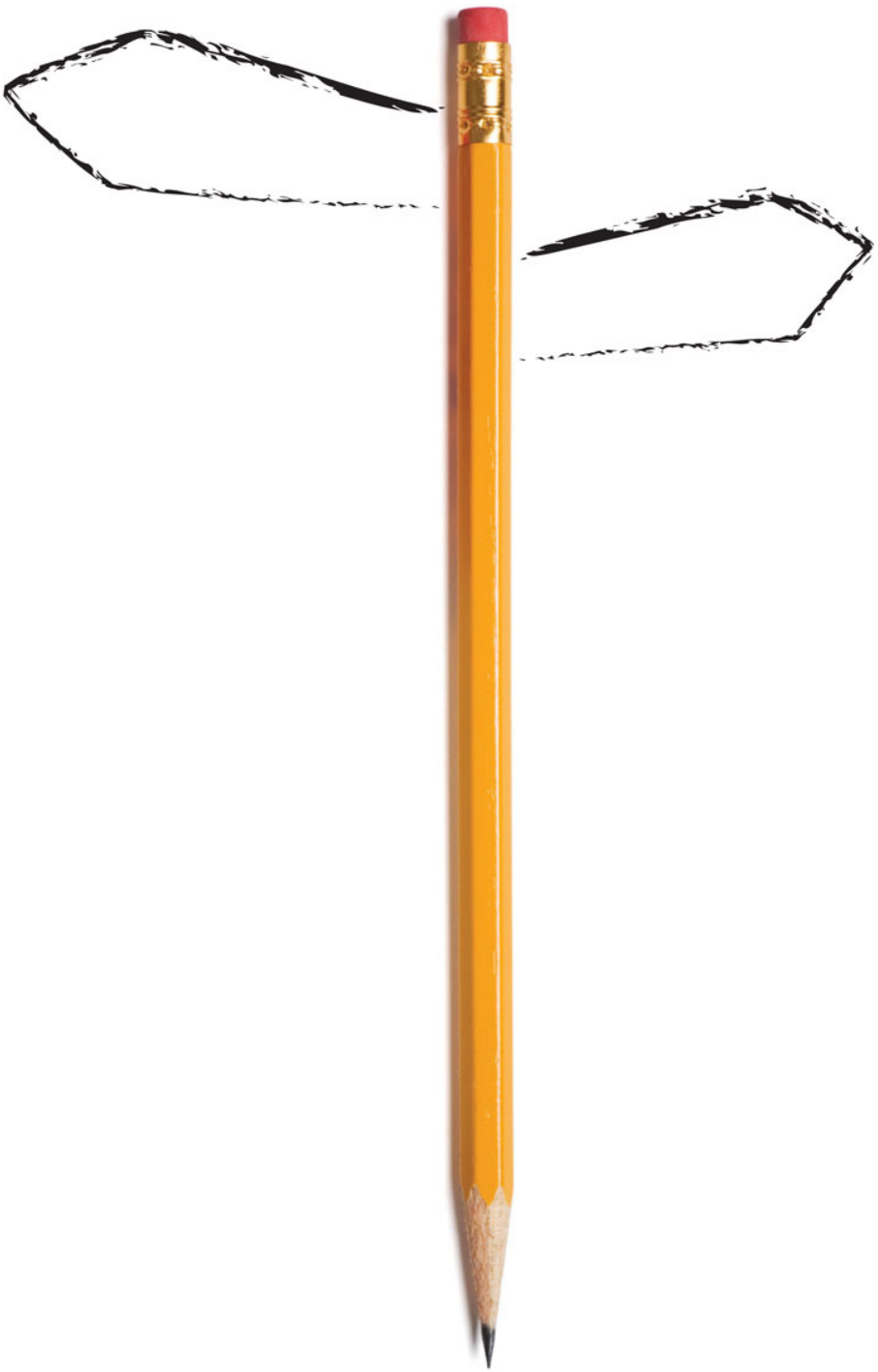
THE RSA AREA BASED CURRICULUM:
Engaging the local



RSA Projects

The aim of an Area Based Curriculum is to engage a wide range of people and organisations in a local area in providing young people with a curriculum that is meaningful and challenging.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

What is an 'Area Based Curriculum', and why is it needed? This document outlines the rationale and principles of operation for a school curriculum that is inspired by the local area's past, present and future, and shaped by diverse stakeholders from the local area. It is intended to provoke discussion among anyone interested in the relationship between areas, schools and communities; but also to establish some principles for action that we suggest might underpin Area Based Curriculum approaches for practitioners and local leaders.

The aim of an Area Based Curriculum is to engage a wide range of people and organisations in a local area in providing young people with a curriculum that is meaningful and challenging; that recognises and values their neighbourhoods, communities, families, cultures and wider locality; and equips them to shape their own futures and that of their local area for the better. The aim is not to reduce learning to the local, but rather to diversify the kinds of knowledges that are valued by schools, ensuring that the resources provided by local areas of all kinds are recognised, valued, and engaged in young people's learning.

This document seeks to address some of the key questions that present themselves in thinking about creating meaningful engagement between education, area and community. It presents a case for the core business of schools — the curriculum — being co-created by teachers, young people, community members and local organisations.

This document will not provide a 'how to' guide or give concrete examples of what an Area Based Curriculum might look like. It is instead exclusively focused on outlining the conceptual premises for such work, and we wish to avoid appearing to prescribe (and hence potentially narrow) how these ideas should manifest in practice. However, examples of related work done by the RSA and its partners in this field are available on the RSA website **www.thersa.org/projects/area-based-curriculum**.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Although progress has been made in some areas, many schools still feel compelled to provide a generic curriculum which fails to engage or enthuse young people, and that misses opportunities to draw on local resources to support young people's learning. Failure to take proper account of the lived worlds and identities of young people can impede the engagement required for achievement.

We begin from a critique of the way in which particular local areas are perceived as problems in education, meaning that only some areas and communities are offered the opportunity to share in and help to construct the kinds of knowledge and activities that young people engage in as part of their school lives. National policy tends to treat schools and children as without context (unless their context is seen to be problematic in some way), rather than ensuring the system takes proper account of the areas it serves. This construction of certain areas as problematic can be damaging, and risks undermining efforts to reduce the impact of social class, ethnicity and neighbourhood on educational success.

This model could empower pupils and parents as well as other local representatives from outside the school, and secure their investment in local children's education; drawing on local resources to support the curriculum and school.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

We see areas and the communities within them as crucially important to the education of children, and propose an alternative way of looking at the relationship between areas and the education provided therein: one that values and takes seriously the knowledge, expertise, culture, and ambition of local areas and the people who live and work within them *wherever and whoever they may be*. We argue that every locality is as meaningful as the next and that every child should be given the opportunity to see their lived worlds recognised and valued by their curriculum — across or between the subjects or areas of learning outlined in the National Curriculum.

An Area Based Curriculum would draw on diverse stakeholders (including young people) in a local area to develop a curriculum though which all children might be critically engaged in the realities and richness of their local area. This model could empower pupils and parents as well as other local representatives from outside the school, and secure their investment in local children's education; drawing on local resources to support the curriculum and school.

In order to do this we posit the concept of an Area Based Curriculum: a curriculum that challenges our usual way of seeing local areas in terms of:

- the people: who is or can be involved in education
- the places: where learning happens, and what places have educational value
- the cultures and knowledges: what is worth knowing, and who constructs and holds this knowledge

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

Development and implementation of an Area Based Curriculum is by no means easy, but there is a large amount of evidence that supports a range of positive outcomes that could be attained through this work. Alongside opportunities, however, the idea poses a number of questions and challenges which we address in the main document. We propose a way forward underpinned by the key principles below.

The first principle is especially important to note:

1 There is not a single, uniform model that can be applied across areas. Any local area should develop and own its own curriculum designed to address the specific history, socio-economic context, needs and resources of the locality.

Nevertheless, there are a number of other key principles that should underpin the design and operation of any Area Based Curriculum, as follows:

2 An approach to local areas that starts by mapping the resources, opportunities and expertise already held within an area, and the 'lived worlds' of the young people in the area.

3 Curriculum co-developed in collaborative and equal partnerships between schools, and community partners (organisations, groups, or individuals), supported by a charter of principles.

Any local area should develop and own its own curriculum designed to address the specific history, socio-economic context, needs and resources of the locality.

4 The engagement of young people as partners in curriculum development, and an insistence on ensuring the involvement of those young people least engaged in school.

5 The starting point for community engagement being those groups least often engaged or heard in the formal education sector.

6 Monitoring of experiences and indicators of engagement and achievement among pupils learning from the Area Based Curriculum.

7 Provision of support for curriculum design and partnership skills, and opportunities for the development of activist professionalism in teachers and community practitioners.

8 A critical approach to the relationship between the local, national and global dimensions of learning, focussing on the links between these.

9 An action research approach that includes on-going processes of: mapping the terrain and need; collaborative approaches to monitoring and evaluation; reflection and refinement.

10 A locally collective approach to solving the practical barriers to the Area Based Curriculum, including developing area wide arrangements for teacher cover, risk assessments, safe-guarding, sharing contacts and so on.

11 The promotion of a critical approach in young people to multiple (local, regional, national, global and other) knowledge discourses to ensure they are able to access and to shape their multiple identities and worlds.

The RSA approaches its Area Based Curriculum work in a spirit of enquiry, and will be further exploring the ideas presented in this document with the children and other stakeholders involved with the work, continuing to share findings as we move forward.

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SECTION 1: *Background*

WHY THE RSA?

The RSA has a long history of social innovation, especially in addressing equality of access to education, and advocacy of a broad and holistic view of learning. Currently the RSA education programme is focused on agendas of curriculum innovation, devolution, and social justice; and the Area Based Curriculum speaks to all these.

There has been a great deal of concern in policy, research and media circles at the narrowness of the existing National Curriculum, and its limitations in meeting the needs of all children in terms of both engagement and outcomes. Such concerns, coupled with the evidence of the various other problems created by nationally-centralised approaches that marginalise the local, which we outline in Section 2, led the RSA to develop and pilot its 'Area Based Curriculum' in Manchester in 2008-9. This pilot project worked with three secondary schools in the creation and implementation of a 'Manchester Curriculum'; and its evaluation is published by the RSA (**Facer**, 2009a).

WHERE NEXT?

In 2009 Peterborough City Council and the Arts Council approached the RSA asking for a range of interventions that would promote participation, attachment and innovation in the city's public services and citizens. The Area Based Curriculum approach was of particular appeal and, building on the challenges identified and lessons learned from the Manchester project, the RSA will be working with schools, citizens and other organisations in Peterborough to develop a Peterborough Curriculum between 2010 and 2012.

This document comprises a statement on the RSA's thinking on the Area Based Curriculum, and draws heavily on our projects experiences, and on the evaluation and literature review conducted for the RSA by **Professor Keri Facer** (2009a; 2009b). Those documents contain extensive research evidence and elaboration of theoretical perspectives that underpin the ideas expressed here.

The challenges to changing how schools and communities think about education in their local area are complex. Here we make the case for why those challenges are worth taking on, and some of the practical and conceptual means by which they may best be addressed.

An area can contain lots of 'places' and many 'communities' and we do not want to limit interpretation, or assume what or who might 'count' in this regard.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS PAPER

We begin by elaborating the existing problems caused by centralised national approaches to the curriculum. Section 2 elucidates the limitations of such approaches, and the problematic ways in which local areas and the communities within them are frequently viewed. The impact of such 'deficit' approaches and the initiatives they produce is discussed. In Section 3 we present the arguments for an area based approach, highlighting the benefits of engaging place in education. Section 4 explores how curriculum in particular should take account of local areas. And Section 5 is focused on the operationalisation of an Area Based Curriculum, including discussion of both the opportunity and the challenges inherent in the idea. The final sections summarise and conclude our arguments. But before we start, given the title and content of this document it is important to consider what exactly we mean when using somewhat nebulous and contested terms such as 'area', 'community', and 'curriculum.

DEFINING AREA, COMMUNITY, AND CURRICULUM

Area and place

We are taking 'area' to mean a geographically bounded location, the people contained within it, and the subjective ideas of place that are constructed in and about that area by those people. An area can contain lots of 'places' and many 'communities' and we do not want to limit interpretation, or assume what or who might 'count' in this regard. We use the term 'area' as a means of establishing a frame through which people with different experiences and identities might find commonality in how that area affects them. Although in practice an Area Based Curriculum might be established within existing bureaucratic boundaries (such as a local authority region, or a school catchment area), the boundaries around these areas should not preclude the inclusion or consideration of other places that form part of the lived experience of children and their families.

Community

Ideas about what counts as a community are contested: a range of commentators, from academic researchers to activists engaged in identity politics, have observed the problems of drawing boundaries around places or groups of people (for example, on the basis of location, heritage, 'race', religion, gender, 'ability' and so on). Discussion has highlighted how these constituencies contain diversity, intersect each other, and exceed categorisation; and the problems of assuming key individual representatives can 'speak for' particular communities. In addition, it is more useful to think of communities as dynamic and as the product of day to day interactions, rather than as static phenomena.

Any Area Based Curriculum intervention needs to be aware of these likely contentions and to explore the possibilities and challenges on an area by area basis.

Local and regional strategies are constructed for the fulfilment of priorities decided at the national level, not the other way around.

Curriculum

We define curriculum broadly as everything that is explicitly and implicitly taught in a school. This includes the schemes of work that enshrine the knowledge and skills a school is attempting to pass on, and the National Curriculum is clearly integral to this, although increasingly schools have been encouraged to see the National Curriculum as only a part of the overall school curriculum, the rest being tailored to and by each school (**QCDA**, 2008). However, the implicit curriculum is also important because what children learn through the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by the institution and people within it are crucial to understanding the experience and outcomes of education.

SECTION 2: *What's the problem?*

NATIONAL POLICY TENDS TO DISCONNECT CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND LEARNING FROM PLACES

A number of trends in national education policy over the past twenty years have made the education of children increasingly disconnected from the places where they live.

Firstly, national policy interventions such as the National Curriculum and National Strategies reflect a wider education policy trend to centralisation, driven by concerns about national standards and effectiveness. Such policies have often been the product of human capital theory, reflecting questions such as: what do we need children in the UK to be able to know and do? What skills does/will the UK need? How can education support UK international economic competitiveness? How does the UK compare with other countries? Local and regional strategies are constructed for the fulfilment of priorities decided at the national level, not the other way around.

At the same time, a focus on individual institutions through Ofsted assessments, league tables and the encouragement of competition between schools in local areas has made it difficult for regional, local, or place-based agendas to get much attention. This emphasis on the performance of individual children and the further use of individualised and competitive data to monitor and drive the system constructs children as 'placeless'. The renewed emphasis Ofsted places on attainment data abstracted from the situation of the school, or indeed from the observations of inspectors, is an example of how this construction of children as somehow separate from their context is operationalised in the system of accountability. Schools are imagined as isolated institutions floating in a neutral space and as such, it is supposed, can be straight-forwardly compared through data on measurable indicators. Thinking about schools as dynamic, embedded, situated, human institutions makes comparability far more difficult and hence challenges dominant education discourses.

We argue that the emphasis on the national and the individual to the exclusion of the local needs to be redressed if we are to tackle disengagement, exclusion and inequalities in the national system.

There are some excellent rationales for taking a universalised individualistic approach to questions of education and children: the application of universal human rights of all children, a national entitlement to high quality education and high status knowledge, a refusal to accept less for some children than for others, and Every Child Matters policies all contribute to an agenda that seeks to ensure the wellbeing and equal opportunities of every child. However, these essential elements of liberal, universalist discourse have often been operationalised as targets, rather than as a minimum entitlement, and so have led to the exclusion of place, locality and community as valid arenas for educational debate and intervention. We argue that the emphasis on the national and the individual to the exclusion of the local needs to be redressed if we are to tackle disengagement, exclusion and inequalities in the national system.

The current construction of children, schools and learning as divorced from place and context leads to a set of assumptions about how best to approach problems and challenges in education including: 'one size fits all' approaches; the parachuting in of universally applied 'expertise' in the form of consultants, advisors and initiatives; and a universal set of targets that define the purpose and role of education at a national level. Despite a concentrated focus on reducing educational inequality, increasingly universalised and commercialised solutions have failed to reduce the gap in attainment according to socio-economic background. In 2009, 49% of children on free school meals achieved 5 A*-C at GCSE, while 73% of their better off peers met the threshold (**DCSF**, 2010).

AREAS ARE VISIBLE ONLY WHEN THEY ARE SEEN AS PROBLEMATIC

At the same time that the role of local areas in formal education has been squeezed, attention has been focused on certain localities, due to their determining impact on children's outcomes. It is widely recognised that children living in certain areas — neighbourhoods, towns, estates, catchment areas — are much less likely to achieve the higher levels of educational attainment reached by children living elsewhere. Clearly, there is a powerful relation here between locality, social class, and quality of schooling. There is a strong trend for middle class pupils to be concentrated in good quality and high achieving schools, with working class and BME pupils disproportionately represented in poorer quality and lower achieving schools. Locality intersects as a factor here, with many poor schools located in 'disadvantaged' neighbourhoods. However, such correlations should by no means be automatically presumed, as some schools judged as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted are located in particularly deprived areas.

Responses to the perceived difficulties caused by the geographical location in which children were being educated have often involved attempts either to 'regenerate' an area; or strategies which involve physically removing children from the local area for shorter or longer periods.

There are three dimensions of these so-called 'areas of educational disadvantage' that are often presented as problematically impacting attainment:

1. The people who live in an area: families and communities who are perceived to have 'low aspirations' and low levels of engagement and interest in their children's education; who have low levels of educational attainment themselves, and insufficient social networks and cultural capital to help children to achieve.

2. The geographical and physical properties of an area: neighbourhoods, areas, estates, places etc. where economic and social disadvantage are concentrated geographically; which are usually characterised by a dilapidated built environment, poor infrastructure and a lack of high status cultural and economic locations (museums, libraries, government buildings, etc.).

3. The cultural, linguistic and knowledge resources of an area: a deficit in what an area is perceived to be able to offer in terms of content; a lack of mainstream knowledge resources to support learning, the absence of famous or high status things to know about the area, and, most often cited, an English language deficit which is seen to disadvantage all children at schools where this is the case.

Stereotypical renditions of these characterisations are often applied uniformly with little acknowledgement that the areas to which they are applied are in fact as different from one another as they are from more 'successful' areas.

AREA BASED INITIATIVES — INTERVENING TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF PLACE

For governments to seek to intervene in those areas in which underachievement is concentrated might seem to represent a rational and admirable policy response. From the Education Priority Areas of the 1960s and Education Action Zones of the 1990s, to the contemporary City Challenge, successive initiatives have sought to provide enhanced professional, financial and structural support to areas of educational disadvantage. These centrally-driven initiatives targeting particular 'deprived' areas are termed 'area based initiatives'.

Responses to the perceived deficits of the people residing in areas of educational disadvantage has frequently involved one of two strategies: interventions that seek to remedy the families and communities themselves through education, engagement with the school (e.g. through Extended Schools), persuasion, punishment, and more targeted community development activities; and the development of schools as 'buffers', 'havens' or 'exit routes' for children to escape from the presumed deficiencies of their communities which are perceived to be holding them back.

Responses to the perceived difficulties caused by the geographical location in which children were being educated have often involved attempts either to 'regenerate' an area; or strategies which involve physically removing children from the local area for shorter or longer periods (e.g. school trips to a nearby area of greater 'value' such as a city centre or a museum, or scholarships to better schools outside the area).

Although the National Curriculum represents a broad social consensus around the knowledge considered to be important, the 'lived worlds' of better off children are more likely to be recognised in the assumptions not only of the curriculum as a document, but also in how it is enacted by professional teachers in schools.

And finally, responses to the problem of what a local area and its residents have to offer in terms of knowledge are primarily found in the assumption that schools should compensate for deficits in the knowledge and culture that children might have access to through the people, institutions and resources in their local area. The provision of a national entitlement of knowledge — and more recently of some forms of 'skills' — in the form of the National Curriculum, schemes of work, and National Strategies, is an attempt to ensure that children from areas with less valuable fonts of knowledge are not disadvantaged with respect to their peers from local areas where high status forms of knowledge are available in the community.

PROBLEMS WITH THESE APPROACHES

Such approaches may appear sensible and progressive, focusing resources where they are needed most for the benefit of those in our society who are most in need, and using the institution of the school to achieve social ends. However, there are problems with such perspectives. Researchers in the field of education have long argued that area based initiatives in education have come to be *"associated with a deficit view of communities and a psychological account of educational failure (passed down between families) rather than a structural critique of socio-economic factors leading to disadvantage"* (**Facer** 2009a).

Children from some better off areas and communities are equipped to use the education system and meet its requirements more effectively than others. Although the National Curriculum represents a broad social consensus around the knowledge considered to be important, the 'lived worlds' of better off children are more likely to be recognised in the assumptions not only of the curriculum as a document, but also in how it is enacted by professional teachers in schools. Other children may not find the National Curriculum so easy to engage with, struggle to relate to its cultural assumptions, and find that their families and networks outside school are unable to support their learning because of their own distance from the norms embodied in formal education. The blame for the resulting inequalities between these groups of children is often laid at the door of the areas that do not fit the 'norm' and the individuals living within them, rather than with the broader system.

But why does this matter? Firstly, research has shown that being treated as a problem to be solved renders certain schools, estates, catchment areas and neighbourhoods alienated; lacking in confidence and motivation (**Raffo**, 2006). The disengagement of entire families and communities from mainstream education over several generations has been shown to be a rational response to a variety of factors. For example, a response to the failure of the system to provide opportunities for certain groups and certain localities; to the humiliation and alienation previously experienced by parents in their own 'educational failure' at school, and a consequent wish to protect their children from unrealistic expectations; and to the blame that that same system then lays at the door of the people it has failed (**Reay**, 2004).

We posit that the Area Based Curriculum is a means by which communities and schools can work together to ensure that schools draw on the knowledge and resources of communities to create diverse approaches to learning.

Secondly, focusing on blaming communities means that the system of formal education itself is not challenged or questioned. As we have seen, most initiatives aimed at improving the performance of disadvantaged children at school are aimed at shaping the communities, families, parents, children — and indeed teachers — so that they better support the standards agenda. Few ask whether the standards agenda is supporting the communities it is supposed to serve.

Certainly, the mismatch between what schools are trying to do and what they are able to achieve in certain places begs questions about the system's fitness for purpose, for whom it was designed, and whose interests it continues to serve. We have outlined the ways in which places are constructed as problems by the education system, and some of the difficulties that this can cause not only for the people and children who live in those areas, but for the system itself as it undermines its own stated aims of reducing inequality, raising standards and improving outcomes for all young people.

This kind of analysis can lead to fatalism, wholesale rejection of school as causing rather than reducing social inequality and so on. However, there is an alternative to insisting either that local areas and communities must fall in line with dominant assumptions about appropriate knowledge and forms of engagement, or that schools must be radically redesigned. We propose a more collaborative approach. We posit that the Area Based Curriculum is a means by which communities and schools can work together to ensure that schools draw on the knowledge and resources of communities to create diverse approaches to learning. Communities and schools may take on different roles in supporting one another to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to engage. By developing curriculum on a local level and with a local community the system stands a far better chance of meeting the needs of all children.

Finally, it is crucially important to understand that the Area Based Curriculum approach does not only apply to areas where children do not currently achieve. Nor does it only apply to areas with diverse or deprived communities. Rather it is based on an assumption that *all* areas have something to offer the school curriculum, and that *all* local knowledges (including those that may seem in accord with the dominant national 'cannon') are worth addressing in the school curriculum. Children growing up in affluent middle class areas should be given as much opportunity to think about why those areas are the way they are, to meet adults from a range of occupations and expertises, to learn outside the classroom in unusual places and to critically place themselves in relation to alternative ways of knowing as those in diverse, multicultural or disadvantaged areas.

Children's learning will always be mediated by the world they experience outside of school.

SECTION 3: *Why are areas so important in education?*

This section briefly outlines some of the arguments as to why the formal education system must, despite the dangers discussed in the previous section, take place seriously into account.

PLACES ARE ENGAGED IN EDUCATION WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT

Regardless of whether policymakers feel that a place has the right kinds of infrastructure, economy, culture or language to support children's learning, that place will deeply affect what children bring to school, and how they interpret what they find there.

The very tendency to see places as problems in education is underpinned by an acknowledgement of the important role that areas play in education. Perhaps more than any other public service institutions, schools are inextricably linked both to geographical area and to places as they are constructed and experienced. Catchment areas, the model of school governorship, the 'parish like' nature of their presence in every locality, the importance of parental engagement to the educational success of children, and the fact that children attend school every day during term time, are factors that not only reflect but define local areas.

Areas, therefore, *have* to be taken into consideration when thinking about the quality and effectiveness of schooling and education. It is not as simple as parachuting financial and professional resources in and providing a national entitlement in terms of knowledge, content and teaching resources (although exclusive concentration on what is measurable, comparable and abstractable from schools and from children's learning can encourage such a view). Children's learning will always be mediated by the world they experience outside of school.

BENEFITS IN ENGAGING PLACE IN EDUCATION

Aside from the unavoidable impact of place on education, there are additionally a number of rationales for the benefits of taking place into serious account in education — and schooling in particular. These break down into two arguments:

- the positive impact that the engagement of an area can have on the school's educational agenda
- the positive impact that engagement with a school can have on the wider area

...it is well established that children's health, well-being, home life, and relationships with other students, are intimately connected to their ability to learn and achieve academically.

HOW COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT CAN HELP SCHOOLS

The benefits of parental involvement in schooling, including positive impact on attainment levels, have become well established in recent years (see, for example, **Feinstein et. al.**, 2008). This value of parental involvement has been enshrined in government policy (e.g.in the New Labour government's 2005 and 2009 Education White Papers; and more recently in the Coalition government's commitment to Free Schools). There is also evidence that children's learning benefits when not only their parents but their wider communities are interested in and value learning, making the dominant standards agenda in schools increasingly reliant on local engagement to achieve its ends (**Craig**, 2005).

Beyond parental involvement, there has been a lot of interest in the benefits of schools engaging with employers to the educational and real world outcomes of children and young people. An Ofsted review of 14-19 learning under the new Diplomas found that high quality employer engagement 'significantly enhances motivation and learning' (**Ofsted**, 2009).

In addition, the agenda for schools has expanded in recent years, with schools expected to tackle a whole array of social issues such as social cohesion and teenage pregnancy. It is therefore important that schools are able to marshal resources from outside their gates to meet these ends. It remains to be seen whether the coalition government will sustain the emphasis on the broader role of schools in the welfare of children: however, it is well established that children's health, well-being, home life, and relationships with other students, are intimately connected to their ability to learn and achieve academically. Hence the broader remit of schooling is likely to endure.

Attempts to integrate and coordinate Children's Services through local authorities and other public service providers using the Every Child Matters framework have contributed to the wider support of schools in this regard. In addition, the more universalist model of Extended Schooling has sought to locate the school as a site for a range of services and as the focus of efforts to promote social cohesion, well-being and equality for communities. The focus here, however, is resolutely on what the school can do for the community, rather than what the community might be able to offer the educational mission of the school. We need to go further if we are to make use of the untapped resources held in communities and local areas but outside of local government control.

The social mixing and mutual learning generated via a wider network of people getting involved in the life of the school, building relationships, and working together toward common goals, may also increase levels of social capital, and promote community resilience to a range of actual and potential contemporary socio-economic changes and challenges.

HOW INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS CAN HELP THE COMMUNITY

The benefits of a more meaningful engagement between schools and their places of location are not one way. Communities and the individuals within them also benefit from participation in civic life. Participation is widely considered to improve social cohesion and public services, as well as provide individuals with increased self esteem, confidence and wellbeing (see **Brodie et. al.**, 2009). The social mixing and mutual learning generated via a wider network of people getting involved in the life of the school, building relationships, and working together toward common goals, may also increase levels of social capital, and promote community resilience to a range of actual and potential contemporary socio-economic changes and challenges. Schools provide a unique space for this collective activity to take place.

There are also instrumental benefits to stakeholders: for parents in their children's better engagement with schooling (and potential impact on attainment); for employers in being able to input to the curriculum and contribute directly to the development of the knowledge and skills young people need for the workplace; and for teachers in the professional development involved.

SECTION 4: *The particular importance of curriculum*

We have briefly reviewed just some of the reasons why we believe that place should be taken into serious account by the formal education system. But how do we begin and on what basis?

As the title of this document indicates, of all the different aspects of schooling that might be addressed, our focus is on curriculum. As we set out in Section 1 our definition of curriculum includes both the explicit and implicit dimensions: the schemes of work, and the cultures and behaviours embodied by the school.

Why focus on curriculum?

Firstly, RSA agendas and expertise in education have in large part focussed on curriculum, and as a result of our previous work we understand and are convinced by the power and importance of local curriculum design.

Secondly, we see curriculum innovation as having the greatest potential to engage wider stakeholders in the education of young people because it sits right at the very core of what schools are there to do. It is notoriously difficult for schools to engage parents, and for other organisations to find meaningful and sustainable ways of working with schools. By involving a wider group of stakeholders in the core business of the school we believe that the Area Based Curriculum may succeed in sustainably and meaningfully engaging a wider community in education where other initiatives have failed.

...we see curriculum not only as an entitlement to a cultural inheritance or a means to the creation of an educated and skilled citizenry and workforce, but as a crucial mechanism for defining what we as a society value.

Finally, and most importantly, we see curriculum not only as an entitlement to a cultural inheritance or a means to the creation of an educated and skilled citizenry and workforce, but as a crucial mechanism for defining what we as a society value. As we have observed, curriculum is inherently political, reflecting economic and socio-historic concerns and priorities with regard to what young people should know. As **Facer** (2009) reflects,

"any discussion of curriculum is a discussion about what knowledge should be made visible and valued through formal education. Because there is only limited space for the encounter with such knowledge, and because the selection of such knowledge will subsequently influence future knowledge development, any discussion of curriculum is highly political" (p. 3).

A multiplicity of knowledges

Hence curriculum are often determined on a national basis, and however broad the consultative process used to establish a common purpose, national curriculum will always represent the views and interests of certain groups to the exclusion of others. Additionally, the idea of a single curriculum (national or otherwise) perpetuates the idea that there is one kind of knowledge that schools should impart. Our argument is that knowledges are multiple, overlapping and multi-dimensional. The official, national, canon of knowledge is but one of many that young people — and everyone else — do and could encounter. An Area Based Curriculum would not seek to replace this national knowledge with more locally determined knowledge, but to recognise that schools can and should engage with a multiplicity of knowledges to equip young people to understand themselves, their communities, and their worlds more fully.

Structurally, however, an area based approach to curriculum should not be seen as an 'add on' to the main curriculum, as a short term project, or as applying only to aspects of the curriculum such as the humanities, citizenship and the arts where curriculum innovation is so often safely located. The principles and arguments below apply equally across the curriculum, including to the high status, 'core' subjects of English, Maths and Science, for which real opportunities exist in the creation and recognition of authentic and situated learning experiences (see, for example, **Taylor**, 2009).

...the involvement of local employers, other professionals, members of minority ethnic or language communities, experts in local history or geography, and myriad other people and groups can significantly increase the range and depth of expertise and knowledge available to young people.

SECTION 5: *Imagining an Area Based Curriculum*

The primary challenge to those engaged in Area Based Curriculum development is to think more creatively about how to use the curriculum to engage positively with the three dimensions of areas that are so often considered in a negative light. The following section outlines various possibilities and challenges in thinking differently about doing this and is structured around the three aspects to area that we sketched at the outset: *the people* involved with curriculum development and enactment; *the places* where the curriculum is taught, learned and developed; and *the cultural and knowledge basis* of the locality. The principles for action listed at the end of this document are derived directly from the proposed approaches outlined in this section.

THE PEOPLE

Opportunities

We would argue that the inclusion of a more diverse range of people who live in an area in the design and enactment of the curriculum has a positive benefit in five major ways.

Firstly, there are educational benefits to having a wide range of people involved in children's learning. We have already discussed the benefit of parental involvement to academic attainment. But the involvement of local employers, other professionals, members of minority ethnic or language communities, experts in local history or geography, and myriad other people and groups can significantly increase the range and depth of expertise and knowledge available to young people.

Secondly, there are personal gains for young people in working with a wide range of adults as part of their core formal education. Social capital, employability, social skills, and confidence are all lauded as benefits of work experience and other initiatives that put students in contact with a range of adults from outside the school. Longitudinal evidence from schemes such as Career Academies shows that the impact of this can be significant gains in earning potential, even where academic success in school is not impacted (**MDRC**, 2008). It has been repeatedly demonstrated that those with better and wider connections are more likely to be in employment, to enjoy better health outcomes, and to report themselves as being happy (**Putnam**, 2000, **Woolcock**, 2001). We propose moving beyond the occasional and often incidental contact between children and adults through school by embedding contact between children's learning and a wider network of adults in the core business of curriculum creation and enactment.

Thirdly, there is a democratic opportunity for people in a local area to have a say in what they think it is important for young people to know, and for a diversity of knowledges to be recognised in the school curriculum. Groups or individuals who may not be able to offer much expertise in the content of the nationally defined curriculum, may find themselves experts in languages spoken locally, cultural activities of certain communities, the processes of local industry or local knowledge and history, thus raising the status, participation, and representation of previously marginalized groups or individuals and their children.

The involvement of a broader community in the creation and enactment of curriculum could anchor the curriculum more securely in the local area and community and allow that wider community to act in the interests of all children in a local area.

Fourth, the participation of a wide range of adults in the life of a school increases the levels and opportunities for civic participation in local areas. The civic awareness, confidence and skills of young people would also benefit from more substantial engagement with the world outside school. The idea of citizens engaging with public services to create more value is becoming increasingly familiar via theories of co-creation and the Big Society (see, for example, **Boyle et. al.**, 2010). While we would wish to stress the role of institutions and state services as enabling and supporting such activities, we see the potential of civic and collective activities around the curriculum as facilitative of empowerment and community cohesion within and without schools.

Finally, schools working with a more diverse range of stakeholders as well as with one another in a local area could play an important role in tempering the segregation and competitive isolationism that could result from increased marketisation of schooling (potentially exacerbated by the coalition government's move to allow high achieving schools to become academies, and the expansion of the Free Schools model). The Area Based Curriculum approach contests the dominant view of parents as simply the consumers or clients of education services, and also of parents as the only local stakeholders that should engage with schools. The involvement of a broader community in the creation and enactment of curriculum could anchor the curriculum more securely in the local area and community and allow that wider community to act in the interests of all children in a local area.

CHALLENGES

Discussions that involve re-thinking who can and should be involved with the education of children immediately raise a number of challenges:

1. the increasingly restrictive regulation of access of adults to children
2. a perceived threat to the professionalism of the teacher
3. how to ensure that decisions about curriculum are representative and include groups not usually engaged or represented in such processes
4. how to ensure that local individuals and organizations, particularly poor families, are not simply 'commandeered' by schools in the service of the dominant national agenda
5. how to ensure that young people's needs remain central

SOLUTIONS

The first challenge concerning health and safety and access to children is largely a logistical and bureaucratic issue, although a significant one. It can be overcome with the support of Local Authorities and schools working together with local partners to share the burden of ensuring the necessary permissions and checks are in place. This collective approach is essential, and may beget further discussion about how communities (including parents, schools and others) choose to go about keeping their children safe; whether typical bureaucratic procedures are either necessary or sufficient; and what level of risk might be deemed tolerable.

...a form of teacher professionalism that is rooted in their role as creative curriculum developers and pedagogical experts as well as activist professionals operating on behalf of a community could provide additional opportunities for teachers to develop a democratic professionalism.

With regard to possible perceived challenges to teacher professionalism, teachers and the unions that represent them have fought hard to establish and protect their role as professionals. There remain a variety of threats to this positioning, however, including the 'managerialisation' of education since the 1980s. Policies such as the national strategies and National Curriculum, growing focus on performance and the shift to standards-based teacher training, have been seen by some as *"an unacceptable attack on teacher autonomy and teacher creativity, transforming teachers from professionals to technicians"*. (**Whitty**, 2006, p. 12).

Hence the proposition of a curriculum that is owned in partnership with a range of non-teacher stakeholders might be seen as one that threatens teachers' professional identity and autonomy. However, we believe that this would be a misconception. The idea that the school curriculum be in part locally developed, designed, and enacted in partnership with other stakeholders represents a significant opportunity for continued professional development. It opens up opportunity for teachers and other educational professionals in schools to become more deeply and creatively involved in the re-thinking and development of curriculum; development in which they would necessarily retain an integral place. Hence this work would enhance and support their role as education professionals in their schools and wider communities.

Further, a form of teacher professionalism that is rooted in their role as creative curriculum developers and pedagogical experts as well as activist professionals operating *on behalf of a community* could provide additional opportunities for teachers to develop a democratic professionalism. Democratic professionalism emphasises accessibility of the profession and sharing of skills, an activist role within and on behalf of the communities served. The professional identity of teachers does not therefore need to be that of the traditional, closed, privileged professions; nor need it be limited to delivering their subject specialism within the confines set by government.

The third concern over how to ensure that local decision making is not dominated by the 'usual suspects' is a challenging one, demanding reflection on what we mean by 'community'. In Section 1 we acknowledged the difficulties of defining who constitutes 'the community', but argued that the loose definition of 'people who live in an area' is a useful place to start for the purposes of an Area Based Curriculum. However, this challenges those working for an Area Based Curriculum to ensure that *all* people who live in an area are able to input, including those not usually engaged in such initiatives and/or impeded from doing so by factors such as language, time, work inflexibility and so on. Hence logistical considerations will need to be addressed to ensure inclusion. Further, while it is important that more traditionally involved groups such as middle class parents, business leaders or well organized special interest groups are included too, it needs to be ensured that particular voices do not dominate agendas.

Schools need, in particular, to ensure that they are looking beyond their own institutional agendas if they are going to enter into meaningful relationships with community partners.

There is no single solution to this problem and approaches will undoubtedly look different depending on the area in question. Structures that bring representatives of different constituencies together on a council or board offer a partial solution, but there are difficulties with: a) the concepts of representation and 'voice' which tend to assume a uniformity of views within different constituencies; and b) with the cost, maintenance, commitment and leadership burdens such structures could impose on communities. We would propose at a minimum that those engaging in an Area Based Curriculum commit to finding ways to overcome obstacles to involving the groups and individuals that are least engaged with schools. These groups are likely to be those whose knowledges and cultures are furthest from the dominant agenda of the school (groups with low literacy, non-native English speakers, ethnic and religious minorities, for example) and whose inclusion may therefore challenge dominant assumptions about curriculum.

The fourth challenge of ensuring that community partners are not simply commandeered to service a school agenda driven by national policies requires a slightly different approach. Effective partnership working between schools and external partners requires all parties to approach the work in a collaborative spirit. A good starting point is the establishment of expectations and requirements for partnerships in a set of principles, or a charter, to which all partners subscribe at the beginning of the curriculum development work. The identification of partnerships on the basis of mutual concerns, ambitions or topics for enquiry (around a particular social problem or area of interest) may also help to ensure that the partners are really working together to a common end. Schools need, in particular, to ensure that they are looking beyond their own institutional agendas if they are going to enter into meaningful relationships with community partners.

With regard to ensuring that working class families are not simply brought into a dominant professional set of assumptions through deeper engagement with schools, as some researchers have warned against (e.g. **Reay**, 2004), the role of the teacher as a professional working on behalf of the whole community is a very important one. Professional development and training will be required in many cases to ensure that teachers are able to transcend dominant assumptions about the hierarchical role of the school and the community it serves. The Area Based Curriculum model takes as its starting point the knowledge, expertise and ambition of the community around the school, and so assumes a more equal relationship from the start. However, the assumptions, cultures and structures of the school may be fundamentally challenged by any community oriented approach, and will require support and ongoing local collective commitment if the changes are to be sustained.

Nevertheless, the engagement and democratic space that the structures of the Area Based Curriculum have the potential to open up would, we hope, provide the opportunity for more meaningful action and organisation on the part of those previously marginalised by the system. These spaces are essential to providing a better engagement between school and community, but how this works, and how it looks, will vary according to the area in question.

...the challenge will be for teachers and other practitioners to listen equally to a variety of young people, and specifically those with ideas that teachers find least palatable, least compatible with received ideas about the curriculum, and most challenging to the assumptions behind the work.

Finally, it is logical to assume that an Area Based Curriculum includes young people as partners, both in order to establish the starting point for curriculum, which must include the area as experienced by young people, and in order to include the young people's knowledges on the same basis as diverse local adult knowledges. It is important that the diversity of young people's experiences and knowledges is considered, and to acknowledge the limitations of notions of 'voice' wherein it might be assumed that one young person can speak for others. In particular, the challenge will be for teachers and other practitioners to listen equally to a variety of young people, and specifically those with ideas that teachers find least palatable, least compatible with received ideas about the curriculum, and most challenging to the assumptions behind the work. As we have already suggested above in terms of how to ensure that sections of the community that are rarely engaged in school have their say, the very nature of the proposed work insists that challenging and reticent voices are valued.

In our wider definition of the curriculum, there is scope for young people to become involved in the design and implementation of the work: behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, places, and people alongside the content of what is taught, are potential areas for development in partnership with students. However, projects should be careful to ensure that the processes and experiences by which young people are engaged is not limited to 'servicing' the success of the curriculum, but should also be beneficial to them — educationally, and personally. The partnerships should be designed such that they contribute to young people's skills, engagement, confidence and sense of ownership over their learning, with the processes evaluated against these criteria.

Additionally, literature around student voice highlights the importance of networks between organisations and different people, and developing the spaces and practices by which to do this (**Fielding**, 2004). It would therefore seem important not only to ensure that schools involved are talking to the community partners they are working with, but also with each other; that the young people in each school are able to interact with the young people from the other schools; and that all the young people have opportunities to have meaningful dialogue with community partners, teachers, parents, and so forth. This is key if we are to generate conversations between all partners that embody the importance we have placed on valuing all knowledges and 'knowers' equally.

THE PLACES

Opportunities

Establishing an area as a place of learning in its own right is probably the easiest dimension of an Area Based Curriculum for people to understand. The potential is easy to see: using the local area and its residents as a resource for learning; encouraging children to experience and value learning beyond the school gates and school day; using the local to illuminate wider questions and principles of learning; and allowing for more authentic experiences that enable children to see the point of what they are learning.

We are talking about learning happening in local business premises, healthcare settings and sports clubs; in local streets, religious institutions and even people's homes and back gardens.

The Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto (2006) represents a well established consensus around the benefit and desirability of young people learning outdoors for wellbeing, memorable learning experiences and respect for an engagement with their outdoor environments. Separately, research conducted by organizations like the Museums, Libraries and Archives Partnership frequently emphasizes the importance of authenticity and situatedness of museum and gallery learning, and learning in cultural settings. Such education, when done well, is found to be more engaging for a wider range of learners, more memorable and diverse than classroom learning alone. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (**CABE**) and English Heritage teamed up to conduct some research in support of their joint Engaging Places programme, finding that nine out of ten children find that they remember more from a school visit than from a classroom lesson (**CABE**, 2009).

The opportunity for an Area Based Curriculum is to push the boundaries in thinking about where learning could happen in a local area. We're not talking about just parks and museums, important though they will be. We are talking about learning happening in local business premises, healthcare settings and sports clubs; in local streets, religious institutions and even people's homes and back gardens. Likewise, we are not just talking about taking young people to learn outside school, but also bringing outside stakeholders into the school to supply curriculum content. In this sense the Area Based Curriculum deconstructs the boundaries of the school and the assumption that children are to be physically separated from the rest of society. Moreover, the Area Based Curriculum challenges the traditional confines of valid content, demanding that local heritage be taken seriously as constitutive of young people's identities — for example the local trade union history, credit co-op or mosque demands as much attention as do the more traditional vehicles for the expression of social history (e.g. museums and galleries). The possibilities really are endless and all local areas have numerous places that are not yet exploited as places for learning.

Challenges

Again, the major challenges to recognising and building on local areas as learning environments are both pragmatic and conceptual. The pragmatic challenges come in the form of the financial cost of necessary transport and teacher cover required to take children out of school on school trips or visits; and the time consuming bureaucratic processes such as risk assessments.

The more profound conceptual challenge made to engaging areas more fully in children's learning is that areas are unequal in what they have to offer: some areas are simply richer in resources for learning (especially with regard to nationally determined knowledge) than others. Rural areas will have better green spaces at their disposal, and areas with traditionally high cultural status and large cities will have greater resources to offer than small commuter towns, large estates and more isolated regions. How can children in such 'ordinary areas' compete if their education is to be determined by the resources found in their local areas?

Too often children are shipped out to high status locations when locally based resources are available, and this can contribute to a deficit view of the areas where children live.

Solutions

There are three responses to these challenges.

Firstly, the pragmatic problems could again be addressed through Local Authority and joint school and community efforts to make it easier for teachers and students to get out of school. Based on recommendations from the evaluation of our pilot project in Manchester this could include: city wide risk assessment procedures to reduce the burden on individual schools and teachers; free or subsidized public transport; guidance and collaboration on cover arrangements; and so on. But the pragmatic problems often encountered by schools transporting children a long way away from school and home can also be mitigated by better use of local facilities and an imaginative view of how pupils can learn from the local environment. Too often children are shipped out to high status locations when locally based resources are available, and this can contribute to a deficit view of the areas where children live. Much can be learned in the immediate vicinity of a school, especially when the curriculum is an area based one drawing on local experiences and expertise. CABE's Engaging Places project found that a group of schools in Coventry were able to organise ten educational trips per pupil out to the local area over the course of a year, at an average cost of 80 pence per pupil per trip.

In response to the problem of some areas having more to offer than others, it is fundamentally important that we think about what counts as a resource for learning in different curriculum models. Under a traditional National Curriculum model with a highly prescribed set of learning outcomes and content to be covered, children living in areas far from locations held in high national esteem with museums and galleries containing national treasures are indeed disadvantaged. If children must learn about the Great Fire of London then those close to the Museum of London with its tailored exhibitions for children will be at an advantage. If the challenge is instead for children to learn in depth about another culture and language to their own and reflect upon the meanings and implications of a multicultural society then another set of children — probably those in the multicultural inner cities and estates of cities in the north and the midlands — will find themselves surrounded by rich resources for learning, whereas those living in white, leafy suburbs may not. Hence every area has different advantages and potential expertise if schools are willing to use the flexibility already available in the National Curriculum imaginatively.

It should also be acknowledged that an Area Based Curriculum approach does not preclude the inclusion of learning and trips outside of the local area. It merely argues that the resources that can be found locally must be recognised as valuable as well. The important question is how the different resources — and by implication the different knowledges — are brought together, and who decides on their relevant importance in different contexts. In other words, every child should be able to experience local, regional, national and global learning opportunities. How these things relate and are constructed will be different for different areas and for all children. If we care about equality we must ensure that how we approach these dimensions is taken with the context of children's lives in mind rather than assuming that only traditionally high status locations are of value.

...children in different places will bring different kinds of experience and knowledge into school, and will require different inputs from school in order equalise knowledge and opportunities with children elsewhere.

Finally, it is important to consider what counts as an area: big cities may contain the best museums that many children living in rural areas cannot easily access, but children living in estates on the outskirts of large cities with many resources often rarely visit the numerous high status institutions in the city, remaining instead in their own neighbourhoods. The RSA's pilot work in Manchester was inspired by just such a situation where young people living in the Greater Manchester area were found rarely to access the learning opportunities in the city centre (**Facer**, 2009a). An area based approach would stimulate a renewed look at what is available locally, regionally and nationally so that all children — regardless of their background or locality — are offered opportunities to learn outside of school both locally and further afield.

THE CONTENT

Opportunities

An Area Based Curriculum approach to the content of the curriculum has two facets: the first and most important is space for a local sense of what young people in an area need to learn; and the second is the use of the context of the area — its history, cultures, future, languages, geography, economy etc. — as a framework for learning.

The first element is crucial to understanding the idea of an Area Based Curriculum. Curriculum in this sense stops being about transferring certain knowledge from one generation to the next, and starts to be understood as an intervention that is intended to meet particular aims. The National Curriculum provides an example of this, with content and assessment evolving to meet contemporary socio-economic agendas.

We argue that important though these national agendas are, they should be balanced by more local ones at various levels: what do children in Tower Hamlets need to or want to learn at school in order to thrive in the real world? Is it precisely the same as what children in Cumbria need to or want to learn? Some of it will be, but some things will be different. And not necessarily because all these children will end up living in the same place in which they went to school; but rather because children in different places will bring different kinds of experience and knowledge into school, and will require different inputs from school in order to equalise knowledge and opportunities with children elsewhere.

Additionally, using the local area as a context for inspiration and enquiry for the content of the curriculum, learning can be made more meaningful for young people and opportunities for authentic learning experiences are increased.

...the National Curriculum is in fact far more flexible than many people think it is: many ordinary primary and secondary schools are engaged in major curriculum innovation that takes advantage of this flexibility whilst meeting statutory requirements that ensure a national entitlement for every child.

Challenges

Using local context as a framework for deciding both educational aims and curriculum content raises the pragmatic challenge that the National Curriculum, accountability regime and qualifications frameworks limit the ability of schools to change the curriculum in such fundamental ways.

A further and more profound challenge lies with the importance of ensuring that excluded groups are not further disadvantaged by not being provided with access to high status or 'powerful' knowledges that they need to access elite universities and professions (**Young**, 2007). It has often been asserted that devotion of significant time and resources to specific local knowledges (heritage language, for example) further disadvantages children from certain groups by distracting them from, and reducing time spent on, the key curriculum subjects that may facilitate social mobility. Hence too much attention to the local may deepen, rather than mitigate, social and educational inequalities. This cuts to the very heart of the education debate and requires careful attention.

Finally, there is risk inherent in focussing on any dimension of education that you do so to the exclusion of all others. Young people are increasingly part of global communities, and some aspects of their identities — and their opportunities in life — are formed not by where they live but by who they identify with outside their local areas, often through digital or traditional media. Focusing exclusively on what is geographically local risks reducing the opportunity this holds for young people to escape the geographical context they find themselves in. It also risks becoming even less relevant than the national framework that we have already argued is limited in its ability fully to meet the needs of many young people.

Solutions

Our counter to the pragmatic challenge is that the National Curriculum is in fact far more flexible than many people think it is: many ordinary primary and secondary schools are engaged in major curriculum innovation that takes advantage of this flexibility whilst meeting statutory requirements that ensure a national entitlement for every child. Local authority support, networks of schools in a local area, and networked monitoring and evaluation of the work will support individual schools in taking the risks that this kind of work entails.

Powerful knowledge does not need to be one dimensional, and we would argue that being able to engage with multiple knowledges has the potential to be more empowering for young people than the mere mastery of one form.

With regard to the argument that disadvantaged children require access to powerful knowledges, we would argue that curriculum is not always the zero sum game that it is so often portrayed as being. Engaging children through a local curriculum does not necessarily mean replacing the content of the National Curriculum and can indeed be used as a way to engage children with wider knowledge. Indeed this will hardly be a new idea to many teachers. As we have stated, it is not only obvious subjects like the humanities and citizenship that can be engaged by using local areas as contexts. Science can be taught through looking at its application in local industries or the health service; music through the exploration of different musical traditions in an area; languages through engaging with minority language communities; mathematics through performing statistical analyses on local issues and so on. We envisage that these traditional learning goals could be met more easily through an area based framework for learning.

Importantly, however, we reiterate that a national entitlement to knowledge may be necessary but insufficient to serve the purposes of allowing all children to reach their potential. The recognition of locally constructed knowledges and contexts — be they cultural, industrial, historical or other — has positive benefits for the self esteem and status for groups traditionally marginalized by the National Curriculum, and is essential in a democratic system that seeks to promote equality. There is little point arguing about the niceties of whether to teach children about music through Mozart or Bangla if the children are not at school or are not listening. We would argue for a focus on engagement with a diversity of knowledges as the most important starting point for equitable distribution of educational opportunity.

Finally, by understanding their local area and subjective experience in the context of the national and global, young people will be better equipped to position themselves and their goals in relation to both those frames. Understanding the value and limitations of their immediate context should challenge and stretch previously held assumptions and will enable young people to broaden and shape their horizons. Powerful knowledge does not need to be one dimensional, and we would argue that being able to engage with multiple knowledges has the potential to be more empowering for young people than the mere mastery of one form. This is potentially the most important aspect of the idea of an Area Based Curriculum: its potential to enable young people to reflect constructively on their identities and place in the world, and to shape that world and their own futures.

...if we are to take seriously the idea that curriculum is about more than learning predetermined content and regurgitating it in exams, then we need to explore alternative models of assessment that allow the creativity, practical application and critical positioning of the Area Based Curriculum to be measured and recognised.

SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

We have dealt with the opportunities and challenges that are raised by thinking differently about the *people*, the *places*, and the *knowledges* and *cultures* that are implied by an area. However, there are a number of additional areas for consideration that are not specific to an Area Based Curriculum, but are worth briefly mentioning here.

Pedagogy

Any fundamental challenge to the way that schools go about doing things can have pedagogical implications, and curriculum design is not the least of these. The Area Based Curriculum model that we have outlined here certainly implies enquiry based learning, critical pedagogies and real world experience as potentially compatible approaches. Additionally, the diversification of kinds of knowledges will challenge assumptions of who is the expert in the classroom, especially where the norm has previously been that of a subject specialist teacher. The increased access to information through digital technologies has already challenged what the most useful role of the teacher should be and an Area Based Curriculum will build on these conversations.

Structure

Traditional, subject based curriculum structures bring with them a set of assumptions about when, where, and with whom learning happens in a school. So it follows that if we challenge who, where and what is engaged with in the core curriculum we will also need to think again about the structure of that curriculum. Schools working on Opening Minds approaches have found thematic, project based structures to be useful when the curriculum requires learning experiences based in real world activities. However, there is nothing in the Area Based Curriculum that *requires* that schools change the structure of their curriculum if they prefer to teach through traditional subject boundaries.

Assessment

Current national assessment models are set up to measure student attainment competitively against a common curriculum. Clearly, an Area Based Curriculum already requires that we think again about what the curriculum is there to achieve, and therefore we must think differently about how we assess it. Of course the nationally determined knowledge may continue to be assessed nationally, and more diverse knowledges should deepen rather than undermine the acquisition of what young people require to engage with nationally determined assessment. But if we are to take seriously the idea that curriculum is about more than learning predetermined content and regurgitating it in exams, then we need to explore alternative models of assessment that allow the creativity, practical application and critical positioning of the Area Based Curriculum to be measured and recognised.

SECTION 6: *Summary*

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

On the basis of the analysis above, we propose that an Area Based Curriculum should be based initially on the following key principles:

1. There is not a single, uniform model that can be applied across areas. Any local area should develop and own its own curriculum designed to address the specific history, socio-economic context, needs and resources of the locality.

2. An approach to local areas that starts by mapping the resources, opportunities and expertise already held within an area, and the 'lived worlds' of the young people in the area.

3. Curriculum co-developed in collaborative and equal partnerships between schools, and community partners (organisations, groups, or individuals), supported by a charter of principles.

4. The engagement of young people as partners in curriculum development, and an insistence on ensuring the involvement of those young people least engaged in school.

5. The starting point for community engagement being those groups least often engaged or heard in the formal education sector.

6. Monitoring of experiences and indicators of engagement and achievement among pupils learning from the Area Based Curriculum.

7. Provision of support for curriculum design and partnership skills, and opportunities for the development of activist professionalism in teachers and community practitioners.

8. A critical approach to the relationship between the local, national and global dimensions of learning, focusing on the links between these.

9. An action research approach that includes on-going processes of: mapping the terrain and need; collaborative approaches to monitoring and evaluation; reflection and refinement.

10. A locally collective approach to solving the practical barriers to the Area Based Curriculum, including developing area wide arrangements for teacher cover, risk assessments, safe-guarding, sharing contacts and so on.

11. The promotion of a critical approach in young people to multiple (local, regional, national, global and other) knowledge discourses to ensure they are able to access and to shape their multiple identities and worlds.

...we approach this work in a spirit of enquiry and pose a range of questions that we hope to answer through practical attempts to implement Area Based Curriculum.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Although we propose the above principles as a basis for moving forward, we approach this work in a spirit of enquiry and pose a range of questions that we hope to answer through practical attempts to implement Area Based Curriculum. We will further be exploring the ideas presented in this document with the children and other stakeholders involved with the work; continuing to share findings as we move forward.

Questions emerging from our discussion, and which need to be addressed in any Area Based Curriculum programme, include the following:

- What structures, policies, protocols and systems (e.g. around CRB checks, risk assessments) need to be or can be changed at a local level to facilitate and enable the involvement of a wider range of people in the enactment of an Area Based Curriculum?
- Can mutual and collaborative partnerships be established between school and curriculum partners through a focus on mutual enquiry?
- What can local authorities and decision makers do to make it easier for students to learn outside the classroom?
- What structures might be best to ensure that learning opportunities and resources in localities are recognized, used and shared by schools?
- How do we develop a framework for deciding between local resources and those farther afield?
- How might assumptions about what local, regional, national and global mean, and how they are valued, be challenged and critiqued by practitioners, partners and students?
- What can Local Authorities and networks of stakeholders and schools do to support curriculum innovation in a context of national accountability?
- How can local contexts be engaged to make learning exciting and meaningful even for the traditionally marginalized, without losing equal access to a national entitlement for all children?
- Can we ensure that all children are able to construct their own pathways to success through enabling them to position themselves critically with respect to their local context and their national and global position?

...we hope that the positive experiences of the young people and wider communities in the areas where we work will provoke a reimagining and further debate about what is possible for schools, parents, communities and the relationships between them.

SECTION 7: *Conclusion*

Education is one of the most situated of all public services, and yet schools still struggle to make use of the vast resources afforded by local areas. Many of those local areas are treated by policy makers and schools alike as problems that it would be better to remove children from, rather than as real places of value, with real resources to offer. We assert local communities have the means to be more fully engaged with the education of the children that live there, and that this engagement will benefit pupils and schools.

We argued that the structural exclusion and denial of knowledges and experiences that the current system creates is in part to blame for the educational disengagement that is characteristic of many families, communities and children. The very treatment of areas as problems becomes a self fulfilling prophesy.

The involvement of diverse local stakeholders with education could have countless benefits for young people, schools, communities and teachers. Indeed, if we wish our young people to grow up to be able to critically engage with the world as they find it then we need to do more than provide a national framework of knowledge and skills and additionally ensure that young people can value, criticize, and link the local, regional, national and global contexts they live in. The challenges to doing this are not insignificant, but nor are they insurmountable.

We have laid out here our rationale as to why we need to think differently about the relationship between area and education, and have outlined the challenges to achieving what we propose. The Area Based Curriculum is very deliberately a proposal for action research, not for policy change at national level. However, we hope that the positive experiences of the young people and wider communities in the areas where we work will provoke a reimagining and further debate about what is possible for schools, parents, communities and the relationships between them.

For more information about the Area Based Curriculum or the RSA's other education work please email education@rsa.org.uk or visit the RSA Projects website at www.thersa.org/projects.

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