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Area-Based Initiatives in England: Do They Have a Future?

¿Qué porvenir para las iniciativas territoriales en educación en Inglaterra?
Welche Zukunft für territoriale Erziehungsinitiativen in England?

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Area-Based Initiatives in England: Do They Have a Future?

Alan Dyson, Kirstin Kerr, and Carlo Raffo

Education-focused area-based initiatives (ABIs) are attempts to vary the forms of provision and practice that are typical within an education system in order to respond to what are held to be the particular challenges of particular places. They have been used extensively in English education policy as a means of tackling educational disadvantage. This paper[1] reviews the history of their use, but argues that their effects have been mixed at best. Critics have pointed out that ABIs have been based on inadequate analyses of local contexts, have deployed limited resources, and are incapable of tackling the socio-structural origins of disadvantage. However, the paper describes some "new style" ABIs which seem to overcome some of these criticisms. Although there is still only limited empirical evidence on these new ABIs, this paper outlines a theoretical basis for their likely effectiveness as part of a wider range of interventions.

Keywords (TESE): school, priority area, underachievement, school-community relation, social exclusion, poverty.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN THE ENGLISH CONTEXT

The English education system has many achievements of which it can be proud. Free, universal elementary education was established well before the end of the nineteenth century, and the principles on which it was based have extended progressively ever since. By the middle of the twentieth century, all children had access to high-quality, free education through the secondary phase, increasingly offered in non-selective "comprehensive" schools, and accompanied by a wide range of special education and other supportive provision for children experiencing difficulties. From the 1980s onwards, strenuous efforts have been made to improve the performance of the education system to the point where "world class" standards can be achieved. How successful these efforts have been is open to some dispute, but nonetheless, the latest available PISA results show England safely ensconced in the top half of the OECD country "league table", and performing at least as well as broadly comparable countries such as France, Germany and the USA (Bradshaw et al. 2010).

Despite this, there have been recurrent concerns on the part of policy makers about the persistently low levels of educational achievement amongst certain groups of learners. In particular, there is a strong association in England between learners' social

background and their educational achievements (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Schools Analysis and Research Division Department for Children Schools and Families 2009). As one recent review of the evidence puts it: ". . . British children's educational attainment is overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income, and qualifications. Marked differences become apparent during early childhood with regard to readiness for school. By the age of three, poor children have been assessed to be one year behind richer ones in terms of communication, and in some disadvantaged areas, up to 50% of children begin primary school without the necessary language and communication skills. As compulsory schooling progresses, educational inequalities continue to widen between children from poor families and those from more affluent backgrounds . . . Furthermore, these children are more likely to attend the lowest-performing schools in deprived areas. They are also disproportionately likely to have been in care, and/or have special educational needs. Although this is a widespread international phenomenon, and research has shown that social deprivation has a negative impact on educational attainment across all OECD countries, the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation and is one of the nations with the most highly differentiated results among OECD countries." (Perry and Francis 2010, 5; citations omitted)

Socio-economic factors, of course, do not act in isolation. They are cross-cut by gender, ethnicity, and language. They are also cross-cut by spatial factors. It is increasingly clear that *where* education takes place–specifically, which city, town or district–has important implications for *how* it takes place and for the outcomes that result (Lupton 2006). There are many aspects of the "geography of education" (Taylor 2009) that are potentially important, including who attends which school, what choices families really have as to where to educate their children, how well the school is resourced, and how easy the school finds it to recruit and retain staff. However, all of these are compounded by the spatialisation of social–and hence, educational–disadvantage in England. Poverty, ill health, low skills levels, unemployment and other disadvantaging factors tend to cluster in certain places (MacInnes, Kenway, and Parekh 2009), with inevitable consequences for education in those areas. As one government report explained: "The attainment gap between children from deprived and more affluent neighbourhoods has long been an issue of concern for policy makers. Only 26 per cent of children living in the 10 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in England achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE[2] in 2002 compared to 72 per cent in the 10 per cent most affluent neighbourhoods. . . . In addition, the evidence suggests that as children in deprived areas get older they fall further behind. Therefore, many of these children are missing the opportunity to obtain higher level qualifications, such as GCSEs which are crucial in accessing higher education or better job opportunities." (Whitworth et al. 2009, 10)

The mechanisms whereby concentrations of social disadvantage in an area become translated into poor educational outcomes are complex, contested, and may well vary from place to place (Webber and Butler 2007). However, Lupton's (2006) model of these interactions seems as good as any: The characteristics of places affect the individual learners who live in those places, by increasing the likelihood of problematic aspirations, low self-esteem, and limited parental support for education; these characteristics also affect the schools which serve those places in the form of internal stresses, recruitment difficulties, and poor quality provision; and the schools in turn compound the effects on individual learners through poor experiences and limited opportunities. Whilst it is important to say that there are likely to be many exceptions to this overall picture, it is hardly surprising that policy makers have long seen the poor educational outcomes associated with the most socially disadvantaged places as an issue that needed to be tackled both in its own right, and as a means of breaking the powerful association between social background and educational outcomes that has troubled the education system as a whole.

AREA-BASED INITIATIVES IN THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Unlike in some other European countries, the education system in England has never–at least until recent years–been highly centralised. The tradition has been that central government has set a broad framework of policy, but that "local authorities" (currently just over 150 in number) have had considerable freedom to develop educational responses to what they saw as their own situations. Although it is certainly true that central government has taken much greater control over the system in the past two decades, this has been offset by a growing autonomy for individual schools, the introduction of private sponsors of some schools, and a continuing

attempt to give local authorities a meaningful role in shaping educational provision (see, most recently, Deloitte 2011). As a result, there is nothing unusual about educational provision varying in some respects from place to place in England. This capacity for local variation has long been used as one way of tackling concentrations of social and educational disadvantage, for instance, by resourcing poorer local authorities and schools in poorer areas more favourably than those elsewhere. However, the deep-seated nature of these concentrations has also from time to time called forth other, more vigorous and (in some respects) more carefully targeted interventions– usually known as "area-based initiatives" or ABIs.

There is no formal definition of what constitutes an ABI, and the boundaries between them and other local variations in provision are not clear-cut. For our purposes, however, an ABI is an attempt to vary the forms of provision and practice that are typical elsewhere in order to respond to what are held to be the particular challenges of particular places. Because standard forms of provision and practice stem from national legislation, ABIs often require a national policy initiative which creates local freedoms and flexibilities, and/or which provides some additional resources to support local developments. ABIs have been a common feature of provision across many aspects of public policy in England. There have, for instance, been Health Action Zones, Employment Action Zones Housing Action Zones, and Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. Some of these have had more or less substantial education components, but the ABIs we are interested in here have had education as their principal focus, even if they have also ventured to some extent into other policy areas. Because schools and local authorities have always had some degree of freedom to shape provision according to local circumstances, these education-focused ABIs have tended to operate at a different level of the system, usually defined by the boundaries of a supposed area of disadvantage. In most cases, these areas have been defined at a level somewhere between the neighbourhoods from which individual schools recruit their students and the administrative areas for which individual local authorities are responsible. In at least one case, however, areas have been defined at a supra-local authority level, tackling educational problems that are seen as demanding a cross-local authority response. Using this definition, it is possible to identify four major education-focused ABIs since the 1960s:

– *Educational Priority Areas* (EPAs) flourished between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, aiming to bring additional resources and other forms of "positive discrimination" to bear on the "deprivation" experienced by children in the poorest areas (Central Advisory Council for Education 1967). In addition to better-resourced schools, EPAs were also expected to have an emphasis on nursery education, parental involvement and community schooling. The expectation was that EPAs would find innovative solutions to the problems of educational disadvantage, and an "action research" programme focused on the development of new practices in and around schools. There was some interaction with other area-based initiatives focused on non-educational issues in these areas, and a good deal of innovative effort. However, by the mid-1970s the initiative was foundering amidst a lack of political commitment and obvious success, and ceased formally to exist (Smith 1987).
– *Education Action Zones* (EAZs) flourished in the late 1990s and early 2000s, based on a partnership model between local authorities, schools and a range of community members, and public and private sector organisations (DfEE 1999a). EAZs, particularly at first, had considerable freedom to develop innovative responses to poor outcomes in disadvantaged areas. The work of each zone was guided by a forum of the various partners and zones received additional funding from central government. However, they were also able to receive material and financial resources from their partners. Typically, EAZs worked on improving the quality of teaching and learning, providing students with additional learning support, tackling non-attendance and disruptive behaviour, involving parents in their children's education, and developing links with local businesses.
– *Excellence in Cities* (EiC) overlapped with and then succeeded EAZs (Kendall 2004). Based on a similar model of developing strategies for tackling educational disadvantage in groups of schools, there was a higher level of prescription from central government as to what these strategies would be, with an emphasis on leadership, behaviour and teaching and learning. Each EiC area was expected to implement a series of "strands" of action, including the provision of learning mentors to encourage students to achieve more highly, the establishment of "learning support units" in secondary schools to provide for students at risk of exclusion for disciplinary reasons, the development

of a programme for "gifted and talented" students and the funding of "city learning centres" to enhance adult learning opportunities for local people.

– *The City Challenge* was launched in 2003–originally in London–to tackle educational problems, as its name suggests, in major cities and conurbations (DfES 2007). It focused more narrowly than previous initiatives on improving school practices in order to drive up levels of attainment. Moreover, it relied less on the hope that local innovations would find the solution to endemic problems, and instead focused on spreading established "good practice" round the system by giving underperforming schools and teachers access to support from elsewhere in the City Challenge area.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES FROM ABIs

Despite the proliferation of education-focused ABIs, the evidence for their effectiveness in improving outcomes, narrowing the gap in attainments between more and less disadvantaged learners, or equalising outcomes between more and less deprived areas is ambiguous, to say the least. In broad terms, EPAs were unable to demonstrate large-scale impacts in either the short or the longer term (Smith, Smith, and Smith 2007; Smith 1987); EAZs likewise seem to have had few impacts on outcomes (Rees, Power, and Taylor 2007); Excellence in Cities appears to have had some modest impacts on some outcomes (NFER 2007); and City Challenge appears to have had some impacts on attainment outcomes (DfES 2007), though it is less clear that this has done much to narrow gaps between more and less disadvantaged students, and the absence of external evaluation casts some doubts on these apparent achievements. The most that can be claimed for ABIs, therefore, is, as one research team put it, that, "the evidence to date suggests that ABIs continue to have limited impact and any benefits are, at best, patchy." (Rees, Power, and Taylor 2007, 265)

There are many reasons why these ABIs may have been less than transformatory in their effects. One is undoubtedly to do with the design of different initiatives. It is noticeable, for instance, that EAZs, which placed an emphasis on local experimentation, seem to have had relatively few impacts, whilst Excellence in Cities and City Challenge, both of which were steered heavily from the centre, seem to have been more successful. The implication is that ABIs can be more effective if they incorporate well-designed interventions targeted at clearly-specified problems and aimed at specific outcomes. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a move currently for the greater use of "evidence-based" programmes in formulating local initiatives (see, for instance, Allen 2011; Higgins, Kokotsaki, and Coe 2011), though the price which may have to be paid is an ever-narrower focus in terms of the issues which initiatives seek to address.

However, there is a more fundamental critique of ABIs which attributes their relative lack of success to a mismatch between their avowed intention to tackle educational disadvantage and the tools they have at their disposal. Although ABIs typically attract resources over and above those available in other areas, for instance, it is clear that those resources are "puny" (Smith 1987) in relation to the massive social and educational problems they seek to address, and, indeed, even in relation to the level of educational resources already available in those areas. There seems to be no reason to believe that small additions of resources will make a significant difference, and the hope, in particular, that these resources will support local experiments that will somehow find a solution to deep-rooted problems seems, to say the least, naïve. This has led some commentators to conclude that the attempt to tackle structural disadvantage through relatively small-scale local initiatives is inevitably doomed to failure, and is simply a way of avoiding the need to consider the large-scale social reform that is necessary (Power, Rees, and Taylor 2005; Rees, Power, and Taylor 2007).

Even commentators who are more favourably disposed towards ABIs, however, have noted that they seek to tackle the social and educational problems of an area without really analysing how those problems arise or what might be needed to address them (Lupton 2010; Smith 1987; Smith, Smith, and Smith 2007). ABIs, they argue, lack any deep understanding of the relationship between the indicators of disadvantage in their areas and the wider socio-economic process generating that disadvantage. They therefore tend to define areas in somewhat crude and arbitrary ways and to tackle the presenting symptoms of disadvantage rather than the underlying causes. It is notable, for instance, that the English ABIs described above have focused almost exclusively on tackling specifically educational issues through educational interventions, with little consideration for the social conditions out of which those issues might arise. Even where (as in the case of EPAs and EAZs) there

has been some acknowledgement of a link between learners' difficulties and family, community or local economic contexts, there is little evidence of sustained attempts to engage partners beyond the schools, or to develop strategies for tackling social and educational issues simultaneously.

THE CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE

Although the history of education-focused ABIs casts them as small-scale, isolated and rather ineffective interventions, the irony is that the more recent of them have been set within a broader policy landscape that may have the potential–to put it no more strongly–to overcome their endemic weaknesses. Between 1997 and 2010, the UK had a series of new Labour governments that were much exercised by what they characterised as the problem of "social exclusion", defined as: "what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown" (Blair 1997). Whilst this concept of social exclusion was problematic in many ways (Levitas 2005), it nonetheless acknowledged that the problems afflicting "disadvantaged" groups were multiple in nature, that they compounded one another, and that they called for some kind of multi-strand response. Moreover, there was a further acknowledgement that these multiple problems tended to be concentrated in particular places, and therefore that various kinds of area-based strategies were needed so that no-one should be "seriously disadvantaged by where they live" (Social Exclusion Unit 2001, 5).

The consequence was that, at the same time as governments sponsored the education-focused ABIs described above, they also supported a range of other efforts to marshal multi-strand responses to disadvantage. Amongst the most notable of these were neighbourhood renewal initiatives (Social Exclusion Unit 2001), aimed at tackling the multiple problems of disadvantaged areas, and the Sure Start Programme (DfEE 1999b), aimed (in its initial form, at least) at bringing together multiple forms of support for disadvantaged young children and their families in those areas. As these initiatives unfolded, New Labour governments also began to mandate the integration of education, social care and health provision into new-style "children's services" in every area (DfES 2003). At the same time, they developed the capacity of schools to act as delivery hubs, so that they could offer access to a range of "extended" services and activities, including child and family support, as well as additional child and adult learning and leisure opportunities (DfES 2005). In order to make this possible, schools were encouraged to work together in clusters, usually serving larger geographical areas than individual schools could reach, and aligned with the areas in which other child, family and community services were responsible (Cummings et al. 2011).

By the end of the New Labour period in 2010, therefore, the landscape in which education-focused ABIs could be formulated had changed significantly. Whilst ABIs such as City Challenge might still focus almost exclusively on schools, there were now more-or-less established practices and structures for working across agency boundaries in tackling the multiple problems facing disadvantaged families and (particularly) places. Schools, moreover, increasingly found themselves drawn into these practices and structures, often playing a lead role in formulating strategies for the areas they served and concerning themselves not simply with the educational manifestations of disadvantage, but with the more fundamental family and social conditions underpinning those manifestations (Carpenter et al. 2010; Cummings et al. 2007). Added to this was the ready availability of funding to support new initiatives, the introduction of new, non-educational players into school governance through the academies programme (National Audit Office 2007), and a substantial programme of school rebuilding (4Ps and Partnership for Schools 2008). This was fertile ground for somewhat different forms of education-focused ABIs from those which had been familiar since the 1960s.

"NEW STYLE" ABIs

In the second part of the New Labour period, many examples emerged of initiatives aimed at addressing endemic problems of educational disadvantage through co-ordinated, multi-strand interventions in disadvantaged areas. Most of these were led by schools in their new "extended" roles, and relied on the ability of school leaders to enlist support from other agencies in order to tackle the issues which seemed most important from an educational perspective (see Cummings and Dyson 2007;

Cummings, Dyson, and Todd 2011, for more detailed accounts). Whilst these are undoubtedly interesting, they often suffered as much as they gained by being led by individual schools. Not surprisingly, school professionals' understandings of needs and priorities dominated, the commitment of other partners was variable, and efforts centred around a school and its student population rather than around an "area" defined in terms of its social, economic and cultural dynamics and the possibilities of intervening therein.

Perhaps of more significance are a smaller number of initiatives which included schools as partners without being dominated by them, and which were therefore able both to call more reliably on non-school resources and to think in less school-based terms about "area". We have reported a number of initiatives of this kind elsewhere (see, for instance, Cummings, Dyson, and Todd 2011; Dyson and Kerr 2011; Dyson, Kerr, and Weiner 2011; Dyson, Jones, and Kerr 2011; Rowley and Dyson 2011), but brief details of some examples here may help illuminate their distinctive characteristics:

– *Weston*[3] *Academy* is a school that is sponsored by a provider of social (i.e. subsidised) housing. The housing provider became involved with the school because of what it perceived as the synergy between housing and educational issues. Put simply, a viable area of social housing needed a flourishing school to make it attractive and to act as an engine for development, whilst a viable school needed a flourishing area from which to recruit its students. The housing provider therefore formulated a complex theory of action, based on an evidence-based analysis of the area's dynamics, and showing how the school could contribute to an overall strategy to address the endemic problems of the area. The strategy involved developing a business-focused school curriculum raising the expectations and capacities of young people to take advantage of a wider range of employment opportunities than had traditionally been the case. It also involved developing a series of community activities aimed at engaging parents with the school and increasing the learning and leisure activities available to local people. Finally, it involved developing a support team for students and families in difficulties which could work closely with the community support teams that the housing provider had in place. To develop all of these forms of provision, a senior officer in the housing provider was appointed as a member of the academy's senior leadership team.

– *Bairstow Learning Centres* have been developed as alternatives to traditional schools by the local authority located on the fringes of a major city. Bairstow is made up in large part of housing estates developed to accommodate people moved from "slum" housing in a neighbouring city itself. Its secondary school sector has suffered for many years from low levels of achievement, and analyses undertaken by the local authority suggest that this stems ultimately from the economic vulnerability of the area which means that many residents are now unemployed or in low-paid work, that social problems are widespread, and that people have learned to expect little by way of meaningful careers. In response, the local authority has: reconfigured its secondary school provision around a number of coherent localities; developed an "extended" family, community and adult education role for its schools; linked the schools to partnerships of service providers, voluntary agencies and community representatives in each locality; instituted a radical pedagogy in the schools, based on individually-tailored learning in open-plan and IT-rich environments, designed to re-engage young people who have become disaffected from traditional forms of teaching; and adopted radical new school building designs to support the new pedagogy. The label "schools" has been dropped in favour of "centres of learning" to signal their new, wider role. However, the rethinking of schooling is seen as part of a much wider strategy aimed at the economic and social regeneration of the area. Underpinning this strategy is the expectation that the network of learning centres will produce a more skilled and engaged workforce, living in more stable and viable communities, and that this will both attract new employers into the area and enable young people to take advantage of the employment opportunities that will be on offer.

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR ABIs

It would be a mistake to present the Weston and Bairstow cases as successful and fully-operational models of "new style" ABIs. In fact both they and most of the other examples we could have cited have experienced significant problems in implementing their often ambitious plans. In most cases, these problems can be attributed to contradictions in national policy. Specifically, at the same time as schools were being encouraged to contribute to a broad social agenda

in collaboration with a range of partners, they were also being encouraged to act in a highly autonomous manner in pursuit of a narrow attainment agenda (see Rowley and Dyson 2011). There is therefore much that could be said about how initiatives of this kind are best developed and implemented, and what kinds of policy environments are necessary for them to thrive. However, for the purposes of this paper, what we wish to focus on is the extent to which Weston, Bairstow and their like offer a model of ABIs which *under the right circumstances* might provide a more effective alternative to traditional education-focused initiatives.

Viewed from this perspective, the new-style ABIs can be seen to differ from traditional ABIs in one fundamental respect: They escape the narrow focus on tackling educational disadvantage in isolation, and instead see this as part of a wider struggle to tackle underlying forms of social disadvantage. As a result, they are based on an analysis–however flawed this may be in particular cases–of how social disadvantage "works" in particular places, and how it leads to the familiar litany of educational problems. They deploy strategies which include, but are by no means confined to internal school improvement strategies. They call on a wide range of resources over and above those provided by the school in order to support this strategy, and they are dependent for these resources not on the goodwill of schools' partners, but on agencies from beyond the school which see the initiative's agenda as their own. Above all, perhaps, their governance is not solely in the hands of the school, but rests with some other body–in these cases a housing provider and local authority–which is not constrained by purely educational perspectives.

These characteristics, we suggest, offer a set of principles on which ABIs can be developed. If they are taken together with some common elements of provision–an extended role for schools, a reconceptualised pedagogy and curriculum, the alignment of school provision with other local services, the formulation of a local regeneration strategy, for instance–we have something like a "model" of ABIs which can, in principle, be adapted to work in many places. With this in mind, we have begun to formulate guidance that practitioners and local policy makers can use to develop their own ABIs (Dyson and Kerr 2011). However, this may not be quite enough to establish the case for ABIs of this kind. In addition to the problems of implementation to which we alluded above, there is, as yet, little or no evidence to show that these new-style ABIs are any more capable of impacting on educational disadvantage than their more traditional predecessors. This is hardly surprising given their relatively recent appearance and the well-known problems of evaluating complex initiatives in open environments (Dyson and Todd 2010). Nonetheless, it leaves these ABIs as vulnerable as their predecessors to the charge that there is an inherent contradiction between the socio-structural nature of disadvantage on the one hand, and the "puny" efforts to tackle it through purely local initiatives on the other.

Under these circumstances, a robust theory of how and why ABIs should work is an essential basis for their further development. Such a theory has to rest on a convincing account of how educational disadvantage arises, what is necessary to overcome it, and why a focus on the "area" should be important. The elements of such a theory are in fact already to hand. Whilst there has long been a view that, in Basil Bernstein's famous dictum, "education cannot compensate for society" (Bernstein 1970), recent studies of how social disadvantage translates into educational outcomes throw into question the simplistic notion of causation which this dictum might be taken to imply (though not necessarily, of course, by Bernstein himself). There is now considerable evidence to suggest that, whilst social background plays a key role in shaping outcomes, it is by no means certain that every individual from a poor background will go on to have poor educational outcomes. Some go on to do much better than others, and the factors which apparently enable them to do well can be identified in systematic ways. Duckworth (2008), for instance, argues that children learn and grow in a series of interacting contexts which include the family, the school and the peer group, as well as the wider socio-economic context within which these are set. Outcomes are determined not by socio-economic background alone, but by the ways in which these contexts compound or moderate the negative effects of background. Some researchers conceptualise this situation in terms of a series of "risks" to which children are subject, but which may not result in poor outcomes if there are sufficient "protective factors" in the child's environment. Where these protective factors are adequate, children become "resilient" in the face of risks and go on to do well (Schoon 2006).

This has important implications for what might be expected of ABIs, and indeed, of many other efforts to combat educational disadvantage. Whilst relatively small-scale initiatives do indeed remain "puny" in the

face of the socio-structural forces against which they are pitted, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they might act to strengthen the factors which moderate the effects of those forces. They do not replace the need for more fundamental action to remove the risks to which children are subject, but they may in the meantime do a little to reduce those risks and a great deal to build resilience in children's environments.

Likewise, the importance of area-based approaches becomes clearer if we move beyond deterministic models of how disadvantage works. It is indeed the case that socio-structural–indeed, global–factors act to shape conditions in every locality. Small-scale local initiatives can hardly be expected to counter much more powerful forces originating in the global economy. However, this process of "glocalization" (Robertson 1995) works both ways: if global processes can be seen everywhere, they do not everywhere produce precisely the same results. Places–even "disadvantaged" places–are not identical to one another, but have different configurations of employment opportunities, crime, ethnicities, cultures, amongst many other things. Not surprisingly, therefore, ethnographic studies of particular places typically report the distinctive characteristics and dynamics that differentiate one from another (see, for instance, Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston's [2011] recent study of how different places shape young people's aspirations differentially). Rather than thinking of disadvantaged areas as straightforwardly produced by socio-structural and global factors, therefore, it makes more sense to think in terms of a much more fluid set of interactions between global and local factors such that common global processes produce different outcomes in different places, and in which places themselves are constantly being formed and re-formed (Massey 2005).

The implication of this view is that, even in the context of powerful global forces, interventions at the local level can produce different outcomes in different places. Again, studies of particular places quickly tend to find these different outcomes, and to trace them at least in part to the purposeful actions of policy makers. A case in point is the way different policy strategies have produced markedly different outcomes in European and American cities, despite the fact that both have faced similar global economic pressures (see, for instance, Power, Plöger, and Winkler 2010; Wacquant 2008). It is for this reason that a review by the UK Department for Communities and Local Government concluded that national-level policies alone are inadequate to tackling poverty and promoting equality. Rather, "place matters", and governments need policies that facilitate the development of local solutions at a number of spatial levels (Department for Communities and Local Government 2008).

In the light of this, ABIs are perhaps best seen as localised interventions in the factors that mediate between underlying disadvantage and outcomes. They aim to mitigate the effects of global and societal processes generating inequality and disadvantage and, by so doing, to strengthen the protective factors in the environments of individuals so that those individuals do better than might otherwise have been the case. This is a modest aim. Not only does the empirical evidence suggest that effects tend to be modest (Griggs et al. 2008), but from a theoretical perspective, the targeting of mediating rather than underlying factors is unlikely to produce transformatory effects. This means that ABIs have a very particular and circumscribed place in the toolkit to which policy makers potentially have access. They cannot, for instance, substitute for more fundamental policy interventions tackling the underlying causes of disadvantage. Neither should they take the place of universal (i.e. national-level) policy interventions where these can target mediating factors more effectively. Effective and equitable schools, for instance, have an important role to play in maximising outcomes for disadvantaged learners, and there are clearly some technically-straightforward (though politically complex) national-level actions that can be taken to improve school systems (see, for instance, OECD 2008; OECD 2012).

In an ideal world, therefore, ABIs do not develop simply as stand-alone solutions to the problem of educational disadvantage. As Ballas et al. (2012) point out, different aspects of disadvantage arise and can be tackled at different societal and systemic levels, and responses are needed at whatever levels particular causal factors operate. Viewed in this way, the role of ABIs is to intervene in distinctively local contexts, identifying those local factors which exacerbate the effects of disadvantage, and marshalling whatever local resources are available to address those factors in the most effective way. For education-focused ABIs, this will, as we have seen, almost certainly mean carrying out a searching analysis of what those local factors are, developing the "internal" processes of the school (in terms, for instance, of pedagogy and curriculum) and extending the "external" capacity of the school to intervene in

those factors, and aligning the work of the school with that of other agencies concerned with the same issues.

One final point may be worth making. In many countries–not least, in England–the education service has traditionally led a life of its own, focusing on its own internal organisation and practices, and concerning itself with wider social issues only insofar as it wished to enlist support for its own somewhat narrowly-defined purposes. This is in marked contrast to Health, where there has long been a field of so-called "public health" which has concerned itself with the way in which social conditions impact on outcomes. In recent years, there has been a particularly strong focus on the concept of the "social determinants of health" (Commission on Social Determinant of Health 2008), giving rise to efforts at world, European and national levels to identify those determinants and formulate a set of policies and strategies that might tackle them (see http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/, accessed February 17, 2012). There is no reason in principle why similar perspectives should not be adopted in education, where outcomes are as much socially determined as they are in health. If this were to happen, schools and other agencies working together on an area basis might come to be standard practice in many countries, rather than the sporadic short-lived experiment that is often now the case.

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NOTES

1 The analysis in this paper has been informed by debates in the ESRC seminar series, "Breaking the link between education, disadvantage and place: What future for area-based initiatives (ABIs)?" (RES-451-26-0683). Any misunderstandings or errors are, of course, entirely the authors' responsibility.

2 GCSE–the General Certificate of Secondary Education–is a set of examinations taken by most students when they reach the end of statutory schooling at age 16. Passes are graded from A* to G. Successive governments have set the number of students achieving five passes at grades A*-C as the main benchmark against which school performance is judged.

3 All names are pseudonyms.

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