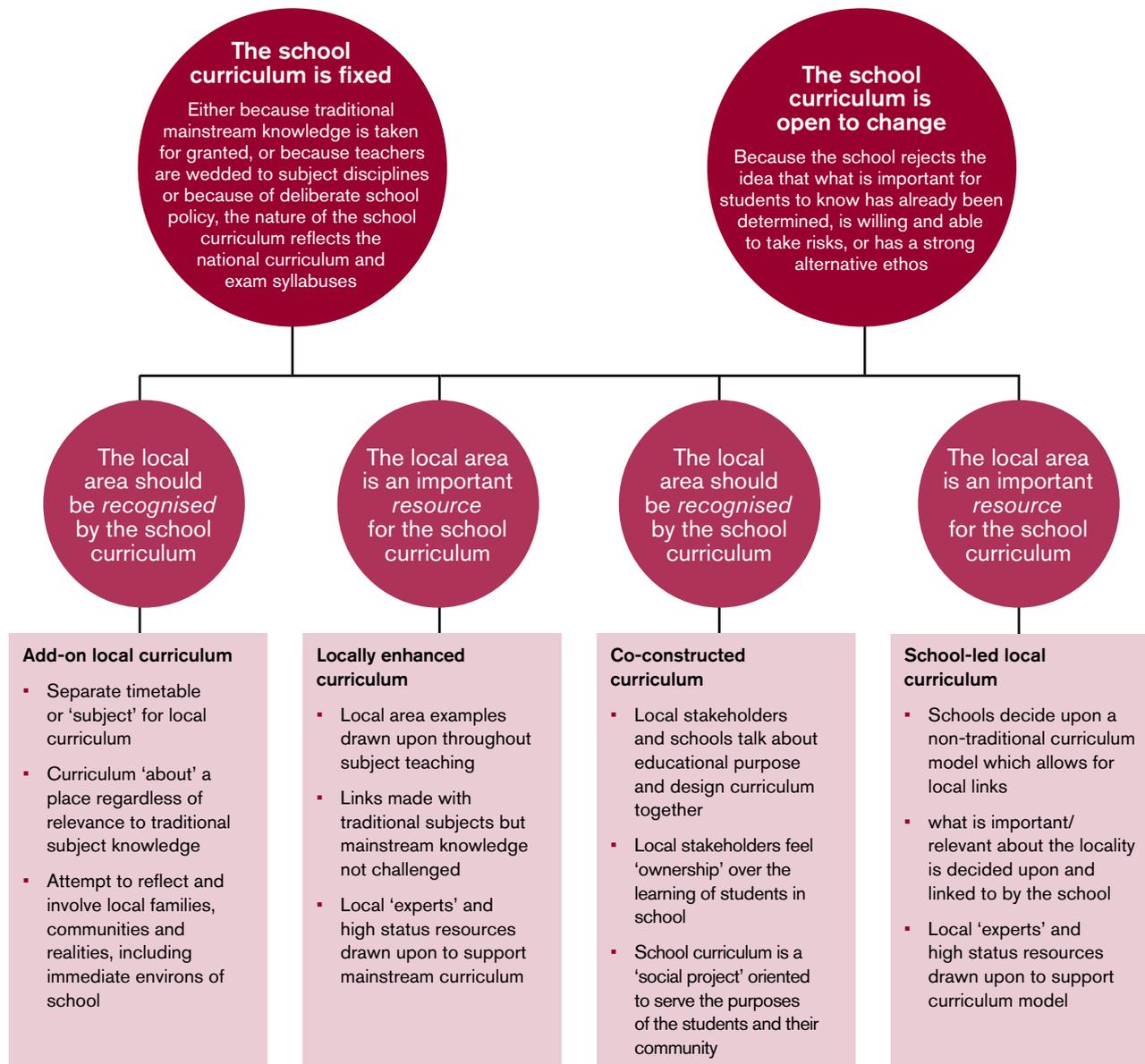
An honest appraisal of the extent to which a school curriculum is *open to change*, and an analysis of a school’s existing *capacity* to shape its own curriculum, is therefore critical before embarking on the development of an Area Based Curriculum.

An honest appraisal of the extent to which a school curriculum is open to change, and an analysis of a school’s existing capacity to shape its own curriculum, is... critical

A model for thinking about an Area Based Curriculum

We have developed the following model, based on the above key questions, to help schools and those seeking to work with them to think through their own motivations and aims in developing a local curriculum.

The four 'ideal types' of Area Based Curriculum presented below are not mutually exclusive, and do not describe observed reality. Rather we hope they are useful tools to help draw out the implications of different ways of thinking about the locality and the curriculum.



Useful exercises

- Place these ideal types of curriculum **in order of priority**, according to what you would like to see in an ideal world.
- Consider **which of these applies to your own answers** to the key questions of how open the curriculum is, and what the locality means to your school.
- If your ideal curriculum is not the same as the one implied by your answers to the key questions, **what might need to change to get there?** Who else agrees, and who do you need to convince?
- To what extent would each of these types be 'about', 'by' or 'for' a place?

Key lessons learned



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

The importance of teachers

“For schools to become truly embedded in, and accountable to, their communities, teachers will need to be skilled in curriculum development, as well as in community engagement.”

Thomas (2012, p.3)

The importance of teachers being open to curriculum design and collaboration as part of their role is explored in depth in *Re-thinking the Importance of Teaching* (Thomas, 2012). The paper highlights two key points:

- that teachers are the best placed people to design curriculum, but they require support to do so

“While many teachers approach the idea of curriculum design with enthusiasm and confidence (especially at primary level), some also betray anxiety as to how to simultaneously ensure that their projects meet the outcomes specified in the National Curriculum and by Ofsted. Established curriculum resources are often seen to be valuable, and their absence can provoke anxiety when considering alternative content and ideas. This raises questions about how teachers see themselves in relation to ‘delivering’ or ‘creating’ curriculum.”

Thomas, 2012

- classroom teachers, and not only school leadership and community managers, need to be driving the engagement with the locality if there is to be an impact on the learning of students

If partnerships with local organisations are to make a genuine contribution to curriculum design then it is teachers that need to engage directly. As described above, the idea of the ‘curriculum’ is one that is difficult to penetrate, and the idea of external input into a school seems to be hermetically sealed off from the business of what goes on in the classroom.

This is exacerbated by non-teaching staff being tasked with managing the partnerships – particularly in secondary schools. Many schools have members of staff with responsibility for outside partnerships and ‘enrichment’ activities. While advantageous in terms of having a contact person who is happy to work with partners and usually does so with great energy, this can also prove to be a barrier to penetrating further into the school.

“Projects either end up with me, or usually, start with me! Everything

comes through me. What we do here is I meet regularly with heads of faculties every term and I say ‘I’ve got x, y and z’, this is what I’ve done the research, there’s loads of projects, and do you want any of these put together to work together.”

Partnerships manager, partner secondary school

“I think there’s a huge challenge and a huge learning curve for teachers, and the more we can expose our teaching staff to external agencies – rather than just one person in school – the better these projects are going to be.”

Community manager, partner secondary school

Several of the teachers we have worked with have moved schools during or since the project, and all have developed new partnerships, maintained partnerships with existing partners, or plan to work with staff in new schools to systematically embed partnership working in the curriculum. This network of teachers reports being empowered by the knowledge that they have relationships with the community partners with whom they have worked, as well as with the other teachers who have been involved in the project.

A key finding from our work is that opportunities to engage with the ‘real world’ on a sustainable basis through partnerships with local organisations had a significant impact on children’s learning

The significance of granting children access to the ‘real world’

A key finding from our work is that opportunities to engage with the ‘real world’ on a sustainable basis through partnerships with local organisations had a significant impact on children’s learning.

Many participants in the programme agreed that this was the most important factor in improving student learning.

“I think a lot of our children needed more ... practical, real reasons for doing what they do ... I think that’s been the real crucial thing about it – is they’ve had real people to speak to, real people to work with, and it’s been based in Peterborough.”

Headteacher, partner primary school

“It’s a real life outcome, so children that didn’t understand percentages last week – because they’ve got a shop opening next week – have made it their business to learn about it ... they are then more engaged and our levels have gone up maths-wise.”

Teacher, partner primary school

For partners, too, the way children responded to being given meaningful learning and activities was surprising.

“One of the biggest surprises was the kid’s understanding and their maturity – I think was quite interesting. They really were grown up and took the lead in some instances ... they acted like ‘I’m here, with a job to do and I’m going to do it as best I can’. And they did it ... if they know it’s something lasting, that there’s a legacy there, then they will. They’ll step up.”

Staff member, partner organisation

The message from practitioners in the Peterborough Curriculum is not to underestimate what children can do if given access to opportunities to interact with and have 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.”

Teacher, partner primary school



The RSA Area Based Curriculum Criteria for projects

The potential of the locality to open up national and global contexts

Any approach to learning that takes the local area as a focus is always going to raise concerns about whether this will be at the expense of national and globally important knowledge and opportunities – and what Michael Young describes as ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2008). The RSA Area Based Curriculum Criteria for projects acknowledged this concern by requiring that all projects relate the local, national and global elements of learning in a way that enabled young people to link their own immediate contexts with broader issues.

Several of the schools involved in the project have a diverse student intake, and many of the students and their families have strong and recent international links. Teachers were aware of the potential of these links for creating local-national-global links in their curriculum.

“I think it’s been actually quite easy. Personally I think 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!”

Deputy head, primary school

“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.”

Headteacher, partner primary school

Teachers have also been very clear that their aim was not to limit children’s learning to a locally relevant context.

“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 – grows from there.”

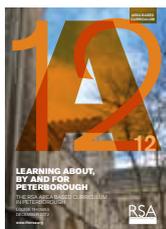
Headteacher, partner primary school

However, it is not only the diverse and mobile communities of Peterborough that mean that focussing on the locality can open up opportunities for understanding nationally and globally. For one school the systematic use of local examples to build children’s comparative and critical skills was an important precursor to a wider understanding of the world.

“It’s the difference between educating for knowledge and ... learning for life so ... being able to use that knowledge. So the skill is, ‘can you compare?’ Well, if you take a city they’ve never been to, no, they can’t compare, but if you take two suburbs of Peterborough, yes they can compare.”

Teacher, partner primary school

Towards an Area Based Curriculum



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

A model for developing school partnerships

“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!”

Teacher, partner primary school

At the core of the Area Based Curriculum approach in Peterborough 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: what in a Creative Partnerships context has been referred to as ‘*a mutual suppression of scepticism in the pursuit of creativity*’ (Hallgarten, 2008). This form of partnership working was intended to provide a range of benefits to students and schools:

- 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

Additionally, this form of partnership indicates the ‘distribution of

By engaging in conversations with external partners, schools were able to place the needs of children in the centre of project design, which simultaneously ensured that school and partner objectives were met

the educational effort beyond schools’ talked about in the early documentation (Facer, 2009a, p.3). A recognition that the education of young people is the concern of people beyond just parents and schools, and the establishment of ‘common cause’ between schools and local communities is critical to making this happen.

Crucially, the Peterborough Curriculum revealed that by engaging in conversations with external partners, schools were able to place the needs of children in the centre of project design, which simultaneously ensured that school and partner objectives were met.

“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.”

Deputy head, partner primary school

“The fact you’re working with a teacher – the children, and then another person, it kind of ... it changes the way you look at – at the learning, so that you don’t become too narrow with your perspective.”

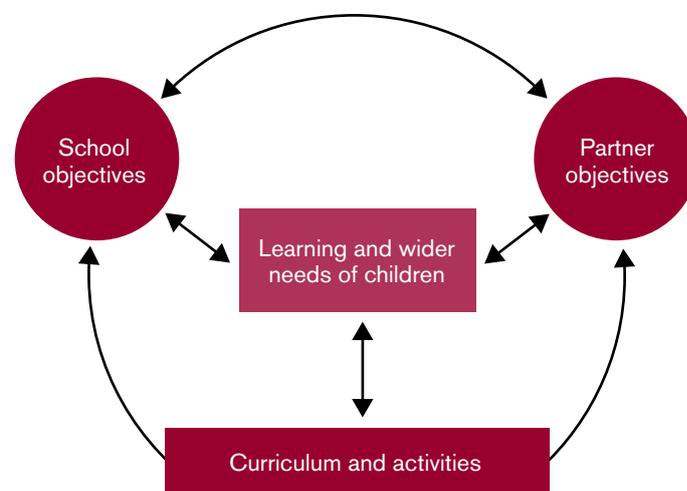
Headteacher, partner primary school

“Because there’s been the pull of the RSA and the pull of the cathedral, and the pull of the children’s learning and what their genuine next steps need to be ... it keeps you focused – it makes you do it!”

Teacher, partner primary school

Below is a suggested model for planning an Area Based Curriculum project in partnership: where partner and school objectives only lead to curriculum and activities via the learning and social needs of the children; but the outcomes of the activities can impact on school and partner objectives directly.

Using this model ensures that the needs of children are always at the centre of every activity, but allows for benefits to accrue to partners and schools as institutions, to support their continued engagement.



A suggested process for developing an Area Based Curriculum project in your school

Reflect

- Ask yourself, or the school(s) with which you are looking to work the three questions identified in this document:
 - Why is the local area important to the school curriculum?
 - How open to change is the school curriculum?
 - What, and who, ‘counts’ as local?
 - Put these questions to staff, partners, and anyone else involved on a regular basis
-

Map

- Take a serious look at what the area immediately around the school consists of, before looking further afield. What businesses, cultures, buildings, parks, streets, challenges and opportunities are there?
 - Map the school’s existing connections to local business, people, places to visit. How might these be used more fully? What kinds of relationships are they?
 - Ask students about their places of birth, family occupations, any international connections
 - Ask students to place ‘emoticons’ on a physical map of the local area, indicating places about which they feel positively and negatively
-

Engage

- Engage early with partners, and begin a conversation about the purpose of education and the needs of the locality
 - Be honest about the aims of everyone involved from the beginning, and address how those aims can be met
-

Scope

- Have a wide-ranging scoping session (see [Scoping Sessions Agenda](#)) that explores opportunities that are beyond the obvious
 - Include as many staff as possible in this process
-

Plan

- Make a concrete plan for a project together with a partner, including dates and objectives for young people
 - Ensure both parties are involved in the drafting and have a copy
-

Commit

- Draw up a partnership agreement which sets out the expectations on both parties (see [Partnership Agreement](#) for a suggested model)

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