



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

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### ABSTRACT

This paper uses Fraser's (1999) concept of social justice as comprising both redistribution and recognition as a frame to interrogate two 'Area-Based Curriculum' projects running since 2008 in Manchester and Peterborough schools. It argues that historic concerns about working with 'the local' in cross-curricular activities has originated in a concern that such activities will fail to 'redistribute' powerful educational goods. This paper asks, however, whether such projects are also able to realise the goal that is frequently claimed for such projects, of recognising the diverse knowledge of students and their communities. Drawing on interviews, fieldnotes and observations across 8 schools, the paper argues that dominant geographical imaginations of the local area, social networks and material resources such as transport infrastructure, militate against the city being used within such projects as a resource for recognition. It argues also that the growth of a new 'educational enhancement sector' is beginning to mediate between schools and cities, producing the city in a form that is 'fit for' educational consumption. If area-based approaches are to achieve their goal of recognition, they need to be informed from the outset by theoretical frames that recognise knowledge as multiple, embedded and contextual.

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### 1. Introduction

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

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

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## 2. The Area-Based Curriculum projects in context

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

One approach to this highly contested territory might be to understand these competing views of curriculum as reflecting competing views about what constitutes educational and social justice. To this end, Nancy Fraser’s conception of social justice is a helpful guide. Fraser argues that social justice might be understood to comprise both redistribution and recognition. A politics of redistribution seeks to guarantee fairer access to social goods. A politics of recognition seeks to ensure a more plural society in which the all individuals are valued irrespective of their diverse identities (Fraser, 1999a).<sup>1</sup>

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

In contrast, a notion of educational justice as concerned with *recognition* makes the case that valuable knowledge takes many forms and that assumptions about what constitutes powerful or desirable educational knowledge should be up for debate. This is premised upon the analysis that, as Apple (1992) argues, ‘*what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups*’ (1992:4). This perspective therefore seeks to create a more plural educational experience and a society in which diverse sources of knowledge, diverse identities and diverse experiences might be valued. This argument for recognition underpins calls for curriculum to build upon young people’s gendered, classed, geographical and cultural lives outside the school in the classroom. It is found in the growth of feminist and indigenous curriculum projects (Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Riley, 2008); in the attempt to draw on migrant families’ ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Moll & Gonzales, 1997); and in new literacy projects drawing on children’s popular and digital cultures (Buckingham, 2003; Haas-Dyson, 2010; Mahiri, 2011).

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

In so doing, the paper makes the assumption that the process of designing a curriculum that uses ‘the city’ as an organising theme is not a neutral process. To ‘localise’ a curriculum does not mean that a teacher simply needs to open the door of the school to allow a commonly agreed idea of the city to flood in. Instead, as with any other area of curriculum design, the process of making visible ‘the city’ in the curriculum is a process of social construction. It is a political process in which views of what ‘counts’ as valuable knowledge from the multiple resources of the city will be contested by different groups (Apple, 1992; Hamayer, 2007). Any curriculum design project that seeks to engage with ‘communities, cities and cultures’ as its thematic organising principle is likely, therefore, to produce ideas of ‘the city’ that are subject to contestation.

Just as curriculum is a site of struggle, so too is ‘the city’ a site of contestation. Pahl and Rowsell (2010) for example, make the case that the world beyond the school must be understood ‘not as a reified fact, but as something complex, contested and alive with problematics’. Neighbourhoods are not static, they are changing and dynamic and subject to different historical and geographic forces, from migration to deindustrialisation (Comber, 2009; Lavia & Moore, 2009; Midwinter, 1972). They are also experienced in different ways by different groups within them. Children in particular may have very different understandings of community and neighbourhood from the adults around them (Christiansen & O’Brien, 2003; Orellana, 1999); and the experiences of the wealthy and the poorest in urban environments are increasingly so divergent that there are now calls for a new ‘right to the city’ to prevent the poorest from exclusion (Harvey, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> In applying this terminology to curriculum debates we are not, of course, implying a conception of knowledge as a disembodied material good that can simply, as the popular terminology would frequently have it, be ‘delivered’ to young people. Rather, we have found the terms redistribution and recognition to be useful metaphors for the relationship between education, power and equity that are assumed in competing views of curriculum goals.

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