

LESSONS FOR LOCALISM

THE RSA AREA BASED CURRICULUM

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RSA

Projects



BACKGROUND

The coalition government proposes to encourage and free up local participation, to empower local people to take responsibility for the shape and provision of services that matter to them. However, such intentions raise a range of challenges, both philosophical and practical. At the RSA we have developed a specific education intervention, the Area Based Curriculum, which provides a case study for the localism agenda in both intention and practice. This work has only just begun implementation but is already generating exciting teaching practice, networks and outcomes. The development of the project to this stage has revealed a number of interesting dilemmas that we seek to share here. Alongside significant successes, our experiences in developing this intervention raise specific questions pertinent for the government's programme of devolution and public service reform. These questions relate to ownership, participation, democracy and power. We will show that adequate reflection on these questions, and attention to addressing the challenges they raise, is vital if the 'Big Society' is ever to be more than ambitious rhetoric.

Introduced by David Cameron in July 2010, the idea of the Big Society embraces both localism and agency in a vision in which citizens are engaged in setting up and running post offices, libraries, schools, housing projects and more. Former Big Society 'tsar' Nat Wei indicates that the first stage of creating such a society will involve steps to "re-engineer parts of government so that more power is shifted to the localities and to the frontline" (Wei, 2011). Public service reforms such as devolving NHS commissioning to consortia of GPs, and facilitating the establishment of state-funded Free Schools by parents, local groups, teachers, businesses or faith groups, are examples of this decentralisation agenda.

Alongside public service reform and devolution, the coalition government also aspires to empower individuals and communities: "giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area." (Cabinet Office, 2011a). David Cameron states he wants government to "stop treating everyone like children who are incapable of taking their own decisions. Instead, let's treat adults like adults and give them more responsibility over their lives." (Cameron, 2011). In order to make this a reality, Big Society advocates acknowledge that direct government intervention will be necessary: initiatives such as the national citizenship service and community organisers will, it is argued, increase the capacity of citizens to become involved in civic life. "We are not naively hoping the seeds will grow everywhere of their own accord; we are helping to nurture them." (Cameron, 2011).

These values and ambitions resonate strongly with those of the RSA, which for 250 years has provided a forum for progressive thinking and social action, and which (in its contemporary '21st Century Enlightenment' mission) endeavours to realise human potential, and to mobilise the social capital of its 27,000-strong Fellowship for the social good. The RSA's education programme reflects this agenda of realising human capability, and has consequently focused on educational engagement as a precursor to attainment, and on democracy and empowerment in and through education. These latter concerns, coupled with an interest in devolution of power and decision-making, underpin our Area Based Curriculum intervention. This curriculum is an example of localism in action. We seek to draw out some of the challenges arising in its implementation in order to shed light on the profound issues with which policymakers must grapple to realise any vision of a more participative society.

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THE RSA'S 'AREA BASED CURRICULUM'

Aims

The RSA's Area Based Curriculum is based on two key ideas. Firstly, it uses the locality to illustrate the content of the National Curriculum, making the latter more relevant and engaging to young people, and increasing their sense of identity with, and understanding of, the local area. Secondly, the curriculum is owned and created locally, by multiple stakeholders (including for example parents, pupils, local businesses and organisations, community groups and so on).

The Area Based Curriculum seeks to challenge dominant views of a top down, hierarchical curriculum by supporting schools and their local communities to develop their own curriculum. By tasking schools and communities to design curriculum together using the local area as a stimulus it was hoped that they would create parts of the curriculum that more readily engaged students from all backgrounds.

Hence the Area Based Curriculum directly reflects Big Society intentions of

- decentralisation
- community decision making
- local ownership of public services
- building capacity of individuals and groups
- participation of greater numbers of people in civic life

Approach

We have trialled the Area Based Curriculum in a range of schools with a commitment to curriculum innovation, previously in Manchester, and currently in Peterborough. Central to the Area Based Curriculum's approach is the aim of involving diverse groups in co-creation of the curriculum with schools. The resultant curriculum projects not only involve the local area as subject matter, with learning taking place in and around the local area, but are designed by diverse constituents represented in a locality. Importantly, as well as engaging those traditionally well-represented in educational circles (heritage institutions and organisations, teachers, certain groups of parents), we sought to involve community and parent groups whose voices are less frequently heard.

THE STORY SO FAR

At the time of writing the five schools working with the RSA in Peterborough are beginning to adopt the curriculum projects that they have developed in partnership with other local organisations over the past year. During this time all five schools have made multiple links with a variety of local partners including among others Peterborough United Football Club, the Red Cross in Peterborough, sheltered accommodation providers close to schools and heritage organisations. Three of the schools are beginning to implement projects that have been co-designed by teachers and staff from partner organisations, and two further schools have projects in development.

Our publication *Engaging the Local* (RSA, 2010) argued that policy makers and the formal education sector more broadly too often regard local areas as barriers to children's achievement, leading to a damaging deficit view of children and their families. The schools we are working with, on the other hand, have exhibited a willingness to engage with their local communities both in the immediate area served by the schools and in the wider city in a different way. In particular they are willing to see communities usually perceived as having little to offer the formal education of children as resources for learning.

Our school site, set in the heart of a massive post-second world war show-case housing estate representing the nation's attempt to rebuild a better future for the surviving families of the war — the builders of the estate still live amongst us, some struggling to come to terms with the change in identity of their locality... We will not know what our community knows, cherishes and aspires to unless we engage with it in a way that we have not done so up to now. Exciting prospects to move into the unknown. — Headteacher, Primary School in Peterborough

There has also been an enthusiastic response from a diverse range of local organisations to becoming more involved with schools. In particular the cultural and heritage sectors have shown both the interest and the capacity to work substantively with schools on curriculum; but local businesses, faith groups and public sector providers have also got involved.

The Area Based Curriculum projects designed so far all involve young people in learning through engagement with real world processes and activities in their local area. Projects take the views of young people seriously: already Year 5 students from one junior school have given their opinion on the future of transport in Peterborough to local councillors, and students from another school will be involved in the design of a new education centre in Peterborough Cathedral. As such these projects seek to involve young people not only in learning through their local area, but also in shaping its future.

Initial feedback from schools tells us that the engagement of students with their learning in these topics has been high, and that students value getting to know the staff from partner organisations as they learn about different roles people have in the local area. More data about the impact of the projects on students, schools and partner organisations will be available when the projects are evaluated in the summer and autumn of 2012, but we anticipate improvements in engagement, student social capital and awareness of their local area, and strengthened relations between schools and other local stakeholders.

“involvement is likely to be shaped by social variables such as ethnicity, social class, religion, educational background, nature of occupation, and so on, raising questions about inclusion and democratic representation”

KEY ISSUES ARISING

Alongside significant progress and anticipated positive outcomes of the work for children, schools, and communities, there are two key challenges emerging from this work, which relate to localism more broadly:

- Some groups are more able and/or willing to participate than others
- Who mediates competing groups’ conflicting preferences and values?

These issues are of course linked, and raise key issues about representation, autonomy, accountability and democracy. We will elaborate these points, drawing illustrative examples from our experiences in developing the Area Based Curriculum.

REPRESENTATION: SOME GROUPS ARE MORE ABLE AND/OR WILLING TO PARTICIPATE THAN OTHERS

The RSA Area Based Curriculum model involves work with schools and other partners from a local community to design aspects of the school curriculum that draws on the locality. The ‘consensus’ model optimistically anticipated by the RSA, and apparently envisaged by Big Society proponents, would thereby involve parents, businesses, and voluntary groups in a local area working with schools to provide additional resources and opportunities for enriching young people’s learning and consequent educational attainment.

However, in spite of our awareness that including less well-represented and ‘hard to reach’ groups would be challenging, and our consequent building in of time and strategies to involve such individuals and groups, nevertheless the results in this regard have been limited. We have found that the capacity of different organisations and groups to get involved varies enormously, and has a significant impact on the end result in terms of the nature of the curriculum projects produced. Schools’ approaches to potential partner organisations have been received enthusiastically by heritage sites, faith institutions and arts organisations with a pre-existing educational mandate or offer, whereas responses from parents, minority language groups and local small businesses have been far more limited.

We have identified two main elements to this question of capacity. Firstly, there is the challenge of culture, meaning differences in perceptions of who can and does get involved with what. Organisations with a pre-existing educational mandate are far more likely to hear of an invitation to become involved with the curriculum in local schools and consider that to be something they should become involved with. Other stakeholders – those who are not already involved with schools – will find it much more difficult to even see the point of attending an initial meeting. There are strong assumptions in the minds of many parents, local citizens and even council officials that the curriculum is set by government and that it is the job of schools to provide it to children, and so they understandably struggle to see how they would fit in. As one teacher explained:

[some] parents have a very traditional view of education – they think everything is the job of the school (I am obviously generalising here!). — **Key contact teacher at W* school, first scoping session**

This is likely to be especially true for disenfranchised groups. As was explained:

There were many individuals representing groups that do not have any association with contemporary education, children or young people and therefore felt they wanted to know a little bit more about education prior to any involvement in schools. — **Event feedback from Peterborough City Council from networking event**

Some of the groups won’t engage because they don’t think they have anything to offer – it is the history of immigration. — **Community development worker**

There are issues here about confidence, both in terms of the assertiveness and ‘know-how’ to generate sufficient confidence to interact with schools and teachers, and in terms of a feeling one has something useful and relevant to offer. Those without English as a first language, or who have had negative personal experiences in their own educational histories, may feel embarrassed and/or alienated from involvement with schools; and they and specialist community groups may feel they have little to offer the mainstream English curriculum (Crozier and Reay, 2005). Yet of course, it is precisely these experiences and interests that need articulating to make a local curriculum representative and meaningful.

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1 See Cleaver, F. (1999). Questioning participatory approaches to development. *Journal of International Development*, 11, 597-612 for an excellent critique of participatory development.

2 ActonW3.com, community forum. See <http://www.actonw3.com/default.asp?section=community&app=forum/default.asp>

Thus involvement is likely to be shaped by social variables such as ethnicity, social class, religion, educational background, nature of occupation, and so on, raising questions about inclusion and democratic representation. One parent we spoke to warned of the dangers of self-selection among parents:

Parent reference groups would be made up of people like me. Perhaps better to access parents through other community groups or through the council. — Parent representative on project interest group

Further, teachers were concerned that given the level of diversity in the area, it would be difficult to be representative of all groups at once:

The challenge of working with one group and not others could be sensitive. It was agreed that as with businesses, for this round we would seek to involve these groups in projects primarily developed with other organisations. — Minutes of second school network meeting

Research into participatory development programmes in the developing world can be reflected on here. It has been found that well-meaning attempts over the past 20 years to involve local groups in decision making and planning of development projects tended to entrench existing inequalities by giving disproportionate amounts of additional power to those already well represented in local decision making. Often women, children, less powerful ethnic groups and the economically disadvantaged were found to be excluded from the processes established by external agencies. The lesson is one that should not be forgotten in our own localities.¹

Moreover, in an increasingly commercialised education sector there is also an assumption that relationships with schools should be transactional rather than collaborative in nature: that if anyone outside the school helps the school with their agenda there should be a *quid pro quo*, financially or otherwise. As one community representative remarked in frustration at our expectation of free input:

Everyone wants something for nothing – I can get you people but they will want to be paid. — Community representative

However, more profoundly there is the very genuine question of differential amounts of time and resource that different groups are able to offer. Some agencies and personnel urgently need payment for survival, while others have such gratis activities factored in to their operating model. In our Area Based Curriculum work we have found that small local businesses struggle to engage in a time of restricted finance where there is no direct incentive to do so. Parents, who expressed interest in being involved, have struggled to attend more than one meeting. Such challenges impeded involvement:

These groups have very little resource – perhaps if you wrote to them outlining what they would get out of it. — Community development worker

Such dilemmas around capacity are already evident in debates around other ‘Big Society’ exemplars such as Free Schools. For example, in the case of the newly-founded West London Free School, concern is being expressed by residents on online forums that no one from the South Acton Estate is represented on the school’s trustee board. Another contributor points out that there has been no contact from anyone from the estate, and that there is nothing stopping them from contributing; the response being “what efforts are being made to get single mums there?”² Clearly there are barriers: be it culture, confidence, time and resources, or simply a lack of knowing how, parents from working class backgrounds are less likely to be able to engage than those from middle class backgrounds with strong traditions of educational involvement, and the work flexibility, confidence and networks to make things happen.

Given these barriers to meaningful engagement by many under-represented groups it is clear that substantial intervention is required by external agencies to ensure democracy and equality of representation and ownership of such ‘Big Society initiatives’. This is acknowledged by David Cameron in his launch speech:

And we shouldn’t be naïve enough to think that if the government rolls back and does less, then miraculously society will spring up and do more. The truth is that we need a government that actually helps to build up the Big Society. — Cameron, 2010

However, the means by which the government will intervene, and how it will facilitate the involvement of disenfranchised groups given the issues of inequality of recognition and resources that preclude them, are not elaborated. The programme of 5,000 Community Organisers to be recruited and trained by community organising charity Locality will reach only some areas. As catalysts for involving more people in more things they may have an impact in some areas. However, the process of changing cultures and the inequality in people's resources and time is much longer than the devolution of health, education and other services promises to be.

This leaves live a central question as to how we account for diversity in the capacity of different groups to engage with schools and other public services, and ensure that all voices are represented.

ARBITRATION: WHO MEDIATES COMPETING GROUPS' CONFLICTING PREFERENCES AND VALUES?

In discussion with the parents that we *did* manage to engage concerning the curriculum intervention another challenge came to light. Some of these parents we spoke to – while broadly supportive of their children's schools – thought that schools in Peterborough generally paid too little attention to 'proper academic subjects'. Parents from ethnic minority groups felt that schools' aspirations for their children in particular were low, and wanted to see more of them entered for more difficult A Levels. In this sense, some of the parents wished to pursue a more traditionalist agenda of elite knowledge, rather than opening the curriculum up to reflect local diversity.

The possibility for conflict between parental preferences and school agendas is often acknowledged by schools, and even by government. For example, allowances are made for parental opt-out of sex education for their children, and the government has recently taken measures to ensure that schools teach evolutionary theory, in the face of some Islamic and Christian schools' reported creationist pedagogy. Differences in culture, religion and social attitudes are thereby reflected to some extent by schools.

Despite this acknowledgement that conflict between local and national agendas is possible a problematic assumption underpinning the notion of the Big Society is that what professionals and communities want, and what the government wants them to have, are the same things. Giving professionals and communities the tools and permission to develop their own services and set their own goals is deemed unproblematic because it is assumed that what they will come up with will be broadly in line with a national agenda. What results from this 'consensus' model is a more efficient set of services that is closely tailored to what local areas need, and over which individuals and groups in local areas feel ownership and responsibility, but which contributes to an overall national set of priorities. For example, Michael Gove might be heartened by the responses of the parents noted above, having himself maintained that parents want a traditional curriculum, but that the 'educational establishment' has imposed a progressive mind set on teachers. "My hunch is that there is an unfulfilled appetite on the part of both teachers and the public for a curriculum offer which, when it comes to literature, when it comes to history, is more traditional, more classical." (Gove, 2010).

However, as our Area Based Curriculum experiences illuminate, and is further illustrated by some of the agendas of parents engaging the government's Free Schools programme, such consensus can by no means be assured. What professionals in institutions, local stakeholders and the agencies that intervene want education to look like can vary significantly.

Such tensions beg the questions,

- 1 Who counts as the 'community', and what happens when groups disagree locally?
- 2 Does the government (or society in general) really want 'total' democracy of choice?

With regard to the first question concerning local disagreements between 'communities', it is important to note that even the term community is a convenient (and arguably meaningless) generalism that hides a multitude of competing needs and interests (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). Where conflict occurs there is a serious risk that the agenda of more powerful groups in a local area will prevail. Big Society rhetoric, however, tends to treat 'communities' uncritically:

The Organisers... will be driven by local communities' needs. — Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, Cabinet Office 2011b

For the Area Based Curriculum this could mean the professionals and institutions (schools and teachers) rather than citizens with less power (parents, perhaps, with less confidence or who do not speak English). No one elected these groups to make decisions on behalf of the rest of the residents in a local area, and there is no guarantee that the interests of those without the time, money or organisational capacity will be represented.

The second question addresses age-old questions about individualism versus universalism which we would argue that the government needs to adequately confront in its commitment to the Big Society. What happens when groups of people want things that are unpalatable to government? The recent e-campaign for parliament to debate the death penalty, and debates over application of Sharia law, are two contemporary controversial topics that illustrate this tension. The awarding of the contract to train Community Organisers to Locality (who propose a consensual approach to community organising), rather than to previous favourite Citizens UK (who use a methodology based on Saul Alinsky's practice of engaging with and challenging the powerful), is indicative that the coalition is not seeking to 'empower' people to oppose a central agenda, but rather to deliver it. As one group aligned with Citizens UK has said:

If 5,000 were trained on the Alinsky model you'd have a very potent political force in the country...I'm not sure the government has got its head around that yet, although whether what they call community organising and what they want out of it is the same as us, I don't know. I don't know if they know. (Waters of Church Action on Poverty, in 'Analysis: Why Alinsky's supporters lost out.') — Third Sector, 8 March 2011

As we have seen, the architects of the Big Society accept that at least initially, citizen empowerment must be actively created by government intervention. However, for what purpose does the national government intervene and promote the localism in circumstances where the result will not support national agendas or the national interest? Would government support the creation of disruptive forces that work against efficiency in the name of agendas that government does not share, or does it simply naively assume, as we suggested above, that national and local agendas are one and the same? This brings us to our final question:

- Are those who intervene to distribute power to local communities prepared to see their own agendas overridden?

DISCUSSION

There are strong questions here for the RSA, let alone the government. In the case of the RSA's Area Based Curriculum, are we agnostic about the kind of education that a locally developed curriculum might offer, or do we only want to support projects that are broadly in line with our own educational values?

The answer is both. We are dedicated to our RSA principles, and these include ethical practice and efforts towards diverse representation, but also remain faithful to our progressive educational values. To ensure that these were embedded in the Area Based Curriculum project and resulting partnerships and practice, we developed a set of criteria that would frame any project that wanted to call itself an RSA Area Based Curriculum project. These criteria were in turn drawn from our principles outlined in *Learning from the Local: The RSA Area Based Curriculum* (2010) in which we develop the concept and outline our rationale and values in relation to it.

Most of the criteria relate to the process of involving the locations and people in the local area with the curriculum. Our criteria make no mention of whether history is more important than art, whether an inquiry based approach is appropriate or not, whether the projects should be framed around competences or knowledge, or what proportion of the timetable should be allocated. The intention is for stakeholders to determine these things locally.

What the criteria do require is that the projects address the specific context of the locality, be based on the resources available in the community, and take a critical approach to the relationship between local, national and global knowledge frameworks. It is these criteria that make the offer distinctive and encourage teachers and other stakeholders to do things differently. This is the RSA's agenda and without such criteria one might ask what the point of our involvement might be. We would suggest, then, that the government needs a similar reflection on mission and articulation of corresponding principles in guiding Big Society agendas. As Lord Wei recognises:

With the Big Society, there's a real desire to empower the local, but the local do need to have some things off the shelf that they can do which are more complex and more difficult. — Nat Wei, quoted in Rentoul, 2010

However, he does not go on to elaborate what these might look like, leaving it unclear as to whether it is the outputs that will be 'off the shelf', or guidelines as to how to construct the processes by which outputs are produced. We would suggest that it would be more valuable for central government to provide a set of principles for co-working, rather than a range of packaged solutions. The goal would be to support people to work through conflict; ensure inclusion of the marginalised; and help local groups to understand how local and national goals do or do not align with one another. Rather than simply shifting responsibility for delivery onto the shoulders of local groups, the active role of government would be one of facilitating the fair and effective involvement of communities.

WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT CONFLICT WILL OCCUR

The case study of the RSA Area Based Curriculum disrupts cosy assumptions that localism can be achieved without conflict, or that central agendas can be achieved by handing ownership to professionals and citizens at local level without winners and losers.

The RSA Area Based Curriculum does argue that local resources and expertise can be brought to bear on the National Curriculum, helping young people to engage with the high status knowledge decided upon by a central body. However, along with this consensus approach is an acknowledgement that dominant narratives of knowledge can be disrupted by involving communities in the process of curriculum design, challenging the central agenda and creating debate between communities and professionals on one hand, and between local stakeholders and the state on the other.

Big Society rhetoric, on the other hand, uses terms like localism, ownership, and empowerment within a narrative of consensus and efficiency with little acknowledgement that local and national agendas will not always align, and that groups will not always agree with one another. But without reflection and action on the various questions raised in this article it is likely that engagement in the Big Society will be limited to those who agree with the common agenda; that those whose agendas prevail are those who shout loudest and have the capacity to act; and that

“if the Big Society agenda genuinely aims to enable communities to have more voice in shaping the world around them, then we need better frameworks within which to deal with conflict”

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3 For example, for Britain to meet emissions targets decisions on local planning projects must be weighted towards those with a lower carbon footprint.

central agendas win out in instances of conflict through mechanisms that quash real debate on key issues by citizens. In other words, that in practice the Big Society will look like a very Small Society, and possibly act for limited interests.

Perhaps most importantly, what counts as the local could by default become defined as those who have engaged, with a real risk of entrenching new and existing inequalities.

MANAGING CONFLICT

There are two responses to managing the reality that people simply do not necessarily agree on as the best way forward for public services.

Firstly, if the Big Society agenda genuinely aims to enable communities to have more voice in shaping the world around them, then we need better frameworks within which to deal with conflict. Local, democratically accountable bodies (such as Local Authorities) must be empowered to better represent, and to mediate between, all elements of society (see e.g. Hatcher, 2011).

Alternatively, the terms of engagement need to be framed in such a way that conflict is unlikely, either because the remit for engagement is so narrow, or by setting the terms of engagement such that it is only worth those who agree with the direction of travel engaging in the first place. This, however, is not the same kind of ‘community empowerment’ or ‘ownership’ that some might hope the Big Society could achieve, but more a kind of franchise or commissioning arrangement.

However, there is not always a clear or transparent distinction between these two responses. In education, the English Baccalaureate provides a pertinent example. On the one hand, the rhetoric surrounding Free Schools indicates that they can provide any kind of education to their students depending on the local preferences of the parents and organisations generating them. But on the other hand, the expression of clear ministerial preference for an academic core curriculum via the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, which adds market incentives to secondary schools to provide this academic curriculum, sends a clear signal to all educators about what is considered to be important and appropriate. The centralised agenda is promulgated at the same time as local empowerment is promised, in part under the assumption that the majority of new freedoms for schools will be put into the service of the national agenda. As we have seen, this is not always so straightforward. Pressures like the English Baccalaureate may result in giving the impression of consensus, where in fact there is cultural colonisation, and no real attempt to encourage diverse responses.

WAYS FORWARD

If organisations and governments wish to intervene in the world, they must have a vision of what kind of world they would like to see created as a result: it is not just a question of how services are delivered and who is responsible for that delivery.

It is tempting to fall back on claims like “what everyone wants is better public services that meet local needs”. But who defines those needs? Who decides what is ‘better’? What is the world those services reflect or create?

In any attempt at devolving power or control over public services to citizens and professionals conflict is possible either vertically or horizontally: between the state or agency which intervened to empower people and what those people decide to do; or between different groups at local level who have different ideas about how to do things.

This means that government and/or intervening organisations must take responsibility for how conflict between groups is managed, as well as take account of the extent to which its own agenda will be privileged over any conflicting local ones.

Drawing on our experiences in developing the Area based Curriculum, we make the following recommendations:

- Central government needs to have a transparent account of what happens when local and national agendas come into conflict. This could take the form of the publication of clear and precise national priorities which would override local priorities;³
- Clear frameworks of principle need to be articulated to guide organisations and communities seeking to provide services. This is particularly important for equality and representation issues where principles such as ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups in local decision making can easily be missed. The Area Based Curriculum

principles for action include “The starting point for community engagement being those groups least often engaged or heard in the formal education sector”. Similar commitments in other areas might prevent easy reliance on ‘the usual suspects’ and consequent entrenchment of existing inequalities in outcomes;

- There need to be mechanisms at local level for mediating conflicts when they arise between groups seeking to provide services. Such mechanisms or institutions should be democratic and representative, and so a strengthened role for Local Authorities as mediating agencies could be considered;
- Citizenship or communities education in schools needs to provide young people with a conceptual and emotional basis through which to negotiate the ethical and political dilemmas of community involvement and service provision. Individualistic and competitive systems of education are inadequate to populate any Big Society with citizens who can sensitively and effectively navigate the complexities of participation in civic life. Therefore involvement of young people with real life change in their local area as a means of building understanding and skills could be a useful next step for citizenship education, possibly linked with the national community service programme already in train.

CONCLUSION

The coalition government's localism agenda aims to encourage local autonomy and participation in the provision of public services that meet local needs. We have drawn on an RSA Education intervention that shares similar aims as a case study to illustrate some of the challenges in 'Big Society' approaches to local activities, and tensions that may arise. These include the key dilemmas that:

- Some groups are more able and/or willing to participate than are others
- Who mediates competing groups' conflicting preferences and values is unclear

These (connected) issues raise questions concerning representation, autonomy, accountability and democracy. We have drawn on examples of experiences from our Area Based Curriculum work to show how, often despite the best intentions, traditionally-marginalised groups may become excluded from participation and decision-making, with the result that interventions and initiatives risk representing only certain (often already empowered) sections of the community. To this end, we have shown how capacity and agency are not evenly distributed.

Further, we have illustrated how different sections of 'communities' may not agree on what is best, and we have argued that community agendas may also not necessarily align with those of government. Hence we have posited the questions:

- Who counts as the 'community', and what happens when groups disagree locally?
- Does the government (or society in general) really want 'total' democracy of choice?
- Are those who intervene to distribute power to local communities prepared to see their own agendas overridden?

We have argued against relativist approaches here, maintaining that a) devolved approaches that are not properly representative risk further empowering already powerful individuals and organisations, hence demanding arbitration and democratic governance; and b) that as the elected body, governments (whether local or national) should have a role in both direction and arbitration.

Again drawing on the findings and experiences of the RSA's Area Based Curriculum intervention in application to broader challenges for localism, we have set out some recommended strategies designed to harness local autonomy and innovation while simultaneously maintaining democratic transparency and fairness. These experiences and strategies should prove useful to others involved with the creation of public services that encourage participation, but are underpinned by guiding principles that ensure inclusion.

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