
West Town Primary School and Peterborough Cathedral

PETERBOROUGH CURRICULUM CASE STUDY



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Introduction – what is an Area Based Curriculum Project?

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

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

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

The school

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

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

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

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

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



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

The community partner

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

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

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Officer, Peterborough Cathedral

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

The partnership

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

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

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

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

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

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher West Town Primary School

The project

Summary

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

Peterborough Cathedral



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

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

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

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

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

Nikki Cherry, Head teacher, West Town Primary School

The goals

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

Specifically the project aimed to:

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

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

For the Cathedral goals included:

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

Activities

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

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

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

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

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

Mark Tomlins, Schools and Community Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

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

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

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

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

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

How is this different from what schools normally do?

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

Hannah Quinn, Deputy Head, West Town Primary School

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

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

Impact

On students

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

Estella Todisco, teacher, West Town Primary School

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

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

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

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

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

On teachers

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

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

Teacher, West Town Primary School

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

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

Teacher, West Town Primary School

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

On the wider school

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

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

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

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

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

Hannah Quinn, Deputy Headteacher, West Town Primary School

What does it mean and what have we learned?

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

Nikki Cherry, Headteacher, West Town Primary School

This project demonstrates two key points:

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

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

What next?

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

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

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

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

Food for thought

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

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



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