

Chapter 56

Knowing Your Place? The Urban as an Educational Resource

David James

56.1 Introduction

There is a long-standing and well-established association between ‘urban schools’ and ‘the urban working class’, and in this context ‘urban’ also carries strong connotations of deficit, especially in certain areas of policy (see Archer et al. 2010; Maguire et al. 2006; RSA 2010). Yet in some industrialised countries, most people live and work in urban settings, and institutionalised education is largely an urban matter. In England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics’ analysis of the 2011 Census suggests that 81.5% of the population live in urban areas, that population increase is greater in urban than in rural areas, and that urban areas have a younger age profile (Office for National Statistics 2013). This is important because as Dyson pointed out some time ago, whilst there is overlap between the terms ‘urban’ and ‘disadvantage’, it also matters that the urban setting is characterised by concentration, which has its own dynamic effects (Dyson 2003). So as well as being an important context, the urban also has a more *constitutive* sense. How and why does ‘the urban’ – real, imagined or both – feature in schooling, in the curriculum, in teacher/student activity, in learning and achievement? What part do distinctively urban elements play in the learning culture, and what are the consequences? This chapter outlines two contrasting examples of deliberate action that harnesses features of the urban in educational processes. The first has a socially progressive intent, attempting to work through institutions. The second is what we might term ‘individually progressive’, in that it is largely about individuals securing the elements of an individual educational project. The chapter ends with some brief observations about how the two examples connect to tell us something about the role of

D. James (✉)

School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University,
Glamorgan Building, King Edward V11 Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK
e-mail: JamesDR2@cardiff.ac.uk

‘the urban’ as a resource in educational endeavour and how it can be most helpfully understood.

56.2 A Partnership- and Area-Based Curriculum in Peterborough, England

In the 2011–2012 academic year, the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA)¹ commissioned an independent evaluation (James 2012) of an important phase in their Area Based Curriculum initiatives. This provided resources and expertise to bring together five schools (three Primary [age range typically 5–11], two Secondary [age range typically 11–16]) and several organisations from the public and private sectors, in Peterborough, England. The project’s objectives included ambitions to increase student engagement through area-based curriculum projects in each school, to increase the quality, number and diversity of relationships that students had with individuals and organisations in Peterborough, to enhance school partnerships with others in the community, and to develop a model that could be ‘scaled up’.

These objectives rested upon a clearly articulated set of concerns about an increasing disconnection between children and the places where they live, seen to have been exacerbated by the National Curriculum, National Strategies and other policies driven by powerful ‘standards’ and ‘economic competitiveness’ agendas (RSA 2010). Such forces were changing the very concept of the school. In much policy, it was argued:

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 (RSA 2010, p. 8)

The project also sprang from a critique of large and well-known area-based policy interventions such as Educational Priority Areas,² Education Action Zones,³

¹The RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) was founded in 1754, and has a mission to ‘enrich society through ideas and action’ and to mobilise creative capacities towards ‘a twenty-first century enlightenment’. See <https://www.thersa.org/about-us/>

²Educational Priority Areas were proposed in the Plowden Report (1967) and involved extra resources being directed to schools in areas with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils. The initiative faltered by the end of the 1970s (see Smith 1987).

³Education Action Zones (EAZs) were launched in 1998 as ‘the standard bearers in a new crusade uniting business, schools, local education authorities and parents to modernise education in areas of social deprivation’ (Department for Education and Employment 1997; See also Reid and Brain 2003).

Extended Schools,⁴ and City Challenge,⁵ which it was felt were associated with deficit views of certain communities and geographical areas, and which fostered narrow, individualised accounts of how families passed on educational failure (RSA 2010). The RSA expressed serious concerns about the effects of all this on the well-being of children, on how and what they learn, and on what they can achieve in educational settings.

The RSA diagnosis sketched out above connects with long-standing concepts of education for citizenship (see for example Kerr 1999), but also had resonance with perceptions ‘on the ground’, at least amongst teachers and representatives of the organisations with whom they formed partnerships. One teacher, whose background included working in a large engineering company, spoke for many others when he described the scale of recent social and economic change in Peterborough: The decline of major industry had ‘torn the heart out of the City and affected thousands of lives’; in addition to the loss of jobs, there had been marked changes in the social fabric. For example, the ‘eight or nine working men’s social clubs, which were hugely important, providing sport like football and cricket’ were now gone. Coupled with a rapidly-changing ethnic composition and a relatively large number of recently-arrived families, he suggested that these shifts made it more difficult for all children to have or feel a strong connection with their city. To most of the adults interviewed, the project seemed to offer a small opportunity to do something about this problem.

Whilst there is not the space here to do justice to the full breadth and complexity of the project, we can use elements of the evaluation to look at what activities it fostered, and consider how these worked, and the extent to which they entailed a reconceptualization of the local, urban setting. Most of the data for the evaluation was gathered during four substantial visits to Peterborough in the 2011–2012 academic year. It included: observational data (e.g. derived from ‘walking the city’, and 7 visits to schools and 3 to partner organisations); 34 interviews (with teachers, representatives of partner organisations, young people, and RSA co-ordinator); perusal of young people’s work in all 5 schools and of school-level curriculum and other documents. It also included participation in a RSA ‘Expert Seminar’ and some quantitative data collected by RSA against a pre-project baseline. Evaluation access was assisted by a RSA-employed senior researcher who coordinated the wider project activity. The design and conduct of the evaluation was approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (for further details, see James 2012).

⁴Extended Schools in England are based on a similar idea to the ‘full service schools’ in the United States. The Department for Education and Skills began to actively promote the concept in 2002. In practice it usually means promoting the use of school facilities by the community and the building of better school/community links. There is a strong emphasis on areas of social disadvantage.

⁵City Challenge was launched in April 2008 by the Department for Children Schools and Families. It was designed to improve educational outcomes and ‘to crack the associated cycle of disadvantage and underachievement’ in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and London (see Hutchings et al. 2012).

56.2.1 Project Activity

In one example, staff at Dogsthorpe Junior School⁶ had for some time been concerned to make ‘place’ a more prominent feature of the curriculum, partly in response to increases in the proportion of its pupils who were recent arrivals from Eastern Europe. The project enabled the key teacher in this school to build up a close working relationship with *Railworld*, an educational charity and heritage/leisure organisation focused on the history of railways and on sustainable transport. *Railworld* was keen to raise its profile and develop its facilities so that they would be more attractive to younger visitors. The partnership gave rise to a number of activities. In one, the school and the organisation jointly set up an event at the Town Hall, attended by the Mayor and the local authority Head of Tourism amongst others, in which some 80 children acted as ‘tourism consultants’ for the city. In another, children visited *Railworld*, and in addition to the sort of learning activities that are common in school visits, they were asked to provide detailed feedback on such matters as layout, signage, and the design of exhibits. This information was used to shape the development of the site, and the same children were invited back for a ‘fiesta’ event to see the results. The teacher reported that for some children, the activities had provided a new ‘sense of place’ and, for the first time, a real connection to something in the city other than their school. She was also pleased that she and her colleagues had been able to make *Railworld* a core feature of some of their work in the mainstream curriculum, for learning in literacy, reading, design and technology, maths and science.

In another example, a partnership between West Town Primary School⁷ and Peterborough Cathedral included pupils responding to a request from the Cathedral’s education office for help with the preparation of a large bid for resources to improve the Cathedral’s educational facilities. At the same time, their visits to the Cathedral formed the basis for projects with considerable depth and reach across the curriculum: pupils used items and events as diverse as the tomb of Katherine of Aragon and a relatively recent fire at the Cathedral (in 2001), the latter forming the basis for an imaginative writing competition. Children also contributed to displays of drawings, painting and model-making inspired by the Cathedral, discussed principles in building construction and maintenance with two visitors from the construction industry, and considered plans for the renovation of a former hospital building near the school.

These deliberate attempts to make explicit use of elements of the locality, and many others like them, were closely intertwined with other pedagogic goals. In both the examples mentioned above, serious attention was also paid to giving children new opportunities for ‘voice’. Indeed, in the West Town example, the RSA project

⁶Now Dogsthorpe Academy, part of the Greenwood Dale Foundation Trust group of Academies. See <http://dogsthorpeacademy.org/> (Accessed March 2015).

⁷Now West Town Primary Academy, part of the Cambridge Meridian Academies Trust. See <http://www.westtownprimary.org/> (Accessed March 2015).

was preceded by work with Creative Partnerships⁸ in which the school used the approach of Dorothy Heathcote to guide teaching and learning: Heathcote's concept of *mantle of the expert* was used to frame group-based activities designed to provide a rich educational experience characterised by her 'Three Rs' of rigour, realisation and responsibility.⁹ Many of the activities at both these schools were as much about democratic citizenry as they were about sustainable transport, the Cathedral or Peterborough itself. It is worth noting too that in all three primary schools involved in the project, the energetic pursuit of a partnership-driven area-based curriculum was seen as compatible with mainstream curriculum goals and with the maximisation of learning opportunities and pupil achievement. Work under the initiative was felt by teachers to be clearly enhancing the quality and coherence of the education on offer, and to be contributing positively to school's account of itself to Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills),¹⁰ to parents and to other stakeholders.

There was a striking contrast between the three primary schools and the two secondary schools involved in terms of what activities were initiated in the name of the project. Thomas Deacon Academy,¹¹ a very large secondary school of around 2200 students, was divided into six 'Colleges' each of which functioned as the 'home' for students and the place for their tutor group time, amongst other things. The school's participation in the project saw each College review its community links, then seek to form a partnership with one or more organisations or individuals beyond the school in order to develop a new curriculum unit that would run through the summer term. The partners selected included a radio station, an artist, a museum, a relationship counselling service, an engineering company, a charity, sports organisations and a Trust concerned with mental health. In the event, there was a great deal of variation

⁸ 'Creative Partnerships was the UK's flagship creative learning programme running throughout England from 2002 until 30 September 2011 when funding was withdrawn by Arts Council England... (it) brought creative workers such as artists, architects and scientists into schools to work with teachers to inspire young people and help them learn... From 2002 to 2011, Creative Partnerships worked intensively with over 2700 schools across England, 90,000 teachers and over 1 million young people'. See <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/>. For a good analysis of examples of activity see Jones and Thomson, 2008.

⁹ Dorothy Heathcote was an educationalist and drama teacher who became particularly well known for her concept of *mantle of the expert*. This 'asks children to approach problems and challenges as if they are experts... in 1981, for the BBC programme *Teacher*, the producer Roger Burgess filmed Heathcote giving a classic demonstration of "mantle of the expert". She aims to release the latent knowledge in a class of 9-year-olds by asking them to run a fictitious shoe factory... The children had digested Heathcote's Three Rs – rigour, realisation and responsibility' *Guardian* Obituary, 17th November 2011. Reproduced with the kind permission of Guardian News & Media Ltd as the copyright owner.

¹⁰ Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Office for Skills, a non-ministerial department of Government. It inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about> (Accessed March 2015).

¹¹ See <http://www.thomasdeaconacademy.co.uk/page/default.asp?title=Home&pid=1> (Accessed March 2015).

in the activities in terms of volume, density and how much 'traction' each one appeared to gain. From the outset, there was a tension between the ambitions of the project and what could be achieved in the 3 h of a student's timetable that the school felt able to dedicate to it. Several proposed activities appeared to 'run out of steam' before using the whole of the 3 h, which itself further diminished their apparent importance to the school. Where activities had filled the whole of this time, many students described them as productive and enjoyable, and there was clear recognition that new connections were being made with the city (and, it was often claimed by students, such connections were entirely absent across the rest of the curriculum). A good example would be the use of 'migration boxes' from the museum that contained sets of personal belongings of people who had migrated at various times. This session was part of a set of three that connected humanities subjects to the local area and community. Yet whilst students valued these highly, the staff concerned had reservations. As one said, whilst the activities had been worthwhile, '...they did not lead to a measurable increase in knowledge of the local area or community whilst at the same time running the risk of "dumbing down", giving students a superficial view of history, geography and psychology' (James 2012, p. 15).

The other secondary school participating in the project, Ken Stimpson Community School,¹² appeared to have a large number of pre-existing links with a range of organisations, in part owing to its 6 years of Business and Enterprise College Status. There were close links with engineering firms, churches, faith groups, a cluster of sheltered housing, and a multinational corporation. Involvement in the project had seen the addition of a new relationship with the Peterborough Environment City Trust, but in more general terms, according to the Deputy Head, the RSA project had '...been a catalyst that has further promoted our desire to get right into our local community and (it had) underlined our wish to do even more of that' (see James 2012, p. 16). Nevertheless, only one new example of a collaborative curriculum design came to light during the evaluation, and this involved partnering with a local college rather than with a non-educational organisation. Most of the activity that appeared in some way attributable to the initiative took the form of two 'collapsed curriculum' days in which some 180 Year 8 students participated. The first of these looked at refugees, involving both the Red Cross and the testimony of a refugee, and it included competitive group-work in which the winning group were invited to present their impressions on local radio; the second had teams of students working with local adult volunteers to compete in a 'fashion through the ages' event. On this second occasion, the winning team saw their designed garment made up. The key teacher spoke of the difficulties of having collapsed curriculum days, given the pressures on subject-teaching colleagues to increase and maximise GCSE attainments. She thought that such days were unlikely to increase beyond 2 per year for this reason. In this school, the area-based curriculum initiative found some affinity with a concept of 'enterprise', though it must be noted that in practice, this latter term appeared to mainly refer to students working in teams on tasks with a competitive element.

¹² See <http://www.kscs.org.uk/> (Accessed March 2015).

56.2.2 Improving the Learning Culture?

There were several prominent themes in the analysis presented by the evaluation of the RSA Area-Based Curriculum project in Peterborough. One of these is about whether or not new activities and learning opportunities were enabled. There were marked differences between the primary and secondary schools in this regard. In the primary schools, the initiative was embraced as a fresh approach to collaborative curriculum design and implementation as teachers worked with partners to explore new starting-points around which learning activities could be generated. The evidence showed clearly that the learning experiences of several hundred children were enhanced as a result. Children were, in effect, ‘repositioned’ by the initiative, because their relationships to the locality and a number of organisations within it were fundamentally revised, often from a minimal starting-point. Equally strong was evidence of a powerful boost to professional identity for the teachers themselves. The evaluation suggests that in the primary setting, some key elements of the learning culture (including the nature of accountability, the meaning of professionalism, the lower profile of discrete academic subjects and the responsibility of teachers to operate across subject boundaries) made it possible for teachers to innovate and to take risks. Importantly, these risks were not seen as being in opposition to securing measured improvements in standards, given the prevailing conceptions of this term. Rather, they were seen as strategies for improving the processes that underpin successful teaching and learning. Indeed, in one school the initiative was regarded as part of an institutional strategy following a disappointing Ofsted inspection, and was collectively perceived as offering a means to build new strengths that both Ofsted and the local authority would recognise and welcome.

Though not without merit, the initiative had little success in the secondary schools. Key elements of the learning culture here include the clear lines of separation between subjects, but even more importantly between subject learning and the more skills-focused and pastoral aspects of secondary schooling. Such distinctions have long been strongly interpreted and regarded as differences in status – of types of knowledge, qualifications and even of teachers (see for example Follett 1989; Power 1995). The evaluation of the initiative in the two secondary schools suggests that Watkins’ recent meta-analysis is correct: a climate in which certain General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results are so crucial to the contemporary secondary school is also one in which a ‘performance orientation’ now overshadows a ‘learning orientation’, despite the fundamental dependence of the former on the latter (Watkins 2010). Hence, even in secondary schools that were keen to participate, the only small foothold available for an initiative like the RSA Area-Based Curriculum is in the time and space normally allocated to the pastoral and to skills-focused activity. Even here – the evaluation found – the activities often became further diminished. It is as if, institutionally speaking, secondary schools can only take up initiatives in a wholehearted manner if they contribute directly, immediately and obviously to the headline measures by which the school will be judged. A similar finding emerged in recent research on work-related learning in the

secondary curriculum in Bristol, in which it was found that subject-oriented materials and processes based on the world of work, designed by experienced teachers to improve the learning and attainments of young people of *all* abilities in GCSE mathematics including the ‘high-fliers’, were in practice relegated to being used as a ‘remedial’ measure for a few students on a C/D GCSE borderline. This group’s outcomes would make most difference to the standing of schools in the league tables (James, Bathmaker and Waller, 2010). In sum, whilst the two secondary schools involved represented different kinds of response to the RSA initiative in Peterborough, in neither one could it be said that the initiative had an impact of the sort set out in its objectives.

56.2.3 Affinities with Other Educational Values

A second theme coming through strongly in the analysis was around the importance of teachers’ educational values and what might be termed ‘pre-existing educational mandates’ in some of the organisations forming partnerships. This was something that previous RSA-based reflection had identified (e.g. Thomas 2011, p. 5). A specific example would be the Cathedral’s energetic educational programme and its need to be able to demonstrate that it had consulted children as part of its major bid for resources to improve its educational facilities. But in more general terms, both individually and collectively, teachers and other key players who were centrally involved found the initiative to be compatible with values they already held about teaching, learning and the purposes of schools. Examples across the initiative include: a strong pre-existing drive to use the local area more explicitly across a school; an established way of working with a strong child-centred, problem-solving approach (Heathcote’s ‘mantle of the expert’ mentioned earlier); a ‘social enterprise’ interpretation of the expectations associated with the Business and Enterprise secondary school specialism.

56.2.4 Teacher Professionalism

Like other observers, the RSA had pointed out that a generally declared greater autonomy for teachers to own the curriculum came at the same time as many teachers had been, in effect, ‘deskilled’ by the National Curriculum and National Strategies. A third theme in the analysis pertains to this dilemma and what the initiative might provide in response. Thomas pointed out that the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education 2010) had promoted more training in classrooms and more focus on ‘core teaching skills’ whilst saying nothing about how teachers could learn to deal with what should be taught and why. This, it was argued, was similar to contradictions in government views of teachers and teaching, and ‘...any genuine recognition that teachers could be curators or

creators, rather than merely organisers, of knowledge, is missing from government analysis for what makes a quality teacher. Hence, support for teachers to develop into professionals creating and mediating knowledge is likely to be absent, despite the rhetoric of curriculum freedom' (Thomas 2012, p. 10). In England at least, new forms of support will be needed if teachers are to develop curriculum with confidence, and all the more so if they are innovating and experimenting for the first time. The RSA initiative provided a supportive structure (and leadership, which the evaluation found to be bold, energetic and consistent), offering a model that could be used in this way. In a very telling phrase, one group of teachers described how the initiative had given them the confidence to 'tear up the script'. There are strong parallels here with the findings of the evaluation of the Teacher Training Agency's *School Based Research Consortium Initiative* where being involved in supported reflection in a research project appeared to energise teachers and provide them with an enhanced sense of professional autonomy (see Simons et al. 2003).

Finally, it was instructive to think about the initiative in terms of its conceptual basis, and to look at it alongside other recent accounts of the problems in the schools sector and their accompanying recommendations for change. As we have seen, the initiative did rest on a particular diagnosis of problems and weaknesses in current policy and practice, and it was designed to offer some sort of remedy, at least by way of providing an example. However, at the same time it was driven by widely-held definitions of those problems and weaknesses rather than by a compelling alternative vision for education, such as Fielding and Moss's (2011) notion of radical education and the common school, or Coffield and Williamson's (2011) 'communities of discovery'. Both these views of how educational arrangements might be revised are powerful because they are utopian in the best sense (Levitas 2003), offering the sense of purpose and direction that is otherwise lost or missing. They do this using real-world examples as well as theory-based reasoning. The evaluation suggested that for all its many strengths and achievements, in working within a dominant and dominating (yet under-articulated) set of purposes in secondary schools, the RSA initiative was in effect institutionally sidelined and therefore very limited in its potential reach in that sector.

56.3 White Middle Class 'against the grain' School Choice

The orchestrated harnessing of elements of the urban in the RSA initiative, outlined above, sits in contrast (and perhaps, opposition) to the way in which 'the urban' surfaced in another research project. In the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project *Identities, Educational Choice and White Urban Middle Classes*¹³ (ESRC reference RES-148-25-0023) there were a number of dif-

¹³ Part of the ESRC-funded Programme *Identities and Social Action*. The project was directed by Diane Reay, Gill Crozier and David James. The team also included Phoebe Beedell, Fiona Jamieson, Katya Williams and Sumi Hollingworth.

ferent facets of the urban context that came into sharp relief. The project studied a sample of white middle-class families turning their backs on ‘mainstream choosing’, instead making choices of secondary school that might be termed ‘going against the grain’. The schools they chose were averagely- or low-performing schools when other, more conventionally justified choices could have been made. ‘Mainstream choosing’ is part of a broader neoliberal context in which choice, markets and individualism have increasingly overshadowed the fragile discourse of welfare (Ball 2003). This made the specific group of particular interest, not least because it seemed that they may be strong supporters of comprehensive secondary education and may have been guided in their choices by welfarist values that stood outside or beyond the now-dominant ideology. We studied 125 families in London, ‘Riverton’ and ‘Norton’, mainly via interviews with 181 parents and 68 young people (for further details of the design and method, see Reay et al. 2011, 2013).

Again, there is only space here for a brief glimpse of the findings and analysis of the study. A major and early finding was that in only very few of the families were there clear commitments to either comprehensive schooling or to the welfare state, and most of the choices of secondary school were driven by a broad and complex mix of motives and orientations. The history of schooling in the family played a large part, and in order to grasp this we found it helpful to distinguish between first, second and third generation white middle class people.¹⁴ In some instances, the choice of school was a reaction to the social narrowness of a parent’s own schooling, in terms of its social class or ethnic composition or its ethos and/or disciplinary regime. In others, the choice reflected a deliberate re-creation of the parents’ own trajectory, where for example at least one parent’s background included upward social mobility attributed to schooling. There were however many other considerations in addition to family history: One of the most crucial of these was how the parents saw and understood matters like the quality of an educational process and the extent to which one could compare schools.

56.3.1 A Clearly Defined Educational Project

Across most of the parents there was a great deal of scepticism in regard to the information that in policy terms is assumed to underpin the enabling of rational choice in a market, and we heard frequent criticism of conventional assumptions around examination results and their use in league tables and in Ofsted reports. In general this group of parents appeared to have a view of schooling and its outcomes informed by sociological insights. For example, they were aware of long-standing

¹⁴For example, a ‘first generation’ middle-class parent would be one whose own parents were working-class; a third generation middle-class parent would be one whose own parents and grandparents were middle-class.

correlations between social class and academic attainment, and thought that league table position might tell one more about the social composition of a school than about the quality of education on offer.

This point is vital in understanding their ‘break’ with ‘mainstream choosing’, especially when put alongside another major theme, namely the conception of the educational project as something greater than schooling (even while schooling was acknowledged as its main ingredient). It was common for these parents to have a clearly-articulated sense of the goals and purposes of the educational process *for their own children*, that it should (for example) equip them to live and work comfortably alongside people from different social and ethnic backgrounds. A fairly typical expression of this view came from the parent who told us that her son’s exposure to the diversity of backgrounds in the local comprehensive school would ‘make him a better doctor’, or another parent who felt a similar experience made his daughter a ‘fully paid up citizen of the twenty-first century’ in a way that his own narrower, more conventionally privileged schooling could not have done. These signals of the educational project are perhaps also a reminder of the poverty of the market conception of ‘choice’ running through much education policy of recent years, in which ‘choice’ is constructed as a preference amongst a series of plausible options of the sort presumed to face people in everyday retail consumption. We found that a decision to attend a particular school was not the expression of a mere preference of one option over another, but something much deeper. Rather, it was an expression of *commitment* (see Sayer 2005 for a helpful discussion of this preference/commitment distinction).

56.3.2 *Ethnic Diversity as a Resource*

There were many examples of parents promoting friendships across ethnic groups and celebrating the ethnic diversity of the chosen schools, and it was clear that such experience was considered an important facet of the educational project, as well as a source of capital for young people in a context of globalisation and multicultural living. There is here a deliberate use of the urban context (specifically, ethnic diversity) in order to generate particular kinds of disposition. We have described and discussed these aspects of the analysis at some length elsewhere (see for example James et al. 2010; Reay et al. 2007, 2011, 2013) and found some strong parallels with other work on public sector urban professionals for whom urban schools nurture a cosmopolitan view (e.g. Van Zanten 2003) and on the ‘cultural omnivore’ in certain forms of middle class self-formation which encompasses and celebrates a wide variety of cultural forms (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009).

Connected to this valuing of the ethnic ‘other’ as an educational resource was a frequent denigration of both the black and the white working-class ‘other’, which at first appeared paradoxical. There were several examples of parents voicing what

Bourdieu termed ‘white racism’ (Bourdieu 1998) in which lower social classes are thought of as morally inferior, and terms like ‘white trash’, ‘chav’ and ‘charver’ were sometimes used to describe whole groups of people and their children – sometimes groups of children in the chosen school, and sometimes those in other schools that had been avoided. The contrast (sometimes implied, sometimes explicit) was with those ethnic minority families that seem to display a strong work ethic. Our analysis suggested both anxieties in respect of excessive whiteness (cf. Skeggs 2004) and also deliberate processes of differentiating the white middle class self through what we might term ‘adding colour’ to it by association with ethnic diversity. There is a striking resonance here with the work of Skey on different strains of national belonging and the middle class identification with a cosmopolitan cultural diversity (nurtured, for example, through ‘travel’, but constructed in opposition to mere tourism – see Skey 2011).

56.3.3 *A High-Risk Investment?*

This brings us to two final examples of where the analysis of the project would take us. Firstly, the fears and anxieties mentioned above were directly linked to high levels of monitoring of schools and teachers across the sample, and a level of vigilance we termed ‘parental managerialism’. In part, this may be understood against the backdrop of both the popularly imagined and the researched reality of the types of secondary schools their children were attending. As many studies have shown, some urban schools appear to be very good at individualising social differences in economic, social and cultural resources, at recognising only certain forms of ability and at producing personal failure (see for example Archer et al. 2010; Gewirtz 2001). A consideration of this backdrop led us to suggest that white middle-class against-the-grain secondary choosing could often be understood via the metaphor of a *high-risk investment*. In other words, there were conscious and deliberate actions by parents to serve the ends of a clearly-defined educational project, but the means available were anxiety-producing and felt to carry relatively high risks. Nevertheless, the potential gains were also high, compared to the ‘safe’ alternative (of a secondary school with less diversity and high examination pass-rates). As a response to this anxiety and risk, and again in keeping with the financial investment metaphor, parents tended to monitor the process very closely indeed, through roles on governing bodies, visiting the school, friendships with teachers and other contacts. Several spoke of the option of ‘pulling out’ if things did not work out as hoped. However, things did usually work out as hoped:

Across all three locales the young people were generally doing well at school. Most were performing well compared to their age equivalent peers, with some performing significantly above average. The choice of school their parents made did not seem to have had any negative impact on academic development and in fact the children seemed to have benefited from being in inner city comprehensives. In terms of measurable academic success, of the 117 young people who had reached at least 16, all except three boys and one girl did well

in GCSEs...Of the 71 who were over 18, eight went on to Oxbridge after A levels (six from London) and the others went to a range of pre- and post-1992 universities' (Reay et al. 2011, p. 128).

Finally, it is important to note that the anxieties and vigilance we saw were often balanced by a confident perception of the young person's intrinsic high ability, or 'brightness'. Our interviews contained over 250 references to this, none of which had been directly solicited. Collectively, these families held a strong view that their children were special or especially bright and that this would (other things being equal) become reflected in academic credentials. This may be understood as a form of Bourdieusian *misrecognition* (James 2015) as it 'explains away' the social advantages that produce the outcomes, masking the strong mutual affinity between a school's absolute compulsion to maximise its headline results, the persistent monitoring by parents, and the propensity of middle-class children to do relatively well in conventional academic terms, even in these averagely and below-averagely-performing schools. The 'Gifted and Talented' scheme¹⁵ was an important element, and in addition some of the schools attended by young people in our sample had gone to great lengths to persuade them to stay.

56.4 The Urban as an Educative Resource

The two projects reported here, then, give rise to contrasting examples of 'the urban' itself functioning as an educative resource. In the first, there is a city-level attempt to form new partnerships to use the urban locality (and even recent industrial decline) as a tool to drive a large part of the curriculum, not only giving young people a new vehicle for the learning of maths, English, Art and so forth but also the opportunity to change their relationship to the locality and even to engage in meaningful decision-making within it. In the second there is a deliberate family-level use of the urban context to provide a school setting that is itself part of a wider educational project, the fruition of which will be seen in a young person who achieves well in conventional terms but who can also be worldly, street-wise, resilient, comfortable with – and able to relate to – a wide range of other people from a diversity of backgrounds. These more obvious differences between the two examples are important, but it is worth giving at least some brief attention to how they may also be connected.

¹⁵Described at the time of the study on the UK Government Department for Children, Schools and Families 'Standards' website thus: 'Gifted and talented children are those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities). In England the term "gifted" refers to those pupils who are capable of excelling in academic subjects such as English or History. "Talented" refers to those pupils who may excel in areas requiring visio-spatial skills or practical abilities, such as in games and PE, drama, or art'. The Guidance Note *Identifying Gifted and Talented Learners – getting started* was revised in 2008 and is now available at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Getting%20StartedWR.pdf> (accessed March, 2015).

An important connection is that in both cases, intentions and individual actions are heavily refracted by powerful structural features, and have a range of consequences that go well beyond initial goals. Whilst the current level of curriculum specification and current accountability regimes for primary education (that is, some of the main elements of the learning culture) offered a 'space' in which the Area Based Curriculum project could work, the equivalent learning culture in the secondary school setting provided little opportunity for it to gain purchase. Indeed, it could be argued that what emerged here was *a demonstration of the irrelevance of the local urban setting for the most revered forms of educational activity*. This point about the learning culture and its affordances as a field is vital, because in educational settings we have become accustomed to look to personal, interpersonal and technical-organisational factors (such as vision, leadership, new 'species' of school or forms of organisation) to provide recipes that might yield improvement. Linked to this, and as several theorists have noted, the UK (and arguably, specifically England) continues to suffer from a lack of a shared purpose around educational endeavour. This lack of a shared articulated educational purpose may suit some interests quite well, but the main point here is that it continually prevents any real progress with regard to achieving greater equity. A lack of explicit educational purpose opens the door to a range of shifting assumptions, and

...implicit assumptions about educational purpose, quality and equity do not engage systematically or analytically with detailed arguments about what an equitable education system might look like (Raffo 2014, p. 3).

In respect of the second project reported here, individual choices of school that could be characterised as less than optimal (in the terms of the assumptions of policy and practices of 'mainstream choosing') nevertheless yielded a range of specific advantages. The parents concerned were geographically mobile, with almost 70% having recently moved to the areas in which they now lived, which were often the 'gentrifying' areas of an urban landscape (see for example Butler 2003). They were also highly educated and qualified: as a group they had over four times the UK average incidence of private secondary education and a high proportion had been to selective state secondary schools. Some 83% were qualified to degree level, and over a quarter also held postgraduate qualifications. Together with aspects of family educational history, these characteristics produced capitals and dispositions that would play out differently depending on the field in which they are enmeshed.

The parents' high level of involvement in the schools was often explained in a conventional way. Certain backgrounds, professional skills and connections were felt – by the schools and the parents themselves – to offer valuable support to the school (and by implication to *all* the students within it). Formal involvements included many Governor roles¹⁶ across the sample, but there were also many informal contacts as well. At the same time, our data showed us that it would naïve to regard these contacts as entirely separate from parental monitoring and management

¹⁶For general information about school governors in England, see <http://www.nga.org.uk/Home.aspx> (Accessed March 2015).

of the specific young person's education, so in a sense the parental 'input' to the school may come at a price. Like the American work of Brantlinger (2003) our evidence and analysis suggested that given their backgrounds and dispositions, the families studied would find it difficult to avoid reaping advantages that are hard-wired into the urban school and its systems. This was particularly evident in the form of the extra resources made available to those students designated as 'gifted and talented'. Yet these parents were not setting out to generate further inequalities and were (on the whole) attempting to act ethically in an unethical context. Indeed, many of them saw their choice of an ordinary local school as a strategy for *avoiding* conventional educational privilege and the sorts of differentiation and distinction that come with it.

Yet despite their 'sociological' appreciation of their relative advantage and their confidence that their own children were particularly 'bright', it is important to note the anxiety and uncertainty that characterised the actions and experiences of most of the families. In addition, the structural advantages we clearly see across the sample cannot be equated with some kind of on-going continued structural certainty. As we noted in the preface to the paperback edition of the main book to arise from the project, contemporary economic and social changes put increasing strain on middle class people like those in the study:

...for many of this group, the near-certainties of middle-class life have gone, as welfare cuts bite, job security is non-existent and credential inflation – particularly for graduates – takes hold and is felt more keenly by more people. More of the middle-classes find themselves on uncertain ground, positioned between an extremely rich powerful elite and a growing number of struggling poor. For people like those in our study, this economic and social in-between-ness is lived out, practically and psychologically, in a struggle with a contradiction between wanting the best educationally for their own children, yet at the same time desiring a fair education system for all children. Such tensions generate anxiety, insecurity and ambivalence (Reay et al. 2013, vii).

56.5 Conclusion: The Urban as Urbane or Mundane?

It is clearly possible for the urban to be a positive educational resource in the sense that the locality can be a rich source of expertise, curricula focus, pedagogic design, inspiration, and so forth. Yet for this to work to the advantage of many requires curriculum and accountability structures that permit 'the urban' to be treated as 'the urbane' (Raffo 2014). This seemed to be possible in the three Peterborough primary schools but somewhat out of reach in the secondary schools. It is now many years since secondary schools in England could easily adapt parts of their high-stakes public examinations to be geared to the local through officially-recognised teacher-defined components (the so-called 'Mode 3' General Certificate in Education) and it is important to note that there were perennial concerns around this even in its heyday (see for example Whitty 1985). In England, recent years have seen powerful encouragements to schools to focus on a narrowing band of academic achievements in the name of 'raising standards' and in the hope that doing so may lead to greater

economic competitiveness and even greater equity. There has been some loss of vocational qualifications and also skills-focused qualifications as a result, with the latter having *worsened* some student's chances of access to 'powerful knowledge' via recognised mainstream qualifications (see Harrison et al. 2015). It would be difficult to design a system more effective in preventing a positive use of the local urban area in the secondary curriculum: here, the urban appears not so much urbane, as mundane. Meanwhile, as we have seen in the second study discussed above, the urban setting offers, for some, the means to develop certain counter-intuitive forms of capital as well. Even as the school harnesses new local parental expertise, this is far from a simple gain for all students in the school and it can be bound up in processes that maintain and even amplify certain relative advantages and disadvantages. Thus, as well as being a dynamic and constitutive context, 'the urban' functions powerfully as an educative resource, but in doing so it always begs the difficult and uncomfortable questions 'In whose interests? To whose benefit and to whose disadvantage?'

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