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Towards an Area-Based Curriculum? Creating space for the city in schools

Keri Facer (Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol) and Louise Thomas (Royal Society for the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce)

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Contact: Keri Facer
Graduate School of Education
University of Bristol
35 Berkeley Square
Bristol
BS8 1JA
Keri.Facer@bristol.ac.uk

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Introduction

At the heart of many cross-curricular approaches is the attempt to create a more 'relevant' or engaging education for young people through organising curriculum around 'real world' examples and themes. In 2008, the Royal Society for the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA) began working with a small number of schools on practical cross-curricular experiments to develop a local curriculum inspired and resourced by the cities that surround them. The Area Based Curriculum (ABC) project ran first in 3 schools in Manchester from 2008-2009 and then in Peterborough in 5 schools from 2009 to the present. The aim of the two projects was to enhance the educational experience 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"* (RSA, 2009).

Notably, the projects were developed as practical interventions first and subjects for theorisation later. This paper constitutes a retrospective reflection upon the two projects drawing on interviews conducted with participating teachers, school leaders and city partners. It locates these experiments within the wider history of debates on the relationship between schools, subject disciplines and localised approaches to curriculum. It discusses how the broad aspiration to 'mobilise the city' was realised in these projects and the factors that influenced this. The paper concludes by exploring the issues raised for thinking about role of 'localised' rather than subject-oriented curricula in achieving educational and social justice.

The area-based curriculum projects in context

The Manchester and Peterborough Curriculum projects do not enter virgin terrain in attempting to organise curriculum around the themes and resources of the city. Rather, they are the latest contribution to a longstanding debate about the relative merits of organising education around either the 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2007) of 'portable' subject disciplines or the 'useful knowledge' (Midwinter, 1972) of specific local conditions. The Community School approaches of the Education Priority Areas in the 1970s in which 'the area' of the local school was taken as a focus for socially engaged, enquiry based learning would often be seen as the touchstone for these debates in the UK (Thomson & Hall, 2008; Rutter et al, 1979). Egan, however, has persuasively mapped out the much older origins in Plato and Rousseau of the parallel disputes between a curriculum of classical knowledge and a curriculum of 'meaningful' knowledge (Egan, 2009). These arguments are not restricted to the academic arena. Rather, they are urgent questions underpinning contemporary education policy debates, from the UK coalition's English Baccalaureate to the US 'No Child Left Behind' Policy.

One approach to this highly contested territory might be to understand these competing views of curriculum as reflecting competing views about what constitutes educational and social justice. To this end, Nancy Fraser's conception of social justice is a helpful guide. Fraser argues that social justice might be understood to comprise both redistribution and recognition. A politics of redistribution seeks to guarantee fairer access to social goods. A politics of recognition seeks to ensure a more plural society in which the all individuals are valued irrespective of their diverse identities (Fraser, 1999a)[i].

Drawing on Fraser, we might understand calls for a national entitlement to socially valued knowledge as being underpinned by a *redistributive* notion of educational justice. From this perspective, education's purpose is to create more equal access to the highly valued educational goods defined by either universities or employers and codified in subject disciplines. The task of education is therefore to ensure that such knowledge is acquired by greater numbers of young people. This argument motivates some of the trenchant critiques of 1970s 'localised' curriculum projects (e.g. Rutter et al 1979; Halsey & Sylva, 1987). More recently, Young (2007) has argued that attempts to localise curricula through blurring boundaries with the 'real world' do not provide the basis for the sequential encounter with disciplinary knowledge needed to ensure successful participation in elite scientific knowledge communities.

In contrast, a notion of educational justice as concerned with *recognition* makes the case that valuable knowledge takes many forms and that assumptions about what constitutes powerful or desirable educational knowledge should be up for debate. This is premised upon the analysis that, as Apple (1992)

argues, '*what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups*' (1992:4). This perspective therefore seeks to create a more plural educational experience and a society in which diverse sources of knowledge, diverse identities and diverse experiences might be valued. This argument for recognition underpins calls for curriculum to build upon young people's gendered, classed, geographical and cultural lives outside the school in the classroom. It is found in the growth of feminist and indigenous curriculum projects (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Brown 2008; Riley, 2008); in the attempt to draw on migrant families' 'funds of knowledge' (Moll & Gonzales, 1992/1997); and in new literacy projects drawing on children's popular and digital cultures (Mahiri, 2011; Haas-Dyson, 2010; Buckingham, 2003).

The RSA's Area-based curriculum projects might be assumed, given their commitment to localising the curriculum, to fall into the latter 'camp' in this debate and to be concerned with an educational politics of recognition. What we want to do in this paper, however, is to explore whether these 'area-based' projects can be automatically assumed to draw on this legacy, or whether there are new balances being struck by educators between redistribution and recognition in the recruitment of 'the city' as a resource for education.

In so doing, the paper makes the assumption that the process of designing a curriculum that uses 'the city' as an organising theme is not a neutral process. To 'localise' a curriculum does not mean that a teacher simply needs to open the door of the school to allow a commonly agreed idea of the city to flood in. Instead, as with any other area of curriculum design, the process of making visible 'the city' in the curriculum is a process of social construction. It is a political process in which views of what 'counts' as valuable knowledge from the multiple resources of the city will be contested by different groups (Apple, 1992; Hamayer, 2008). Any curriculum design project that seeks to engage with 'communities, cities and cultures' as its thematic organising principle is likely, therefore, to produce ideas of 'the city' that are subject to contestation.

Just as curriculum is a site of struggle, so too is 'the city' a site of contestation. Pahl and Rowsell (2010) for example, make the case that the world beyond the school must be understood 'not as a reified fact, but as something complex, contested and alive with problematics'. Neighbourhoods are not static, they are changing and dynamic and subject to different historical and geographic forces, from migration to deindustrialisation (Midwinter, 1972; Lavia and Moore, 2009; Comber, 2009). They are also experienced in different ways by different groups within them. Children in particular may have very different understandings of community and neighbourhood from the adults around them (Christiansen & O'Brien, 2003; Orellana, 2000); and the experiences of the wealthy and the poorest in urban environments are increasingly so divergent that there are now calls for a new 'right to the city' to prevent the poorest from exclusion (Harvey, 2010).

It is not possible, therefore, either to grasp 'the city' in its entirety or to reflect its reality neutrally in the curriculum. To make such a claim is not to imply that the city has no material reality – indeed, the highly unequal division of economic and cultural resources between different parts of all cities would make such a statement profoundly unethical (Dorling, 2010). Rather, it is to imply that a city mobilised as a theme for organising a curriculum needs to be understood as a socio-material construction (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) with all the concommitant compromises and settlements between competing possible 'cities' that this implies.

Research Questions

In exploring how the 'area-based curriculum' was realised in these two schools, then, we are exploring an emergent, contested and political project. To that end, we ask:

- *What did it mean to 'mobilise the city' as an organising structure for the curriculum in the Manchester and Peterborough schools?*
- *How was this process informed by existing discursive, social and material resources in schools?*
- *What are the implications for social and educational justice, and in particular, for the competing views of curriculum as a resource for redistribution or recognition?*

In addressing these questions we draw on interviews with 17 teachers from the 3 schools involved in the

project in Manchester from 2008-2009 (conducted by the first author) and fieldnotes and interviews with 5 Head Teachers and a number of local organisations involved in the project in Peterborough from 2009-2012 (conducted by the second author). Facer was commissioned by the RSA to retrospectively evaluate 'The Manchester Curriculum' and reflect on its potential for further development in the light of the RSA's desire to harness the resources of 'the city' to support learning. The interviews were audio-recorded, participants were given transcripts and interpretations of analysis to review, and the process was understood as a formative evaluation to inform future development both within Manchester and nationally by the RSA. Thomas was the lead researcher for the Peterborough curriculum, responsible for recruiting schools and local participants. She was also working within the context of the wider Citizen Power project which constructed the overarching goals for the Peterborough Curriculum. It was through this informal process that she gathered the data reported here, which consists of detailed fieldnotes taken during and immediately after meetings with headteachers and local organisations in the first two years of the project.

Mobilising the city in the curriculum: institutional roots and contested purposes

The Manchester and Peterborough curriculum projects arise from negotiations between a wide range of organisations and individuals. In 2007-8, Manchester City Council and RSA Education Officers discussed the possibility of a citywide curriculum project. This 'Manchester Curriculum' was inspired by the RSA's previous education work and by existing Manchester projects such as Higher Futures 4 You. The original idea for 'The Manchester Curriculum', notably, was developed by the city's regeneration team rather that by the local education or children's services team. It was underpinned by an economic agenda that sought to harness the economically successful areas of the city as a resource for building aspiration amongst young people.

In contrast, the RSA researcher, based in London and with limited on the ground input to the project, was drawing on his personal experience of community and informal learning to frame the project in a very different way. He saw it as a process of 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" (RSA, 2009).* This different emphasis reflects the fact that the area-based curriculum forms part of a wider RSA programme that is attempting to bring into being a particular and distinctive set of new relationships between city and community. The RSA is a 250-year-old charity with a global membership of 27,000 fellows working in areas ranging from design to public service innovation to education and social enterprise. In the UK, the RSA's work in education has become particularly associated since the late 1990s with its competency-based curriculum 'Opening Minds'. More recently, however, the RSA as a whole has focused its attention on a mission to build a new relationship between 'state' and 'citizen'. It is now forging what might be understood as a 'communitarian' path in keeping with its constitution as a fellowship organisation. This bears no small resemblance to the Burkean 'little platoons' of the current government's 'Big Society' agenda, but also has older new left roots in the idea of 'the community' as a basis for social change. As New Labour guru Anthony Giddens argued in 1998:

> *'The theme of community is fundamental to the new politics, but not just as an abstract slogan. … "Community" doesn't imply trying to capture lost forms of local solidarity; it refers to practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns and larger local areas' (Giddens, 1998, p. 79)*

The Area Based Curriculum project in Peterborough was initiated a year after the Manchester Curriculum as part of an explicit attempt to put this perspective into action. 'Citizen Power' was a collaboration between Peterborough city council, the RSA and the Arts Council. It aimed to *'explore how the renewal of civic activism and community action might improve attachment and networks between people, build local participation and cultivate public service innovation'*. In this context, the stated aim of the Peterborough Curriculum was to connect learning in school with the place where young people lived, as a means of improving civic participation and educational opportunity.

The RSA's communitarian perspective draws on legacies from Ivan Illich (via Charles Leadbeater) to Amitai Etzioni in order to conceive of communities as potentially constituting mutually supportive webs of relations between people (Leadbeater, 2008; Etzioni, 1995). In so doing, it reimagines the education institution as an important platform for facilitating and strengthening such webs (Small, 2009; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). It has resonances with ideas of the 'co-production' of public services that

are gaining ground in economic theory and in new public services theory (Simmons and Birchall, 2009 Ostrom, 1990). In seeking to establish the area-based curriculum therefore, the RSA might be understood as seeking to bring into being a particular conception of the mobilised, mutually supportive community as a resource for education.

This aspiration is far from being universally accepted as either achievable or desirable as a resource for curriculum design. It is also ambivalent in its orientation toward knowledge – is 'the community' to be mobilised as a means of supporting and promoting dominant knowledge. Is 'the community' to be offered a role in shaping and determining what 'counts' as valuable knowledge? And which 'community' is to have a say in that process? In other words, it is not clear whether the idea of the area-based curriculum was conceived with an agenda of either redistribution or recognition in its aspiration to enhance educational and social justice.

Schools' motivations to participate were also complex: for some, this was an opportunity to link with a high profile national organisation, for others it was about accessing funding and creating space for 'thinking big' in a time of constrained resources, for others it was about getting the Local Authority 'on-side' with what they were already doing. On the ground the Manchester project was coordinated by a teacher with a specialism in Opening Minds curriculum approaches who was seconded from one of the local schools. Teachers participating in the project were either advocates for Opening Minds cross-curricular and competency based approaches or subject specialists, recruited from disciplines including geography, history, drama and IT subject disciplines.

The Area Based Curriculum project, therefore, had a complex genesis. It was being framed as a project by a London-based charity seeking to mobilise civic society as a resource for education in two regional cities; it was actually being designed and run on the ground by teachers in schools and academies with responsibilities for engaging students with the national curriculum; and it was being funded by local council officers with remits for education, culture and regeneration. Rather than landing 'fully-formed' from on high, therefore, the 'Area-Based Curriculum' has been and arguably remains a highly contested idea.

As a consequence, the Manchester and Peterborough projects were less a 'Brave New Curriculum' than a highly diverse set of activities that reflected provisional settlements between different views of educational purpose and the role of the city as a curriculum resource. The following brief pen sketches of the different curriculum activities designed by the participating teachers make this clear:

In one Manchester school, Year 7 children spent half a day a week over the course of a term on 'Our Manchester', focusing in particular on the history, culture and geography of the city. The focus here was on teaching humanities and ICT. Students researched, wrote, filmed, edited and presented a DVD about Manchester's history based on research in the museums and galleries, on bus and walking tours of the city and on drama workshops conducted with a local actor. In a second school, Year 7 children participated in 6 sessions over the course of 3 weeks. These included learning about the history of the city, a full year group visit to the city centre, including visits to museums, guided walks and trips on the new 'Manchester Wheel' in the shopping centre. This was followed up by workshops from creative practitioners including poets and artists. In a third school, the project ran intensively over three weeks with around half of the year 7 and 8 students. The students were challenged to make a film on 'What Makes Manchester Great' to be shown on BBC big screens across the city. Over 90 students visited local museums, shopping centres, sporting venues and conducted their own research through guided walks around the city. Student visits were interspersed with time in school explicitly reflecting upon their personal development of competencies such as team working, planning and reflection.

In contrast, in Peterborough, the area-based curriculum activities include collaborations with local organisations over a longer period of time. One school, for example, is working with an environment and transport heritage site to involve students with the ongoing regeneration and planning processes around the railway area of the city. Another is working with a major faith institution to involve students in the development of a new education and visitors centre. A third is working with the same faith institution and a community radio station to develop a radio programme debating the role of faith institutions in a diverse 21st century city.

Discursive, social and material resources for the Area-Based Curriculum

These settlements about what an 'area-based' curriculum would mean in Manchester and Peterborough were far from inevitable. Rather, it seems to us, that there were three factors that were particularly important in shaping how 'the city' came to be used as a focus for cross-curricular activity in the schools:

Tales of the City

Competing geographical imaginations played an important role in determining how the city was envisaged as a potential theme for cross-curricular work. In Manchester, for example, the project was initiated by the local regeneration team who played an important role in framing the project as building on Manchester's assets and enhancing its economic success. This meant drawing on what Harvey (1973) might call the neo-liberal geographic imagination of the city which constructs the city as a space for investment of global capital. In this imagination, the history of the city's role in the industrial revolution is harnessed to stake a claim to being a major UK power base with a global reach. This global reach is exemplified in its music (Smiths, Hacienda etc) its sport (Manchester United & City, the Commonwealth Games) and its new culture industries (the Manchester International Festival; the arrival of the BBC in Salford).

This neo-liberal geographic imagination is constructed against and despite alternative geographic imaginations. The International Festival, which is managed by a private company has, for example, been accused of drawing funding away from local artists and of offering a limited platform for the promotion of local talent. The divide between a relatively small city centre (Manchester city itself) and the wider region of some nearly 2.6m people, some of whom live in areas of profound poverty, is becoming more visible. Wythenshawe, for example, was subject of a notorious documentary *'the Duchess on the Estate'* in which Duchess of York visited the area and patronised (in all senses of the term) a local family.

Popular perceptions of 'Manchester' within the city, therefore, are complex, comprising associations both with international fame and profound deprivation. Manchester teachers' accounts reflected these conflicting narratives. They discussed their awareness of the disjunction between the poverty of children's families and the affluence of the city centre, and talked of how this had informed their aspirations for the Manchester Curriculum. They told stories of students inhabiting the shared geographic reality of the city but living in separate and isolated cultural and economic spaces, a disjuncture which they hoped the curriculum would overcome:

> *Teacher 2: They do go to Manchester and go to Primark … but they don't go to the Museum of Science and Industry, they don't go to Albert Square or St Anne's Square, or The Royal Exchange or the Library Theatre (School P, Manchester)*
>
> *I was at the City Stadium on a bus and a girl said 'oh, I go to Asda, I've driven past here, I never knew what that was' – She never knew that that was the B of the Bang* [an iconic Manchester sculpture designed for the Commonwealth Games] *or that's the City Stadium. She's in a car where nobody mentions what it is (School W, interview with teacher lead, Manchester)*

Indeed, many of the teachers constructed the area-based curriculum as a project that sought to restate students' rights to participate in the increasingly elite and excluding spaces of the city centre, spaces that are becoming (as Harvey puts it) 'recobbled for the tourist gaze' (2010: 38). In all three schools, the teachers sought to relocate the children bodily *within* these 'global' spaces in the city through the curriculum. It was as though by encouraging them to physically inhabit these places the children would in some way gain access to the symbolic capital that these areas represented:

> *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 (School P, teacher participant, Manchester)*
>
> *[…] guarantee that all students are familiar with their city and area and feel a sense of participation and ownership' (School W – project outline documentation, Manchester)*

This view of the city constructed the purpose of the area-based project as being to 'widen horizons'. Indeed, it encouraged, in the end, a view of the curriculum as being about connecting young people with the globalised spaces of the city beyond their familiar physical and cultural geographies.

Peterborough, in contrast, stakes fewer claims to international status and has a less clearly visible city centre. It is a unitary authority which includes a multi-ethnic city with a range of suburban and semi-urban 'townships' as well as rural and at times very affluent environs. In the east of the UK, it is in commuting distance of both London and Cambridge. Many of its prestigious cultural resources are located outside the city itself, popular sporting icons are not often local to the city and it is a site of high turnover in population with high levels of recent immigration. The RSA was invited to partner with the city and the Citizen Power project was initiated, in some ways, to begin to construct a new economic and cultural geographical imagination for the city.

Peterborough teachers and their collaborating city partners reflected these views. They told stories of: a 'cultural desert'; the absence of a coherent strategy for the city; of the city as 20 years behind the rest of the country; as ruined by 1960s planning; as the 'arson capital of the country'; as over-consulted by outside agencies but then ignored; as having a 'hunkered down' mentality; as being suspicious of outside influence; as having a complex about Cambridge; of the Local Authority as inexperienced and bad at valuing the city's resources. One headteacher described the city as *"somewhere you aspire to leave, not to stay" (headteacher, School B, Peterborough).*

These ideas informed the teachers' designs of their respective 'city' curricula. In Manchester, history, geography, IT, creative arts and media studies subjects were those seen most likely to 'fit' the area-based theme, focusing on the history of the city and enabling students to participate in its creative futures. In Peterborough, the primary schools constructed the project as an extension of student-led research projects, with greater collaboration with local organisations.

It is important to note, however, that some of the teachers serving local populations with high levels of migration contested the RSA's often highly localised conception of a 'communitarian' project implicit in the area-based curriculum. One headteacher, for example, noted that the concept of the school 'community' was rapidly changing, drawing in a highly diverse group of people from outside the geographic and cultural boundaries of the UK, for whom the school perhaps had less legitimacy and influence:

> *We don't know who the constituency is any more – our immediate community is aging and children have grown up – falling rolls so we take overspill from city centre, particularly eastern European immigrant students. Amount of influence over local community is diminishing – […] - less of a community school than previously. (School K, fieldnotes from first meeting with headteacher, Peterborough)*

Another project lead argued that an 'area-based' curriculum should be mindful of the city's history and future as deeply embedded in global flows of people rather than as circumscribed by physical geography:

> *I think we want to get students to feel that they're part of our school community; they're part of their wider community and they're part of a global community. So we had one project that focused on fair trade and social enterprise kind of issues and I think if we hadn't had any world view, you know, that wouldn't have been good, and I suppose, on the identity one we were thinking about, well, we're in Manchester but we've got all these links with other countries that people have come from, so that's kind of what's made Manchester what it is, the links its got with other places (School W, project lead, Manchester)*

The ways in which the teachers were able to realise ambitions to engage with this more complex geographical imagination in the curriculum, however, were often circumscribed by other factors, such as social and professional networks and material and logistical constraints.

Social Networks

The realisation of the city as a theme for curriculum design was deeply informed by existing social networks and relationships. The familiar limitations on time for curriculum design, for example, meant that teachers often worked in evenings and at weekends to develop the projects. As a result the use of the city as an organisational structure for curriculum was heavily influenced by teacher friendships and professional networks. For example, in Peterborough, one member of a local organisation shared an

enthusiasm for railways with the husband of the key contact at the partner school, facilitating a new partnership. In another, the key contact at one school sought to develop links with the local football club because he was a life-long fan of the team and shared the team's concerns about a declining fan base. In Manchester, it was one drama teachers' personal and professional networks in the community of creative practitioners in the city that furnished the majority of facilitators for the workshops in one school

Where teachers sought to build partnerships with local organisations without existing personal contacts, other factors influenced who they approached and how the partnership developed. In particular, schools tended to turn to those organisations who they felt would 'get' education and schools. Partnerships flourished with those organisations who, on a practical level, talked with children in a similar way to teachers, understood 'what children needed' and knew what the existing curricular requirements might be in schools. Teachers' desire for partnerships with institutions who understand children is clearly reasonable given that some of the cultural institutions schools visited reportedly treated children as though they were about to steal the exhibits. It does, however, limit the diversity of institutions with whom schools found it easy to collaborate.

In order to be able to respond to schools' perceived needs, some local organisations employ specialised education officers to liaise with schools. The unintended consequence of this, however, is to further narrow the nature of the partnerships possible between schools and external organisations. As one education officer observed in Peterborough, her appointment as the 'education specialist' means that other staff in the organisation no longer prioritised working with school groups at all.

> *We have masses of expertise with conservation officers and rangers, tree specialists, wild flowers – challenge is to free them up – staff are enthusiastic but limited time and I was hired so that they wouldn't have to do it any more…(education officer at potential partner organisation)*

Teachers also looked for those organisations who were able to guarantee repeat activity in future years around the schools' stated objectives. This approach excludes more informal collaborative relationships and tends to position the external partner as a 'service provider'. In this formulation of the relationship, the external partner simply plays a role of 'enhancing' or 'providing an authentic context for' students' learning, the goals of which remain determined by the school. This tension between the needs of the school and the needs of community organisations has been documented in other analyses of the difficulties of 'partnership working' between schools and communities (e.g. Cummings & Dyson, 2007; Innovations Unit, 2008).

This transactional approach towards local organisations also seems to be self-replicating. The legacy of the idea of schools as commissioners rather than collaborators, for example, led to many organisations disqualifying themselves from participation in the project. Small local businesses, voluntary and community organisations or other public institutions simply did not want to come forward to collaborate. Their perception was that schools would want partnerships that fulfilled existing curricular goals rather than seeking to understand their own agendas, and that schools would want a partnership without offering financial reward. For low income organisations, such collaborations would understandably be a luxury they could not afford. Many also felt that, without in-house educational expertise, they simply didn't 'know enough' about education to be able to offer partnership.

This self-disqualification meant that the types of organisations putting themselves forward for partnership with the schools in Peterborough in particular were either cultural institutions with an existing 'offer' for schools, non-profit organisations with education as part of their existing purpose, or profit-making organisations with resource to 'sell' to schools. The RSA's communitarian idea of schools as hubs for mobilising and drawing on the expertise of a wide range of civic society organisations, in this context, seems increasingly unlikely.

Attempts within the project to draw on students' own families' knowledge also hit familiar difficulties. A project that was conceived as a curriculum based on harnessing 'the resources' of the city was confronted by real uncertainty about the sorts of 'resources' that the students own, often long-term unemployed, families might offer:

> *What came out from their [parents] questionnaires is that they had very little grasp over what people did for a living – have very limited knowledge of jobs. Lots said 'used to' or 'before they did this'.*

Unstable work. Idea of keeping and working way up in job is alien to them. (school D scoping session, Peterborough)

This is one of the most deprived wards in Europe. There is huge, huge – it's quite shocking, the level of poverty, because you don't see it because it's not totally in your face… but go in the doors and there's no furniture and no wallpaper and there's no food in the cupboards (School P, Manchester)

At the same time, there was an anxiety that any form of invitation for parents to engage might in itself be a basis for increasing rather than tackling inequalities. As one head teacher said: *the challenge of working with one group and not others could be sensitive (Minutes second meeting school network Feb 11).* Parents from minority ethnic groups were seen as potentially important sources of knowledge for a city-based curriculum, providing insight into the experiences of migrants to the city and into the diverse cultures and heritage of the cities. Drawing on this resource, however, was paradoxically seen as particularly difficult given the perception that such parents would have very different views of education:

Parental engagement is a big issue for the school. Eastern European families working long hours – Pakistani parents have a very traditional view of education – 'it's the job of the school' (obviously generalising here!). (key contact teacher at School WP, first scoping session, Peterborough)

Parental engagement, moreover, had previously brought some schools into conflict with parents around issues of rights and tradition. One school, in particular, was struggling with parents to make the case for young women's right to continue to sixth form and with issues of forced marriage.

These factors influence 'the city' that was made visible in the curriculum. Relationships were easiest with and were reinforced by the emerging professional 'educational enhancement' sector, which employs education specialists able to speak the teachers' curricular language and structure activities for different age groups. Often former teachers themselves, the development of this new 'interface' between schools and communities may make it much easier for schools to access these types of institutions as providers of enhancement 'services'. Arguably, however, it narrows down the diversity of organisations with whom schools might partner in more collaborative relationships likely to disrupt existing curricular assumptions and expectations. The 'city' is increasingly filtered through assumptions about educational priorities even before the school comes to engage with it.

Material resources

The idea of the area-based curriculum also implied disruption to existing spatial and institutional relationships between schools and city organisations. It implied engaging the city's institutions as educational resources, and creating more porous boundaries between the school and the city. Institutional boundaries, however, are held in place by myriad logistical, material and financial components that are particularly difficult to disrupt (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Prout, 2005). Consider, for example, the financial, transport and training issues that one school had to take into account in order to get students to another local school up the road:

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

The seemingly innocent 'letter home' played a familiar role in determining children's participation in activities beyond the school walls:

It's just giving out the letters, people not returning letters ….it can be just a lot of paperwork and I think they're finding it difficult to get certain trips organised.(Teacher K)

More surprising, perhaps, was the fact that in a climate of 'austerity', the schools were sometimes told

that they would be charged for access to (now privately managed) council buildings, limiting students' opportunity to witness and participate in local democratic spaces.

For two schools, the most transformative experience of participating in the Area Based Curriculum Project may have been the fact that it opened up the possibility for access to free or low cost transport. One school negotiated free travel passes for all students from the local transport authority, while another found a sponsor who provided free buses. The difference that this made to the spatial imagination of the teachers and to the students own perceptions of where school begins and ends, was tangible:

> *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*

Such issues are, of course, familiar from previous discussions of the difficulties of organising learning outside the classroom (Braund & Reiss, 2004). However, they have particular implications for the way in which the city might be used as a theme and structure for cross-curricular activity. These material factors, for example, inform where it is easy (or not) to visit, what scale of activity is possible (many children or only a small number), and the types of relationships that might be built with those external partners (visits or ongoing collaborations).

Put simply, the socio-material practices of contemporary schooling make it difficult for young people to independently navigate the city, make it hard for young people to encounter individuals who are not 'pre-vetted', make it hard for small groups of young people to participate across a wide number of different sites, and prohibit participation in activities that might require financial outlay. Such factors encourage collaboration with institutions that are large enough to 'host' a whole class or even a year group, are already equipped with children-friendly policies including risk-assessment, and that have 'outreach' to schools as a core part of their remit from which costs can be recovered. Such factors encourage, in other words, engagement with those institutions that are part of the familiar dominant narratives of 'the city'.

Discussion: the city, the curriculum and aspirations for educational justice

The Area-Based Curriculum Project is still in development. The schools in Manchester continue to develop community relationships independently of the RSA while the Peterborough project is still ongoing, with schools and local organisations developing a number of long-term partnerships that are beginning to translate into sustained teaching and learning activity. To date, these projects have attempted to change commonsense understandings of the sites of curriculum design, a process which, after years of centralisation, has been difficult, disruptive and required significant personal effort on the part of many teachers.

What, then, might these two experiments have to say about the role of a localised curriculum in the educational politics of redistribution or recognition; and how do they contribute to the debates on cross-curricularity that form the focus for this special issue?

The Manchester and Peterborough Curriculum projects can be understood as originating in a desire to change the relationship between the 'local' and the 'national' in curriculum design. This desire had multiple sources: from some teachers' concerns that ever greater standardisation of national curriculum was leading to diminishing returns in terms of student engagement and attainment; from council officials' concern that children's educational experiences were not connecting them to the economic resources of the local area; to the RSA's concern that schools were not finding ways to value and mobilise the resources of parents and civic society to help with the task of education. These different concerns were held together in a simple idea – to use 'the city' as a basis for a new, local curriculum.

One consequence of these multiple and potentially conflicting motives, however, is that while many new areas of activity have developed, they have arguably not achieved the sort of disruptive change in relationships between schools and their 'communities' that the RSA, in particular, might have wished to see develop. The projects have not, for example, succeeded to date in realising the aspirations (that the RSA's communitarian agenda might imply) to recognise and draw on diverse community expertise and knowledge. The pre-filtering of engagement between local organisations and schools as a result of social

networks, logistical and material constraints, popular conceptions of the city's strengths and the growth of an educational enhancement sector, means that engaging 'the city' in its rich, problematic and contested diversity has not yet been possible in these projects.

Instead, what has become clear is that the 'localisation' of curriculum has been translated into a redistributive educational project. The city has been seen as a resource to be harnessed in pursuit of national curriculum goals. The city, in other words, has been interpreted as a pedagogic rather than curricular resource, a resource that casts 'the community' in the role of supporting act to the school rather than partner, critical friend or site of challenge. This view of the role of the city, in turn, acts as a selection device that determines which city 'resources' are appropriate to be drawn upon. It reciprocally shapes, for example, the perception of which parents or civic society organisations might be qualified to contribute to the work of the school.

But why does this matter for discussions of cross-curricularity? It matters because an important rationale for many cross-curricular projects is that they will engage young people in disciplinary knowledge by working on issues that are 'relevant' to them and that respond to their particular local, economic and cultural conditions. Thematic, cross curricular work that draws on local topics and themes are often positioned as better placed to recognise the diversity of students' lives and experiences in contrast to heavily subject centred disciplinary projects. While such projects have been challenged for their failure to effectively redistribute educational goods, our analysis here, however, also suggests that without care they may fail to achieve the educational justice goal of recognition with which they are more commonly associated.

We would not, however, wish this to be seen as a call to retreat from the politics of recognition in education. Rather, we would suggest that, if recognition of diverse knowledge, cultures and values is a goal, then communitarian projects like the RSA's area-based curriculum, need to begin to work explicitly and intentionally with theories of knowledge as multiple, as socially embedded, and as produced through dialogue that underpin work such as Moll & Gonzales' Funds of Knowledge. Such approaches will not be straightforward, as Thomson and Hall have already argued:

> *We cannot simply castigate the teachers, or indeed ourselves, for their failure to take up the children's and the community knowledges and practices. We suspect that it will not necessarily be easy to mount the kind of professional support programme that might be needed in order to introduce a funds of knowledge approach into English schools. (Thomson and Hall, 2007)*

Without this explicitly stated goal to respect diverse community knowledges and traditions, we would suggest that calls for cross-curricular projects to draw on the city as a resource may have unintended consequences. It is, for example, organisations like the RSA, and its spin-off network 'Whole Education', that are beginning to agitate for greater localisation of curriculum thinking; while environmental and social movements are beginning to agitate for schools to play an important role in place-making. Such third-sector organisations are equally likely to draw on a literature relating to organisational theory and public service reform as on the literature of curriculum design (Williamson, 2012). They are often more likely to reference economists such as Elinor Ostrum than curriculum theorists such as Basil Bernstein. As a consequence, without an explicit theory of knowledge, these projects calling for localisation of curriculum risk unintentionally configuring 'the community' simply as a subordinate site of social activity that should be directed towards existing, and often nationally prescribed educational priorities. The risks of cross-curricular activity that takes 'the city' as its theme, therefore, should be understood not simply to be the well-rehearsed arguments about whether such projects provide access to powerful disciplinary knowledge. Rather, they need also to be subject to critical scrutiny for their adequacy in achieving the goal of recognition that their advocates might promote. At heart, then, any project that seeks to engage its 'communities, cities and cultures' needs to return again and insistently to the familiar questions – whose communities, whose cities and whose cultures?

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[i] In applying this terminology to curriculum debates we are not, of course, implying a conception of knowledge as a disembodied material good that can simply, as the popular terminology would frequently have it, be 'delivered' to young people. Rather, we have found the terms redistribution and recognition to be useful metaphors for the relationship between education, power and equity that are assumed in competing views of curriculum goals.