

## Education Action Zones, Empowerment and Parents

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### Summary

This paper focuses on one aspect of the work of Education Action Zones (EAZs) that has been neglected by emerging research, namely their efforts to tackle social exclusion and empower a more representative set of parents to become involved in policy-making processes for education in their localities. Data from three EAZs across the country are presented to demonstrate that empowerment of parents through zones is restricted. Instead, the interests of educational professionals, and to a lesser extent those parents who have previously been socially and politically active, predominate across EAZs. The paper claims that the assumptions pervading the discourses of powerful coalitions across EAZs and their discursive competencies are actually presenting a barrier to wider parental empowerment in the form envisaged in policy texts and the rhetoric of ministers.

*Keywords:* Education Action Zones, empowerment, parents, governance

### Introduction

Education Action Zones (EAZs) were set up across England from September 1998 onwards to embody several principles of what is termed a 'Third Way' creed. Advocates of this Third Way reject what is perceived to be a 'dichotomistic public-private distinction' in favour of a concept of 'governance' based on 'heterarchy' – i.e. 'horizontal self-organization among mutually interdependent actors' (Jessop, 2000). The main objective of EAZs is to improve educational standards, and they are expected to do this by adopting a 'partnership' and decentralized model of governance which can 'engage' greater numbers of 'local people' in the development and management of the strategy for each zone (Blunkett, 1999). They are meant to be about addressing a prior 'tendency to parachute solutions in from outside rather than engaging local communities'. It is claimed this resulted in many members of local communities feeling 'locked out' of the local policy process (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998).

EAZs are examples of a comprehensive community initiative (CCI). The concept of CCI derives from the USA, where they became the preferred mechanism for applying the values of the Third Way philosophy held by the Clinton administration (Connell *et al.*, 1995). CCIs in the form of EAZs – and several other area-based interventions – have been set up to respond to 'the dynamics of the neighbourhood' (*ibid.*). The main way in which EAZs attempt to achieve this is by allowing parents and other stakeholders to have representation as members of an action forum, as outlined in the 1998 Education (Standards and Framework) Act. However, CCIs in the form of EAZs and other area-based regeneration initiatives across the UK do not represent a wholly new venture in terms of policy. Area targeting has a long history as part of attempts to tackle geographically focused deprivation, and the current initiatives have similarities to the Community Development Programmes (CDPs), Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) and Urban Programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. These earlier initiatives used methods of partnership working and community involvement and empowerment that are key tenets of the newer 'zones'. Where EAZs differ, however, is in their conception as 'testbeds for innovation' intended to exert a significant modernizing influence. They are meant to be characterized by change and experimentation, often in the form of Third Way policies of pluralism and active partnership.

To this end, EAZ forums are required to include a person appointed by the governing body of each participating school, unless the governing body of a school chooses not to make such an appointment. One or two persons are

appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. Each forum also has powers to add to its membership. Policy literature implies that the government expects that a diverse set of parents will be represented on EAZ forums in this way. This is demonstrated by the DfEE list of those that 'may' be included – headed by parents (DfEE, 1999) – and by the stipulation that EAZ forums should have an appropriate gender balance and be representative in terms of 'significant minority communities' (DfEE, 1998). It was hoped that EAZ action forums would allow a broader set of parents to voice their concerns and represent their interests in the local governance of education. The legal technicalities of EAZ forums were 'clearly specified' (Dickson *et al.*, 2001). EAZ forums were meant to include parent representatives.

In addition, EAZs were given the discretion to experiment with innovative ways of achieving a 'bottom-up' approach to policy-making through empowering people and communities, including parents.

In these ways, it was anticipated that EAZs would play a part in helping to reinvigorate local democracy. Indeed, authors (Gewirtz and Power, 1999; Hatcher, 1999) and government policy documents (DfEE, 1999) pointed to the potential significance of EAZs as a new model of educational policy-making which represents a departure from approaches adopted by previous governments. In the final two decades of the twentieth century, the procedural rationale of the market was applied to public education in the UK. This was an attempt to empower parents as consumers of education. But it is claimed that the marketization of education resulted in benefits for those parents with power and resources and disbenefits for many parents who lacked these (Ball, 1998; Crozier, 1998).

Involving parents in EAZ policy-making is seen as an attempt to overcome the ways in which some parents have been disadvantaged by the education policies of previous governments. Indeed, by 1999 former Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, praised EAZs as examples of a policy that had helped reduce social exclusion by reinvigorating local democracy. EAZs and other CCIs were claimed to be 'empowering people and local communities'. Parents as key members of communities were allegedly being empowered to become active citizens and educational stakeholders with a 'voice' in the local educational policy process: 'Education Action Zones and Employment Zones have shown the success of this approach in involving people on the ground in developing the policies which affect them' (Blunkett, 1999). The credibility of this claim is critically assessed in the following.

### **The concept of empowerment and EAZs**

Empowerment is central to the success of EAZs and yet it remains an elusive and ambiguous concept. Griffiths (1998) suggests that empowerment is linked to different conceptions of power, and proposes a threefold schema of ideal types. First, there is individual empowerment, where people or groups experience 'being empowered' or even just 'feeling empowered'. This category of empowerment is most commonly based on the notion of personal agency. Secondly, a structuralist socialist-Marxist interpretation of empowerment can involve the 'loss of a false consciousness combined with the resultant opportunities for organisation among people with common political interests'. Thirdly, a post-structuralist and relational interpretation of empowerment accentuates 'the context and relationship aspects of power, so that empowerment is about the place of the agent within the context of their discourse and institution' (*ibid.*).

Using Griffiths's schema, it appears the first and third conceptions of empowerment pervade the EAZ policy. There is the assumption underpinning EAZ policy that empowerment is something that can be attributed to individuals or groups, as well as discursive social contexts. On the one hand, there is the hope that EAZs will encourage individuals (including parents) to acquire the self-confidence and skills to participate in education initiatives. On the other hand,

through partnership and capacity building the aim is to encourage a greater sharing of power between educational professionals, parents and others in communities across local networks. But there may be a discrepancy between the rhetoric of empowerment contained in policy texts and the actual implementation of policy. It is this potential gap between rhetoric and actual operation of policy that this paper addresses. Two key questions are addressed in the following: what are EAZs doing to empower parents?; have the efforts of EAZs to empower parents resulted in greater numbers of them participating in local educational policy-making?

### **Background to the research**

This paper attempts to fill a gap in the knowledge base regarding EAZs and democratic participation. Although an impressive corpus of research is now emerging regarding the involvement of various 'partners' in EAZs (Dickson and Power, 2001; Dickson *et al.*, 2001; Hallgarten and Watling, 2001; Jones and Bird, 2000), parental participation in these endeavours seems to have been neglected. The data, which form the basis for the following observations, stem from a wider empirical study of EAZs. The parents and empowerment strand of the investigation has involved the collection of documentary sources (EAZ action plans and minutes from meetings), interviews with educational stakeholders (EAZ Project Directors in three zones, head teachers and parents) and observation at EAZ forums. Data were collected from three EAZs that are all situated in metropolitan areas characterized by multiple disadvantage. All three EAZs became active in September 1998. The EAZs will be referred to by pseudonyms – Northern EAZ (NEAZ), Central EAZ (CEAZ) and, finally, Southern EAZ (SEAZ). As the pseudonyms suggest, they are located in the north, Midlands and south of England.

### **Parents and EAZs – empirical findings**

#### *Southern EAZ*

The Project Director of SEAZ described their relatively small forum: 'We have a forum that is very small. It is only 22 members. The [LEA] were very lucky, in that they persuaded the schools to accept that there would only be representatives on the forum. They persuaded the governors that there would only be representatives. So if you look in the action plan, there are three schools who are representatives. Then there are two parent governors, a secondary and primary governor, a voluntary-aided governor, the usual sort of stuff. Only one teachers' union representative who represents [the local area's] teachers' panel. He represents all the unions but he actually is NUT. Then we have got the community groups, the business partners and two from the LEA. So it is very small and lean.'

As a way of promoting parental participation, the SEAZ runs 'action partnerships' once or twice a year to provide information and advice to the community. The main way, it seems, that parents participate in the SEAZ comes through a learning community strategy which is attempting to address a number of areas such as low expectations among parents; poor support for schools among parents; lack of parental support for children's education; low level of basic skills among parents; and a lack of community involvement in education. These initiatives aim to work at the individual and also the relational level by empowering parents to equip themselves with new skills and competencies, and by transforming existing relationships within educational governance so as to enable greater participation. However, the Project Director in SEAZ conceded that despite such schemes parental participation in the zone was still limited:

'Parents are involved as governors in their schools. They are involved in terms of their children's education. They are involved in consultation, but actually if the truth were known, they have not been to any very large extent involved in developing the strategy of the EAZ.'

### *Northern EAZ*

The data from the NEAZ show that educational professionals have dominated attendance at the zone's forum meetings – there are only two parent governors who regularly attend. Very few parents have been empowered at the individual level, in the sense of gaining the information, knowledge and skills necessary to participate within the NEAZ. Even fewer have been empowered when the term is defined as the ability to become part of networks involved in setting priorities and agendas for the NEAZ. Over its first year, attempts were made by NEAZ staff to consult the community and particularly the views of parents and others in the local area. One way in which this was undertaken was by the distribution of a newsletter (the SEAZ also uses a newsletter) and by regular public meetings. However, the interest shown at the public meetings was extremely disappointing – three people attended the first meeting, two the second meeting and one the third meeting.

One of six 'key priorities' listed in the NEAZ's action plan is the 'Involvement of the local and wider community'. But the term 'involvement' assumes a restricted meaning in NEAZ literature. It was hoped to achieve 'involvement' through an increase in the number and range of family learning courses devoted to developing parenting skills. When interviewed, a parent governor on the NEAZ forum noted the lack of success in broadening representation in terms of parental involvement in NEAZ policy-making: 'most parents haven't got a clue what the EAZ is about.' A headteacher in the NEAZ claimed:

'I'm not sure that there is partnership because it is more reporting to a group of people. Yes, we all sit at the forum and listen to what is happening, but I'm not sure that it is functioning as it was imagined it would be, for example, the partners feeding [their views] into the partnership.'

### *Central EAZ*

In contrast to the two EAZs noted above, the CEAZ has been much more active in exploring ways of promoting the involvement of parents. In part, this is because there was a shared belief that such involvement was crucial to the aims of raising standards and changing attitudes to education. As the Director of the CEAZ suggested: 'The aims in [Central] EAZ really are about raising achievement, and that is of children across all ages. Raising expectations of the teachers and the parents and the children themselves. We are looking at various strategies to do that in terms of involving parents further, raising the quality of teaching, and so on.'

Consequently, the CEAZ has moved farther in terms of empowering parents and getting them involved in policy-making, notably through its 'Parents as Partners' programme. This approach was meant to ensure that the programme became embedded in school culture but simultaneously met community needs. School staff, then, gave a commitment to develop policies on parental involvement. One way of achieving this was via Parent Linkworkers who were recruited from different areas of the zone to gather parents' perceptions about education in the area. It is claimed that, in this way, each community and its cluster of schools in the CEAZ had input into the planning of its own Parents as Partners programme before its launch.

Various strategies were planned to promote the Parents as Partners programme, including outreach strategies, parents' panels (feeding views of parents on various issues into the CEAZ) and schemes to help parents develop self-advocacy skills to improve their dealings with school staff. Detailed scrutiny of the CEAZ's Parents as Partners programme, though, reveals that parents do not play a significant role in the zone's governance and shaping of its overall strategies. This is because the notion of partnership used in the programme is not about empowering parents to 'bring their voice' to the overall approach of the CEAZ. Rather, the programme's aims are restricted to viewing parents only

as supporters of their children's learning at home and in the classroom. Indeed, when describing membership of the CEAZ forum, the Project Director named the usual professional interests:

'The partners to the zone are [16 schools], the universities, the training and enterprise councils and the careers service, and the LEA obviously is the lead partner in setting up the zone. Also the business trust, the football club, the chamber of commerce and the [regional] orchestra.'

### **Explaining parental participation in EAZs**

Overall, the central finding resulting from an analysis of the empirical data above is the lack of progress made by EAZs in involving parents as policy-makers, particularly those parents who have previously been marginalized. There has been little progress made in transforming the existing power relationships that underpin the local policy-making processes for education. Parents are largely restricted to being the recipients of information through uni-directional consultation and/or programmes designed to promote their parenting skills. But in terms of a more representative set of parents contributing to EAZ policy-making, little progress has been made. The few parents found on EAZ policy-making forums are those who were previously socially and politically active. Based on data obtained, the following section offers one possible explanation for this limited progress.

### **EAZs, discourse and a deficit model of parents**

The other side of the limited involvement of parents and others from local communities in EAZ decision-making is the dominance of professional interests. EAZ forums have allowed a strengthening of professional interest (Halpin, 2000). In particular, EAZ project managers, LEA officers and the head teachers of schools involved in zones are pre-eminent. The discourse of educational professionals is dominant in shaping the work of all three zones investigated. The use of the concept of discourse to analyse data from the three EAZs in this study has been useful. Discourses are simply ways of talking and thinking about issues. Employing discourse as an investigative tool helps highlight how the use of terms such as partnership and empowerment may mask moves towards the adoption of a deficit model of educational disadvantage. In the three EAZs visited several key individuals – including educational professionals and significantly some parent governors – share a discourse which is unified by common assumptions about the parents of pupils in their schools.

First, parents are assumed to be largely an homogeneous group. Secondly, because of this homogenization, it is assumed that most parents are lacking the intelligence, correct values and motivation necessary to participate at a higher level in EAZs. Thirdly, as a result of the above, it is further assumed that parents and others living in EAZs are ripe for manipulation and shaping through parenting courses and the imposition by educational professionals of an 'expert' discourse, with its allegedly superior knowledge. EAZ forum members holding a deficit model of parents have formed powerful discourse coalitions across EAZs and dominate policy-making. Discourse coalitions are groups of actors who share the assumptions underpinning this model. Those sharing a deficit model of parents agree on a solution to this alleged 'problem'. In this sense, discourse coalitions often share and use a 'mode of rationality' (Clegg, 1989) which offers direction in terms of addressing 'problems'. Thus, in each of the three zones investigated, the addressing of low aspirations and expectations, a lack of parental support for pupils and/or inadequate parenting skills are pre-eminent in the strategies adopted for involving parents. As a head teacher in a EAZ noted: 'I've worked in this area for a long time. So I know the patch fairly well, and it wouldn't be stretching a point to say that education does not have the value that it perhaps ought to have in the estimation of a large proportion of the adults in the community for various reasons. What we are seeking to do is to alter that perception.'

Organization of the EAZs, in this study, points to a rhetoric of partnership

which masks a culture of co-option of stakeholders in order to legitimize the views and interests of professional educators. At the outset of NEAZ, for example, it was anticipated that parent representatives would be changed after several months. However, the same two parent representatives remain in place three years after the launch of the zone. Those few parents on EAZ forums have a 'track record' in local governance and can be trusted not to rock the boat. One parent governor on an EAZ forum made the following claim:

'You know they just speak in initials . . . No matter how many times they told me what the initials stood for, I didn't understand them. I wouldn't remember, there's that many . . . If I don't understand something, I just say "I don't understand it", and obviously there are some things that do go over my head, but then I think that's fair enough.'

This parent governor's description of the parents within her zone reveals that she shares a de. cit model of parents. She describes parents in her area using a negative connotation, and she reveals her propensity for viewing parents in the EAZ as an homogeneous group:

'There's quite a divide, I think. People in this area, I have to say, tend to just send their kids to school and just let them get on with it . . . They don't really have any expectations of school, except that the kids are going to be there all day and come home at night-time, and they don't get into trouble in the meantime. And, I think, a lot of people that's all they expect of schools.'

Deficit model discourse plays a part in reducing the possibilities of innovative modernization in terms of governance in the three EAZs investigated in this study. EAZ forum members holding a de. cit model of parents have formed powerful discourse coalitions – i.e. groups of actors who share the assumptions underpinning this model – and dominate policy-making. They have advocated a 'reality' that views parental involvement in EAZ policy-making as a 'problem'. As a result, alternative ways of thinking about parental involvement in local educational governance are ruled out or even ignored, and effectively, this helps Education Action Zones, empowerment and parents preserve and/or reinforce existing power distributions across EAZs. The notion of empowering parents through discursive local networks becomes less likely.

Preserving the status quo in terms of educational policy-making perpetuates under-representation based on factors such as social class and ethnicity. Observation at meetings and an investigation of attendance records for EAZ forums reveal that policy-making across the zones remains predominantly middle class and white. In this sense, EAZs have resulted in similar outcomes to previous policy approaches attempting to empower parents through marketization and reforms of school governance (Crozier, 1998; Ball, 1998). Using discourse as an analytical tool helps explain anomalies in terms of strategies for empowering parents across the three EAZs in this study. It highlights that the picture is more complex than a simple binary between professionals and parents. Just as it is wrong for those holding a deficit model of parents to assume that they are a homogeneous group, it is also wrong to assume that all educational professionals have the same views when it comes to parental empowerment and involvement in EAZs. This helps explain differences between the strategic approaches of the three EAZs outlined earlier in the empirical evidence. Dominant discourses across EAZs differ to varying extents as a range of linguistic resources shape their formation. Discourse advocating a deficit model of parents must compete against other discourses that do not share this view.

### **Concluding remarks**

Based on documentary and interview data from three EAZs, this paper claims that, although given the discretion to experiment in terms of applying innovative ways of achieving greater democratic participation in local educational policymaking,

broader representation among parents has not been achieved. One possible explanation comes from evidence showing that a deficit model of parents has been constructed and articulated as a 'problem' across three EAZs investigated. The action plans in each EAZ allow for this alleged 'problem' to be made amenable to diagnosis and treatment. EAZ action plans are viewed as carrying some 'authority' because they are enunciated by the EAZ forums – strategic bodies which allegedly have a commitment to continuing deliberation, negotiation and the pooling of ideas. This suggests that their conclusions are shared and will have the required 'symbolic capital to make performative utterances' (Atkinson, 2000, p. 214), and ignores the possibility that many of the 'voices' that make up the diverse and complex communities that EAZs serve remain 'locked out' of the policy-making processes.

The process involving the creation of a deficit model of parents as a 'problem' can be characterized as 'image-making'. The process involves attributing cause, blame and responsibility. Those discourse coalitions pushing a deficit model of parents assume that educational disadvantage across zones is attributable to the deviant values and practices of parents. These discourse coalitions deliberately portray this 'problem' in ways calculated to gain support for their side. This process also serves to restrict the possibilities for alternative courses of action to be considered and so EAZ forums have not been keen to pursue new innovative ways to involve parents and other community members in their governance. The 'problem' of parental deficit, though, is not necessarily any reflection of social reality – although this is not to deny that some individual parents may have poor skills. Rather, it is helpful to see the 'problem' as a social construction – a discursive formation that supports political direction in a context where competition exists between discourses and the paradigmatic form of power enables certain interests to blend their capacities to achieve common purposes (Stone, 1989). A key concern of those members of EAZ forums belonging to a discourse coalition advocating a deficit model of parents has been a desire to limit the involvement of parents. Parents are homogenized and any notion of empowerment becomes limited and elusive.

EAZs as an initiative are presently being subsumed into other larger CCIs, such as Excellence in Cities and New Deal for Communities; but whatever initiative is preferred, it will be underpinned by the principles guiding Third Way policy – in particular, governance based on heterarchy and partnership. Improving the strategies for empowering a wider range of parents across localities will not be an easy task. Indeed, failure to recognize the scale of the challenge is perhaps a reason why the policy for EAZs is currently so limited in effect. Addressing this challenge will not simply involve tinkering with the mechanisms – for example, the positive aspects of the work of EAZ forums suggested by some authors (Dickson *et al.*, 2001). Further debate should involve discussion about the potential benefits of community schooling. It is also essential that the alleged benefits of broader and more representative parental involvement in local educational policy-making need to be further scrutinized and more clearly demonstrated.

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