

# **Inequalities in education: Targets and Education Action Zones**

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The present Government is committed to raising educational standards. However, current policy documents and ministerial statements put much less emphasis on the need to reduce educational inequalities, implying a belief that these inequalities will become smaller if standards are raised. This article considers two of the ways in which the Government hopes to raise standards: setting targets and creating Education Action Zones. It is argued that neither of these policies will necessarily reduce inequalities and that they are not guaranteed to raise standards either.

## **Targets**

The education White Paper ("Excellence in Schools") states that by 2002 the Government expects that 80 per cent of pupils aged 11 (the end of Key Stage 2) will be at level four in English with a corresponding figure of 75 per cent for mathematics. The data for 1997 show that these targets were reached by 63 per cent of pupils in English and 62 per cent in mathematics. Setting targets in this way raises a number of questions: Why have these particular targets been chosen; how are the targets to be achieved; what value can we put on them if they are achieved; and what effects will setting targets have on teaching and learning?

The Government has handed down its Key Stage 2 targets to each Local Education Authority (LEA), allowing some variation between LEAs to allow for differing social circumstances. In turn, each LEA will set a target for each of its primary schools, and it will be up to the head of the school to 'deliver' these targets. Each of the players in the system will have to make decisions about how to organise the resources available to them in order to try to reach their targets. It would not be surprising if some LEAs set high targets for schools in more favoured areas and concentrated their resources on these schools. Similarly, some heads and teachers will be tempted to concentrate on those pupils most likely to reach the desired level, paying less attention to those pupils who are far behind. For example, in 1997, seven per cent of pupils had not reached level three in

English. These pupils may well be ones who are seen by their teachers to have less potential, and they are, or course, likely to be concentrated in disadvantaged social groups.

Consequently, it is possible to raise standards overall, but also to increase inequality. Consider the following hypothetical situation; suppose pupils are divided into three social groups with 35 per cent in the top group, 50 per cent in the middle group and 15 per cent in the bottom group. Table 1 shows how the percentages reaching at least level four could rise slightly over the period in question for the top group (from 90 to 98 per cent), substantially for the middle group (from 55 to 90 per cent) and not at all for the bottom group (seven per cent at both time points). In other words, standards might have risen for groups one and two but not for the bottom group. Therefore, in this hypothetical example, educational inequality has widened. Unfortunately, we are unlikely ever to know whether such a change has taken place because national assessment data are not broken down by any social classifications except gender.

**Table 1: Hypothetical Percentages reaching at least level 4, at two times by social class group**

		Social Class			Total
		1	2	3	
Distribution (%)		35	50	15	100
Level 4 and above	Time 1 (%)	90	55	7	60
	Time 2 (%)	98	90	7	80

There are useful attainment targets to aim for. Setting out explicitly to reduce the gaps between ethnic groups, social classes and the sexes is both legitimate and, importantly, measurable. These targets do not, however, appear to figure prominently in Government plans.

## Education Action Zones

There are Government plans for up to 25 Education Action Zones (EAZs). These zones will cover approximately 15 primary and 3 secondary schools and each zone will receive about half a million pounds a year in extra resources. According to the White Paper, they will be 'set up in areas with a mix of under-performing schools and the highest levels of disadvantage'. To quote the Secretary of State, 'they will provide new and exciting ways for schools, LEAs, parents, business and community organisations, to work together to raise standards'.

Ironically, EAZs can be regarded as a 1960s solution to a 1990s problem. In the late 1960s, Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) were set up with very similar aims to the proposed EAZs (and those with an interest in the history of Radical Statistics might like to know that the first report of the Education sub-group, in RSn3, focused on the EPA research). EPAs were not, however, a great success. One of the reasons for this lack of success can be ascribed to the 'ecological fallacy'.

As part of the EPA research in London, Barnes and Lucas (1975) created a six-point risk index for individual pupils, and divided primary schools into two groups: EPA schools (accounting for 14 per cent of pupils) and the rest. They showed that six per cent of those pupils at least risk attended EPA schools and 72 per cent of those at most risk did not attend EPA schools and, very importantly, the majority of disadvantaged pupils did not attend EPA schools. In turn, this means that a proportion of the resources directed at EPA (or EAZ) schools will benefit already advantaged pupils whereas the majority of disadvantaged pupils will receive nothing extra.

There is merit in a redistributive policy which allocates relatively more resources to those groups identified as disadvantaged, but the difficulty lies in deciding how much more, relatively, the disadvantaged are to receive. It is perfectly possible to squander resources, as suggested above, unless careful consideration is given to the optimal policy. When overall resources are scarce and no new resources for education are being made available, the removal of resources from some schools or areas into others may have an overall deleterious effect.

## Resources for EAZs

The extra resources to be directed at the proposed EAZs are miniscule. In 1996/7, total public expenditure on education in England was nearly £29 billion, 90 per cent of which was current expenditure. Hence, the half a million pounds extra for each zone amounts in total to about just 0.05 per cent of total current expenditure. If we assume that the 25 zones comprises 75 secondary schools and 375 primary schools altogether, then the zones will cover about 2% of all schools (and hence about the same proportion of pupils) in England. Bearing in mind recent estimates which suggest that a third of all children live in poverty, then even if all the pupils living in EAZs were living in poverty (which they won't be), only a small proportion of poor children will benefit from any extra resources. On this basis, it is difficult to see how the introduction of a small number of less than generously funded EAZs can have much effect either on standards, or on educational inequalities.

## European programmes

There have been similar programmes to the EAZs in at least two other European countries: France and The Netherlands. The French Zones d'Education Prioritaire (ZEPs) started in 1981; there are 563 of them, covering 10 per cent of all pupils. Seventy Dutch priority areas (OVB) were set up in 1986. In The Netherlands, some attempt was made to direct resources towards disadvantaged pupils, rather than just to schools with disadvantaged pupils in them. However, the amounts involved were rather small and the evidence from the evaluations of the OVB programme - which, it is important to note, ran concurrently with the programme itself - suggest that the programme had little effect on reducing inequalities. Evaluative evidence from the French programme also points to only slight effects on pupils' educational attainments.

## Conclusions

Most official education statistics are not broken down by social groupings. Hence, we know less about educational inequalities, and how they are changing, than we do, for example, about inequalities in health. Nevertheless, there is evidence from studies such as for example National Child Development Study to inform us that there are substantial differences in educational attainments by social class, ethnic group and gender. The effects of these inequalities on children's

life chances mean, in turn, that the road towards equality based on equality of opportunity is bound to be blocked until these systematic differences are substantially reduced. It is argued here that the Government's policies, and their new programmes, well-intentioned as they may be, will do little to reduce inequalities and may well exacerbate them.

One of the most depressing aspects of the way new policies are being formulated is that there is no evidence that the Government is aware of, or willing to learn from, the experiences of the past, or of our European partners. A substantial amount of research resources were devoted to the EPA idea. As a result of that research, it is possible to conclude that spatially and institutionally based interventions of this kind, however, imaginatively planned, cannot be expected to solve the deep-seated problems they are hoping to address. The same argument applies to Health Action Zones and other similar schemes such as the Priority Estates Project (Foster and Hope, 1993).

The arguments marshalled here against EAZ-type interventions do not imply that there is no place for educational interventions of any kind. Interventions which are targeted directly at pupils with specific problems can work. But even interventions which are successful in the short run often need to be continually reinforced to maintain their effectiveness. Perhaps the best way to raise all educational standards, and not only those related to pupil's performance in national assessments and public examinations, is to create a public education service which achieves excellence in all areas of the country. And a really worthwhile target would be one which aimed for such excellence that the private sector starts to fade away. But the most effective way of tackling those educational inequalities which arise from poverty is to tackle poverty itself.

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