London Review of Education
Vol 3, No. 2, July 2005, pp. 101–116

New Labour and educational disadvantage: the limits of area-based initiatives

Sally Power*, Gareth Rees and Chris Taylor
Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Since coming to power in 1997, New Labour has adopted area-based initiatives (ABIs) as a key strategy to combat economic, social and (especially) educational disadvantage. This paper briefly outlines the history of ABIs within the UK and explores the discontinuities and continuities between recent initiatives and their earlier counterparts. It argues that while New Labour's ABIs incorporate distinctive, new characteristics, they are largely based on the same assumptions which underpinned previous ABIs. The limits of these models, and the somewhat patchy track record of ABIs, raise serious questions about their efficacy and the restricted policy repertoire of the UK State.

Introduction

The New Labour administrations since 1997 have adopted area-based initiatives (ABIs) as a key component of their policy repertoire to combat economic and social disadvantage. The targeting of extra resources on those geographical areas which are viewed as experiencing the severest problems has been a key strategy in alleviating economic and social disadvantage and improving life-chances more widely. Moreover, eradicating educational disadvantage in particular has been a central element in this wider regeneration strategy. Improving educational attainment is argued to be a key mechanism for improving access to labour market opportunities, thereby lifting individuals, households and whole communities out of poverty and social deprivation. This major role for educational improvement is reflected not only in the creation of ABIs focused specifically on educational change, such as Education Action Zones (EAZs), but also in the programmes developed by 'integrated' ABIs,

* Corresponding author. Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK. Email: PowerS3@cf.ac.uk

ISSN 1474-8460 (print)/ISSN 1474-8479 (online)/05/020101–16

DOI: 10.1080/14748460500163864

such as the New Deal for Communities (NDC), which cut across different policy areas.

In according ABIs the significance they have, the New Labour Governments have reinvigorated a policy approach which has a relatively long history in Britain (and, indeed, elsewhere). Certainly, this history dates back at least to the 1960s and ABIs in a variety of forms can be traced through the following decades as elements in successive administrations' attempts to combat economic and social disadvantage, especially in major urban areas. A key question, therefore, is why the area-based approach has proved such an enduring feature of state policy in this field. More specifically, what insights into the efficacy of New Labour's ABIs can be gained from an examination of ABIs' impacts over the rather extended period that successive administrations have utilised them?

In addressing these issues, we present in what follows a brief history of the use of ABIs in Britain. We argue that the area-based approaches adopted by the New Labour Governments both incorporate distinctive, new characteristics, as well as sharing key features of the analytical models which underpinned previous ABIs. This analysis throws light on the ways in which economic and social disadvantage is constructed not only within the discourses of state policy, but also more widely. This, in turn, leads us to—albeit tentative—conclusions about the deep-seated limitations of state strategy in this context.

Area-based Initiatives in Britain: a (very) synoptic history

As in most advanced industrial societies, the use of geographically-defined administrative areas as an organising framework for the allocation of key elements of state resources has long been a feature of the British system of governance. For example, after 1902 and the advent of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), compulsory education in Britain has largely been determined at a relatively local scale, with the LEAs providing the administrative basis for school provision. In many ways, then, the LEA has been the dominant area-based form of state intervention in British education.

However, it is worth noting that although the allocation of resources to the majority of state schools is still administered via LEAs, the 1980s saw two competing processes of policy change in compulsory education—centralisation and devolution—that began to change the LEAs' role. Greater autonomy was given to individual schools, particularly in budgetary control, while simultaneously the UK central Government took a more regulatory role in the delivery of schooling, including the practice of teaching and learning. This has been further complicated by constitutional devolution, establishing devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (and, in rather different ways, in London too). The growing divergence in educational policy which this has implied is reflected, *inter alia*, in the increasingly distinctive functions of LEAs in each of the national territories of the UK.

Irrespective of these complications, however, it remains the case that the distribution of resources via local administrative units remains an essential feature of the

British system of governance. However, they typically provide the administrative framework for *universalistic* provision across areas, albeit in ways which recognise the specific circumstances and needs of local areas. In this way, therefore, an ideal of 'territorial justice' should be attained, where the distribution of resources is in direct proportion to the needs of people living in a particular area (Davies, 1968).

In some ways, the adoption of ABIs implies the recognition that this ideal situation has not been attained in reality. Hence, ABIs are concerned to *target* extra resources on those areas which are deemed to be characterised by the most severe incidence of social and economic disadvantage. The basis for this has been an acknowledgement that there is a mismatch between social needs and universalistic systems of resource distribution, reflecting the special needs of particular groups of people, such as the poor, recent immigrants and so on, many of whom are argued to be spatially concentrated into disadvantaged geographical areas. Moreover, it has been recognised that the local implementation of national policy is frequently problematic and that front-line delivery services have often failed to respond adequately to the needs of these particular social groups (Eyles, 1989).

Accordingly, certainly since the 1960s, there were many attempts to develop area-based programmes and initiatives. For some time, therefore, ABIs have framed an important element in attempts by the state (ostensibly) to combat poverty generally and educational disadvantage more specifically, especially in the major urban areas of the UK (see Rees & Lambert, 1985). Moreover, whilst there have been important differences between these ABIs, it is also widely recognised that they share key features. In particular, the strategy of ABIs has been argued to embody a particular construction of the nature of poverty and wider social disadvantage.

Firstly, ABIs have generally been seen to target areas which are characterised by the combination of *multiple* forms of social and economic disadvantage. Hence, strategies have most often addressed an array of substantive priorities, including housing and the physical environment, health care, crime prevention and employment creation, as well as the improvement of educational provision. Indeed, sometimes it has been precisely the *coordination* of different aspects of state provision which has been the principal objective of ABIs (Rees & Lambert, 1985). In consequence, whilst educational provision has always been regarded as a key element here, there have been relatively few national ABIs where the main objectives have been primarily educational.

The principal exception has been the Educational Priority Area (EPA) programme, initiated in the late 1960s, which involved 150 building programmes in 51 local authorities, plus 572 schools that were recognised for giving their teachers special payments for the more difficult teaching conditions. There was also a joint scheme between the (then) Department of Education and Science and the Social Science Research Council to fund a £175,000 action-research programme in five EPAs. The funds were spent developing and implementing educational initiatives and ensuring rigorous evaluation of their impacts, with a view to developing innovative approaches to the enhancement of educational attainment in socially disadvantaged areas (Department of Education and Science, 1972).

Secondly, ABIs have been based on the view that social and economic disadvantage is a 'residual' category, which can therefore be defined in terms of remaining 'pockets' of disadvantage in a wider context of increasing affluence. It is precisely this view which provided the rationale for the targeting of small areas. In addition, it is argued that the concentration of poverty or disadvantage in any given area can produce *additional* problems beyond those experienced by individual residents. The cumulative results across a group of residents within the confines of a relatively small space are loosely termed 'area effects' (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001).

Thirdly, the rationale underpinning ABIs ascribes a major part of the responsibility for economic and social disadvantage to the disadvantaged themselves. In the earlier phases of the implementation of ABIs, this was expressed through an emphasis on, for example, the inter-generational transmission of deprivation through families or, even more contentiously, the 'culture of poverty', thereby embedding poverty in particular areas over time. In this context, the frequently acrimonious debates generated by the Home Office's Community Development Project during the late 1960s and early 1970s were especially instructive (Lees & Smith, 1975).

More latterly, there has been a greater acknowledgement of the influence of wider structural factors in causing poverty, such as the restructuring of economic activity. For example, Parkinson (1998) has identified a common shift in the nature of ABIs across five European countries from their emphasis during the 1980s on the regeneration of the physical environment to approaches which stress employment creation and economic development during the 1990s. Nevertheless, it remains the case that attention continues to be directed at the 'internal' mechanisms that maintain or perpetuate socio-economic disadvantage (Skifter Anderson, 2001). For example, Hall (1997) argues that ABIs often take an 'inward-looking' as opposed to 'outward looking' approach. As a result, they view the source of the 'problem' as internal to the neighbourhood, and therefore are repeatedly characterised by their commitment to community development and empowerment and to enhancing or improving the physical fabric of an area. In similar vein, Cameron and Devoudi (1998) have suggested that ABIs established during the 1990s can be characterised as being 'inward-looking' *and* 'outward-looking', particularly in terms of their focus on employment and training. Moreover, it is striking that even when area-based regeneration strategies recognise the impacts of structural economic shifts in creating social and economic disadvantage, the resolution continues to be located in the need for individuals and communities to enhance their 'employability' through participation in education and training (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004).

ABIs and New Labour

Since 1997 in Britain, there has been a significant renewal of ABIs. New Labour strategy to combat social and economic disadvantage has focused significantly on area regeneration, in which education has been only one element, albeit an important one. As with many of the previous ABIs, considerable emphasis has been placed here on the coordination of different elements of state intervention in 'joined-up'

regeneration schemes (Hall & Mawson, 1999). For example, the New Deal for Communities (NDC) represents such an 'integrated' approach to regeneration. This was established in 1998 with 17 NDC pathfinder partnerships. There have since been an additional 22 NDC partnerships (39 in total) sharing two billion pounds. Alongside a concern for educational 'under-achievement', NDC partnerships must also focus upon poor job prospects, high levels of crime, poor health and problems with housing and the physical environment. As with the other more education-orientated ABIs, these are organised around partnerships, but this time with a wide variety of public services and support agencies.

Reflecting the divergences made possible by devolution, a somewhat different form of 'integrated' ABI exists in Wales, the Communities First programme. This covers 142 areas, the majority of which are the most deprived electoral divisions in Wales. The Communities First programme has a planned life of ten years and has been established with the aim of building social capital and empowering local residents. In partnership with the key local agencies and institutions, residents themselves are intended to develop strategies to regenerate their own local communities.

One of the innovations in New Labour's approach has been the introduction of a number of ABIs which have a principal focus on educational provision (Halpin *et al.*, 2004). This is consistent, of course, with the characteristic New Labour emphasis on education as a motor of social change. They do represent, however, a significant departure from previous ABI strategy, where the EPA programme provides the only—very partial—parallel (see earlier). To date, these education-orientated ABIs include Education Action Zones (EAZs), and most recently, Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiatives such as Excellence in Cities Action Zones (EiCAZs) and Excellence Clusters. It is perhaps instructive that each of these initiatives is confined to England, again emphasising the growing divergence of policy approaches between the different territories of the UK.[1]

EAZs were launched in 1998 and ran for five years. They were run by a small number of 'partners' including local authority, business, voluntary sector and community representatives. It was hoped that EAZ partnerships would 'draw in local and national agencies and charities involved in, for example, health care, social care and crime prevention' (DfEE, 1997, p. 4) and would 'link up' with Health and Employment Zones and projects funded by the Single Regeneration Budget. A typical EAZ consisted of around 20 schools (usually two or three secondary schools plus their feeder primaries), managed on a day-to-day basis by an appointed director and governed by an Education Action Forum (EAF). EAFs each had a statutory responsibility for formulating, implementing and monitoring a detailed local action plan. To support them in this task, EAZs received Government funding of up to £750,000 per annum for three to five years, which they were expected to supplement with £250,000 per annum sponsorship in cash or 'kind' from the private and/or voluntary sector.[2] EiCAZs are smaller—often called mini-zones—have less administrative infrastructure and less funding, but are underpinned by the same commitment to working across schools and welfare areas. Although it is hard to generalise about the kinds of initiatives EiCAZs and EAZs have developed, they

usually involve a range of curriculum enrichment activities, extra in-class support and the provision of mentoring for staff and/or students.

These initiatives have been promoted as reflecting the commitment by New Labour Governments to address the needs of the most disadvantaged and socially-excluded areas in England (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001). Improving levels of educational attainment is seen to provide a key mechanism through which individuals and communities can extricate themselves from social and economic disadvantage. 'Human capital' is viewed as crucial to ensuring entry to the labour market and opening up avenues to social mobility (for example, Giddens, 1998). Furthermore, the scale of these education-orientated ABIs is considerably greater today than it has been in the past. Hence, for example, compare the EPA programme of the 1960s with the EAZs, which involved 73 areas at its height, including 2198 schools. The EiCAZs, which have now superseded EAZs, currently cover 117 areas, alongside a further 50 Excellence Clusters (197 secondary schools and 470 primary schools), a number of which were former EAZs.

These education-orientated ABIs have several features in common, both with each other and also with previous ABIs. Clearly, they are area-based and their main focus is on educational objectives. More significantly, it is striking that they have been based upon similar understandings of poverty and social disadvantage to those which characterised earlier ABI strategies. For example, Excellence Clusters were described by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as bringing their benefits to 'small pockets of deprivation'. Moreover, in their emphasis upon the efficacy of human capital acquisition by individuals as the key mechanism for alleviating problems of economic and social disadvantage, they echo the earlier attributions of responsibility for disadvantage to the disadvantaged themselves.

The form of these ABIs also suggests important divergences from previous approaches. LEAs have played a key part in their establishment and operation. However, they are allowed to exist across administrative boundaries, encouraging greater partnership with neighbouring local authorities and reflecting the 'lived' social spaces of residents. Nevertheless, to date, there are no EiCAZs or Excellence Clusters that would appear to overlap these administrative boundaries, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of developing partnerships within a competitive process.

The latter point has wider ramifications. One of the key changes in the process of selecting areas for ABIs has been the adoption of competitive tendering since the early 1990s. Previously, areas were identified by central Government on the basis of an estimation of social needs, reflecting to a greater or lesser degree indicators derived from socio-economic data and research. With the adoption of competitive tendering, however, ABIs are now increasingly selected on the strength of how well the special needs of an area are *presented* and the ideas and value-for-money that are being *proposed*. This may permit greater innovation in terms of strategies for educational improvement, but also results in a tendency to focus on the visible aspects of poverty and disadvantage and on short-term goals.

'Partnership' is also central to these ABIs. In common with other New Labour initiatives, there has been a requirement that the education-orientated ABIs attract

regular private finance from businesses or other partners. Internally too, these ABIs involve collaborations between schools and with the local education authority. So, for example, each EAZ typically involved two or three secondary schools and a cluster of neighbouring primary schools, making around 15 to 20 school 'partners'. There would also be additional 'partners' in an EAZ, including the private businesses that financially supported its work and other key support agencies, such as social workers and health workers. The new EiCAZs are smaller in size, typically organised around just one secondary school. However, the importance of partnership still remains, reflecting a greater commitment to integrated regeneration schemes.

A Typology of ABIs

This discussion has highlighted some of the key characteristics of ABIs in Britain. It has also begun to highlight the commonalities and differences of education-orientated ABIs over time. From this, it is possible to produce a schema that can assist in developing a typology of ABIs. This is presented in Table 1, which shows the key ways in which an ABI can be described, alongside their potential, and contrasting, characteristics.

This schema proposes seven features that can be used to characterise the commonalities and differences across ABIs. Many of these characteristics may not be wholly independent of one another, but they nevertheless assist in comparing ABIs systematically.

Accordingly, this schema can be used to characterise actual examples of ABIs and illustrate continuities and discontinuities over time. In terms of continuities, and as already mentioned, ABIs largely continue to locate the source of the 'problem' within the locality rather than within wider societal processes. Along other dimensions, though, it is possible to identify discontinuities between earlier and more recent ABIs. In general, New Labour ABIs have tended to move away from state bureaucratic modes of governance towards self-governing partnerships. There has also been a tendency for accountability to be based on the delivery of measurable

Table 1 **Schema for identifying the key characteristics of ABIs**

Nature of ABIs	Contrasting characteristics		
Governance	Self-governing partnership	◄ - - - - - - ►	State bureaucratic
Accountability mechanism	Outcome-based	◄ - - - - - - ►	Input-based
Source of 'problem'	Internal to area	◄ - - - - - - ►	External to area
Source of 'solution'	Education	◄ - - - - - - ►	Cross welfare
Identification of strategies	Bottom-up	◄ - - - - - - ►	Top-down
Identification of areas	Self-defined	◄ - - - - - - ►	Externally defined
Temporal dimensions	Time-limited	◄ - - - - - - ►	Ongoing

outcomes (such as educational attainment targets) rather than scrutiny of the procedures determining the appropriate investment of resources (on the shift from *a priori* to *a posteriori* evaluation, see Neave, 1988). In parallel with the preference for partnership-based governance, the identification of which strategies should be developed within ABIs has been increasingly determined at the local level, although this has varied even across New Labour ABIs. For example, while EAZs and Scottish New Community Schools were free to develop their own strategies, EiC strategies have largely been implemented through a 'menu-driven' approach.

The move away from state bureaucratic modes of governance has also brought about shifts in how areas 'in need' are identified. Although partnerships submitting bids for ABI funding may draw on standard indicators of deprivation (including free school meal eligibility, examination attainment, levels of recorded crime and housing conditions), the nature of the problems and the boundaries of the area to be targeted are self- rather than externally-defined.

Despite the localisation of determining area boundaries and regeneration strategies, New Labour's emphasis on education as the key mechanism for lifting individuals, households and whole communities out of poverty and social deprivation, has meant that more ABIs than hitherto are directed at education provision. Again, though, it is possible to identify divergence across the UK. Scottish New Community Schools are less education-focussed than their English equivalents, EAZs. Wales' Communities First areas will only address educational issues if that is what the local community believe is necessary and preliminary indications suggest that these do not feature very prominently.

This schema is intended to be heuristically useful. Certainly, it helps to clarify the ways in which there are both distinctive aspects of New Labour's ABIs, as well as strong continuities with earlier policies. Indeed, in some ways, what is most striking is that ABIs have endured as a central element in state strategy over such a long time. This, in turn, begs the question of the efficacy of ABIs in combating poverty and social disadvantage.

The Track Record of ABIs

One way of addressing this latter question is by evaluating the impacts of ABIs in terms of their own aims. Although it is unrealistic to expect dramatic change within short time-scales, evaluations of recent ABIs suggest that any benefits are, at best, patchy. Research on England's EAZs, for example, shows that relatively few of the programme's original objectives were realised (Ofsted, 2001; CELSI, 2002; Power *et al.*, 2004). Even in terms of attainment targets, there was little measurable improvement and in some Zones there was even a negative zone effect. Similarly, the Scottish New Community Schools initiative displayed an equivalent lack of progress (Sammons *et al.*, 2003). And, of course, this implies that wider issues relating to the impacts of improved educational attainment on the alleviation of wider economic and social disadvantage simply cannot be addressed in these contexts.

In these various evaluations, a number of reasons for the lack of progress are put forward. Some relate to weaknesses identified within individual programmes and their implementation. Advocates of the EAZs, for example, claimed that its uptake was severely damaged by inappropriate and misleading press coverage (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004). Time-limited funding is also commonly seen as contributing to high staff turnover, insufficient planning and 'short-termism' (see Sammons *et al.*, 2003).

Other explanations relate to the sheer proliferation of ABIs. The House of Commons Urban Affairs Sub-Committee (HofC, 2002, p. 20) commented that 'At any time there can be approximately 27 different area-based initiatives operating in any one of the English regions'. Two studies commissioned by the UK Government's Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (2000a, b) also concluded that there were just too many initiatives of this sort, causing confusion locally, where people spent disproportionate amounts of time negotiating the system, rather than delivering. Even initiatives designed solely to link across the plethora of ABIs appear to have made little difference. Again the House of Commons Urban Affairs Sub-Committee reported that it had 'received no evidence to suggest that Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) add value to the regeneration process.' (HofC, 2002, p. 26)

Limited impact has also been attributed to the effects of organisational cultures. In particular, it has been argued that there have been problems in crossing departmental boundaries within Government and significant barriers between professional and lay communities. For example, a DETR report found that;

> … community leaders held a low opinion of the extent of co-ordination of ABRIs [area-based regeneration initiatives], which they saw as being plagued by a lack of holistic strategy and professional jealousies. (DETR, 2000a, p. 67)

While all of these explanations reflect the very real challenges that those working in ABIs experience, they fail to question the premises of this overall approach. They imply, in effect, that with a little more foresight, careful evaluation of past experiences and the development of sufficiently robust evaluation-based policy-making, such schemes might actually have important impacts on educational attainment and combating social disadvantage more widely. However, our analysis suggests that this is unlikely to be the case. We argue that ABIs are underpinned by overly simplistic and under-theorised conceptions of inequality and geography, which fail to recognise the complexity of urban processes. Moreover, ABIs may also produce *negative* consequences that compound the very problems they were designed to overcome.

ABIs and the Geography of Inequality

A key premise of ABIs of all kinds is that there is a geography of poverty and social disadvantage, which is best addressed by adopting a policy approach which is framed spatially. How best to understand this spatial distribution of poverty and social disadvantage has been debated for many decades. In general terms, two types of argument have been proposed in this context.

The first is that it is possible to identify empirically local areas which are relatively homogeneous in terms of their social disadvantage relative to other areas. In other words, social disadvantage can be said to be concentrated into particular neighbourhoods. So, for example, this could be a situation where children within a given locality have historically achieved significantly lower academic grades relative to children in other areas or measured against some indicator of average attainment levels. Consequently, it is believed that some form of positive discrimination towards the children in this area is required. This could be in terms of resources, teaching and learning strategies or some other policy to address the spatial imbalance in outcomes.

However, it is well established that it is very difficult to identify homogenous neighbourhoods, where there exists such obvious and significant differences from other areas. As early as the mid-1970s, Holtermann (1975), using data from the 1971 Census of Population and working inside government, found that there was very little concentration of particular aspects of poverty; there was just as much variation *within* as there was *between* them. Furthermore, the majority of the most socially disadvantaged households were located outside of the most disadvantaged areas. Again during the 1970s, Berthoud (1976) argued that most variation in household income in London had nothing to do with area. Similarly, Townsend (1976) warned that positive discrimination on the basis of ecology would miss out more people in need than it would include. Barnes (1975) showed that EPAs in Inner London only slightly favoured the most disadvantaged children; resources going to EPA schools reached 13.6% of all children and only 20.2% of the most disadvantaged. In short, although there was clearly a bias towards pupils with the most needs, EPAs in Inner London included less than a quarter of the most disadvantaged.

It is, of course, important to bear in mind that these earlier studies are highly contingent on the specific forms of empirical analysis adopted. They reflect not only the actual geographical distribution of social and educational disadvantage, but also, for example, the particular definitions of such disadvantage which were adopted and the nature (and, in particular, the size) of the areal units on which the analyses were based. Nevertheless, it remains legitimate to conclude from these analyses that contemporary ABIs need to *demonstrate* the extent to which they are able to embrace individuals and households experiencing the most severe manifestations of social disadvantage, rather than simply presuming that they will do so. Moreover, even where significant concentrations of social disadvantage can be plausibly identified, it is important to remember that this does not in itself provide an adequate understanding of *why* such concentrations exist.

The second approach to the analysis of the spatial distribution of poverty and social disadvantage explores the existence of ‘area effects’. These are defined as the impact on, or contribution towards, the life chances of individuals or households of living in one area as opposed to living in another area (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001; Buck, 2001). Furthermore, these area effects can be considered as either positive (that is, in working to avoid disadvantage) or negative (in working to promote

poverty). Such an approach, therefore, is interested in processes rather than simply outcomes.

The main difficulty with this approach is that of defining and identifying unambiguously the nature of area effects. A number of models for identifying these effects have been proposed. For example, Jencks and Mayer (1990) discuss the role of childhood socialisation in contributing towards some area effect on educational disparities, and hence socio-economic disadvantage. However, not only is the process of observing childhood socialisation, and then associating that with some form of educational outcome, difficult, the danger is that it assumes that a 'culture of poverty' exists *a priori*. Buck (2001) underlines the complexities involved in identifying area effects by outlining eight different, but overlapping models of 'neighbourhood effects'. These are: the 'epidemic' model; the 'collective socialisation' model; the 'relative deprivation' model; the 'competition' model; the 'network' model; the 'expectation' model; and the 'insecurity' model. In practice, although some area effects have been identified, they are often considered to be small and of less importance to variations between, and influences at, the household and individual level (Kleinman, 1998; Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001; Buck, 2001).

In short, therefore, ABIs are based on overly simplistic conceptions of the geography of inequality. The use of ABIs tends to reinforce the notion of homogeneity within an area, thereby ignoring the frequent coincidence of extreme wealth and poverty in urban areas and creating an exaggerated impression of the concentration of poverty within a given neighbourhood. Certainly, ABIs need to make the case that they are able to encompass a significant number of disadvantaged individuals and households within the areas to which they are directed. More fundamentally, however, an understanding of economic and social disadvantage in terms of a geography of local areas in which the severest problems are concentrated embodies an inadequate theorisation of the processes through which such disadvantage is generated (Hamnett, 1989).

The Representation of Pathological Populations

This overly simplistic conceptualisation of the geography of inequality has contributed to images of cities as dangerous and degenerating places. Smith (1987) argued that one reason for the demise of the EPAs was that the lack of a coherent conceptualisation of disadvantage led to the 'internal collapse' of the policy. In particular, he criticised the tendency to emphasise the 'worst' features of EPAs which led to a perception that disadvantage was attributable to familial and individual pathologies rather than broader structural processes.

These weaknesses are still evident in current ABIs and have even been exacerbated as a result of the current fashion for bidding for funds. As we have seen, rather than resources being centrally allocated according to pre-determined criteria, New Labour has shown a preference for 'bottom-up' tendering. The process of tendering, it is argued, ensures that partnerships are developed in the planning process and that needs are locally determined by those 'closest to the ground'. However, the emphasis

on bidding has not only led to the emergence of a thriving industry of tendering consultancies, it potentially reinforces the already negative representations of poor communities. In order to make a strong case for funding, it is imperative that bids emphasise the decline and decay of urban areas, highlighting the concentration of chronic unemployment, disintegrating families, welfare dependency and low aspirations.

More specifically, in an analysis of bids for EAZ funding, Power and Gewirtz (2001) found that a combination of discourses surrounding disadvantage were invoked. Unlike the earlier EPA initiative, urban poverty was not explained solely in terms of 'fecklessness' and/or 'work-shyness'. Indeed, in terms of Halsey's (1972) three alternative explanations of the sources of poverty, most bids started from the more radical position and located the source of poverty within the changing structure of employment opportunities, in line with the analytical shifts outlined earlier.[3]

However, thereafter, the attributes of the population were seen as the key determinants in continued disadvantage. As Lister (1999) argues:

> The Government's approach to tackling social exclusion reflects an uneasy amalgam of SID [social integrationist discourse], MUD [moralistic underclass discourse] and RED [redistributive, egalitarian discourse]. Although it has, at times, deployed a definition of social exclusion in the RED tradition, all too often it talks the MUD language of 'welfare dependency' and 'handouts'. Its policies are firmly rooted in SID, most notably in their identification of paid work, supported by education and training, as the key route to social inclusion. (Lister, 1999, p. 4)

Within EAZ applications, MUD discourse was clearly evident in the representations of families: '… the norm is where pupils have been brought up in families dependent on benefits from the Government'. The dysfunctionality of these families is revealed through 'an apparent lack of male role models' and a climate of indiscipline. The bids describe how 'domestic violence and abuse are two common features of every day life within the housing estates', where 'many parents do little to ensure their children … subscribe to basic norms of behaviour' (Power & Gewirtz, 2001, p. 46). The dangers of discourse such as this is not just that inadequate diagnosis of the problem will lead to inappropriate treatment, but that when the treatment fails, it is these already disadvantaged communities that will pay the price of failure.

The counterproductive effects of 'partial' solutions are outlined by Fraser (1997):

> Although the approach aims to redress economic injustice, it leaves intact the deep structures that generate class disadvantage. Thus, it must make surface reallocations again and again. The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time such a class can even come to appear privileged, the recipient of special treatment and undeserved largesse. (Fraser, 1997, p. 25)

This kind of analysis suggests that not only are ABIs unlikely to make significant differences to the problems of urban regeneration, they may underscore the hopelessness of effecting *any* positive change and compound the socio-economic inequalities with further pathologising. It emphasises the practical consequences of

recognising that social and economic disadvantage is not a residual phenomenon which is concentrated into localised 'pockets'. However, it is equally clear that re-conceptualising disadvantage as a 'normal' consequence of the profoundly unequal outcomes of social and economic restructuring poses major problems for state policy.

How Can We Understand the Continued Use of ABIs?

These arguments clearly raise the issue of *why* ABIs have continued to be used by successive UK Governments; and, indeed, have enjoyed something of a resurgence under the New Labour administrations since 1997. In the face of evidence which suggests that not only have ABIs proved to be of limited effectiveness in their own terms, but are also based on a misconceived analysis of the nature of poverty and social disadvantage, why have they been such an enduring element in state strategy? Answering this question necessitates an examination of the limitations of this state strategy itself.

Taken at face value, the widespread adoption of ABIs by New Labour can be seen as an interventionist response to the failings of the previous administrations. New Labour came to power in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative rule—a period defined by overwhelming support for neo-liberal solutions. The move away from neo-liberalism was presented as the arrival of a more active state with a social conscience:

> We learnt in the 1980s that looking after number one was not enough; that without opportunity, responsibility was weak; that an unfair society was a less prosperous one. The philosophy was wrong—it hurt millions of families and left our country with lasting problems. (Blair, 2001, p. 4)

From this perspective, then, ABIs can be seen as a way of redressing the excesses of neo-liberal policies, through targeting investment at those areas worst affected by the failures of the market.

While such an interpretation in terms of ideology is plausible, it is somewhat ahistorical. As we have seen, ABIs have been adopted by governments of very different political complexions, suggesting there is no simple relationship between political ideology (at least understood in terms of government programmes) and their adoption. Accordingly, we need to go beyond accounts which are couched exclusively in terms of relatively short-term political ideologies.

What our analysis of ABIs points to are the deep-seated limitations of the policy repertoire available to the UK state (Rees & Lambert, 1985). Once social and economic disadvantage is re-defined as an aspect of the inequalities which are characteristic of British society, then these limitations become apparent. The state is not in a position to engage with issues of social inequality, structural shifts in the organisation of economic activity and their consequences, except at the margins. ABIs and the conceptualisations of disadvantage on which they are based reflect this. They provide a means of presenting the promise of 'active Government' within the highly restricted policy repertoire available in reality. Clearly, if this account is correct, then

it is highly likely that ABIs will continue to provide a key element in state strategies to combat poverty and disadvantage. It is also highly likely that they will fail.

Notes

[1] It is also important to note that these ABIs operate in addition to other educational programmes which may be deemed to have important effects on neighbourhoods. For example, New Labour's pursuit of school diversity in England, with the development of Academies, Specialist Schools, Beacon Schools, Federations and Extended Schools, can be argued to have important localised effects, depending upon geographical patterns of pupil recruitment (Taylor *et al.*, 2005). However, the recent introduction of market reforms to education in the UK is transforming the relationship between schools and neighbourhoods (Taylor, 2001). The introduction of open enrolment and greater school choice has meant that neighbourhoods and schools can no longer be seen as congruent with one another. Individual children and families within a given neighbourhood are now more likely to be attending a variety of different schools, perhaps diluting the 'area effect' of the school. We wish to keep our consideration of ABIs separate from such policies.

[2] First-round zones were guaranteed £750,000 Government funding per year for three years. Second-round zones are only guaranteed Government funding of £500,000 per year, with a further £250,000 available annually to match contributions from the private sector. EAZs were subsequently invited to apply for two-year funding extensions—which all first-round zones and all but one second-round zone were eventually granted.

[3] The first two explanations relate to inadequate socialisation by either (a) the family or (b) other socialisation agencies such as schools. The third explanation relates to lack of opportunity in the social structure.

Notes on contributors

Sally Power is a Professorial Fellow in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. Her research interests include the sociology of education policy and education and social class.

Gareth Rees AcSS is a Professor in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. He has researched and written extensively on lifelong learning, education and economic development and the changing governance of education policy.

Chris Taylor is a Lecturer in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences. He has written extensively on the geography of education, education policy, education marketisation and school diversity.

References

Atkinson, R. & Kintrea, K. (2001) Disentangling area effects: evidence from deprived ad non-deprived neighbourhoods, *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2277–2298.

Barnes, J.A. (1975) Educational priority, Volume 3, *Curriculum innovation in London's EPAs* (London, HMSO).

Berthoud, R. (1976) Where are London's poor?, *Greater London Intelligence Quarterly*, 36, 5–12.

Blair, T. (2001) Fulfilling Britain's great potential, *Ambitions for Britain: Labour Party Manifesto* (London, Labour Party).

Cameron, S. & Davoudi, S. (1998) Combating social exclusion, in: A. Madanipour, G. Cars & J. Allen (Eds) *Social exclusion in European cities* (London, Jessica Kingsley).

CELSI (2002) *Evidence of progress: an independent review of evaluation activities in education action zones* (Canterbury, Canterbury Christ Church University College).

Davies, B.P. (1968) *Social needs and resources in local services* (London, Michael Joseph).

Department of Education and Science (1972) *Educational priority*, The Halsey Report, Volume 1, (London, HMSO).

DfEE (1997) *Education Action Zones: an introduction* (London, DfEE)

DETR (2000a) *Coordination of area-based initiatives*, Research Working Paper (London, DETR).

DETR (2000b) *Collaboration and coordination of area-based initiatives*, Second Research, Working Paper (London, DETR).

Eyles, J. (1989) Area-based policies for the inner city: context, problems and prospects, in: D.T. Herbert & D.M. Smith (Eds) *Social problems and the city* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Fraser, N. (1997) From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'postsocialist' age, in: N. Fraser, *Justice interruptus* (New York, Routledge).

Gewirtz, S., Dickson, M. & Power, S. (2004) Unravelling a 'spun' policy: a case study of the constructive role of 'spin' in the education policy process, *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 313–334.

Giddens, A. (1998) *The Third Way: the renewal of social democracy* (Cambridge, Polity).

Hall, P. (1997) Regeneration policies for peripheral housing estates: inward- and outward-looking approaches, *Urban Studies*, 34(5/6), 873–890.

Hall, S. & Mawson, J. (1999) *Challenge funding, contracts and area regeneration* (Bristol, The Policy Press).

Halpin, D., Dickson, M., Power, S., Whitty, G. & Gewirtz, S. (2004) Area-based approaches to educational regeneration: the case of the English Education Action Zone experiment, *Policy Studies*, 25(2), 75–85.

Halsey, A.H. (Ed.) (1972) *Educational priority: Vol 1 EPA problems and policies* (London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office).

Hamnett, C. (1989) Area-based explanations: a critical appraisal, in: D.T. Herbert & D.M. Smith (Eds) *Social problems and the city* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Holtermann, S. (1975) Areas of urban deprivation in Great Britain: an analysis of 1971 census data, *Social Trends*, 6, 33–47.

House of Commons (2002a) *The effectiveness of government regeneration initiatives* (HC 76-I) (London, The Stationery Office).

House of Commons (2002b) *The effectiveness of government regeneration initiatives: memoranda submitted to the Urban Affairs Sub-Committee (HC 1207-II)* (London, The Stationery Office).

Jencks, C. & Mayer, S.E. (1990) The social consequences of growing up in a poor neighbourhood, in: L.E. Lynn Jr & M.G.H. McGeary (Eds) *Inner-City Poverty in the United States* (Washington, National Academy Press).

Kleinman, M. (1998) *Include me OUT? The New politics of place and poverty* (London, London School of Economics).

Lees, R. & Smith, G. (Eds) (1975) *Action-research in community development* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).

Lister, R. (1999) 'Work for those who can, security for those who cannot': a third way in social security reform. Social Policy Association Annual Conference, Roehampton Institute London, 20–22 July.

Neave, G. (1988) On the cultivation of quality, efficiency and enterprise: an overview of recent trends in higher education in Western Europe 1968–1988, *European Journal of Education* 23(1/2), 7–23.

Ofsted (2001) *Education Action Zones: commentary on the first six zone inspections* (Ofsted, London).

Parkinson, M. (1998) *Combating social exclusion: lessons from area-based programmes in Europe* (Bristol, The Policy Press).

Power, S. & Gewirtz, S. (2001) Reading education action zones, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16,(1), 39–51.

Power, S., Whitty, G., Gewirtz, S., Halpin, D. & Dickson, M. (2004) Paving a 'Third Way'? A policy trajectory analysis of education action zones, *Research Papers in Education*, 19(4), 453–476.

Rees, G. & Lambert, J. (1985) *Cities in crisis: the political economy of urban development in post-war Britain* (London, Edward Arnold).

Sammons, P., Power, S., Elliot, K., Robertson, P., Campbell, C. & Whitty, G. (2003) *Key findings from the national evaluation of the new community schools pilot programme in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, Edinburgh).

Skifter Anderson, H. (2001) What is the special purpose of area based initiatives? How to understand deprived urban neighbourhoods. Paper presented at EURA Conference, May. Available at: www.sbi.dk/eura/workshops/papers/workshop2/skifter.htm.

Smith, G. (1987) Whatever happened to educational priority areas, *Oxford Review Of Education*, 13(1), 23–38.

Social Exclusion Unit (2004) *Jobs and enterprise in deprived areas* (London, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister).

Taylor, C. (2001) *Geography of the 'new' education market* (Aldershot, Ashgate).

Taylor, C., Fitz, J. & Gorard, S. (2005) Diversity, specialisation and equity in education, *Oxford Review of Education*, 31(1), 47–69.

Taylor, M. (1998) Combating the social exclusion of housing estates, *Housing Studies*, 13(6), 819–832.

Townsend, P. (1976) The difficulties of policies based on the concept of area deprivation. London, Queen Mary College, Department of Economics, Barnett Shine Foundation Lecture.